

A Post-Structuralist Reading of Sylvia Plath's "Bee Sequence"

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Abstract

This paper aims at studying Sylvia Plath's "Bee Sequence" in the light of the post-structuralist theory, hypothesizing that her views of her father and husband as well as her relation to them, conveyed through bee imagery, have no consistency of their own and bear no definite meaning or certainty. The signifiers that frequently appear in that sequence have no fixed relation to their signifieds, thus supporting a post-structuralist presupposition of a de-centering or dismantling of meaning.

The study begins with a brief introduction about post-structuralism and its characteristics. It is also limited to the analysis of the Bee Sequence, since it formulates a shared stream of thought and truly reflects Plath's vague and "undecidable" stance toward her father in particular and masculinity in general. The method followed throughout the study depends on showing the conflict between signifiers and their signifieds, as well as the slide of one signifier into others. Such conscious, or unconscious, devices help create a sense of uncertainty which is one characteristic of post-structuralism.

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قراءة لـ "سلسلة قصائد النحل" للشاعرة سيلفيا بلاث باستخدام نظرية مابعد البنيوية

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ملخص

يهدف هذا البحث إلى دراسة "سلسلة قصائد النحل" للشاعرة الأمريكية سيلفيا بلاث باستخدام نظرية مابعد البنيوية، مفترضا أن آراءها عن أبيها وزوجها وكذلك علاقتها بهما، والتي يرمز إليها بصور شعرية مستمدة من عالم النحل، لا تتسم بالثبات أو الوقوف عند معنى واحد. فالمفردات المحورية التي تظهر بشكل متكرر في هذه السلسلة من القصائد لا ترتبط بشكل ثابت بالصورة المرئية/ المسموعة أو الذهنية المرتبطة بهذه المفردات، وهذا يدعم الفرضية المسبقة لنظرية مابعد التركيبية والتي تنطوي على عدم ثبات المعنى بل وتعدده.

ويستهل هذا البحث بمقدمة مبسطة عن مفهوم نظرية مابعد البنيوية وخصائصها المميزة. ويقتصر البحث على تحليل هذه السلسلة من القصائد، حيث إنها تكون خطأ فكريا واحدا وتعكس بصدق موقف بلاث الغامض والمتأرجح من أبيها بشكل خاص والذكورة بشكل عام.

ويعتمد البحث - كمنهج له - على محاولة إظهار ذلك التناظر والصراع بين المفردات المحورية التي تظهر في هذه السلسلة من القصائد والصورة المرئية/ المسموعة أو الذهنية المرتبطة بها، وأيضا تداخل وتعدد المفردات وتلك الصور، فهذه الأدوات الفنية والتي تستخدمها الشاعرة إما بشكل عفوي أو مقصود تساعد على خلق إحساس بعدم التأكد والذي يمثل إحدى خصائص نظرية مابعد البنيوية.

This paper aims at studying Sylvia Plath's "Bee Sequence" in the light of the post-structuralist theory, hypothesizing that her views of her father and husband as well as her relation to them, conveyed through bee imagery, have no consistency of their own and bear no definite meaning or certainty. The signifiers that frequently appear in that sequence have no fixed relation to their signifieds, thus supporting a post-structuralist presupposition of a de-centering or dismantling of meaning. The sequence, composed of five poems, has been variously discussed and analyzed by many critics. P. R. King, for example, reads it as a group of poems expressing the poet's "loss of personal identity" (178). According to Paula Bennett, the sequence represents Plath's search for a "true self" by identifying with the image of the queen bee (157); likewise, Jessica Lewis Luck contends that "it is exploring in the image of the hive a more deeply biological foundation for identity and source for feminist resistance" (291). Mary Lynn Broe suggests that "Plath attempts to 'recover a self' by exploring the various operations of power within the apiary" (34). In his online article, Stewart Clarke argues that in this sequence "the speaker is subjected to a ritualized, incestuous form of coitus with her daemon, her father, 'The Bee God'".

The study begins with a brief introduction about post-structuralism and its characteristics. It is also limited to the analysis of the Bee Sequence, since it formulates a shared stream of thought and truly reflects Plath's vague and "undecidable" stance toward her father in particular and masculinity in general. The method followed throughout the study depends on showing the conflict between signifiers and their signifieds, as well as the slide of one signifier into others. Such conscious, or unconscious, devices help create a sense of uncertainty which is one characteristic of post-structuralism.

In an interview with Geoffrey Hawthorn, Gayatri C. Spivak gives a date for the appearance of post-structuralism saying:

Since 1968, a group of thinkers there loosely dubbed 'post-structuralists' – Michael Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze and others – have subjected many of the comfortable assumptions about humanity, knowledge, rationality and progress to disturbing interrogation ... Instead of using science and reason to get to a clearer truth, these writers have viewed the very idea of truth with extreme suspicion, something to be dismantled, deconstructed (18).

