

Radical Feminism and Sylvia Plath's "Bee Poems" in the Milieu of Modernist (Confessional) Poetry

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Abstract. Modernism covers a vast panorama of socio-political events. In literature too, the period covers various art movements like Symbolism, Imagism, Dadaism, Surrealism, Expressionism and Vorticism. The term "modernist poetry" is usually applied to the poetical works written roughly between 1890 and 1950. In such poetry, we find utter disillusionment and meaninglessness. The technique of collage, also called montage, marks most of the writings of the period. Sylvia Plath, our poet under consideration, also uses this technique in her poems. Her poems are composed of random pieces that need to be joined together in order to understand them. Plath is mostly celebrated for her confessional writing style. In this tradition, she follows the great confessional poet, Robert Lowell. But unlike her master who lays bare his experiences before his audience, Plath filters her experiences and her evoked emotions before presenting them to her audience. Plath in her poems seldom appears as a nice person, at least if one follows the words of her critics. This paper deals with the series of five bee-poems written by Plath. Plath, along with her husband Ted Hughes, associated herself with learning bee-keeping in the summer of 1962. The poems are about her experiences with the box of honeybees that she later decided to pet. The paper would analyse the relationship between the bees and the beehive on one hand, and men and society on the other. There is an undercurrent of fears, insecurities, vulnerabilities, introverted dispositions and feminist hopes under the beautiful skin of her poems, that this paper would attempt to unravel.

Keywords : Modernism; modernist poetry; confessional poetry; feminine vulnerability; power dynamic; ecocriticism; radical feminism.

Introduction – Modernism, Modernist Poetry, Plath

Modernism in history covers a vast panorama of socio-political events. In literature too, modernism marks several distinct styles in poetry, fiction, and drama. The unfortunate happenings of the Great Depression, World War II, the unprecedented growth of Fascism, the Holocaust, etc. underline the essence of the literary mood of the period. Hence, we have writers problematizing such crises and contributing to the literary output of the period. Such writers are deemed to possess another level of understanding of the world than their predecessors; their experience is different, which is reflected in the content and style of their writings. There is a general sentiment of unrest and impermanence in works pertaining to the modernist tradition. In poetry, too, we feel this sense of disillusionment and meaninglessness. An air of non-conformity is felt in the major writings of this period. Expression and documentation of an individual's experiences matter to the exponents of Modernism,

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and thus, later on, this way even gives way to the confessional poetic tradition. Alienation and rootlessness are yet other important aspects of works written during this literary period. This period sees the slipping of literary realism into the modern (dry and despairing) depiction of the world. In literature, while the former movement attempted to portray the society as it really was, the latter was a literary rebellion against how worse the society had become.

The term “modernist poetry” is usually applied to the poetical works written roughly between 1890 and 1950 in Europe and North America. Modernist techniques followed less formal and unconventional writing styles and focused on individualism, self-expression, emotionalism, and self-identity. Montage or collage technique is the hallmark of this kind of poetry. In the simplest sense, the term would mean “editing” or bringing together fragments and pieces, and putting them all in one frame. The collage made of different fragments would not mean the same thing as before but would join to imply something different from the (original) sources. Since this paper deals with Sylvia Plath, this poetic technique demands some attention, as the poetic images Plath creates in her poems, appear to be composed of random pieces that need to be amalgamated by the readers in order to understand her implications. The technique of ‘montage’ or ‘collage’ could be simplified as given below :

There is—in English, at any rate—no such word as “montage”...The word, then, is not native to our tongue. We have borrowed a French word, montage, with a history in that language going back several centuries. Originally, it had to do with bringing things up from below, as the “mont” part indicates, but at some later date it took on the meaning of putting parts together, as in those complicated things that come to us with a little warning that “some assembly is required.” Assembly, putting-together, montage—these are synonymous terms. (Scholes).

Revelation of the Self – the Confessional Plath

I cannot run, I am rooted, and the gorse hurts me
With its yellow purses, its spiky armoury.
I could not run without having to run forever...
-The Bee Meeting (S. Plath).

Plath is celebrated for her confessional writings which she is known to have learned from the greatest proponent of the genre, Robert Lowell, known to have started the tradition of confessional writing in poetry, in its ‘sternest sense’ (My emphasis). I call it “strictly confessional”; this surely was not the earliest example of this kind of poetry in the history of English literature. However, how Lowell uses the

confessional style, paving the path for poets like Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath, could be said to be truly confessional. To make the argument clear, I would quote Rosenthal, credited to have used the term "confessional" for the first time to refer to the writing mode of Robert Lowell's book *Life Studies* :

