Deconstructing Radiant Inventory: Christopher Dewdney's Representations of the Natural World in Radiant Inventory

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Abstract

This article presents an analysis of Christopher Dewdney's "Radiant Inventory" using the literary theory of deconstruction. The purpose is to try and understand the poem through Jacques Derrida's deconstruction. The article will further examine how the deconstruction of the poem can bring the traditional notion of reading a text into application and how the perception of reality can be challenged to show multiple perspectives using language and imagery. The analysis sheds light on the poem's questioning of the relationship between object and identity and the role of language in shaping our understanding of reality. It will strictly adhere to Jacques Derrida's deconstruction. The purpose is to demonstrate how the deconstructive approach can offer a deeper understanding of the complexities and nuances present in the poem.

Keywords*: Deconstruction, Interpretation, Inventory, Perception, Radiant*

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Introduction

"Deconstruction is not what you think" (Bennington & Geoffery, 1989, p. 84). The deconstruction of a text, according to "Neitzschean-Derridean terms is to arrive at a limit point or deadlocked aporia of meaning which offers no hold for Marxist historical understanding" (Fsynk, 1978, p. 80). But what is it, deconstruction? The word 'deconstruction' is derived from the French word "deconstuire" (Brittanica, 2023), which means to undo something that is already done or made. In short, it means breaking down or analysing something bit by bit. It was initially a "difference," the ontological difference that Jacques Derrida brought between "being and beings, that we only know beings in their mode of existence, never being" (Gunney, 2008, p. 221) A text that "deconstructs itself is self-deconstructive" rather

than being deconstructed by a philosophical intervention" (de Man, "Interview" 307). In literature, there are "many deconstructions, and each one of them is quite different from one another. (New World Encyclopaedia, 2022, p 1)

- "Rhetorical" deconstruction of Paul de Man is different from the "pedagogical" deconstruction of Gregory Ulmer.

- "political" deconstruction of Michael Ryan, the "postcolonial" deconstruction of Gayatri Spivak,

- The "philosophical" deconstruction of Gasche contrasts with the "feminist" deconstruction of Barbara Johnson. (Jeffrey, 1992, p. 1269)

It was coined by Jacques Derrida but mainly taken from the idea of "Martin Heideggar's notion of destruction" and from "Method of Abbau by Edmund Husserl" (New World Encyclopaedia, 2022, p. 1). The literary theory was first used in the 1960s by Jacques Derrida, which revolutionised how European and American criticisms of the texts were done. The book "de la grammatologie," or English translation, "*Of Grammatology,*" (Derrida), changed how the text was interpreted. Jacques Derrida was interested in the works of Ferdinand de Saussure and his linguistics. It can be said that the deconstruction of a text is to find out the empty "presence" or the "absence" behind any literary text. First used in his book, "*Of Grammatology,*" it offered a new method to understand the text and its underlying meaning. "*Of Grammatology* is the toolkit for anyone who wants to empty the 'presence' out of any text he has taken a dislike to. A handy arsenal of deconstructive tools is found in its pages, and the technique, once learnt, is as simple and as destructive as leaving a bomb in a brown paper bag outside (or inside) a pub." (Roger Poole, Notes and Queries, p. 2)

As this research paper is concerned, the researcher will take a poem from one of the Postmodernist poets, Christopher Dewdney. The poem that will be deconstructed is "*Radiant Inventory,*" published by McClelland & Stewart in Toronto 1988.

Statement of the problem

This research paper aims to examine and analyse the complex portrayal of the natural world in Christopher Dewdney's collection of poems, "The Radiant Inventory." This study seeks to interpret the underlying themes, the contextual meaning of the words, and the aesthetic strategies Dewdney employed to depict the various aspects of nature. By investigating the text's literary and scientific dimensions, the researcher aims to reveal how Dewdney deals with the intriguing connection of art with science, offering insight related to environmentalism, the relationship of humans with nature, and the role of literature in shaping perceptions about the natural world.