In fact, some critics confirm that post-structuralism is a development of structuralism. For instance, Terry Eagleton observes that the movement from structuralism to post-structuralism is one from 'work' to 'text' (120). He adds: "It is a shift from seeing the poem or novel as a closed entity, equipped with definite meanings which it is the critic's task to decipher, to seeing it as irreducibly plural, an endless play of signifiers which can never be finally nailed down to a single centre, essence or meaning" (120). Structuralism claims that there always lies an underlying structure behind a text and treats it as a unity divorced from historical and social contexts. Moreover, it tends to "draw rigid boundaries between what is acceptable and what is not, between self and non-self, truth and falsity, sense and nonsense, reason and madness, central and marginal, surface and depth" (Eagleton 115). It further tries to carve up boundaries among opposites: dark /light; low/high and literary/nonliterary. Post-structuralism, on the other hand, dismisses such suppositions and refrains from 'totalizing' the work into any kind of coherent sense. It also tries to show that such opposites may undermine themselves or banish to the text's margins certain important details. Further still, it shows the text's dispersal and fragmentation. In a sense, the text is "less a 'structure' than an open-ended process of 'structuralism'" (Eagleton 120). J.A. Cuddon contends that post-structuralism "doubts the adequacy of structuralism and, as far as literature is concerned, tends to reveal that the meaning of any text is, of its nature, unstable" (691).

Phillip Rice and Patricia Waugh confirm that in some instances

"post-structuralism has almost become synonymous with the name of Derrida and the mode of analysis he inaugurates – 'deconstruction'" (114). In his famous treatise, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) himself argues that the concept of structure is as old as episteme itself, denying the presence of a centralizing structure in a text and claiming that "the organizing principle of the structure would limit what we might call the play of the structure" (176). According to him, literature "affirms a realm of pure differences in which all meanings and identities dissolve" (128). Thus, Derrida is not interested in exposing error as much in showing how truth is constructed. Rice and Waugh further suggest that Derrida has "consistently critiqued and extended structuralism, rigorously following through the most radical implications of the Saussurean theory of language" (173). He has tried hard to deconstruct the "logocentric" impulse in a text.

In his theory of language, Saussure (1857-1913) proposes that any word (sign) has a signifier and a signified. The sign is the basic unit of meaning; the signifier is the 'word image' (visual or acoustic), while the signified is the 'mental concept'. For him, both the signifier and the signified are inseparable; they are bound by an arbitrary relationship which is fixed by social conventions. Their inseparable nature creates a stable and mutual correspondence between them and also attaches identical meanings to them. Rice and Waugh provide the example of the tree (sign), arguing that the visual shape of the tree (signifier) is related to our mental concept of it (signified) by conventions, though they form distinct entities. They add that "the word image cannot be divorced from the mental concept and vice versa" (6). Nevertheless, at the analytic level, the implications of the signifier are more easily grasped than those of the signified.

Explaining his idea of difference in language, Saussure defines any sign only by what it is not. For example, a 'cat' is only a 'cat' because it is not a 'hat,' a 'rat,' a 'bat' or a 'mat'. The sign 'food' does not mean anything unless it is defined by the concept 'not food'. This process of difference is inexhaustible and cannot be finalized. Eagleton goes a step further, complicating things and finding "no fixed distinction between signifiers and signifieds" (111). Hence,

signifiers slide into signifieds in an infinite circulation of meanings and a continual play of differences. Elaborating on Saussure's idea of difference, Eaglton writes: "meaning is always the result of a division or 'articulation' of signs ... The signified, that is to say, is the product of the difference between two signifiers. But it is also the product of a complex interaction of signifiers" (110).

However, post-structuralism questions the arbitrary relationships between signifiers and signifieds, proposing indeterminacy and undecidability of meanings instead. It also questions the coherence, integrity and intelligibility inside the fabric of any text. In "The End of the Book and the Beginning of Writing," Derrida suggests that a signifier "has no constitutive meaning" and that there always exists a "distinction between signifier and signified" though Saussure "argues they are distinguished simply as the two faces of one and the same leaf" (342).¹ Julia Kristeva substantiates this idea, proposing that post-structuralism "opens up the famous gap between signifier and signified" and that "it definitely prevents reducing a language or text to one law or one meaning" (72). In a post-structuralist analysis of a text, meaning, if it ever exists, is not easily grasped; it is scattered along a whole chain of signs which in themselves are not totally pure or fully meaningful.