Rosenthal differentiated the confessional approach from other modes of lyric poetry by way of its use of confidences that (Rosenthal said) went "beyond customary bounds of reticence or personal embarrassment". Rosenthal notes that in earlier tendencies towards the confessional there was typically a "mask" that hid the poet's "actual face", and states that "Lowell removes the mask. His speaker is unequivocally himself, and it is hard not to think of *Life Studies* as a series of personal confidences, rather shameful, that one is honor-bound not to reveal. (42)

In Plath, however, the revelation of the Self takes a bend from that of Lowell's. Although in any case, confessional poetry is meant to involve the "I" and "the self", but poets do differ in the kind of self they desire to reveal to the public sphere. Whether they mould, manipulate or even imagine "the self" or not, it is a choice. In Lowell, according to Rosenthal, there is the direct pouring of the self, while in Plath, there is some problematizing tendency in portrayal of the self, that Plath herself declares :

I think my poems immediately come out of the sensuous and emotional experiences I have, but I must say I cannot sympathize with these cries from the heart that are informed by nothing except a needle or a knife, or whatever it is. I believe that one should be able to control and manipulate experiences, even the most terrifying, like madness, being tortured, this sort of experience, and one should be able to manipulate these experiences with an informed and intelligent mind. (Urdoff).

This feature of "prejudiced revelations" in Plath furthers complications of her poems for the readers. The highly bizarre images she uses might be distanced from the expressing "self" or even the otherwise. In either case, Plath seems to confirm that her poems are not mere outpourings of her mental and emotional space. She filters them through the sieve of intellect. She herself admits that her poetry suffers from more negative imagery than positive, and justifies the same by entering into the discourse of 'superior male' and 'inferior female' dialectic. Elizabeth Hardwick claims that "Plath has the distinction of never being in her poems a nice person." (Urdoff). Critical remarks as these provoke the readers to explore the part of the

Self she tries to reveal (the manifest content) and the part of the Self she avoids to portray (the latent content) in her writings.

Bee Keeping and Plath's Bee Poems

Plath as she grew, had a memory of her father as a beekeeper, and she along with Hughes took a course in beekeeping in the summer of 1962. Right after this, her relationship with Hughes started deteriorating because of Hughes's affair with a fellow poetess and wife of the Canadian poet David Wevill. Thus, undoubtedly, the bee sequence does interpret her changing life. Plath contributes five poems to the theme of honeybees that she wrote in the autumn of 1962, that is, four months before she killed herself. These five poems when read in toto, also voice Plath's exploration of the 'female identity', 'womanhood', and 'selfhood'.

In the present paper, I would attempt to analyse the relationship between the bees and beehives on one hand, and men and society on the other, as portrayed in her famous Bee Poems. Fascinatingly, on the surface, she seems to talk about bees, beehives, the collective living, and the nature of honeybees, but there is an undercurrent of her own fears, insecurities, vulnerabilities, introverted disposition, and feministic hopes flowing through the veins of these poems. It is quite clear that Plath spins the bee scenes allegorically. She wants to deliver a message much deeper than the mere narration of her experience with the bees she has taken in for petting. In the five poems lined one after another, a natural development of the master-servant (or specifically, master-pet) relationship could also be found. Sylvia Plath suffered from severe depression throughout her life, starting from the early years of her childhood. The loss of her father, while she was very young, had left a permanent scar on her mind. Such psychical complications bloomed when she was exposed to the harsh realities of life, especially after having suffered betrayal from her beloved husband, writer and poet, Ted Hughes. Many scholars have commented heavily and harshly on Plath's personal life and her psychosomatic problems, but I would try to delve less into such matters and draw more attention to the kind of "self" and "selfhood" she seems to seek through her poetry. The idea here is of a formalistic reading of the poems, which in Plath's case is a challenge. Most scholars have so scrutinized and linked her personality with her poetic persona that it only coerces one to believe that her poetry is best understood by understanding her psyche as a person who was constantly suffering from chronic depression and suicidal tendencies. She twice attempted to kill herself. Her exposed personal life tends to speak for her troubled mind more than it should. In fact, the confessional style dissects into her private life to tempt dishonourable public judgments. Nevertheless, the paper restricts to the ideas expressed in the Bee Poems, and tries to understand our poet's idea of women, men, society, collective living, etc. through exploration of the poems, namely, *The Bee Meeting*, *The Arrival of the Bee Box*, *Stings*, *The Swarm*, and *Wintering*.