Significance of the study

The significance of this research lies in the exploration of Christopher Dewdney's portrayal of the natural world in his words, "Radiant Inventory." By deconstructing Dewdney's complex representation of nature, this study aims to highlight the ways in which literature can interact with the environment and then interpret it. Understanding Dewdney's techniques and ideas related to science and environment not only helps the readers to appreciate his poetic artistry but also provides a significant amount of understanding of broader themes such as ecological consciousness, the relationship of humans with nature, and the role of literature in shaping discussions related to the environment. With the help of this analysis, the researcher contributes to the growing body of scholarship in literature and environmental studies, providing new ways for appreciating and understanding the

complicated nature of the world as portrayed through a literary lens.

Research Objectives of the Study

1. To explore the relationship between language and the world as the theory deconstructs the constructed reality that is apparent in the text.

2. To apply Jacques Derrida's Theory of Deconstruction in order to have a better understanding of any postmodernist text.

3. To examine if the text can challenge the notion of a fixed, objective interpretation and emphasise the role of the reader in creating meaningful interpretations.

Research Questions of the Study

1. How does the text reveal the interconnectedness of seemingly vague concepts and ideas in its language?

2. How does the poem expose the relationship between language and reality?

3. How does a researcher apply the same deconstruction theory to reveal the meaning and the intention of the author in other literary works?

Literature Review

As developed by Jacques Derrida, deconstruction is a method of critical analysis with three features. The first is "logocentrism" (to structure understanding), in easier words, a focal point, second is "reduction of meanings" (nothing beyond or outside the text); and the last one, which Derrida, in his own words, terms this phenomenon 'différance'. Différance refers to the fact that meaning cannot be regarded as fixed or static but is constantly evolving. It arises from the constant process of negotiation

between competing concepts." (Turner, 2016) It seeks to reveal the underlying contradictions and complexities in language, and it shows how the words are perceived, how a slight change in the word might completely change its meaning and understanding, and how it altogether changes the perspective of the reader.

Deconstruction is an important idea in Jean-François Lyotard's and Jacques Derrida's postmodern relativist philosophy. Derrida characterised deconstruction as a challenge to traditional concepts of language, meaning, and truth (Sim). Derrida contends that all speech is predicated on the belief that words can communicate accurate meanings from speakers to listeners. However, he maintains that words have an intrinsic instability that prevents them from achieving full presence in terms of meaning. The concept of inherent instability and language deconstruction is key to Derrida's philosophy. Derrida challenges Western discourse's logocentrism, which claims that words can adequately transmit meaning. Derrida's deconstruction attempts to shatter this assumption, emphasising the slippage of meaning that happens.

Derrida challenges Western discourse's logocentrism, which claims that words can adequately transmit meaning. Derrida's deconstruction tries to destroy this presupposition by emphasising the slippage of meaning that occurs during the act of communication. Derrida's deconstruction of language calls into question the concept that meaning can be preserved and stable over time. Derrida also criticises the notion of "founding concepts" in Western philosophy. He contends that these ideas, which are frequently taken for granted and considered self-evident, lack a solid foundation. Deconstruction reveals the faulty premise on which Western philosophy is formed, based on these basic concepts that lack a solid foundation.

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Background of the study

Christopher Dewdney is a Canadian poet, author, and naturalist whose unique blend of science and poetry has made a significant contribution to the literary world. His work investigates the relationship between humans and the natural world, particularly emphasising how science and technology have altered our perception of the world.

Christopher Dewdney's use of scientific concepts and language is one of the most striking aspects of his poetry. His poetry uses scientific terms and metaphors, resulting in a distinct and thought-provoking style. This method adds interest and education to his poetry and emphasises the interconnectedness of all living things. The imagery in Dewdney's poetry is also well-known. He creates a sense of place and connection with the natural world by using sensory details to paint vivid pictures. His imagery not only appeals to the senses but also elicits strong emotions and thoughts.

His poetry is also notable for its meditative quality. Dewdney's poems frequently delve into the deeper meaning and significance of the natural world, encouraging readers to consider their relationship with nature. He encourages readers to reflect on their existence, place themselves in the world, and develop a relationship with the environment.

