

Plath's Bee Poems:

Flying, Freedom, and Fertility in Witch Imagery

by Dorka Tamás

Introduction

This paper argues that fertility in Sylvia Plath's bee sequence functions as a source of female power which links female sexual reproduction, creative production, and the supernatural. My analysis of the bee poems relies on the concept of fertility associated with female supernatural powers, which functions as a source of freedom and autonomy of the poetic persona embodied in the queen bee. I argue that the queen and the bees are often portrayed as diabolic and have witch-like characteristics. My reading establishes a connection between Plath's bee poems and popular twentieth-century anthropological works on fertility and the supernatural. The hypothesis that witches participated in a fertility cult was popularized by Margaret Murray; her theory had been recited until scholars of the witch-hunt demonstrated she falsified evidence and fabricated her theory. The other well-known anthropological work is *The Golden Bough* by Sir James George Frazer which I consider as an influence on Plath's thoughts on fertility. In the bee poems, Plath portrays the female persona conscious of her reproductive, sexual, and creative powers which suggest a connection between fertility, poetic

inspiration, and witch imagery.

This paper argues that the bee poems portray a witch-like poetic persona and recognise fertility as a form of female power which function as Plath's representation of her two perceived identities – the poet and the mother – in which she incorporated supernatural elements. I suggest that the poems which were written in October 1962, in particular, the bee poems which use the witch imagery associated with fertility and productivity, could have been a result of discovering Ted Hughes's love poems written to Assia Wevill in which he portrayed Plath as a hag. Plath's letter addressed to Dr Ruth Beuscher dated on 29 September 1962 gives evidence on vital information:

...found them --- sheafs of passionate love poems to this woman, this one woman to whom he has been growing more & more faithful, describing their orgasms, her ivory body, her smell, her beauty, saying in a world of beauties he married a hag, talking about "now I have hacked the octopus off my ring finger." Many are fine poems. (L2 843)

Two of the referenced poems have been identified (L2 843n1) therefore, it is clear that the letter is not a groundless allegation. Further, Plath's quotation from Hughes's poem which indicates his entrapment in the marriage echoes one of his earlier letters in which he claimed to Lucas Myers that he had been "wived, ringed, and roofed" (qtd. in Clark 55). I propose that Hughes's portrayal of Plath as a hag, who is a more repulsive and elderly version of the witch, influenced her to use the female supernatural figure as a poetic identity. This paper argues that Plath's portrayal of the witch-like persona in many of the *Ariel* poems can be read as a poetic response or reclamation of the hag-like identity Hughes depicted her with. In bee poems, fertility functions both as sexual-reproductive and creative-intellectual power which is the main source of female autonomy. By using the supernatural female figure associated with fertility originated from Murray's theory, Plath links female fertility with creative and supernatural powers.

To move on, I turn to Margaret Murray's witch-cult theory to fully understand how and why Plath could have associated witches with fertility. I also study Plath's knowledge of fertility sourced from *The Golden Bough* which argues for Plath's thoughts on fertility and sexual reproduction.

Witch-Cult and Fertility

In the early twentieth century, the Egyptologist Margaret Alice Murray popularised the idea of the fertility cult of witches. Her main book *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (1921) builds on the idea that witches participated in a fertility cult during the Middle Ages and early modern period where they celebrated the Horned God who became the Christian representation of the Devil. Murray established her hypothesis based on the manipulated, edited confessions from different parts and times of Western-Europe, ideas without any grounding, and by

relying on her anthropological knowledge of tribal fertility rituals. Murray's witch-cult idea was inspired by previous popular writings, such as Jules Michelet's *La Sorcière* (1862) and Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890) (Cohn 150-152). Despite some earlier critics, such as George L. Burr (1922), her hypothesis continued to be popular for decades and her entry on "Witchcraft" in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* remained unchanged, even, when it was reprinted in 1969 (Simpson 89). The more established critiques of Murray's witch-cult theory started to be widespread during the 1960s-70s, among the many scholars, Keith Thomas, Alan Macfarlane, and Norman Cohn criticised her work. However, the purge of Murray's theories from academia did not mean that her enormous influence was ended: her witch-cult theory influenced many of the Neo-Pagan movements. The most influential figure of the twentieth-century Neo-Paganism has been Gerald Gardner, the founder of Wicca who used several ideas from Murray's theory: she even wrote the introduction for his book, *Witchcraft Today* (1954).