Eaglton takes this idea a step forward:

Signs must always be repeatable or reproducible. We would not call a 'sign' a mark which only occurred once. The fact that a sign can be reproduced is therefore part of its identity, because it can always be reproduced in a different context which changes its meaning (112)

This means that language is not a fixed entity, but an everlasting changing process in which signs interchange and acquire new meanings in different contexts. It has no crystal clear boundaries or well-defined distinctions between signifiers or signifieds. Sometimes signifiers and signifieds clash or pull against each other, thus deferring the existence of apparent meanings. A text, according to Cuddon, "can be read as saying something quite different from what it appears to be saying, and that it may read as carrying a plurality of significance or as saying as many different things which are

fundamentally at variance with, contradictory to and subversive of what may be ... seen by criticism as a single stable 'meaning'" (210). To put it into a nutshell, meaning in the post-structuralist theory is inherently unstable. Read differently, a text cannot have one essential and stable meaning.

Applying this theoretical framework of post-structuralism to the Bee Sequence, one cannot reach a stable meaning, but a plurality of meanings especially with regard to the main and reiterated sign of the whole sequence, the Bee. In "The Beekeeper's Daughter," which can function as a good introduction to the sequence, her father appears as a tyrant under whose "stony foot" her weak heart strives. As an authoritative figure who died when she was eight, her father prompted in her a lifetime suppressed rage at him, or as Toni Saldivar says, a "pathological animus against" (46) him for abandoning her alone in this world. Moreover, her marriage to the British poet Ted Hughes, who would replace her father, forms another threat to her entity and autonomy. This image of the tyrant father puts in relief her much-loved but ultimately resented and submissive mother who was subjected to her domineering father; by implication, it also shows the general conditions of women as an oppressed social group.

However, her morbid love/hatred for her father causes her to portray him as a "maestro of the bees" who smoothly moves "among the many-breasted hives" (CP 118).² This is a possible reference to her repressed incestuous desire for him. The signifier "maestro" bears many different signifieds: it may mean a leader, a man in control or a manipulator. Such contradictory meanings concomitantly co-exist and make the meaning unstable. Seen as an Oedipal object, the father is further presented as a giant bird, another signifier, that hovers around her flowery corollas and picks at her "well of scents". Not surprisingly, her "trumpet-throat," which symbolizes her sexual organ, opens up and orgasmically responds to his picks by dripping "powder down". In a coveted incestuous relationship, the daughter keeps some sperms to "father dynasties" – new generations. Achieving such a communion with the father, the beekeeper's daughter thinks of herself as a "queenship no mother can contest". Expressing a severe conflict between the unconscious, repressed life of the ego and the conscious

life of the super ego, the daughter acknowledges that such an incestuously-desired, but socially-inhibited, love is "A fruit that's death to taste" (CP 118). Though identifying herself with the female bees at the beginning, the speaker later sees that they are suddenly metamorphosed into masculine elements that penetrate her and "keep house" inside her. She finally identifies herself with the queen bee whose nuptial mating with the male bee, the "father" and the "bridegroom," results in a communion between the male sperm and the female ovum ("Easter egg"). Thus, she achieves in imagination what she fails to do in reality – "The queen bee marries the winter of your year" (CP 118) – because her father died when she was only eight. Also, even if he were still alive, her desire for him would have been repressed because of moral and social considerations.

The language of this poem does not reflect a fixed or stable meaning. The signifier "father" does not have a fixed signified, but it changes in an endless chain of meanings, as Derrida would have said. The father is both looked upon with admiration and contempt; he is regarded as "a maestro of the bees" who handles "many-breasted hives" and as a masculine force that penetrates her. As an authoritarian professor in entomology, Otto Plath wrote a book on bumblebees (*Bumblebees and their Ways*) and was called by relatives as "maestro of bees" who could hold a bee in his fist without being stung. However, this name may also refer to his flirtatious nature and possible extramarital relationships. On the other hand, she looks upon herself as a female bee (one signifier), or a flower (another signifier) round which he, as a drone, hovers then penetrates. This image of flirtation on the part of the father clashes with the atmosphere of suffocation surrounding her, since her "well of scents" is so strong that he can barely breathe in there. Thus, it is not clear whether she really likes him as a lover or hates him as a rapist.

