

Giving Attention to Ambivalent Selfhood and the Difficulty of Resisting the Social Authority through *The Arrival of the Bee Box*

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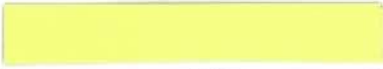


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I. Why Analyzing Sylvia Plath's *The Arrival of the Bee Box*

As Sylvia Plath's poems are considered to belong to "confessional poetry", they, to some extent, contain Plath's personal traumatic experiences. *The Arrival of The Bee Box*(1965) was written right after her traumatic break up with her husband Ted Hughes and was published in the book, *Ariel*. The fact that the speaker of the poem is clearly a representation of herself in that she is a white female speaker and her depiction of chaotic mind and identity shows that Plath is referring to her own private life. Therefore, the poem is not exempt from the criticisms claiming its limitation in being too biographical and personal just like her other critiqued poems such as "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus".

However, despite the criticisms toward her poems being too personal in that she overly expresses her own feeling of anger and disgust, Plath delivers important social issues concerning minority identities as a female poet. Regarding this issue, Vivian R. Pollak quoted from *The Unabridged journals of Sylvia Plath*:

Unlike the caricatured and fragmented "female author" of her poem of the same name, she wanted to exemplify personal ambition, personal pleasure, social usefulness, and the institution of bourgeois motherhood. Seemingly none of her colleagues at Smith had succeeded in this project, but Plath was convinced that the personal could be the political. (8)

It is obvious Sylvia Plath refused the criticisms that ignored political messages that

her poems deliver. Therefore, the readers should be aware that her poems are "relevant to larger things, and bigger things"¹ such as wars and the oppression of the authority. In this sense, her poem *The Arrival of the Bee Box* should be analyzed with an attempt to discover political and social messages. The poem speaks in the voice of the oppressed in the modern society. The minority of the society, who are suffering great torment under colonization, racialism and gender inequality are clearly symbolized as the bees in the bee box. However, the speaker in the poem has very confusing identity that her attitudes and interpretations toward the bee box are extremely ironic and ambivalent. The speaker's identity becomes complex and paradoxical in the social hierarchy as she possesses social power as a white and social weakness as a female at the same time. This leads the speaker to describe the co-existence of hatred and fascination toward power in her mind which intensifies the conflict between ambivalent identities as a white female.

The co-existence of hatred and fascination toward power in the poem triggers readers to realize the extreme difficulty to resist the social power, especially as women against the male chauvinism and patriarchy. *The Arrival of the Bee Box* has its

¹ "I think that personal experience is very important, but certainly it shouldn't be a kind of shut-box and mirror-looking, narcissistic experience. I believe it should be relevant, and relevant to the larger things, the bigger things, such as Hiroshima and Dachau and so on."

Quoted from Sylvia Plath's interview with Peter Orr ("The Poet Speaks," 593)

significance in that it makes the readers to face the difficulty of resisting the social authority and contemplate the direction a social movement to take within the societies where people have so many conflicting and ambivalent social positions in the social hierarchy. Therefore, this paper is going to focus on ambivalent selfhood of the speaker in *The Arrival of the Bee Box* and the political message of the poem in revealing difficulties of revolution against the society's conventional power as a person with conflicting identities.

II. Being a White Female

In order to identify the speaker's attitudes toward social power, it is important to first inspect the ambivalent identities the speaker has inside the poem. The poem certainly starts with the first person "I" and shows the agency and the selfhood of the speaker in telling her reaction and thought to toward *The Arrival of the Bee Box*.

I ordered this, clean wood box

Square as a chair and almost too heavy to lift

I would say it was the coffin of a midget

Or a Square baby

Were there not such a din in it

Here, the speaker's thorough inspection on the bee box suggests inspection into her own mind. The action of describing the box reflects descriptions of her own mind as well. In the journal regarding the Jungian analysis of the poem, Humaira Aslam and Annosh W.Khan wrote:

Plath's introspection into the unconscious mind lays the foundation of her discovering all the qualities that she negates and denies within herself. The word "Arrival" in the title suggests her arrival at the stark truth regarding her own self, which she has been avoiding. (2)

What the writers suggest here is that the speaker, presumably Plath, is preparing to explore her own identity in depth by approaching the bee box which is a symbol of her own selfhood and identity. Descriptions such as "too heavy" and "coffin" represent confinement and difficulty in establishing one's selfhood. The juxtaposition of two irrelevant words, "square baby" gives an impression that the speaker does not fit into the conventional idea of motherhood and womanhood as she is rigid and sharp just like the box. The first stanza provides readers with the concept of troubling self-identity and works as a gateway for the speaker to lead us into deeper introspection of herself.

