

Bee-ing There: The Existential Influence in Sylvia Plath's "Bee Poems"

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"Sylvia Plath would have been a good poet even if she had not committed suicide," George Stade wrote in the introduction to a memoir written by Plath's college roommate (Steiner 3). Despite the initial shock value of such a seemingly unsympathetic statement, Stade was correct. Plath's suicide catapulted her into the cult phenomenon of artistic martyrdom with the likes of Van Gogh, Ernest Hemingway and Virginia Woolf. Frieda Hughes wrote the foreword to *Ariel: The Restored Edition* published in 2004: "I did not want my mother's death to be commemorated as if it had won an award. I wanted her *life* to be celebrated, the fact that she had existed," but as her final statement to a world that perpetuated her decline into hysteria, one cannot ignore such blunt punctuation to a life of letters (Plath xvi). Was it the only way to get her point across?

Plath's poetry shifted dramatically in content and tone in the last year of her life. Frieda Hughes stated "they had an urgency, freedom, and force that was quite new," revealing a new general attitude exhibited by the poet, who had never strayed away from revealing personal, emotional, painful subject matter (Plath x). Yet, the last poems, those left in the manuscript *Ariel*, particularly the "Bee Poems," display radical feminist and existential themes and reveal a Plath on the verge of revolution.

Plath savored and purged every painful circumstance in her life in an effort to divulge the situation of the female *to* the female through the avenue of confessional poetry. She posits herself against the "other," and refuses objectification and maternalization. The "Bee Poems" offer a response to the ontology of being female; and though personal and painful, begs the question: how can we thrive in the hive?

Simone de Beauvoir maintains, "the destiny that society traditionally offers women is marriage" (439). Plath recognized and dismissed this possibility at the age of seventeen in a journal: "I am afraid of getting older. I am afraid of getting married. Spare me from cooking three meals a day—spare me from the relentless cage of routine and rote. I want to be free," (Hughes 40). In a much later journal entry, after her marriage to Ted Hughes in 1956, Plath confesses: "Who am I angry at? Myself. No, not yourself [...] it is all the mothers I have known who have wanted me to be what I have not felt like really being from my heart and at the society which seems to want us to be what we do not want to be from our hearts. I am angry at these

people and images. I do not seem to be able to live up to them. Because I don't want to" (Hughes 272).

Contextualizing this statement within the philosophy of Beauvoir, the feminist existentialist, divulges a much deeper truth. Beauvoir contends that "woman's whole 'character'—her convictions, values, wisdom, morality, tastes and behavior—is explained by her situation. The fact that she is denied transcendence usually prohibits her from having access to the loftiest human attitudes—heroism, revolt. Detachment, invention and creation" (661). She maintains that this cycle is perpetuated from mother to daughter and it is the responsibility of the frustrated female to break this cycle of bad faith. For Plath, the avenue for transcending one's situation becomes more and more obscured when it is perpetuated by not only the patriarch, but *other females* as well. It is in her journals that she is able to reply to the impending future her "mother(s)" have idealized, "a nice little, safe little, sweet little loving little imitation man who'll give you babies and bread and a secure roof and a green lawn and money money money every month," where she finally admits "I hate my mother[s]" (Hughes 268).

Plath wrote in a letter to her mother on October 16, 1962, only weeks after her separation from Ted Hughes, that: "I am writing the best poems of my life; they will make my name" (Plath and Schober 468). And they did. "Daddy," "Lady Lazarus" and "Ariel" reveal a mastery of the confessional form of poetry. Readers will find themes of internal division, madness, fear and frustration throughout these late publications, revealing the side of the woman behind "the curtain of wax" (Plath and Hughes 81). The "Bee Poems" thematically reveal an anxiety of existence and an explication of internal vacancy and frustrated transcendence; an attitude assumed frequently in females, due to the under privileging of the female situation in social and economic spheres. The metaphors and symbols belong to her private life; Plath's father was a bee-keeper—an endeavor Plath and husband Ted Hughes pursued once they purchased the home in Devon, England. Throughout the "Bee Poems" bees serve as the metaphor for the female situated within a society that limits her. Bees lack ambitious, independent qualities: they work for *maintenance*; they are fixed in immanence under the guidance of one queen bee—or the standing socio-economic order. If a bee stings, it dies, which certainly functions to comment on the powerlessness Plath felt toward her own situation. The sequence features five poems: "The Bee Meeting," "The Arrival of the Bee Box," "Stings," "The Swarm" and "Wintering." These

poems actualize the internal oppression Plath vehemently fought against her entire life, but the attitudes expressed thematically rely heavily on her marital situation.

