A LOOK AT THE

NONHUMAN

An experimental index to guide the reader through the complex images, verse, and style of the nonhuman aspects of Inger Christensen's poem *alphabet*.

Dr. Sturm's ENGL 1102

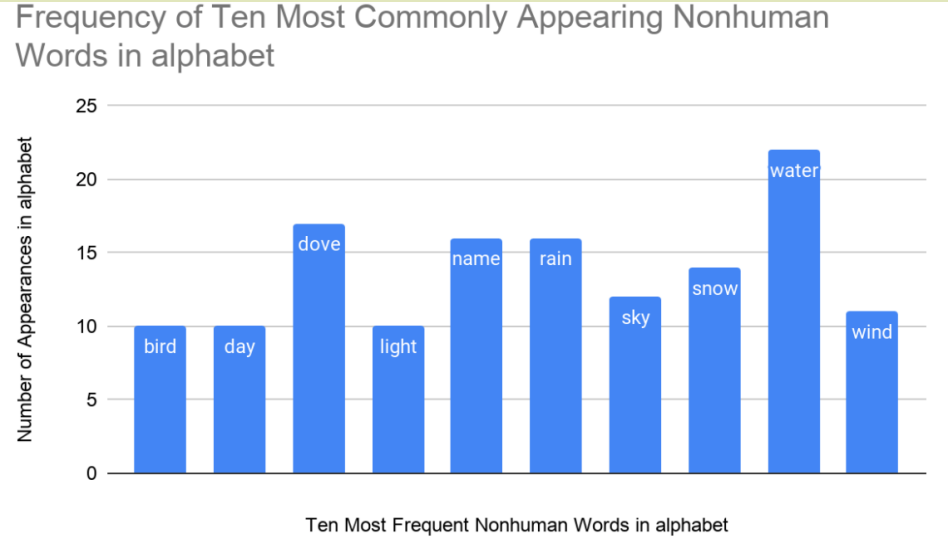
The Existence of Nonhuman

Inger Christensen's book length poem, *alphabet,* was originally published in Danish in 1981 during the Cold war. Christensen utilizes an echoing pattern and also structures the book in the Fibonacci sequence to mimic the mathematical structure of nature and emphasize the importance of the nonhuman through both content and form. By using patterns in nature and nonhuman objects, Christensen refers to the severity of the threats that are created by society. This theme of the nonhuman involves anything not directly connected to humans that can exist independently from humans. This excludes human-made ideas or concepts, such as mythology. The poem mentions geopolitical events such as the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to show how they serve as a warning to society of the potential for the destruction and vanishment of the existing nonhuman. Also, the repetition of phrases related to nature, such as "apricot trees exist," supports our theme of the nonhuman by calling to mind the existence of the nonhuman throughout the poem. The poet's constant acknowledgement of the nonhuman existing forces the reader to realize what exists outside of themselves thus allowing the reader to form an ethical relationship to the threat of losing the nonhuman.

During the process of compiling the index, we encountered a few discrepancies in whether or not some words should be included. For instance, we were unsure if we should include adjectives and colors, but we quickly realized that adding these words would make the scope of the nonhuman theme much broader than we wanted it to be. Also, we debated on including emotions in our index, since emotions are typically associated with humans. However, we found that within the poem, Christensen used these emotions to describe animals and other nonhuman objects thus allowing them to fit our theme of the nonhuman. Our criteria for nonhuman involves anything not directly connected to humans, and excludes human-made ideas. After the completion of the individual indexes, we merged them all into one large one. This index helps analyze the nonhuman themes in *alphabet* by showing how Inger Christensen reiterates the same nonhuman elements throughout the poem.

Through this process, we realized that when we first read the poem, we focused on all literary elements and were less able to note thematic patterns. However, by re-reading the poem using distance reading methods, it allowed us to focus on and better understand the patterns within the poem, specifically those of the nonhuman theme. This method granted us the ability to reflect on Christensen's purpose of revealing to the reader what exists outside of one's self. Subsequently, we were made well aware of the many nonhuman things in the world that are overlooked, which can be surprising for readers who would not normally appreciate them. We recognized that distant reading permits us to further develop our understanding of thematic patterns within a poem or book; whereas, close reading forces us to look at a wide range of reading elements thus making these patterns less visible.

We found that Christensen repeated many of the same terms relating to the nonhuman theme throughout the poem *alphabet*. This can be seen in the graph below, which compares the number of times the top ten words were used in the nonhuman theme.



Through this graph, we can see a trend of nonhuman words relating to the natural elements, such as “water” and “light,” as well as words referring to birds, such as “birds” and “doves,” being used repeatedly throughout the poem. Moreover, we realized that the words “rain,” “water,” “sky,” and “snow” are connected in the water cycle, and the appearance of these words throughout the poem creates the sense that the narrator is enacting these natural sequences of the cycle. Additionally, many bird species and the word “bird” are mentioned throughout the poem; however, the word “dove” is mentioned the most frequently. Christensen's choice to include “doves,” which symbolize love and peace, more than any other bird species in the poem alludes to the idea of the ability to love and cherish thus emphasizing the idea of appreciation for the nonhuman in the poem. In our graph, “name” is an outlier as it is not explicitly related to nature like the other most frequent nonhuman words. The appearance of “name” and various words pertaining to the nonhuman in the poem suggests a similarity to the Biblical Book of Genesis, where all things in the world are named, but in the poem it’s referenced in a secular Cold War context as war related words like “hydrogen bomb” and “dioxin” appear.

By compiling an index for *alphabet*, we were able to learn new ways of interpreting a text. For instance, this method allowed us to view the book in a quantitative and mathematical manner as opposed to our normal literary and qualitative point of view. We were able to break down the book into sets of data as seen in our graph. This method allowed us to track the progression of the nonhuman theme throughout *alphabet*. We found this approach very interesting because we could see the frequency of words related to nature, which we would have normally not paid much attention to while reading close. Ultimately, our index reminds readers of the nonhuman that exists outside of themselves and cautions readers to value them.

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