Grim Imagery and Sick Metaphor

It is believed that Plath chose the bee poems as the ending of her poetry collection *Ariel*, while Hughes tampered with the original sequence and inserted them in the middle of *Ariel*. Plath uses images from the animal and plant world and derives bizarre metaphors from there. Unusual and dull imagery of fauna and flora are frequently used. Such metaphors run along the length of the poems, and tell a superficial story on the outside, differing from the inner story brooding from her real disturbed consciousness. All these poems ascertain her troubled mind, which is reflected in the starkly 'diseased' phrases and comparisons she chooses, for example, "Is it the hawthorn that smells so sick? / The barren body of hawthorn, etherizing its children." (S. Plath). The plant (more accurately, a shrub) "hawthorn" might be used as a symbol for "wild" and "untamed". It makes us think if she seeks some emancipation. Similarly, she uses other unpleasant images, for example – "Is it some operation that is taking place? ... It is the surgeon my neighbors are waiting for... Is it the butcher...?" (S. Plath). In the last poem *Wintering*, she writes – "I have honey, / Six jars of it, / Six cat's eyes in the wine cellar" (S. Plath). Such imagery does not seem to be positive and pleasant if not grim or sick.

Nudity and 'Feminine Vulnerability'

Plath induces nature in her poems and seeks resort in it to compare, contrast and justify the vulnerability of the female nakedness. She holds that femininity is the reason why a female's skill is looked down on and her success as an artist is constrained. In fact, 'in a letter to the poet Lynne Lawner, she wrote that she would reject "Feminine (horror) lavish coyness" and would instead create poems that were "grim, antipoetic"'. (K. M. Plath). Then she uses unusual symbols like "scarlet flowers", "bored hearts" and "blood clots". Painful depictions like the "gorse" hurting her appear from beginning to end in *The Bee Meeting*. Plath seems to distinguish male nakedness and female nakedness with the social politics of dominance or power :

The poetic tradition to which she belonged... In this tradition – that extending from Whitman to both the Beats and the confessional poets-masculine naked-ness came to represent power, assertiveness, honesty, self-expression, and even the writing of poetry itself. From the male body, figures of power and invention are drawn. And in fact Plath herself seemed to have conceived of her creative processes in very masculine terms. Steven Gould Axelrod points out Plath's reliance upon male writers for metaphors with which to explore her own identity: "as a female late-comer burdened by male

precursors whom she considered ‘the really good boys’. (K. M. Plath).

A point worth noting is that the poem *The Bee Meeting* is penned after Plath has officially separated from her husband. Thus, the images of the beehive, villages and the queen of bees, might hint at the happenings of her personal life. She is in emotional turmoil because Hughes has replaced her with another woman, and thus, the “old queen” and the “new queen” metaphors come into play. In a later poem, *Stings*, she thus writes :

Is there any queen at all in it?
 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.
 (Stings, Lines 19-23)

Alienation, Timidity and Fear

The poem *The Bee Meeting* contains hues of alienation, fear and timidity, which undoubtedly represent Plath’s psychological plight – “David Holbrook claims that the image of the hive in the poems reflects Plath’s own diseased and “schizoid” consciousness” (Luck). These ideas too seem to be emanating from her troubled perception of femininity. In the opening stanza, she makes the readers feel that she is in a state of unsafety and insecurity, as she writes, “In my sleeveless summery dress I have no protection...” (S. Plath). Nakedness in any form is a constant threat to her. She is having no shield, no protection. She writes on her nudity – “I am nude as a chicken neck, does no body love me?” (S. Plath). The villagers are heading towards her to attack her, and thus she is frightened. The emotional state is of fear, but no one to empathize– “they will not smell my fear, my fear, my fear.” (S. Plath). To overcome the gaze of the society over her feminine nudity, she finds a way out – “unnoticed and passive.” (K. M. Plath). Probably that is why she writes, “If I stand very still, they will think I am cow-parsley” (Plath).

Inversion of the Power Dynamic – Who Fears Who?

In the second poem *The Arrival of the Bee Box*, the tone suddenly changes from that of insecurity and fear to that of authority. She appears beginning to overcome susceptibility with domination. There is a feeling of unfamiliarity, and so the fear of the unfamiliar, but no expression of the kind of the “one against many” fear as expressed in the earlier poem, is found in this one. The fear appearing has a different nature from the aforementioned fear of alienation, as we can see here – The box is locked, it is dangerous. / I have to live with it overnight (S. Plath). Similarly, the fear of ‘the unknown’ is felt in the following stanza of the poem :

How can I let them out?
 It is the noise that appalls me most of all,
 The unintelligible syllables.
 It is like a Roman mob,
 Small, taken one by one, but my god, together!

(The Arrival of the Bee Box, Lines 61-65)

This fear arises because the speaker is unfamiliar with the bees that she has brought home to pet. It is her first night with them and the poem depicts her nervousness, which is directed from unfamiliarity, as is understood from phrases like "unintelligible syllables" and "Roman mob". She is yet to understand their nature and language. She does not yet know what they are capable of. Nevertheless, the tone of "authority" and the process of assertion of the master-servant relationship seems to begin in this very poem, as we can see :

I have simply ordered a box of maniacs.
 They can be sent back.
 They can die, I need feed them nothing, I am the owner.