"The Bee Meeting" depicts a meeting of neighbors, coming to the domesticated bee hive to remove all the queen bees except for one, to ensure a unified swarm (80-81). For Plath, the experience is full of destructive images of death and misidentification. "In my sleeveless summery dress I have no protection," from the bees, females planted in facticity, identifying *against* themselves by prescribing to the doctrine presented by the standing patriarchal order. Beauvoir comments on this characteristic, offering, "the respect women grant to heroes and to the masculine world's laws stems from their powerlessness and ignorance; they acknowledge these laws not through judgment but through an act of faith: faith draws its fanatical power from the fact that it is not knowledge" (641). The ceremonious nature of the poem, begs the question "is it some operation that is taking place?" that serves to reconstruct her as a female—have her reborn, this time with a more cooperative spirit? The recurring images of white/black and the ceremonious nature of the "meeting" refer specifically to matrimony; the bride in white, the groom in black. Black also serves to perpetuate the image of a death. The bees offer a "black veil that molds to [her] face, they are making [her] one of them," alluding to both matrimony and death in an indistinguishable manner. The final stanza perpetuates the images, offering:

I am exhausted, I am exhausted--
Pillar of white in a blackout of knives
I am the magician's girl who does not flinch.
The villagers are untying their disguises, they are shaking hands.
Whose is that long white box in the grove, what have they accomplished
why am I cold. (81)

The speaker stands a "pillar of white, in a black out of knives," determined "they will not smell [her] fear. She repeats she is "exhausted" from trying to identify the source of her fear—and it is the identity they are compelling her to make her own. She is the "magician's girl" signifying that her acceptance of the identity imposed on her is derived from the realm of the occult; it is unnatural and fatal. The "disguises" they wear serve to perpetuate the speaker's mistrust of the individuals attempting to transform her, as well as their symbolic identities. The bees are successful, "shaking hands," and applauding their victory, fixing her in their socio-symbolic structure. Death is alluded to again, with the "long white box in the grove," the "white" serving to fuse the marriage/death image a final time. She is "cold." She has lost.

It may be true that "Cinderella didn't want to marry the prince, but she was helpless to stop the ceremonies;" however, domestic life proved to benefit Plath initially (Steiner 47). She spoke often of her gardening, baking and running after her child as revitalizing to her spirit in letters to her mother in the 1960-1961 years. Beauvoir takes up the domestic paradox in her chapter on "The Married Woman," in *The Second Sex*. She excuses the female tendency to arrange, fix and exist solely for the house that is made into the family home and the rearing of children—the new womb. She states: "Woman is locked into the conjugal community, she has to change this prison into a kingdom," and "the wife has no other task save the one of maintaining and caring for life in its pure and identical generality" (442). Like a child, Plath played house well with her young family. However, frustration occurred upon the realization that although Hughes allowed her mornings to write alone, it was still an *allowance*, an example of bad faith that dictated her primary role as caregiver of the household, her writing just a supplement to his earnings as a writer. The division of labor in this fashion divides the power as well. In "The Arrival of the Bee Box," the domestic situation is stressed (82-83). Torn between responsibility and desire, the speaker states: "I ordered this, this clean wood box," emphasizing an acceptance of her position, yet the diction that follows—"heavy," "coffin" "locked," "dangerous," reveals a much darker tone. Bleakly stating, "there is only a little grid, no exit," the image reveals a prison, barred windows and "dark, dark." Her frustrations lie in the fact that it seems that she has been forgotten, remade in the eyes of society—once motherhood ensued, it was as if her independent achievements received less special attention. "I am no source of honey/so why should they turn on me?" signaling her feelings toward being a mother. That she *has* a child is a fine thing; however, "no source of honey" reveals that Plath feels that she is more than a walking womb. The "box" is that which she is looking into, yet trapped inside of it. Her introspection allows for her to recognize what her situation has become, "how can I let them out/it is the noise that appalls me most of all?" The box cannot be opened, yet the feelings within the writer are troublesome and violent. The line "I wonder if they would forget me/ If I just undid the locks and stood back," offers dual meanings. Plath is playing with the idea of abandonment; her thwarted transcendence is not recognized by her husband and children. If she left the box open and released herself would they care? Would they even understand why? However, this line could serve to be Plath's way of acceptance. If *she* were to abandon her individual projects to focus solely on the happiness of her family, helping *them* to transcend, would they still forget her?

