

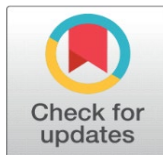
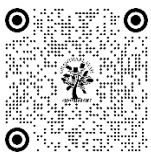
# THE ART OF WORDPLAY: DECONSTRUCTION AND DIFFÉRANCE IN LEWIS CARROLL'S SYLVIE AND BRUNO

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## ABSTRACT

Lewis Carroll, who is best known for his Alice novels, is also the author of a lesser known but equally captivating novel named *Sylvie and Bruno*. This novel, set in both the real world and a fantastical fairyland, is filled with nonsensical phrases, puns and paradoxes which serves to challenge the reader's understanding and perception of language. In Carroll's imaginary world, language and words do not necessarily have fixed meanings and are fluid and open to interpretation. This aligns with the critical concept of deconstruction, pioneered by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, stating that language and meaning are inherently unstable and texts can contain contradictory meanings. Further, the concept of *différance*, which is integral to Derrida's idea of deconstruction, reflects on the fluid nature of text and meaning. In *Sylvie and Bruno*, Carroll's clever manipulation of language and meaning can be examined through the lens of deconstruction and *différance*, thereby revealing the arbitrary nature of language. This research paper aims to analyze how Carroll's manipulation of words, language and meaning reflects Derrida's critical approach of deconstruction, particularly the fluidity and unpredictability of language and meaning.

**Keywords:** Language, Deconstruction, Différance, Meaning, Carroll, Derrida.



## 1. INTRODUCTION

Language is a complicated and multifaceted medium which serves the purpose of communicating ideas and thoughts. The process of communication occurs as a result of the connection and relation between words, the context surrounding the communication and the intention of the speaker. Context forms an important part of communication as it decides the meaning of the words or sentences conveyed. The polysemous nature of language means that meaning is never stable and is continuously in a fluid state where it can change depending on the situation, context, tone and emotion among other factors.

Jacques Derrida was a French philosopher and theorist who developed the concept of deconstruction, which he built upon the ideas of Martin Heidegger. Deconstruction refers to the idea that there is no single, objective truth and that meaning is unstable and prone to take on different forms in accordance with the multiple external factors surrounding it. Derrida first introduced the idea of deconstruction in his 1967 book titled *Of Grammatology*, "where he explored the

interplay between language and the construction of meaning" (Turner, "Jacques Derrida: Deconstruction"). In short, deconstruction can be defined as "a method of interpreting texts that aims to show language is absolutely indeterminate, without limits, an infinite playground of meaning" (Adie, "Derrida's Deconstruction").

Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (27 January 1832 – 14 January 1898), who is best known to the world by his pen name Lewis Carroll, was an English writer, mathematician and Anglican deacon. Best known for his *Alice* novels, Carroll has also authored other works which reflect his quirky and playful style of writing. Carroll's works are characterized by his usage of puns and his imaginative exploration of language, meaning and ideas. He is particularly famous for his nonsensical storylines and dialogues, which lend a humorous and mystical air to his works. Carroll's expertise in mathematics, logic and reasoning is evident in his masterful manipulation and exploration of the possibilities and limitations of language, meaning, reasoning and the fluid nature of words and interpretation.

Lewis Carroll's *Sylvie and Bruno*, which was first published in 1889, is set in both the real world and a fantasy world. The novel follows the lives of the two siblings, Sylvie and Bruno as they interact with the narrator and shift seamlessly between Fairyland and the real world. The novel also narrates the budding romance between the narrator's close friends: Lady Muriel Orme and Doctor Arthur Forester. Carroll makes use of a shifting narrative thereby bringing into play the interaction between two worlds co-existing alongside each other and the multiple perspectives of the characters inhabiting both the worlds. This manner and structure of storytelling which explores the possibilities and limitations of storytelling, language, meaning and multiple points of view and perspectives fits very well into Derrida's idea of deconstruction.

Différance, a term coined by Jacques Derrida, is a key element in his concept of deconstruction. Derrida first coined the term *différance* in his 1963 article titled "Cogito et histoire de la folie". *Différance* refers to the instability and interconnectedness between language, text and meaning. Drawing upon the ideas of the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, Derrida elaborated on the term to mean "both a difference and an act of deferring, to characterize the way in which linguistic meaning is created rather than given" ("Jacques Derrida"). In his book *Positions*, Jacques Derrida defines *différance* as "the systematic play of differences, of the traces of differences, of the spacing by means of which elements are related to each other" (21).

Carroll's *Sylvie and Bruno*, which is set in two distinctively different worlds, serve as an important backdrop, creating a sense of *différance*. Language and meaning are constantly shifting in both the worlds and what makes perfect sense in one realm is deconstructed to mean something entirely different in the other. Throughout the novel, the characters too seem to be aware of the unstable nature of language and meaning and act accordingly, thereby creating multiple perspectives and points of view. This aligns closely with Derrida's concept of deconstruction and *différance* as meaning is constantly shifting in both the realms and interconnected distinctions and context helps to form meaning all through the story. In her article "Derrida's Deconstruction in Literary Analysis: A Detailed Guide", Amanda Adie writes, "Deconstruction is the whole-hearted embracing of this ... infinite meaning, what Derrida described as the 'joyous affirmation of the play of the world ... the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin.' In other words, to deconstruct is a form of 'play'!" (Adie, "Derrida's Deconstruction").