Plath's relationship to the occult has been the focus of the past studies, such as the influence of Tarot cards: Mary Kurtzman's essay from 1988 "Plath "Ariel" and Tarot", and more recently by Julia Gordon-Bramer's book *Fixed Stars Govern a Life* (2014) which "decodes" the *Ariel* poems with the meaning of the major arcana cards from Tarot. Plath's involvement with occult practices has been examined by Judith Kroll in *Chapters in a Mythology* (1976), Timothy Materer in "Sylvia Plath: Occultism as Source and Symptom" published in *Modernist Alchemy* (1995), and Helen Sword in the essay from 1994, "James Merrill, Sylvia Plath, and the Poetics of Ouija". These studies almost always look at Plath's engagement with the supernatural as a result of her meeting with Ted Hughes which inspired poems such as "Ouija" and "Goatsucker". The previous

researches give too much credit to Hughes's influence.¹ For example, Plath showed interest in paganism from her adolescent age which has generally been overlooked by critics who explored her religious beliefs. Her letters and journals are well-documented with her thoughts on religion: in a letter from 1955 to her friend, Elinor Friedman Klein, Plath identified herself with humanist paganism: 'I am the tabu: the "Christian girl" (I can't convince them I'm healthy pagan)' (L1 1040). This view is also expressed in, for example, a juvenilia poem, "Sonnet: To Time": "So cry for the pagan girl left picking olives / Beside a sunblue sea, and mourn the flagon" (CP 311). She regarded the pagan girl in the poem as a representation of closeness to nature as opposed to the mechanical modern age (L1 396). Her religious thoughts and those represented in her poetry give an account of her views of paganism which she identified with nature-centredness. While there is no evidence that Plath was a practitioner of paganism, some of her views align with beliefs of the Neo-Pagan religion, Wicca.²

1 A common error which biographers and scholars have committed is to attribute Plath's interest in magic and occultism to Ted Hughes. Wagner-Martin highlights that Plath got a Tarot pack for her birthday in 1956 from Hughes in *Sylvia Plath: A Biography* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1988), 138. Print.

Yet, Plath mentions ten days before her birthday, on the 17 October 1956 to Hughes that she is reading Basil Rakoczi's *The Painted Caravan: A Penetration into the Secrets of the Tarot Cards* (1954), she writes: 'I began reading my "Painted Caravan" book; it is my favourite book'. *The Letters of Sylvia Plath Volume I: 1940–1956* (London: Faber, 2017), 1306. Print.

She only mentions getting the pack of Tarot cards from Hughes on the 28 October 1956: "he gave a lovely Tarot pack of cards". *The Letters of Sylvia Plath Volume II: 1956–1963* (London: Faber, 2018), 4. Print.

2 In 1954, Plath noted that her ideal marriage ceremony would be "a kind of pagan ritual", close to nature, symbolising "life force and fertility". *The Letters of Sylvia Plath Volume I: 1940–1956* (London: Faber, 2017), 688. Print.

Plath also often used the concept of "sun-worship" or "sun cult" referring to sunbathing, she associates this with

Despite the lack of evidence and scholarly interest in Plath's knowledge of Murray's witch-cult theory, my research suggests that she was familiar with the idea of the fertility cult of witches or had some knowledge of the Neo-Pagan movements in Britain. One of the sources could have been newspapers which often featured articles on the growth of Neo-Paganism when Plath lived in England. Plath could have read articles from *The Observer* whose poetry editor was Al Alvarez, Plath's friend and literary critic. Articles include a piece by Gerald Gardner on "Modern Witches" from 1956, a statement from the Archbishop of Liverpool warning against the rising immigrant pagans in Britain, and a report from Exeter stating that witches in Devon are still practising both black and white magic.³ While living in Devon, Plath could have heard or read in local newspapers about the claims concerning the community of Exeter. For her English 21 high school senior year course in which Plath studied *The House of the Seven Gables*, Plath educated herself on the subject for the project on Hawthorne by, for example, reading from the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* a section on witchcraft laws.⁴ The same edition of the encyclopaedia featured Murray's definition of "Witchcraft" which describes the alleged cult of witches which Plath also could have encountered.⁵ It

paganism. *The Letters of Sylvia Plath Volume I: 1940–1956* (London: Faber, 2017), 732; 736; 1181. Print.

The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath (New York: Anchor Books, 2002), 540. Print.

3 Gardner, Gerald B. "Modern Witches." *The Observer* (1901- 2003), Dec 16 1956, p. 2. ProQuest. Web. 17 Jan. 2019.; "'PAGAN TENDENCIES IN BRITAIN'." *The Manchester Guardian* (1901-1959), 05 Apr. 1956, p. 2. ProQuest. Web. 17 Jan. 2019.; "'Devon Witches Still Practising'." *The Observer* (1901- 2003), 13 May 1956, p. 9. ProQuest. Web. 17 Jan. 2019.

4 From "Library of Sylvia Plath". *Library Thing*; Plath, Sylvia. *The House of the Seven Gables*; Project. Holograph with instructor's comments. 24 p. For English 21. Box 10, Folder 1. Plath MSS. II, Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington.