In a research article by Geoffrey Hlibchuk (2006), the researcher talks about Christopher Dewdney, who explains and manifests the authentic history of nature. However, as per Hlibchuk, critics ignore this historical dimension offered by the poet and focus on the poet's command over "atemporal solipsism" (self as being the only existing reality independent of time). Nevertheless, his series on "natural history" is seen as a heightened consciousness instead of a poetic investigation that intersects

nature and history. Dewdney's work does not only follow historical linearity; it also recomposes natural-historical images temporally. The researcher further explains that the lyrical subject in Dewdney's work is threatened by "primaeval history," which weakens its foundations. The frequency of the fossil in his poetry is an essential element in detailing the fossilisation of the lyrical subject. The force of history returns to the present with revenge in Dewdney's poetry. This collision between fossil and subject is not just a mere poetic flourishment but also an ideological tactic. Dewdney's work aims to push us away from the comfort we rely on and live in. He does this by using the voices of the subalterns who were forcefully silenced. These voices are emblematised by Dewdney in his poetry in the form of a fossil. The past returns to the present world in an "unmediated form."

An article written by Vit Wagner in 2008 analysed Christopher Dewdney's poem "The Soul of the World," the essence of the analysis was that, as per Dewdney, it is disorienting to move forward in time rather than following the time in its natural course. He further elaborates that "Soul of the World" observes the physical, metaphorical, and metaphysical dimensions of time by combining the theories of Einstein, Yogi Berra, and Hawking. Dewdney's fascination with time can be traced back to his father, who was a well-known archaeologist and geologist who introduced him to the concept of "deep time." He further explains that in this poem, Dewdney examines the passing of time through his personal experiences with gardening and stargazing. He also observed the passage of time as the changing of seasons occurred. He observed this all in his Toronto backyard. He also explored the concept of "doing time," as seen in the case of Conrad Black, who was sentenced to serve for six and a half years in Florida prison. Hence, due to Dewdney's obsession with time, a captivating narrative came into existence: the combination of research, the poet's personal experiences, and cultural references. This poetry offers the readers a deeper understanding of time's role in our time.

Christopher Dewdney's other poem, "August," invokes sadness as it contrasts between 'atemporal' and 'temporal' entities. The poem explains atemporal aspects such as Earth and how it orbits around the Sun along with other circular objects in contrast to the temporal living objects like dying insects and leaves. This difference highlights the fated demise of mortal beings, which spreads sadness. The speaker structures the poem in a circular fashion by discussing the state of circularity in the form of Earth's orbit and the gold-platinum alloy ring, which have an infinite life span compared to the temporary beings with a shorter life span.

Recent studies on the sensory dimensions of literature, as explored by Howes (2023), underscore the importance of sensory perception in understanding the natural world, which resonates with Dewdney's vivid imagery in *Radiant Inventory*. Joudat's (2024) investigation into computational images and representation offers a framework for analysing Dewdney's poetic techniques, where the convergence of language, nature, and technology creates a complex interplay between the real and the abstract. This literature expands the interpretative lens through which Dewdney's representation of the natural world can be deconstructed and understood.

This whole idea provokes sadness and reminds the reader of his own death while the world would continue to exist. The poet uses the classic images of the moving nature of life. According to the poet, the surviving beings, like green leaves and those who survived during August, including the insects, spread the melancholic spell associated with the short-lived quality of life. The disappearance of the word' me' in the final stanza subtly outlines the poet's death. Hence, the death of leaves and insects, and the poet create an atmosphere of gloominess (Zipper).

Theoretical Framework

The theory focuses on the internal inconsistencies in language and understanding. According to Derrida, by deconstructing the content of the text, the structure is weakened, "therefore difference becomes the condition for fullness and plenitude" (Derrida, 1973, p. 138), making it easier to understand, revealing the underlying and hidden purpose it serves, which is neither construction nor destruction, but obstruction or hindrance 'of' or 'for' something. It can also be explained in a way that supposes there is a toy, A Lego toy, or an assembled Lego car.