Both Bruno and Sylvie, who are among the central characters in the novel, travel back and forth between Fairyland and the Victorian world, representing the transient and constantly changing nature of both the realms of existence. As the rules of existence, language and meaning are constantly shifting in both Fairyland and the real world, they often intrude upon each other, and both Sylvie and Bruno serve as forces of deconstruction, defining as well as destabilizing the very nature of both the realms. The interplay between language and meaning is evident in the novel as Sylvie and Bruno adapt to both worlds.

Bruno's clever manipulation of language and engagement in word-play fit well into Derrida's idea of deconstruction and *différance*. He is adept at reconstructing words and meaning to suit and help his situation. Bruno's fluid understanding and interpretation of language and meaning is first made evident at the beginning of the novel as he addresses his father. Bruno deconstructs the word "dreamy", doing away with the negative connotations surrounding it and wishes aloud that Sylvie were more dreamy: "'I wiss Sylvie was a little more dreamy,' said Bruno ... 'When I says to her 'Let's stop lessons!', she says 'Oh, I ca'n't dream of letting oo stop yet!'" (*Sylvie and Bruno* 4 – 5). [Hereafter *Sylvie and Bruno* will be mentioned as SAB].

Bruno also manages to successfully puzzle the Professor with his interpretation of the Professor's eccentricities. When the Professor inquires to Bruno if he had had a good night, Bruno replies by answering that he had had the same night as the Professor, as there was only the same one night for everyone after all (SAB 6). Bruno's innocence and child-like interpretation of the world around him opens up new perspectives, further enhancing Derrida's idea that meaning can

never be stable or fixed due to the evolving nature of language. This is further made evident when the Professor tells Bruno during the course of one their many conversations that Bruno sounded a little bit like Sylvie for a while. Bruno takes the comment quite literally, defying the norms of adult logic, stating : ““Why, you talk as if you were Sylvie!” exclaimed the Professor. “I know I did,” Bruno replied very humbly. “I quite forgottted I wasn’t Sylvie....” (59)

Over the course of their journey to Fairyland when Sylvie and Bruno travel through Dogland, they are asked to give their names and Bruno in his cheeky manner refuses to do as he announces that their names belonged to them and he did not want to part with them (81). Bruno constantly rebels against the structured form of adult understanding and logic, redefining the boundaries of language and meaning and creating new meaning in the relationship between them. Bruno’s character represents the fluidity of learning and interpretation and thereby Derrida’s opposition to the “metaphysics of presence”, which is “the tendency to conceive fundamental philosophical concepts such as truth, reality, and being in terms of ideas such as presence, essence, identity, and origin—and in the process to ignore the crucial role of absence and difference” (“Deconstruction”).

Sylvie, on the other hand, tends to stick to the rules and norms and believes in a more structured way of life. Carroll has drawn the character of Sylvie to stand in contrast to the character of Bruno. Sylvie is well-behaved and believes and tries to follow a set of structured norms while Bruno, on the other hand, is disruptive, chaotic, and always testing the limitations of society, language and meaning. While Sylvie tries her best to contain Bruno, Bruno represents the shifting and fluid nature of society, communication and its regulations. This is reminiscent of Derrida’s idea that the center is not static and is prone to shifts in its form and nature, being influenced by external factors. Jacques Derrida in his book *Writing and Difference* states:

The center is at the center of the totality, and yet, since the center does not belong to the totality (is not part of the totality), the totality has its center elsewhere. The center is not the center. The concept of centered structure—although it represents coherence itself, the condition of the episteme as philosophy or science—is contradictorily coherent. (279)

But, Sylvie too is influenced by the core nature of Bruno and occasionally drifts away from her rigid idea of meaning and interpretation. When the Professor presents her with a pincushion for her birthday, he tells her that he received all of the fifteen pins for free, and only one of them was bent. Taking a page out of Bruno’s book, Sylvie replies cheekily: ““I’ll make the bent one into a hook!” ... To catch Bruno with, when he runs away from his lessons!””(SAB 17). This shows that Sylvie’s image as a sticker for rules and regulation is not a stable one, as it too can be subject to shifts and changes according to the context in question. Sylvie’s identity and perception is not unwavering but quite fluid, depending on the situation. This shift in what seems to be the innate nature of Sylvie can be further seen when throughout the course of the novel, Sylvie often fails to admonish Bruno whenever he is mischievous, but rather lets Bruno be due to her great love for him.