5 *Encyclopaedia Britannica* 14th edition (London: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1932) vol. 23, 686-688. Print.

is also likely that she encountered the fertility cult of witches in Robert Graves' *The White Goddess* which was influential in Plath's poetry.⁶ While to my knowledge, no work has explored Ted Hughes's familiarity with Murray's witch-cult theory, some of his poems show awareness of the subject, such as "Witches" published first in 1958:

Once was every woman the witch
To ride a weed the ragwort road:
Devil to so whatever she would:
Each rosebud, every old bitch.
(...)
Dancing in Ireland nightly, gone
To Norway (the ploughboy bridled),
Nightlong under the blackamoor spraddled,
Back beside their spouse by dawn

As if they had dreamed all. Did they dream it?

Oh, our science says they did. (THCP 80)

The poem describes several claims which can be found in Murray's book, such as the night rides of witches and sexual encounters with the Devil which previously has been regarded as dreaming, hallucination, or hysteria of women, claims that Murray dismisses (10; 177). Hughes also studied anthropology at the University of Cambridge (Brandes 69). Therefore, he was likely to gain knowledge of the then-celebrated witch-cult hypothesis. Plath likely encountered ideas about the fertility cult of witches through Hughes's knowledge of anthropology, interest in witches and folklore, and his introduction of *The White Goddess* to her. To sum up, I propose that to some extent, Plath was familiar with Murray's fertility cult theory described in *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* which could

⁶ Graves references Murray's witch-cult theory in one of his footnotes in the chapter "The Tree Alphabet (2)" as supporting material. He also loosely uses the concept of "witch cult" throughout his book referring to the alleged cult of witches from ancient and medieval times. *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (London: Faber, 1961), 201. Print.

have influenced her ideas on fertility and the supernatural.

Plath received *The Golden Bough* as a present from her mother; she first mentions reading Frazer's anthropological book in 1954 in a letter to her mother which she read for her Smith dissertation (L1 822-823). Her copy of the book is kept at the Smith archives, which contains Plath's annotation and underlining.⁷ Plath's journals and letters provide evidence on her interest in the concept of fertility which started to appear roughly the same time when she mentions reading *The Golden Bough*. In a letter addressed to a friend, Philip E. McCurdy from February 1954, Plath expressed her thoughts on wedding rituals stating that she does not "worship in the cult of the diamond" and her ideal marriage ceremony "would be best performed on a rock cliff overlooking the ocean (my personal symbol of life force and fertility) (...) a kind of pagan ritual" (L1 688). Here, Plath echoes a romanticised view of paganism which she associates with nature-centredness symbolising fertility. Some months later, in a letter addressed to Melvin Woody, Plath gives an account of her thoughts on fertility rituals criticising Woody's "sterile" ideas about reproduction:

Your concept of a completed ritual act of fertility is as incomplete and sterile as any I could imagine! (...) Do you accept the fact that the demand of fertility in fertility, creation (not of male euphoria) of babies, and the care of such? Can you deny that the end of fertility is reproduction, not just the hedony which you condone as "a ritual act of fertility allowing no aesthetic distance?" (L1 745).

In the citation, Plath condemns fertility rituals which are centred on male pleasure, she argues that fertility should focus on reproduction, therefore shifting the focus to the female

⁷ From "Library of Sylvia Plath". *Library Thing*.

perspective. The letter gives evidence of Plath's attribution of female and reproductive forces to fertility. Some years later, in a journal entry from January 1959, Plath writes about fertility suggesting the influence of *The Golden Bough*: "Talked easily [with Shirley Baldwin Norton] about babies, fertility, amazingly frank and pleasant. (...) Must read some Sociology, Spock on babies. All questions answered. Can I do the poems? By a kind of contagion?" (J 466-467). Plath also notes that she is not interested in men "at all", only in "women and womentalk" (J 466). The entry gives an account on Plath's recurring interest in the topic of fertility which she associates with a women-centred view of sexual reproduction. In the citation, she also associates reproductive fertility with fertile poetry writing, as a kind of contagion. Plath's phrasing suggests the influence of Frazer's theory of contagious magic (a type of sympathetic magic) which depends on the idea of contact as contagion (174-175). In this context, Plath suggests that fertile sexual reproduction would produce fertile poetry. To conclude, *The Golden Bough* is an essential source for Plath's thoughts on fertility and reproduction which influenced her thoughts on fertility before she became a mother. The evidence suggests that Plath's view of fertility was female-centred and reproduction-oriented which she also depicted in her poetry, such as in the bee sequence. To conclude this section, I argue that anthropological works heavily influenced Plath's thoughts and poetry on fertility, particularly on the fertility rituals which are associated with female supernatural figures and powers. In the next section, I look at the bee sequence, my reading comparing the beehive to a witch-cult and I argue that the function of the witch-cult hypothesis is to source the reproductive and creative fertility from the supernatural and establish the autonomy of the poetic and female identity.