Would she then become just another bee? Though "The box is only temporary," Plath states that she will "set them free," however it is unclear *who* she meant to set free.

"Stings" continues with a similar theme of resignation (84-85). "Bare-handed, I hand the combs," indicating a feeling of emptiness within the speaker. This time the hive is a "teacup/White with pink flowers on it;" and she indicates that "With excessive love I enameled it," commenting upon the labor that went into arranging the household with thoughts of "Sweetness, sweetness" but soon realizing that her efforts seemed to produce nothing of value to her individual integrity. Her voice is thrown outside of her body into that swarm of mother-bees and questions her abilities as wife and mother—the voice echoes: "is there any queen at all in it?" indicating the home she shares with her family. The speaker acknowledges, responding:

If there is, she is old
Her wings torn shawls, her long body
Rubbed of its plush—
Poor and bare and unqueenly and even shameful. (84)

The speaker mingles sarcasm and self-deprecation into a tone of despair that indicates the resentment she feels toward her situation. "Wings torn" reveal an inadequacy or restraint the speaker feels, her body "rubbed of its plush" signifies her feelings toward pregnancy and childbirth, her body is no longer hers solely—it has been inhabited by someone else, meant literally, as in during pregnancy. However, figuratively, this signifies the embodiment of the collective socio-symbolic order that is imposed on her as a female, identifying her as vessel and nothing more. Beauvoir maintains that "the economic and sexual union of man and woman is a matter of transcending toward the collective interest and not of individual happiness," and her responsibility toward maintaining this order as a mother imposes on her individual inclination toward transcendence (448). The speaker is conscious of the new identity imposed on her by the mother-bees, she "stand[s] in column/Of winged, unmiraculous women," isolated. The speaker mourns the loss of her previous identity, before marriage and children. She states that she has "seen [her] strangeness evaporate," indicating that her individual essence has been lost. Her "honey-machine/[...] will work without thinking," signifying the dull, immanent qualities of domesticity and the frustration that she feels in being locked in to them. The speaker feels as if her individuality has been compromised for the benefit of the collective unit—not just her small family, but the expected way in which she is to function as a married woman. Her body and

mind, once hers solely, is now fixed within the socio-symbolic identity imposed on her. She has "dried plates with her dense hair," indicating a frustration at domesticity. She is underutilized. Like "The Arrival of the Bee Box," in "Stings," the speaker indicates a flight from or a step away from her current situation. She indicates that she "has a self to recover [...] / is she dead, is she sleeping?" and her "lion-red body" indicates a simultaneous strength and fragility. The speaker suffers from a division in her desires; in love with her children, she does not wish to abandon them. However, in order to recover her life that she has lost, she must take flight "over the engine that killed her—/The mausoleum, the wax house."

In letter from August 1962 to her mother, Plath writes: "I simply cannot go on living the degraded and agonized life I have been living, which has stopped my writing and just about ruined my sleep and my health" (460). This period in her life marked the separation from Hughes and Plath's desire to "lead a freer life" (460). She began employing nannies part-time to look after the children in order to have more time to pursue her writing. "I must at all costs [...] get a live-in nanny next spring so I can start trying to write and get my independence again," she states in a letter from September (461). The urgency present in her letters makes it clear that Plath felt slave to her situation and she identified the source of her frustration was her responsibility to the socio-symbolic identity of mother and matron imposed on her. "Wintering" reveals this new attitude exhibited by Plath in the late months of 1962 (87-88). It exhibits a fury the previous three "Bee Poems" lack. The title, "Wintering," illustrates a death or hibernation. For Plath, the death is that of her married identity. However, "Wintering" is the season in which the bees shut themselves in the hives, "this is the time of hanging on for the bees—the bees/ so slow I hardly know them/filing like soldiers," commenting upon the alienation she felt from society after she announced her dissatisfaction with her situation (87). Plath states that she "[does] not believe in divorce and would never think of [it]," from a letter in August 1962, which serves to showcase the attitude toward divorce within the community during this period (460). However, she *does* decide to pursue her independence and feels the sting from it. "This is the easy time, there is nothing doing," the speaker states, commenting upon the freedom she feels from liberating herself from her fixed situation. The "bees are all women;" and "neither cruel nor indifferent/ only ignorant," they have turned on her. Fixed in "black asininity" the bees foresee no plight in their situations; they are stuck in facticity. Beauvoir comments upon the female who exhibits this attitude: "One of their typical features is resignation," revealing that though many "bees" may

have entertained thoughts identical to Plath's regarding their situation, they would never revolt (642). Beauvoir continues, offering "the slave imprisoned in the harem does not feel any morbid passion for rose jelly and perfumed baths: she has to kill time somehow," a justification as to why females feel shackled and planted to their facticity (643). Their resignation signifies a fear that all will unravel if they do not *maintain it*. Their identities will collapse. The last four stanzas of "Wintering" offer a rally for revolution:

Now they ball in a mass
Black
Mind against all that white
The smile of the snow is white
It spreads itself out, a mile long body of Meissen (88).

Again the images of black and white are invoked. The bees "ball in a mass" signifying that the power division between the sexes can be changed, if only the entire population of females would rise to the occasion and explicate their miseries. Beauvoir maintains revolution is impossible for the females; historically, they "have never formed an autonomous and closed society; they are integrated in to the group governed by males, where they occupy a subordinate position; they are united by mechanical solidarity," revealing that a shift in the standard socio-economic division of labor will never occur as long as females have nothing in common except their "mechanical" labor and collective functions as vessels (638). Plath blames "the bees" for perpetuating their situation, but offers a solution, "Black/mind against all that white/ the smile of the snow is white." "Mind" in this instance offers an active engagement, specifying that the female should make a conscious decision to relinquish herself from the prison she enters upon accepting the social responsibilities of their identity. It also serves as the defense against this identity. Plath urges the bees to *utilize* their "mind" in effort to solve their problems, instead of solely resigning to them. The dynamic between black and white serves to perpetuate the image of marriage, however "black" in this usage signifies a death—the death of their previous identities as worker "bees." The "white" they fight against *is* that identity, it "smiles" at them, subordinating them to position of blushing bride. The "white snow" functions to perpetuate the lifeless union that would serve to freeze their transcendence. The reference to "Meissen" china in this stanza alludes to the endless routine of maintaining the household that refutes transcendence. How is there an opportunity to rise against when dishes remain in the sink?

"The Swarm" appears in *Ariel: The Restored Edition* in the appendix of transcripts and drafts (188-189). "The Swarm" explores the same theme of revolt found in "Wintering." The tone is vengeful and unforgiving. The "The Swarm" depicts a failure—a revolution gone awry, where the bee soldiers defect, relinquish their weapons and fall to defeat:

So the swarm balls and deserts
Seventy feet up, in a black pine tree.
It must be shot down. Pom! Pom!
So dumb it thinks bullets are thunder (188).

The swarm "deserts" the life of maintenance imposed upon them by the standing patriarch-privileged division of labor. "Seventy feet up," off the ground and *out of facticity* they move toward transcendence. "Black" again serves to signify the death of the order. However, the "dumb" bees still have not proven to be successful. They are unaware of the opposition that intends to pull them back down and restore them to their previous way of life—for if there were no women, no "bees" to work under guidance, the capitably driven system would fall apart, as they work for free. Identifying "bullets" as "thunder" indicates the notion that their situation is demanded by nature, or God, and it is simply *the way things are*. Beauvoir maintains that "because [the female] has never experience the powers of liberty, she does not believe in liberation: the world to her seems governed by an obscure destiny against which it is presumptuous to react," revealing why the bees abandon their position, having thought the opposition was simply "the voice of God" (643).

Beauvoir offers that "through nervous fits in her body she attempts to express the refusals she cannot carry out concretely," which indicates a collective female compulsion that may have contributed to Plath's terminal anguish. Many maintain Plath suffered from mental illness; she exhibited many of actions symptomatic of bipolar disorder. Others contend that she did not intend to take her own life, only to draw attention to her frustrations, which were numerous and evident in her poetry, letters and journals. Despite her cries for help, her pleas were dismissed, discounted and reduced to feminine frivolity.

Tall tales are built around legends. The details of the last morning of her life will remain private to Plath alone and fans of her life and work can only speculate what truly compelled her to end her life. Her husband, Ted Hughes, wrote "in another culture, perhaps, she would have been happier" (Hughes xi); an alarmingly accurate statement. I am convinced Hughes meant a

culture different from our own, whereas Plath hoped to reshape the culture that presently exists, in effort to create a space for the female to express and fulfill her desires without interference, an "organic solidarity upon which any unified community is founded" (Beauvoir 638).

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