To better understand how it was assembled and the purpose of constructing it, it must be broken down piece by piece, Lego by Lego. To better understand which part makes sense, where, and how it later shapes together, it appears to be a car to us. Similarly, a text can also be deconstructed in a similar form, breaking down into all the bits as much as possible and finding out what each of these is "of" or "for." So, by following the process of deconstruction breakdown of its building blocks or units, the researcher can apply deconstruction to any given text to get a comparatively better understanding of it.

Research Methodology

This article will follow a qualitative approach focusing on the text provided. The primary text for this research would be Christopher Dewdney's poem "*Radiant Inventory,*" taken from his collection. Secondary sources might include books and articles by Jacques Derrida to support and reinforce the theory. Other sources may be referred to, such as interviews with Christopher Dewdney, for further exploration of the underlying meaning behind his poetry.

To analyse the poem effectively, a close reading of it will be done by emphasising

each word by deconstructing it using Jacques Derrida's Deconstruction Theory and applying it wherever possible. It will then interpret supported arguments from other related articles if found.

Data Analysis

When applying Derrida's method of deconstruction to the text, it is essential first to identify the key terms and concepts that follow his key concepts. In using his first key term, "logocentrism," we can focus on words that are "world," "spectacle," "absence," "inventory," "sunlight," "waves," "sand," "finite," "corruption," "interpenetrating," "extensile," "miracle," "life," "horizon," "complexity," "resolution," "detail," "theatre," "shadow," and "radiance." By closely examining each line of the text, it can reduce the meaning, following the 2nd key concept of deconstruction. The researcher can see how these key terms and concepts are used to construct meaning. By using the third and last concept, "différance," the research will show how they fill out the empty "presence" or "absence," in shorter terms, the constant, ever-changing understanding of the world.

By closely examining each line of the text and applying deconstruction to it, the researcher can find the underlying meanings, construct meaning, and shape the understanding of the world.

- "The world has become a spectacle of absence," implies that the world as it is presented to us is not the authentic world but instead a representation or an appearance of something that is not truly there. The world is not as it appears to be, and something is missing or hidden. This suggests that our understanding of the world is always incomplete and that there is a fundamental gap between our perception of the world and the world itself.

- "A radiant inventory" implies that the world is a collection of things; hence the word "inventory" has been used. A "radiant" is a scientific term used to denote something quite bright or that emits light. It can be taken as the things that are hidden in plain sight, like the beauty of nature hidden in our plain sight, yet it is so "radiant." This highlights the idea that our understanding of the world is always partial and that there are always aspects of the world that remain unseen or unknowable.

- "The sunlight that falls on the margin of the lake nurtures a deficit in its clarity, its violence," implies that even the things that are positive can have negative aspects and that the world is not a simple place. "Sunlight" is taken as the hope or the source of "life." If there was no sunlight, the world would've been divulged into utter darkness with no life and beauty. "The lake" can be taken as the human mind, which has been restricted from other sources of water and is stagnant, yet the sun still shines on it. It can also be interpreted as the mind (lake), which is the only thing that limits the reader.

- "These waves are items are a description of themselves in discourse with their changes thought time," implies that the waves cannot be understood in a singular way and that our understanding of them constantly changes. This highlights the idea that the world is constantly in flux and that our understanding of the world is always evolving. The ever-changing nature of humans is referred to as "waves." Nature can also be taken as "waves." The continuous race for evolution and the struggle throughout time.

- "The sand is a finite texture of self-corruption," suggests that even something as seemingly stable as sand is subject to change and corruption, which implies that the world is not a fixed or stable place. This highlights the idea that the world

always has a sense of instability and uncertainty. A stagnant thing only rots and is corruptible because it has stopped moving. Similarly, the sand can also be taken as the things or the buildings made from sand and human intervention, which erode through time.

- "Everything interpenetrating, extensile, and at once continuous and discrete" implies that things are not fixed and separate but interconnected and constantly changing. Everything that is a part of nature and life belongs to a collective consciousness; even though "everything" is continuing its journey or surviving, it still follows a plan that is "interconnected." It changes over time, but the destination remains the same. The end goal remains the same.

- "This sunlight both sustains and erodes the luminous surface of matter, the precise miracle of life," presents the idea that even the things that are considered positive have negative aspects and that life is not a clear-cut, miraculous thing but rather a complex and paradoxical concept. The sunlight is also life-giving and life-taking, because in the presence of it, we are born, and we die as well.