The studies which rely on images of the fertility

of the bees often refer to Plath's earlier poem, "The Beekeeper's Daughter". Susan Van Dyne argues that the "pulsing sexuality of the female bees" functions as a threat to the control of the beekeeper-father (*Revising Life* 107). Plath's representation of the bees anticipates the fertile female group in the bee sequence: "The Golden Rain Tree drips its powders down. / In these little boudoirs streaked with orange and red" (CP 118). The sexual connotation of the boudoirs and the colour red establishes the bees as fertile women who are servants of the beekeeper-father: "The anthers nod their heads, potent as kings / To father dynasties" (CP 118). In "The Beekeeper's Daughter", there is a connection between the erotic and the deathly symbolised by honey (Scheerer 472): "A fruit that's death to taste: dark flesh, dark parings" (CP 118). The "The Beekeeper's Daughter" presents the queen bee as the fertile and sexual leader of the hive to whom "no mother can contest," which suggests her divine character. Her matriarchal character evokes the cult of fertility goddesses from ancient cultures, such as Diana (Frazer 40). Further, among Mediterranean and Near East cultures, bees and bee wax have been strongly tied with fertility goddesses (Carlson 2). Some critics, such as Tim Kendall also sourced Plath's bee metaphor from antique cultures; he argues for the influence of Plato's *Ion* which "proposes an account of poetic inspiration which draws a direct parallel between bees and the poets" (*Sylvia Plath* 128). This interpretation argues for the association of bees with creative writing which builds from the notion of poetic inspiration as fertility. To sum up, fertility has often been discussed in regards to the bee poems, my reading argues another reading and proposes the inclusion of the supernatural in the narrative fertility as female (re)productive power.

The Fertility Cult of Bees

In this section, I look at the bee sequence. My reading compares the beehive to a witch-cult and argues that the function of the witch-cult hypothesis is to source reproductive and creative fertility from the supernatural and establish the autonomy of the poetic and female identity. The most important difference between Murray's fertility cult hypothesis and Plath's poems is the idea that the witch-cult worshipped a male deity, the Horned God, also known as the Devil. Murray often likens her fertility cult hypothesis of witches to tribal cultures who held fertility rites in the belief of increasing the fertility of crops which indicates that she applied her knowledge of anthropology to the witch-cult hypothesis (Murray 177). Plath's bee poems portray a fertile beehive which is focused on the female supernatural in the image of the queen bee. This, however, is not in contradiction with Murray's witch-cult, but rather shows that Plath used other influences for her portrayal of the bees and the persona of the queen bee. For example, critics argued for the appearance of the *White Goddess* in the poems (Ferrier 209; 216). My reading proposes that Plath did not feel comfortable with the idea of a male-centred fertility cult, as suggested previously from her journals and letters, but considered fertility as reproduction-oriented and centred on women's experiences. Murray's witch-cult theory and Frazer's ideas about fertility rites provide a basis for Plath's bee sequence which portrays the "coven" of bees in which fertility and productivity become the main supernatural female powers of the queen bee and poetic persona.

I argue that the initiation ceremony and hierarchical structure of the bees in "The Bee Meeting" can be compared to Murray's description of witch covens. Previously scholars, such as Rosenblatt and Van Dyne argued for the interpretation of "The Bee Meeting" as a ritualistic initiation.⁸ I propose that the poem

8 Rosenblatt, Jon. *Sylvia Plath: The Poetry of Initi-*

uses supernatural elements and it alludes to an initiations ceremony into a witch coven. Some critics, such as Ford, propose a similar interpretation and argue that Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" short story influenced Plath's poem.⁹ Building on from this idea, I argue that the speaker imagines the meeting of the familiar faces as a witches' gathering in which she is initiated. "The Bee Meeting" takes place among a small village community who under their protective clothes become unfamiliar and strange to the speaker: "Who are these people at the bridge to meet me? They are the villagers — / The rector, the midwife, the sexton, the agent for bees"; "here is the secretary of bees with her white shop smock"; "Which is the rector now, is it that man in black? / Which is the midwife, is that her blue coat?" (CP 211). The speaker positions herself as the new member of the group who is initiated into the coven of beekeeping. In the initiation ceremony, wearing specific types of clothes and colours is part of the ritual: "Now they are giving me a fashionable white straw Italian hat / And a black veil that molds to my face, they are making me one of them" (CP 211). Murray describes the admission ceremonies into the covens like a new baptism and getting the Devil's mark (74-75). In the poem, the speaker feels unsure about her initiation to the beekeeper community; she does not accept the bees, yet, she wears the clothing which makes her belong to the community. This can be considered a "baptism" into the coven. The *ation* (USA: The University of North Carolina Press, 1979), 29. Print; Van Dyne, Susan R. *Revising Life: Sylvia Plath's Ariel Poems* (London: University of North Carolina, 1993), 105. Print; Perloff, Marjorie. "The Two Ariels: The (Re) making Of The Sylvia Plath Canon". *The American Poetry Review*, 13.6. (1984): 10–18. JSTOR. Web.; Kroll, Judith. *Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1976), 142; 145-147. Print.