In the first poem of the sequence, "The Bee Meeting," the speaker is first presented as one of the attendant villagers who are waiting for the arrival of a beehive, but she later becomes a queen bee of the same hive. The attendants, with their different jobs and significations, are also seen as types of bees: "The rector, the midwife, the sexton, the agent for bees" (CP 211). Though originally symbolizing sacredness and protection, the rector is reversed into a

stinging bee that assaults her defenseless state: "In my sleeveless summery dress I have no protection, / And they are all gloved and covered, why did nobody tell me?" (CP 211) Seen as "the man in black," the rector stands for her husband who would sting her – by having an affair with and marrying another woman. The midwife becomes a working bee that receives and tends the hatched bees (an image of her own mother who was to tend her young children after her suicide), while the sexton and the agent of the bees represent gossiping people (buzzing bees) who insinuate at Hughes's affair, people who are "nodding a square black head" and "smiling" at her gullibility and naivety. Commenting on the acute drama created by the clash of those gender roles, Linda Anderson writes, "Plath produced tense dramas out of her own experience of foreignness in her Devon village, which are also mediated – and intensified – through her awareness of gender roles" (181).

Feeling estranged and vulnerable in a new hive (England), the queen bee (the speaker) sees herself "nude" and loved by nobody. Kathleen Margaret Lant explains, "she regarded her femininity as a curse and the naked female body as a reminder of her physical and artistic failures, because it is vulnerable and susceptible to violation"(624). She also finds that she has been molded in the form of the other members of the beehive. "The speaker here," as Luck argues, "is becoming a cultural product as she passively submits to the shaping and directing power of the villagers" (291). She further expresses contempt and hatred for an elder queen bee (her mother), who is changed suddenly into a "secretary of bees" – a proto-type of a depressive mother who shackles her: "Buttoning the cuffs at my wrists and the slit from my neck to my knees" (CP 211). She tries to escape such an imprisonment, but she finds that she cannot run since she is "rooted" to the ground and enclosed by thick walls: "The white hive is snug as a virgin, / Sealing off her brood cells, her honey, and quietly humming" (CP 211). Brought up among other tamed and submissive bees (women), she is not noticed by them, and her fear is never felt by them. Hence, she feels sick and arid as "the barren body of [a] hawthorn". Such views refer to the early 1950's feminists who hated

their mothers for bringing them up as submissive daughters.

Despite her "barrenness," the speaker feels virtually raped by "hysterical elastics" identified as encroaching masculine forces:

Smoke rolls and scarves in the grove.

The mind of the hive thinks this is the end of everything.

Here they come, the outriders, on their hysterical elastics.

If I stand very still, they will think I am cow-parsley,

A gullible head untouched by their animosity,

Not even nodding, a personage in a hedgerow.

The villagers open the chambers, they are

hunting the queen (CP 212).

Smoke, outriders, elastics and villagers form "black" masculine forces that try to break her "white" virginity, while grove, hive, cow-parsley, chambers and the queen bee symbolize feminine forces to be raped.³ The soft and tricky masculinity, represented by a "phallus," rolls into her gullible grove and opens her chambers in an attempt to satisfy its unappeased lust. But having a mentality different from that of the other bees (women who think that sexual fulfillment is the real joy and end of life), the queen bee (the speaker herself) does not try to show herself as an easy morsel (edible cow-parsley); she resists male brutality by passively hiding to keep herself "untouched by [masculine] animosity".

Obsessed with and humiliated by the idea of her husband's betrayal, Plath identifies herself with the old queen bee which is rivaled by another virgin queen:

She is old, old, old, she must live another year, and she knows it.

While in their fingerjoint cells the new

Virgins Dream of a duel they will win inevitably

(CP212).

Elaborating on such a behavior of old queen bees and virgin ones in the same hive, Janice Green, a professional beekeeper, writes:

"It has been long taught that when a new virgin queen hatches out in a hive she fights the old queen and the

best queen wins. It doesn't always happen this way, however. Often the bees will tolerate the old queen and both will lay eggs until the old queen gives out (email qtd. in Clarke)

Plath could have been introduced to such ideas about the behavior of bees in her father's book, *Bumblebees and their Ways*, as he observes that the original queens of a colony "are often killed and supplanted by others entering their nest; hence, it is possible that the members of a bumblebee colony may be the offspring, not of one, but of several queens" (13). As "an old queen" bee that "must live another year" before a new virgin queen (another woman) takes over, the speaker in this poem stubbornly decides to enjoy one final bridal upflight: "A curtain of wax dividing them from the bride flight, / The upflight of the murderess into a heaven that loves her". The queen bee becomes an airy spirit, an Ariel, which flies toward the sun where it mates with the strongest drone(s). However, the word "murderess" has a sinister implication, since the act of mating implies the death of the drone. After mating, the queen bee returns to the hive to lay eggs which would supply the hive with bees for one entire season.