The Professor is another interesting and eccentric character in Carroll’s *Sylvie and Bruno* who represents the fluid and shifting nature of language and meaning. The professor is an academic figure and is always talking about great and innovative inventions and discoveries. However, all his hard work and quests lead to nothing but comical and absurd creations and findings. The Professor fits well into the Derridean notion that there is no fixed center and meaning could take on different forms in relation to the context surrounding it. It is a commonly accepted notion that education and academic pursuits can only lead to valuable outcomes. The Professor, however, stands in stark contrast to this idea. All his ideas and hard work only end in follies. But, he seems unperturbed by all his failures. Rather, much to the bewilderment of the narrator, the Professor considers his experiments fruitful, and carries on with his works, undeterred by logic or reason. The Professor fits very well into Derrida’s idea of deconstruction and *différance* that the intrinsic value society places on education and authority might not necessarily hold true, thereby rendering the notion of valuable knowledge and academic pursuits unstable. Jacques Derrida states in his work *Margins of Philosophy*, “Essentially and lawfully, every concept is inscribed in a chain or in a system within which it refers to the other, to other concepts, by means of the systematic play of differences ... In a language, in the *system* of language, there are only differences” (11). When the Warden introduces the Professor to his children Sylvie and Bruno, the readers are made aware of the peculiar nature of the Professor. The Warden tells his children that the Professor is a learned man albeit in a unique manner: “He’s been curing himself, you know: he’s a very learned doctor. Why, he’s actually invented three new diseases, besides a new way of breaking your collar-bone!” (SAB 6) The Professor’s ideas of learning and progress are not conventional and go against the accepted norms. Derrida’s concept of deconstruction and *différance* state that there are no fixed or stable ideals, and that every concept or idea is open to reinterpretation. The Professor’s unique approach to learning and academic progress often result in nonsensical observations or invention and thus certainly fit these Derridean ideals.

The Sub-Warden's wife is another curious character in the novel who becomes the object of mockery through her actions and manner of talking. Her words and behavior are very ironic in nature and she inadvertently mocks herself and her loved ones, thereby revealing the coarser motives of their actions, without meaning to do so. When the Ambassador of Elfland comes to assess Uggug, the Vice-Warden and his wife contrive a plan to fool the Ambassador into believing that Uggug is Bruno. But, the Vice-Warden is cautious of this plan as he is well aware of the stupidity of his son. The Vice-Wardeness on the other hand, refuses to see the truth of the matter and indignantly replies: "He's no more an idiot than I am!"(38)

She is a comical character and fails to see the double-meaning lurking behind her words, which ironically reveals her true nature. The narrator notices her contrasting character and remarks to himself: "For an entirely stupid woman, my Lady's remarks were curiously full of meaning, of which she herself was wholly unconscious" (20). Though on the surface, the words and the choice of words of the Vice-Wardeness seems funny and ludicrous, they are in fact full of meaning and open to multiple interpretations as the narrator would come to find out. In another instance, the Vice-Warden and his wife, the Vice-Wardeness, decide to try on disguises, as a jester and his bear respectively, in a bid to fool the people around them. When she sees her husband in the fool's costume for the first time, she comments: "'You do look, oh, such a perfect Fool!' The Fool smiled a doubtful smile. He was not quite clear whether it was a compliment or not, to express it so plainly" (SAB 55). This fits into the Derridean notion that meaning is relative to the context surrounding it and can therefore take on multiple forms and interpretations.

Because each word depends for its meaning on the meanings of other words, it follows that the meaning of a word is never fully "present" to us, as it would be if meanings were the same as ideas or intentions; instead it is endlessly "deferred" in an infinitely long chain of meanings. Derrida expresses this idea by saying that meaning is created by the "play" of differences between words—a play that is "limitless", "infinite", and "indefinite". ("Jacques Derrida")

The Gardener is another one of Carroll's marvelous creations who reflects the shifting and fluid nature of language and meaning. The Gardener, who mostly communicates through riddles and nonsensical poems, seems quite deranged at the first glance. But, his words seem to be interestingly full of meaning when one gains a better understanding of the world he inhabits and the people surrounding him. The Gardener sums up the core of the strange world that he dwells in when he says: "I never means nothing" (41). This also encapsulates Jacques Derrida's idea of deconstruction and *différance* which challenges the idea of stable meanings and instead has its focus on the relational and interconnected nature of language and meaning. "Derrida wrote that ... a word does not contain its meaning, as previously thought. Rather, its meaning is constituted by what Derrida coined as its *différance* — meaning is deferred to what makes this word different from other words. (Adie, "Derrida's Deconstruction")

The characters in *Sylvie and Bruno* embody Jacques Derrida's idea of deconstruction and *différance* as they collectively represent the instability of language and the elusiveness of absolute meaning, further shedding light on the contextual nature of language, meaning and interpretation. Lewis Carroll has beautifully created a world where nothing is permanent and language, meaning and identity are constantly in a state of flux. Through his absurd and comical creations, Carroll's characters bring Derrida's ideas into life, creating a perception of reality, which is nonetheless open to endless interpretation.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None.

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