9 Lindberg-Seyersted, Brita. *Sylvia Plath: Studies in Her Poetry and Her Personality* (Oslo: Novus Press, 2002), 11. Print.; Ford, Karen Jackson. *Gender and the Poetics of Excess* (Jackson, Miss.: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), 142. Print.

speaker describes the honey-making of the bees which throughout the poems appears as a symbol of their female fertility which alludes to the idea of the fertility cult: "The white hive is snug as a virgin, / Sealing off her brood cells, her honey, and quietly humming" (CP 212). Further, the stinging of the bees can be considered a "mark" of the initiation which the speaker does not get. Only at the third poem of the sequence, "Sting," does the speaker start feeling sympathetic towards the bees and identify with the queen which can suggest she received her "mark" from the bees.

According to Murray, the witch covens had thirteen members. She mentions the following roles: "the Devil" (a man dressed up in an animal disguise, black costume, who is the leader of the sabbath, rather than an actual religious figure), officers, leader of dance, and Queen of Sabbath (31; 188-189; 194). In "The Bee Meeting", there are nine members named if we include the queen bee, the magician-father, and the virgin bees (which are not numbered), the members of ceremony can be considered thirteen. In *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe*, Murray cites from confessions of accused witches to describe the identity of "the Devil" who is often referred to as "a man in black" clothing (34). In the poem, the rector is called "that man in black" which alludes to Plath's representation of the diabolic father figure in "Daddy" and "Man in Black". Among the village members, he is the only religious figure who takes up the shape of the devilish character. In Plath's short story about the day at the beekeepers, "Charlie Pollard and the Beekeepers," the diabolic relationship between the rector and the bees is directly expressed:

"See all the bees round the Rector's dark trousers!" whispered the woman. "They don't seem to like white." I was grateful for my white smock.' (...) "Maybe they want to join his church," one man, emboldened by the anonymity of the

hats, suggested. (J 657).

The bees' attraction to the man in black and his dark colour suggest their diabolic nature opposed to the protective white colour, which I suggest, alludes to white magic. The woman's suggestion in the short story that the bees want to join the rector's church indicates the "unorthodox" church of the witch coven. The reference to the speaker's magician-father ("I am the magician's girl who does not flinch" (CP 212)) also indicates that the village gathering has some kind of magical or supernatural element; Ford argues that the "magician's girl" self-characterisation associates the speaker with sorcery (145). The poem suggests that beekeeping (identified as magic) is the shared practice of the group members in which the speaker is initiated. In my interpretation, the speaker has to choose between paternal or white magic, which is the art of beekeeping, and the fertility of the beehive which stands for female supernatural powers. In "The Bee Meeting", the speaker distances herself from both the bees and the group members which means she has not yet decided which tradition of the supernatural powers she is going to take on. As the sequence continues, she identifies more with the fertility of the bees and the queen bee. To sum up, my analysis proposes that the gathering of the villagers in "The Bee Meeting" resembles Murray's account of the organisation structure and rituals of the covens. My interpretation of the bees' association with fertility offers a reading in which Plath engages with the supernatural connotations of the concept.

The diabolic nature of the bees is suggested in their characterisation as dark in "The Arrival of the Bee Box" poem ("It is dark, dark, / (...) Black on black, angrily clambering" (CP 213)), their attraction to the "man in black" figure, and the bees' opposition to the whiteness suggesting the white magic of the father-beekeeper. Van Dyne notes that Plath made the most revision

of "Sting": in the draft Plath gave much more power to the third person who is watching the speaker and the man in white who embodies the father-beekeeper (*Revising Life* 107;109). In the draft lines, Plath did not refer to the sexual nature of the queen bee; she is simply portrayed as diabolic. Van Dyne reads Plath's draft portraying the male spy on her creative process who can be both the father or Hughes which suggests that the bees, particularly the queen bee, refuse male authority (*Revising Life* 109). In this reading, the reproductive and creative supernatural powers of the beehive do not only reject the male presence but kill it – see the stinging of the father. In "Wintering", the last poem of the sequence, Plath explicitly names the gathering of the bees a dark mass which alludes to the witches' sabbath: "Now they ball in a mass, / Black / Mind against all that white" (CP 218). The lines express that the bees stand against "all that white" which can refer to the white and protective magic of father-beekeeper. Murray often quoted from the book of Jules Michelet's *La Sorcière* (1862), a historical study on witchcraft which was one of the first studies which popularised the idea of an organised witch-society consisting mostly of peasants. In his book, Michelet writes about the Black Mass:

His [the Devil's] nocturnal Sabbaths are merely an unimportant relic of Paganism. He honours and fears the moon, exerting as she does an influence over the productions of the soil. Old women are her devotees, and burn little candles in honour of Dianom (Diana-Luna-Hecaté). (98-99)

The quotation gives an account of the witch covens which, according to Michelet, consist of old women who are devoted to the Lunar Goddesses. He also notes the important role of the Moon which proposes supernatural female powers associated with fertility and witches. Although there is no account of whether

Plath was familiar with the book or the ideas presented in it, the bee poems show a similarity to Michelet's Black Mass idea, such as the diabolic nature of the bees and their worship of a female fertility deity embodied by the queen bee.

Throughout the poems, there are allusions to female sexual reproduction, such as in "The Bee Meeting": "Is it blood clots the tendrils are dragging up that string? / No, no, it is scarlet flowers that will one day be edible" (CP 211). In "Sting", production of the honey of the bees is often likened to female fertility: "Of winged, unmiraculous women, / Honey-drudgers."; Here is my honey-machine, / It will work without thinking, / Opening, in spring, like an industrious virgin" (CP 214-215). The honey-making of the bees is a kind of fertility rite which is both productions of food and the sweet substance which is associated with female reproduction and stands for the autonomy of the bees. The poem "Wintering" is the most explicit about female powers and rebirth and also uses allusions to the bees' possession of supernatural power:

They can only carry their dead.
The bees are all women,
Maids and the long royal lady.
They have got rid of the men, (CP 218)

The first line presents the bees as being able to cross to the underworld. In Ancient Greek and Roman mythology, the bees represented a borderland between the gods and humans, having been linked with divine qualities which support their supernatural being (Carlson 19). The lines which present the female-only fertility hive suggest the assertion of female powers and fertile reproduction. Among the bees, Plath names the maidens and the queen who correspond to Murray's description of the two most important female roles in witch covens. The line, "They have got rid of the men" also suggests the refusal of the male deity whom

Murray identifies as the Horned God. Previously some of Plath's poems expressed interest in his figure and considered the male deity as a source of poetic inspiration.¹⁰ In the bee poems, the poetic persona sources her powers from fertility which is characterised as reproductive, creative, and supernatural. Plath's continuous assertion of the bees as women who are honey-makers suggests their reproduction-oriented female fertility cult. In the bee poems, the bees stand for a female identity which is maternal, sexual, creative, and supernatural suggesting that the rebirth of the poetic persona – from the controlling paternal and romantic relationship – is only possible in a female fertile environment. To sum up, Murray's witch-cult hypothesis offers a reading which looks at fertility associated with the supernatural as a cult-like female practice which helps to achieve the fulfilment of the female subject. In the next section, I focus on the portrayal of the queen bee as a supernatural female figure and look at her association of certain characteristics with a witch-like persona which appears in much of Plath's poetry.

Poetic Identity in Witch Imagery

In this section, I argue that Plath portrays the queen bee as witch-like with fertility and female powers. I also propose that in some *Ariel* poems Plath merged the poetic persona who embodies the female supernatural with witch imagery. In the bee sequence, the queen's and the speaker's identity become interchangeable, which gives an account of Plath's portrayal of the queen bee as a representation of her poetic self. The queen first appears in "The

¹⁰ Plath named the spirit who allegedly was visiting them in their Ouija reading session Pan. The Greek god has been also the name of the Horned God worshipped according to Murray. Plath wrote in her letters that she turned to Pan asking for subjects to her poetry writing (L2 258-259). His presence is suggested in the poem, "Ouija" ("The old god, too, writes aureate poetry") and in "Faun" ("Goat-horns. Marked how god rose / And galloped woodward in that guise") (CP 35; 77).

Bee Meeting" poem in which she is described as a wise and old woman: "Is she hiding, is she eating honey? She is very clever. / She is old, old, old, she must live another year, and she knows it" (CP 212). While undergoing the initiation ceremony, the speaker is the most interested in the queen bee's character: "The old queen does not show herself, is she so ungrateful?" (CP 212). The queen bee is the matriarch of the bee colony who, similar to the other bees, has supernatural powers. Besides being the central figure of the fertility bee-cult, her most important supernatural power is that she is able to be resurrected – similar to other poetic personas in the *Ariel* poems. She has powers, as "The Beekeeper's Daughter" poem claims, "no mother can contest" (CP 118) which makes her the most fertile and most powerful among the bees. The draft of "Stings" also suggests that she is "Black as the devil" which proposes the queen bee's diabolic powers. The queen bee has also been likened to a "totem of female power"; her role is essential to the survival of the bee colony (Britzolakis 98). In "The Bee Meeting", the queen bee is portrayed as a murderess who escapes from the beekeepers wanting to sacrifice her: "The upflight of the murderess into a heaven that loves her. / The villagers are moving the virgins, there will be no killing" (CP 212). The lines associate the queen with aerial qualities. Margaret Dickie argues that description of the queen bee alludes to two Egyptian goddesses: Sekhmet, the goddess of warriors and healing, and Bast, who is known as the lioness goddess (Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes 164-165). In my view, Isis had a greater influence on Plath's bee poems. Isis is the goddess of magic and life and is considered a mother goddess, all of which describe many of the characteristics of the queen bee. Plath and Hughes had a large engraving of Isis, and Plath also gave her daughter the name Isis as an "astrological name" (L2 406; 518) which further suggests the importance of Isis in Plath's life. In the sixth