Ironically, it is the queen bee, symbolizing Plath herself who committed suicide one year later, which feels "exhausted" and finally dies. The drama of its life ends in a "blackout of knives." Moreover, the "long white box in the grove" which appears at the end, and which literally means the hive cell, partly stands for the poet's own "pillar of white" – the grave. The signifier "grove," which is used before in association with destructive sexuality, is meant here to be the graveyard where the poet's coffin is to be laid forever. It is not a solitary grave, but a group of graves, thus referring to the victimization of many other women. This idea takes us back to Saussure's theory of difference in language: the signifier "grove" means a grove because it is not the signifier "grave," though the latter meaning is also implied. Hence, one signifier slides into another one, producing a variety of "undecided meanings". To complicate things and to multiply meanings, Clarke comments in his online article, "Plath stands like Lot's wife, transformed into "a pillar of white" salt for ruefully looking back at the apocalyptic destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah".

With the use of the final question in the poem, "why am I

cold?" the poet foresees her own death, an idea confirmed by the personal pronoun "I". In fact, her actual death happened in the coldest winter in England in the century (1963), a winter that accelerated her decision of suicide. Her anticipated death is a natural result of her collapsed marriage, of her feelings of isolation, abandonment and jealousy over a husband who was lost for another rival woman, "a triumphant Assia Wevill," as Clarke suggests, "(whose name helplessly puts one in mind of the parasitic boll weevil)". Her frustration is due to losing a protective force in her life, a substitute for a fatherly figure which meant everything for her as a daughter, mother, wife and poet. In this context, Linda Wagner-Martin argues, "The fact that Hughes had begun an affair – while enraging on its own terms – also may have been catalytic in freeing her to express her deep-seated anger against the controlling and male-dominated literary world" (194).

Disappointed and unable to drive the new virgin queen bee out of the hive, the old queen imaginatively decides to end her own life. Such a terrifying, masochistic death drive helps her return to a state where she cannot be injured any more. If death is the final goal of life, why should not she achieve it so soon? For her surprise, she notes that the villagers, who attend her imaginary funeral, appear as sadistic torturers who gloat over her death and happily "shake hands" for that. Tim Kendall provides another justification for her death drive: "Death had been desirable ... not only because it was the necessary precursor to rebirth, but because it allowed reunion with the father-figure" (150). Edward Larrissy adds, "the union with the dead father [is] representing the woman's assumption of the phallus" (141). Hence, the death drive represents her unconscious desire to be reunited with the dead father. Such a reading is substantiated by symbolic references to sexuality: "hysterical elastics," "smoke rolling into the grove," "open chambers," "bride flight" and ecstatic, dripping honey.

As a signifier, "white" dominates the whole poem – white shop smock, creamy bean flowers, white straw Italian hat, white suit, white hive, pillar of white and white box. It has its different, if not contradictory, signifieds: virginity, sexuality, deception, the coffin and death. On the contrary, the signifier "black" dominates the next poem

in the sequence, "The Arrival of the Bee Box". The inside of the bee box is "dark, dark," and it is also "black on black". Even the moonlight is associated in this poem with mourning, funeral clothes and death. Thus, darkness overwhelms the atmosphere of the poem and renders it mysterious, or multi-dimensional. As a signifier, the "long white box" of the previous poem slides in this poem into another signifier: a "clean wood box" with which the speaker has to spend the night in a dark room. Symbolizing the coffin before, this box is now introduced as "the coffin of a midget / Or a square baby"(CP 212).

Nevertheless, the box is also portrayed as a container of "maniacs" – buzzing bees that threaten her if she releases them out. Sliding into a third signifier, the box could be further regarded as that of her enclosed poetic creativity which is in the process of evolvment. What could possibly confirm this third meaning is the description given to the box:

The box is locked, it is dangerous.
I have to live with it overnight
And I can't keep away from it.
There are no windows, so I can't see what is in there.
There is only a little grid, no exit (CP 213).

The locked box is her mind which includes "dangerous" ideas, a box the poet cannot live without. The furious ideas contained in this box are related in one way or another to her father/husband. She is bound by a love/hate relationship with both of them, one out of which there is no "exit". The fact that this box has no windows testifies to the dilemma in which she finds herself due to the persistent existence of both men in, and their hurting withdrawal from, her life. Caught up in the web of imposed traditional social roles as a daughter, wife and mother, the speaker/poet feels frustrated but finally decides to break the walls of this box and give voice to her "unintelligible syllables" which are strongly palpitating within her "like a Roman mob": "Tomorrow I will be sweet God, I will set them free / The box is only temporary" (CP 213). Thus, her primary fluctuating sense of authority over the bee box, which is full of "maniacs," finally gains a great ground of assurance. Assured of her creative abilities and her impressive views, she asserts, "I am the owner". Now, she has control

over the bee box which here symbolizes her "clambering" mind. Despite this pose of authority, however, there remains an underneath tone of admiration for the bees' vitality, a feeling that enfeebles her sense of mastery. Finally, it is not sure whether she has an utter control over them or not, confirming a post-structuralist presupposition of the undecidability of meaning.

