Artifact #1

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NONHUMAN INDEX

An inanimate approach to Inger Christensen's *alphabet*

ENGLISH 1102

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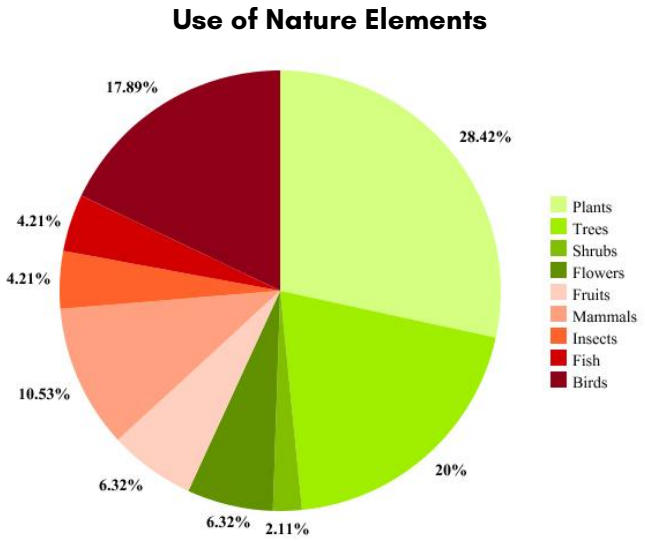
Introduction

Our task for this artifact was to create an index for the poem, *alphabet* by Inger Christensen, focusing on the nonhuman characteristics of the text. The poem is comprised of a vast array of vocabulary, which effectively experimented with the idea of existence while taking a scientific approach to depict the beauty of the natural world. Nonhuman is used to classify the environment and inert elements that are a part of our lives. These elements control not only the content of our world, but also our perception of it. There are countless entities in our world that one could consider nonhuman. As a result, analyzing the poem through this lens was not simple, since it required us to question which elements would have existed without humanity. While most of the words presented in the index appear to be simply inanimate objects, we have also incorporated adjectives and abstract ideas that we concluded can exist without human presence. However, the creation of our artifact did include an abundant amount of philosophical debate.

Our decision making process began by filtering out words that were apparently human, such as child or mother. Though some decisions were unanimous, discourse arose when we found ourselves engaging in deeper concepts; some examples of abstract ideas that could exist without mankind are absence, contagious, and luck. Cardinal directions (north, south, east, and west) were specific words that lead to a lively debate. We decided that north is only considered north because humanity decided for it to exist, and as a result came to the conclusion that directions are completely man-made. Even though north is not a living organism, we made the ultimate decision that we should exclude them from our index since they represent an idea that would not exist without the presence of humans. We tried to incorporate this thought process into the making of our entire index, but truly found ourselves questioning the placement of words throughout the whole process. The index below is the final culmination of our ideas.

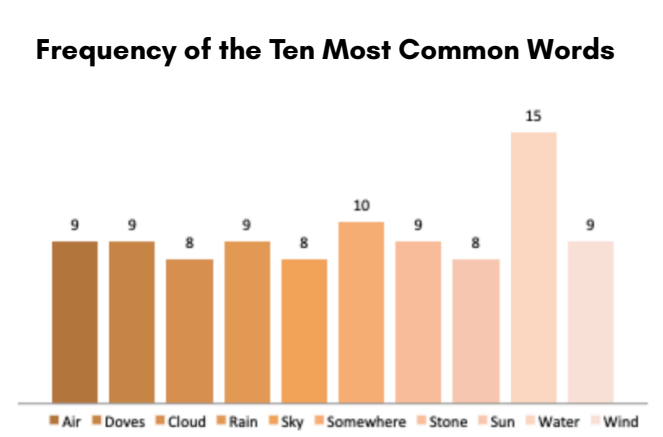


Christensen uses a variety of natural phenomenon within her poem; this is a breakdown of her most common nature subgroups.

Reading Reflection

While reading *alphabet* through a nonhuman lens, it was apparent that we were simply scanning the pages for nouns. With this in mind, we began to question our own knowledge of these words, as it became evident that we only knew their meaning because other humans had taught them to us. As we recognized this loss of meaning, we had to remind ourselves to ignore this phenomenon, or we would never complete the index. During our discussions, we would find ourselves unintentionally focusing on specific words, and as the conversation went on, we began to question how these words apply to our lives. Christensen spent a great deal of time describing the environment, and went into detail describing different types of plants, trees, and birds. We were not as challenged by these words, as they had a concrete meaning and could not be interpreted in more than one way. It was when we came across large concepts that our debates reached depth, and the more these words were repeated, the more we realized that their meanings are subjective.

Viewing the poem this way, it became difficult to envision it as an entire unit. The lyrical flow of words that occur from reading Christensen's poem out loud disappeared, and the stanzas felt choppy. Up until now, most works we have read appear to follow a narrative, but *alphabet* does not. This is why the poem appears to us as an amalgam of words that was difficult to decipher. With this new lens we viewed *alphabet* with, it was easier to look at each item Christensen listed separately, but more difficult to comprehend how all these items came together to create a story.



Our analysis of the ten most used nonhuman words within the poem.

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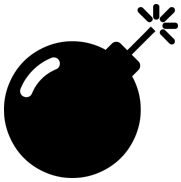

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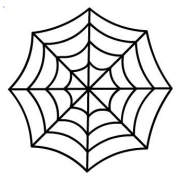

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