volume of *The Golden Bough*, Frazer argues that Isis was also known as the goddess of corn, therefore associated with fertile land (116-117). For Plath, Isis also could have symbolised a maternal witch-goddess.

In "Sting", the queen's and the speaker's relationship become tied together; the speaker explicitly names herself a queen who experiences a rebirth. Similarly, the queen bee wakes up from her hibernation. The "almost magical rebirth" portrayed in the bee poems further suggests the engagement with the supernatural in the sequence (Wood 117).

Have a self to recover, a queen.
Is she dead, is she sleeping?
Where has she been,
With her lion-red body, her wings of
glass?

Now she is flying
More terrible than she ever was, red
Scar in the sky, red comet (CP 215)

Critics such as Van Dyne have noted the similarities of the "lion-red" characterisation of the queen bee to the resurrected self in "Lady Lazarus" who asserts: "I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air" and the burning virgin in "Fever 103°" (*Revising Life* 112-113). In other words, Plath's portrayal of the poetic personas in the poems she wrote in October 1962 show resemblances, are often characterised as fertile or sexual, are reborn, and struggle with a male opponent for survival. Like the queen bee, the speaker of "Lady Lazarus" also flies – in the body of a phoenix – and rejects men as equals. The poetic personas are characterised by the colour red which has sexual and reproductive connotations and alludes to burning signifying rebirth. Further, "Witch Burning" also gives evidence of Plath's early association of the witch figure with fiery red which burns her: "The red tongues will teach the truth" (CP 135).

I suggest that Plath associated red hair

with a sexual and witchy identity which her correspondence gives an account of. In the letter addressed to Dr Beuscher from 1961, Plath writes about her "Wicked Witch Trauma" which she explains was triggered by Olwyn Hughes's hostility towards her during the Christmas she spent at the Hughes's in Yorkshire. Here, Plath describes Olwyn's behaviour, attributing special function to her red hair as associated with promiscuous sexuality: "She acted like a jealous mistress, down to the red-dyed hair" (L2 564). Plath notes that Olwyn was "lecturing" her about "the meaning of womanhood" which Plath considered offensive as Olwyn Hughes did not have children. In the same paragraph, Plath identifies her husband with "Prince Charming" for whom she and Olwyn (identified as the wicked witch) had to compete. The letter is essential to understanding Plath's associations of red hair and sexuality with witch imagery. I argue that Plath used this connection to portray some of her poetic personas in the *Ariel* poems in which the colour red suggests witch-like characteristics. On the other hand, redness associated with fire and rebirth also appears in "Witch Burning". In the poem from 1959, Plath did not use the witch as an embodiment of her poetic persona, yet, it gives an account on her interest in the supernatural female figure whose rebirth symbolises flying, freedom, and unrestricted sexuality. As I proposed at the beginning, the allusions to witch-like figures in the poems Plath wrote in October 1962 are, in some way, the result of wanting to reclaim her poetic identity as hag-like. She transforms the hag into a sexual, fertile, and creative poetic persona and uses her creative and maternal fertility which Plath felt inspired by. The red hair which Plath previously associated with the unsympathetic characteristics of a promiscuous and witchy Olwyn becomes the "lion-red body" of the queen bee and the phoenix-like red hair of the speaker in "Lady Lazarus". Therefore, for Plath, the colour red which suggests fertility,

sexuality, and rebirth was also associated with the witch-like figure.