"Stings" is the most autobiographical poem of the whole sequence, a fact confirmed by the excessive use of the personal pronoun "I" and direct references to personal events and facts in Plath's life.⁴ What on a surface reading might appear as a professional handling of the contents of a hive from within is in reality an exposition to the poet's own life, her relationships with the most important two men in her life, her future intentions and her dreams. With the help of another bee keeper, the speaker handles the interior of the hive bare-handedly, moving the combs containing honey. She also searches for the old queen bee and can not easily locate her within the hive. Finding her, she decides to spare her one more year to enjoy a final mating before she is to be dismissed by the new authoritative virgin queen.

However, the hive can be taken as a metaphor for the poet's personal life. The speaker and the companion bee keeper, who appears at the beginning of the poem, are none but the poet and her husband who enjoy their marital life together:

Bare-handed, I hand the combs.
The man in white smiles, bare-handed,
Our cheesecloth gauntlets neat and sweet,
The throats of our wrists brave lilies.
He and I Have a thousand clean cells between us,
Eight combs of yellow cups,
And the hive itself a teacup,
White with pink flowers on it,
With excessive love I enameled it
Thinking "Sweetness, sweetness" (CP 214).

The bare hands, the combs, the cheesecloth gauntlets and the lilies symbolize the intimate relationship between a husband and wife, while the "eight combs" stand for the eight years they would spend together in marriage. Moreover, the "yellow cups" of honey refer to the happiness they enjoyed, especially at the beginning of their

marriage, while the white and pink flowers, which sweeten their life (the hive), symbolize their son and daughter ("the thousand clean cells between us"). Simply, life for them entails "excessive love" and "Sweetness, sweetness".

After the discovery of Hughes's betrayal (the greatest "sting"), her sweet life dramatically changes into one of bitterness, terror and "fossils of shells". Her view of marriage also changes: marriage becomes, as P. R. King writes, "a vicious circle of misery" (177). In her poem, "The Moon and the Yew Tree," she describes marriage as "A ring of gold with the sun in it? / Lies. Lies and a grief" (CP 173). Hence, not only does she lose control over her life (hive), but she also loses her self-confidence: "Is there any queen at all in it?" Again, she identifies herself with an old queen bee, whose wings are "torn shawls" and "her long body [is] / Rubbed of its "plush". She is no more "a source of honey"; she is "Poor and bare and unqueenly and even shameful." (CP 214). Intending the literal and metaphorical levels of meaning, the poet speaks directly as a woman/wife who stands in line with other wronged, "unmiraculous women" who are supposed to be "honey-drudgers" or "honey-machines" to please men though they deeply suffer. Dramatizing her suffering, she says, "for years I have eaten dust / And dried plates with my dense hair"(CP 214). Suddenly, the wronged wife decides to challenge the depressive conditions pressing her, announcing the beginning of a new era in her life ("I am no drudge") and adding: "It is almost over. / I am in control" (CP 214). Her feeling of defeat is temporary, because she soon declares that she has "a self to recover [as] a queen"; she has a life to restore and a dire wish to survive in a hive where she is still the queen whose "lion-red body, [and] her wings of glass" are sources of attraction and productivity. She ends the poem triumphantly:

Now she is flying
More terrible than she ever was, red
Scar in the sky, red comet
Over the engine that killed her--
The mausoleum, the wax house (CP 215).

She finally decides to overcome her male victimizers and discard the domestic duties she had been performing during her eight

years of marriage. She sees herself as a "red comet" that burns her tormentor. The signifier "engine," which refers to her husband, clashes with its signified. Known as a tool of production, the engine is reversed here to be one of destruction. Metaphorically, she decides to resume her role as a productive queen bee. Her products this time are not more children, but poetic creations. She does not care whether other submissive women will hate her for revolting against the conditions of life then rife. She renounces the "open cherry" and "open clover" which symbolize female seductiveness and surrender. These two images are taken from the bee world: the passive female cherry and clover blossoms are visited by active bees (here represented as male forces) that suck their nectars and concomitantly pollinate them.

Unconsciously, she recalls another male power (her father) that has been forgotten for sometime:

A third person is watching.

He has nothing to do with the bee-seller or with me.

Now he is gone In eight great bounds, a great scapegoat (CP 215).