(Lines 85-87)

Right after the above lines, she shows she has started to care about the bees as she talks of affinity and remembrance. The 'master-pet relationship' has been established by this point, and thus she goes on further to express her curiosity if, in this little time, the bees have developed some attachment towards her – "I wonder how hungry they are. / I wonder if they would forget me." (S. Plath). However, until now, the idea of petting honeybees is a "temporary" one; she is still unsure if she wants to continue keeping the "box of maniacs" out of the uncertainty of bee behaviour.

Wintering and Hope – Plath's Feminism

Venturing through the four poems in the sequence, we have the last poem *Wintering*, that throws light on not just hope but a feminist hope. This poem is reflective of Plath's idea of escape and optimism from male dominions. Plath seemingly explores her Self while contemplating on the politics of the beehive. "David Holbrook claims that the image of the hive in the poems reflects Plath's own diseased and "schizoid" consciousness" (Luck). The mind-hive dynamic explains her agitated consciousness as she tries to explore the possibilities of her life, her freedom, and her success in the world, which she presupposes are specifically designed for men. In her mind, she is a bee or the queen of bees and the beehive represents the society she imagines, that is the one ruled by women. In this poem, she imagines a way out of an entire history of subjugation and disgrace – where women could have another world altogether, without the existence of a man, and she thus writes :

The bees are all women,
 Maids and the long royal lady.
 They have got rid of the men,
 The blunt, clumsy stumblers, the boors.
 Winter is for women...

(Wintering, Lines 11-15)

While putting her feminist thoughts as above, Plath seems to sympathize with the most radical feminists of her time and beyond. "All radical feminists seemed to agree upon the need for separatism, but the scale of separatism varied considerably, ranging from political separatism (women-only discussion groups, dealing purely with issues that affect women), to complete separatism (communes, etc.)" (Whelehan). The idea of community living too, to assure individual sanctity and protection from male dominion and exploitation could be traced in the tradition of various versions of radical feminism :

Communal living was the ideal to render male assistance redundant, and in some cases (but by no means all), lesbianism, 'political lesbianism' (the choice of a lesbian sexual orientation as a political statement, rather than as reflecting one's primary sexual choice) or celibacy was seen as the preferred form of sexual orientation. (Radical Feminism, Whelehan, 1995)

The radical and Marxist feminists like Shulamith Firestone and Luce Irigaray claim that women are perceived as mere commodities in male-dominated capitalist societies. Sylvia Plath sounds similar to these noted feminists when in another poem *Stings* she writes,

I am in control.
 Here is my honey-machine,
 It will work without thinking,
 Opening, in spring, like an industrious virgin.

(Stings, Lines 27-30)

However, in Plath's poem, "winter is for women" because winter represents 'hope for women'. Along with expressing this hope, Plath also expresses suspicion if such a male-free hive/ society would be able to survive until "another year". Plath imagines a women-only society as the only possibility to end female miseries, although she herself is not confident of the success of her imagined liberation. The bees might have to die to pay for the liberation. 'Paula Bennett, like many Plath critics in the 80s, determines that the bee poems represent Plath's search for a "true self," a self that she ultimately finds by identifying with the image of the queen bee and her deadly, victorious flight: she is "reborn even as, stripping off her old self... she dies"' (Luck). In the *Bee Meeting*, she has already asserted a similar conflict

when she writes, "I could not run without having to run forever" (S. Plath). However, in the moment of optimism, the bees "are flying...they taste of spring" (S. Plath), and there is scope and hope for liberation.

Conclusion

The present paper began with an attempt to understand the socio-political context of modernism in literature. Important features of modernist poetry like alienation, disillusionment, collage, etc. have been discussed in brevity. From modernist poetry, we slowly slipped into the confessional poetic tradition, thus trying to understand the background that prepared Plath as a poet. Sylvia Plath was highly influenced by other confessional poets, especially Robert Lowell whose course in poetry she credited. Nevertheless, we ventured, differentiating Plath's idea of self-revelation from that of other confessional writers of her time. In the chosen bee poems, we discovered the poet's psychological development as she tries to explore and establish female identity, womanhood, and most importantly – selfhood, while narrating her encounter with the bees. These poems are also reflective of her troubled consciousness and dejection after separating from Hughes. As Plath, herself believes that although her poetry is an outpouring of her emotions, they are filtered by her intellect. Thus, she ends up spinning extended metaphors in the face of these poems. Overall, the imagery is grim, dark, and often allusive of infirmity. Beginning with herself as a vulnerable female body, she develops some authority towards the end of the poetic sequence, ultimately imagining her 'female emancipation'. Her idea of an all-women community devoid of men, resembling a beehive, reveres her amongst the radical feminists. However, the final poem of the five, *Wintering*, ends with hope and optimism as Plath pictures the bees flying free.

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