In "Wintering", there is no mention of the queen bee, which can be read as the speaker having completely merged with the queen's persona. The poem focuses on female survival, the Black Mass of the beehive, and recounting of her possessions: "I have my honey, / Six jars of it, / Six cat's eyes in the wine cellar" (CP 217). The lines give an account of the fertile product of the beekeeping associated with female sexuality. The speaker's reciting of her honey collection echoes the listing of ingredients of brew which can be read as a protective charm used for the survival of bees. Although in "Wintering" the relationship between the speaker and the bees reaches its final state, there is still a distance between the hive and the speaker/queen who never fully belongs to the colony: "Neither cruel nor indifferent, / Only ignorant. / This is the time of hanging on for the bees—the bees / So slow I hardly know them" (CP 218). Britzolakis argues that in this poem the allegory of a matriarchal community is undeveloped, and "Wintering" concludes the metaphor of beekeeping as "the materiality of writing as social practice" which highlights the relationship between poetic inspiration and fertility in the poem (99). The end line ("The bees are flying. They taste the spring." (CP 219)) uses the analogy between the renewal of nature and female reproduction (Van Dyne, *Revising Life* 114). My analysis of the bee poems argues that Plath used witch imagery to portray the bees as dark and diabolic and fertile flying women, which alludes to Margaret Murray's fertility cult hypothesis. Plath's portrayal of the supernatural character of the female bees is suggested in her continuous reference to the diabolic nature of the bees, the association of beekeeping with magic, the resurrection of the queen bee, and the allusions to the witches' gathering. To sum up, I argue that Plath used the witch imagery associated with fertility to

assert the supernatural qualities she attributed to her reproductive and productive powers with which she also responded in her poems to the hag-like identity with which Hughes described her.

Conclusion

The bee poems give an account of Plath's wish for creative and female autonomy in which fertility associated with women and the supernatural plays a crucial role. My analysis argues that the bee sequence can be read not only as Plath's poetic expression of female powers and autonomy but of the use of the supernatural, particularly the witch figure, as a source of poetic inspiration. Conclusively, the bee sequence reimagines fertility as a supernatural female power of the bees who thrive creatively and sexually. Their flying movements further suggest freedom and allusion to witch imagery.

Works Cited

Brandes, Rand. "The Anthropologist's Uses of Myth." *The Cambridge Companion to Ted Hughes*. Ed. Terry Gifford. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. 67-80.

Britzolakis, Christina. *Sylvia Plath and the Theatre of Mourning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.

Carlson, Rachel D. "The Honey Bee and Apian Imagery in Classical Literature." 2015. ProQuest. 30 Jan. 2020. <<https://search.proquest.com/docview/1675025072?accountid=10792>>.

Cohn, Norman. *Europe's Inner Demons*. London: Pimlico, 1993.

Cooper, Wendy. *Hair: Sex, Society, Symbolism*. New York: Stein and Day, 1975.

Dickie, Margaret. *Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979.

Ferrier, Carole. "The Beekeeper's Apprentice." *Sylvia Plath: New Views on the Poetry*. Ed. Gary Lane. Baltimore; London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979. 203-217.

Ford, Karen Jackson. *Gender and the Poetics of Excess*. Jackson, Miss.: University Press of Mississippi, 1997.

Frazer, James George. *The Golden Bough*. Vol. 6: *Adonis Attis Osiris: Studies in the History of Oriental Religion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

—. *The Golden Bough*. Vol. 1: *The Magic Art and the Evolution of Kings*. London: Macmillan, 1932 [reprint].

Hughes, Ted. *Collected Poem*. Ed. Paul Keegan. London: Faber & Faber, 2005.

Kendall, Tim. *Sylvia Plath: A Critical Study*. London: Faber & Faber, 2001.

Michelet, Jules. *Satanism and Witchcraft: The Classic Study of Medieval Superstition*. Trans. A.

R. Allinson. New York: Citadel Press, 1992.

Murray, Margaret. *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962.

Plath, Sylvia. *The Collected Poems*. Ed. Ted Hughes. New York: HarperCollins, 2008.

—. *The Letters of Sylvia Plath Volume I: 1940–1956*. Ed. Peter K. Steinberg and Karen V. Kukil. London: Faber, 2017.

—. *The Letters of Sylvia Plath: Volume II: 1956–1963*. Ed. Karen V. Kukil and Peter K. Steinberg. London: Faber & Faber, 2018.

—. *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*. Ed. Karen V. Kukil. USA: Anchor Books, 2002.

—. *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*. Ed. Karen V. Kukil. New York: Anchor Books, 2002.

Ranger, Holly. "Plath and Classics." *Sylvia Plath in Context*. Ed. Tracy Brain. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. 33-42.

Scheerer, Constance. "The Deathly Paradise of Sylvia Plath." *The Antioch Review*, 34.4 (1976): 469-480.

Simpson, Jacqueline. "Margaret Murray: Who Believed Her, and Why?" *Folklore* 105 (1994): 89-96.

Van Dyne, Susan R. "'More Terrible Than She Ever Was': The Manuscripts of Sylvia Plath's Bee Poems." *Critical Essays on Sylvia Plath*. Ed. Linda Wagner-Martin. Boston, Mass.: G. K. Hall, 1984. 154-169.

—. *Revising Life: Sylvia Plath's Ariel Poems*. London: University of North Carolina, 1993.

Wood, David John. *A Critical Study of the Birth Imagery of Sylvia Plath, American Poet*. Lewiston: E. Mellen Press, 1992.