She appears to be greatly admiring her father, though it is mysterious why she considers him a "scapegoat"; she yearningly remembers his trivial belongings like slippers and "the square of white linen / He wore instead of a hat" (CP 215). Playing on words, she describes him as "sweet" and his "sweat" as the "rain tugging the world to fruit". However, she regards his death when she was eight as the first real "sting" in her life. She feels attached to him and wishes to be reunited with him through death. Identifying herself with bees that sting his lips though they may die, she decides to shower him with kisses, nevertheless: "They thought death was worth it". She finally decides to leave the hive without a queen, knowing from her father's book on bees that if a queen bee makes her "terrible" flight from the nest, the hive does not become a "mausoleum" but continues its business with different agents. Recalling the father and wishing to be reunited with him at a moment when she feels victorious over all male domination and tyranny is really puzzling. Such a stance arouses

perplexing questions: Does she really admire or hate him for leaving her alone? Does she decide to live or withdraw from life? The answer is: nothing is certain, and all options are open for her.

Like the previous poems, *The Swarm* has different levels of meaning, literal and metaphorical. The "swarm" literally refers to a phenomenon known to bee keepers: it happens when an old queen, feeling rivaled by and jealous of a new virgin queen, flies off accompanying many bees of the hive. In order for bee keepers to restore the flying hive, they would shoot fire into the air to frighten the bees and oblige them to come down. Metaphorically, the clamoring sound, "the dull pom, pom," with which Plath opens the poem could symbolize the great stroke she received at the hands of her cheating husband. It could also mean a retaliatory act in which the poet directs her anger, due to jealousy, against the dictatorial "Napoleon" (her husband, and by implication all men). She writes: "Jealousy can open the blood. / It can make black roses (CP 215-16). This last interpretation, though not the only probable one, can be substantiated by the following lines wherein she states, "It is you the knives are out for / At Waterloo, Waterloo, Napoleon" (CP 216). Using feminist terms, Plath attacks Napoleon who plays a game of chess with women, moving them like "Still figures of ivory". She insults him as a greedy "pack-dog / grinning over its bone". In a post-structuralist model, she unconsciously associates him, with his "red tatter," to the queen bee of "Stings," wherein it appears as a "red / Scar in the sky" whose nuptial flight entails the death of drones. In her view, both become her paradigms for dictatorship; thus, she turns against her earlier signification of the queen bee as a symbol of female productivity, weakness, and jealousy. In other words, she creates a gap, or a "difference" between the signifier queen bee and its signified (positive associations), since she associates the queen bee with dictatorship.

Continuing to use bee imagery, Plath identifies herself with the swarming bees (women) that advocate their rights by challenging the bee keeper, "The man with gray hands [who] stands under the honeycomb / Of their dream" (CP 216). As a signifier, the bee keeper changes its association (signified) from being a tender and caring agent in the previous poems into one who greedily manipulates and badly treats her. So, she resists him as an outrider who tries to "dismember" her entity and subdue her under his control. Scared by his "gunshots," she falls down at the feet of his "Grand Army".

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Frustrated, she feels that her resistance is nothing but a "bleb on the sea," while the victorious bee keeper shows a wide smile of assurance:

The man with gray hands smiles--
The smile of a man of business, intensely practical.
They are not hands at all
But asbestos receptacles (CP 216).

The sense of triumph with which she ends the previous poem appears to be a "temporary" one, as it is replaced here by another one of defeat. The only nourishing and compensatory feeling she has at the end is that she is about to die with dignity in defense of her hive: "bees have a notion of honor". Mockingly, she comments that things will remain as they have always been: "Napoleon is pleased, he is pleased with everything. / O Europe! O ton of honey!" By this she laments that societies will continue to be dominated by men who physically savor women's "sweet" bodies and sadistically enjoy suppressing them socially and politically.

In her last poem of the sequence, "Wintering," Plath identifies herself with wintering bees, assimilating her cold life after separation from her husband to a hibernating hive. Living enclosed within herself, she ruminates over sweet memories of her early married life, just as bees remain within the hive in winter, nourishing themselves on honey stored from the previous season:

I have my honey, Six jars of it,
Six cat's eyes in the wine cellar,
Wintering in a dark without window
At the heart of the house Next to the last tenant's rancid
jam (CP 217-18).

While honey symbolizes her early happiness, the "six jars of it" stands for the six years she already spent in marriage. While the signifier honey in the previous poem entails bitterness, it here signifies sweetness, thus showing a "difference" in signifieds. Moreover, beside their literal signification of the ability to see in darkness, the "cat's eyes" metaphorically symbolize precious gems (memories) that give light to her dark life. Meanwhile, the "last tenant's rancid jam" refers to her absent husband who is presented here as a spoiling force in her life.