- "Now that I have been opened, I can never be closed again" implies that once one has gained knowledge or understanding, it cannot be undone and that knowledge is not a fixed or final thing but a constantly evolving concept. It also extrapolates the idea that our biased knowledge of something, once learnt, can never truly change. We become bound to it. It forever remains the same as it is.

- "The reflection of the sun on the waves is a shining path to the horizon, a dazzling lucent shuttle of unknowable complexity," implies that the world is constantly changing and cannot be fully understood and that the horizon, as a symbol of the unknown, is always just out of reach. The reflection depicts our understanding, our mimicry of knowledge. This highlights the idea that our understanding of the

world can never be complete. There is always and will be more to discover and explore.

- "A cloud over the sun, momentary camera obscura," implies that even something as seemingly insignificant as a cloud can disrupt our understanding of the world and obscure our view. "Cloud over the sun" is also referred to as a bad day, usually because, in the past, the clouds foretold the rain that was to come, which brought destruction to the crops and fields. "Momentary" means temporary, and "Camera Obscura" means something that has clouded our vision and perception; "obscura" means shadowy.

- "And as I move towards resolution, the world abandons its detail, in a theatre at once dark and light," implies that as we strive to understand the world, we may lose sight of the small details and nuances that make the world so complex and rich. If the mere thought of a complete world, "resolution" implies a destination. The world, according to the reader, loses its magnificence. It might imply that life has stages, and near the resolution or death, the world starts to become blurry and hazy.

- "Where life is a kind of joyous shade, a shadow over the sun, a dark radiance," implies that life is not a straightforward concept but rather something that is both positive and negative, something that can be both a shadow and a radiance. "Joyous Shade" can be referred to as saying that if life has brought something good, there is a hint of melancholy "shade" in it as well. "Shadows" has been always described as something that can only come in the presence of a light. They are dark, and they follow, never lead.

The text challenges our understanding of the world by highlighting the idea that the world is not a fixed or stable place but rather a complex and constantly changing

concept. It encourages us to question our assumptions and perspectives and to always be open to new and different ways of understanding the world. The poem also presents multiple and conflicting perspectives on the world, emphasising that our understanding of the world is always shaped by the conditions and perspectives the readers are presented with. The use of symbols and imagery conveys the idea that the world is made up of multiple and interconnected elements constantly interacting with each other. The imagery in "sunlight, waves, and sand" is used to convey the idea that even the simplest things in the world can be seen as symbols of the world's complexity and imperfections. It conveys the idea that the world and our understanding of it are always evolving.

Discussion

The poem demonstrates Christopher Dewdney's adherence to the principles of deconstruction, which challenge traditional understandings of the world and encourage questioning assumptions and perspectives. Dewdney's use of language and imagery, such as sunlight, waves, and sand, effectively conveys the idea that even the simplest things in the world are symbols of their complexity and imperfections. This aligns with the philosophy of deconstruction, which posits that language and symbols are not fixed or stable but open to multiple interpretations.

Moreover, Dewdney's work can be perceived as a reflection on the nature of perception and the way in which a reader understands the world. He presents the idea that the world is not a simple place and that our understanding of it is constantly evolving. This aligns with the deconstructionist belief that knowledge is not fixed but always under construction.

Conclusions

Dewdney's work is a powerful exploration of the complexities and ambiguities of the world, and it aligns well with the principles of deconstruction. Through his use of language, imagery, and symbols, Dewdney's work makes a valuable contribution to the literary and philosophical discourse by providing a unique perspective on the world and how it is perceived.

The very idea of multiple perspectives can also be a notion that the text can be researched repeatedly, and it can have multiple interpretations. Similarly, a comparison of this poem with another poem using "binary opposition" or a different literary approach, i.e., New Criticism, Structuration Theory, Sign and Signifier, etc., can also be used to get a better understanding of the relationship between text and language and how it shapes reality. Deconstructing word by word, instead of line by line, finding all the connotations and denotations behind the text can also be a viable approach.

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