The following lines witness a shift from spaciousness to narrowness: the move is from the signifier "house" to the signifier "room" and then to the signifier "cellar," thus effecting a tightening impact upon the main tenant, the poet/speaker. In fact, this endless movement from one signifier to another divulges a hidden desire to be reunited with her husband whom she once loved, because, according to Eaglton, "All desire springs from a lack, which it strives continually to fill" (145). In her present life, she is suffocated by a feeling of isolation which makes her unable to breathe; she is also surrounded by an overwhelming darkness that "bunched in like a bat". Bees in winter, likewise, pass through similar tightening experiences when they are obliged to leave the spacious, sunny and warm life of the previous seasons and live in narrow, dark, wet and cold hives; hence, they are exposed to actual death. This phenomenon is known to bee keepers as the "colony collapse".

Momentarily, Plath appears not completely vindictive or offensive, as she declares that those who try to possess her – men – are "Neither cruel nor indifferent, / Only ignorant" (CP 218). However, in a dramatic switch of attitude, she argues that it is high time for the bees – women – to unite and "file like soldiers / to the syrup tin" so that they can achieve their shared goals and "make up for" their previous losses. Like bees of the same hive that "ball in a mass," women need to consolidate themselves: they need to have a "Black / Mind," a collective female mentality, that stands "against all white" male mentality. She further assumes a direct feminist resistance:

The bees are all women,
Maids and the long royal lady.
They have got rid of the men,
The blunt, clumsy stumblers, the boors (CP 218-19).

She identifies women with bees, whether as workers or queens. The hive, with all its different ranks, forms a solidarity that stands autonomously against men. Using feminist terms, she calls men "blunt, clumsy stumblers, the boors".

The penultimate stanza may give a false impression about the poet's acceptance of women's passivity and surrender to the status quo, but this false impression is demystified by the fact that she means it only as an irony:

Winter is for women--
The woman, still at her knitting,
At the cradle of Spanish walnut,
Her body a bulb in the cold and too dumb to
think (CP 219).

Like wintering bees, women live a state of hibernation during which they continue to perform traditional female roles as housewives and mothers. The image of the bulb confirms the idea that women are thought of as self-sacrificial sources, radiating warmth and light to their families. However, it is ironical that women are regarded as "too dumb to think"; it is also ironical that they are mainly considered too emotional creatures that lack sound, reasoning minds. Plath ends the poem asking rhetorical questions:

Will the hive survive, will the gladiolas
Succeed in banking their fires
To enter another year?
What will they taste of, the Christmas roses?
(CP 219)

Not surprisingly, the answers bear a note of triumph: "The bees are flying. They taste the spring" (CP 219). She assures that the hibernating bees, and by implication all women, will survive the cold winter and establish a new life; they will taste spring soon. Luck comments, "It is ironic that, despite this promise, Sylvia Plath was not to see the next spring after all because she committed suicide in the winter of 1963" (23). According to Harold Bloom, she thus has become "an exemplary martyr to patriarchal nastiness" (9).

This paper shows that Plath's views of her father and husband, conveyed through bee imagery, are unstable. They fluctuate between deep admiration and contempt. An aspect of such a fluctuation is seen in her constant shifts of identification from one rank of bees to another: once she identifies herself with working bees and another time with the old queen bee. In "The Bee-Keeper's Daughter," for example, she first identifies herself with working bees as female counterparts, but later in the poem she sees them as male transgressors that violate her femininity. The queen bee itself is both seen as a victim and an authoritarian power that controls the hive. This sense of oscillation is linguistically represented in the clash of signifiers with their traditional signifieds, hence hindering the existence of a stable

meaning. It is also reflected in the sliding of signifiers into others, as well as carrying a meaning, or a plurality of contradictory meanings, completely different from what the poems seem to be saying. Conforming to post-structuralist presuppositions, Plath's texts do not usually reflect a stability of meaning(s).

Notes

- 1 Mark C. Taylor argues that "Signification at the most basic level presupposes a distinction between signifier and signified" (524).
- 2 The abbreviation CP stands for Sylvia Plath's, *The Complete Poems*. Any other reference to the texts is taken from the same volume. The numbers provided are those of page numbers.
- 3 According to Stewart Clarke:

The symbolism of white in this poem is very strong. The many white things in the poem ... could symbolise Plath's false purity that she herself likes to believe that she is. The 'man in black' suddenly seems a danger when compared to the mass of 'white' things. Perhaps this man in black is here to take her purity.
- 4 Larrissy, however, contends that Plath is a highly rhetorical poet who "imparts a relatively impersonal air even to self-referential statements of the speaker" (145). This adds to the complexity and instability of meaning.

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