Before studying about her conflicting inner values, it is important to analyze her social position as a white female that is explicitly represented in the poem. This is clearly expressed in the sixth stanza of the poem through metaphor of the laburnum tree.

I wonder if they would forget me

If I just undid the locks and stood back and turned

Into a tree.

There is the laburnum, its blond colonnades,

And the petticoats of the cherry.

In these lines, the speaker says that she would hide behind the laburnum trees and that the bees inside the box would be unable to distinguish her as she would be completely blended in the scenery with laburnum and cherry flower. The specific use of laburnum flowers suggest that she belongs to the racially white group as the image bunches of yellow flowers hanging down implies white people, especially a woman, with blond hair. The phrase that describes the flowers explicitly says the word "blonde" to give a more apparent implication. Also, the metaphor used to describe cherry

blossoms as petticoats is also an important signal that suggests that speaker is a female because petticoats are attire of women and are conventional signs to indicate women. The image of flower is amplified in the next stanza. The speaker describes herself as "no source of honey" and "Sweet God". She links herself strongly with the images of flower and femininity by using words such as "honey" and "sweet" using the imagery of flowers that have been associated with traditional femininity.

The fact that the speaker is a white female is a pivotal theme of the poem as she has clearly ambivalent positions in the society at the same time; as a woman, she is dominated by males and male-centered society and as a white, she has social power above people of other races, especially, as the poem suggests, black people. Her complex positions in the society clearly influence her attitude toward the concept of authority. Her ambivalent stands in the society forces her both to speak for and against the conventional authority of white-male dominated society. This complex status is clearly expressed in Jessica Lewis Luck's analysis of Plath's bee poems and her mind like a hive:

More recent critics have argued that the bee poems are exploring a much different model of selfhood than the "true self" model. Frederike Haberkamp² finds that the

² Frederike Haberkamp, *Sylvia Plath: The Poetics of Beekeeping* (Salzburg: Salzburg University Press, 1997), pp. 52, 60.

bee poems illustrate a shift in Plath's work from a self "defined within a rigid matrix of mutually exclusive opposites" to a self-understood as riddle and paradox, a "self-in process." (5)

As a 'paradoxical' self-located in the complex system of gender and racial politics, the speaker is exploring her attitude toward the conventional society and this process of introspection and exploration reflects the difficulty of an individual to resist social power as a feminist.

III. Complexity in Identity and Power Dynamics

A. Ambivalent Attitudes toward Authority: Fascination

The speaker, as a white female, certainly feels that she has a power or superiority over the bees as the owner of the bee-box. The bees in the box are symbols of the oppressed and is specified as black slaves as she says that the interior of the box is very dark and black "with the swarmy feelings of African hands". The idea of ownership expressed in this part has an implication of slavery of black people in it. The racial hierarchy is therefore evident, and she is clearly located in a superior position in terms of racial politics.

I lay my ear to furious Latin.

I am not a Caesar

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.

As explicitly depicted in this stanza, the speaker speaks as if she has certain power over the bees and suggest her power as a white. The line "They can die, I need feed them nothing, I am the owner.", which is obviously written in language of authority, reminds the readers of the oppression and exploitation of black people. Despite the sense of fear and trouble toward the bees in the box which is going to be studied later in this paper, her sense of ownership and control over the bees is very strong to the point that she believes that she can determine the life and death of the bees inside. The imitation of the voice of the authority in the white male dominant society shows a part of her identity that is attracted and attached to the interest of the authority.

This kind of attachment is recurrent throughout her life and her other poetry as well. For one instance, Daniela MOLDOVEANU quoted from Sylvia Plath's own journals and showed that she had expressed her attachment and interest toward the lives of males:

Yes, my consuming desire to mingle with road crews, sailors and soldiers, barroom regulars – to be part of a scene, anonymous, listening, recording – all is spoiled by

the fact that I am a girl, a female always in danger of assault and battery. My consuming interest in men and their lives is often misconstrued as a desire to seduce them, or as an invitation to intimacy. Yet, God, I want to talk to everybody I can as deeply as I can. I want to be able to sleep in an open field, to travel west, to walk freely at night [...] (5)

As explained in the text, Plath constantly has an aspiration to be associated with the world of male and the reason behind is far from hetero- sexual and hedonic desires. Rather, it is about the power that males possess in the society, that they are invulnerable and free from the discrimination and abuse of the misogynistic society as the owner of the power. This fascination toward the power is what drives her to write poems about male figures like “daddy” and many of her poems such as “Lady Lazarus” reflect her attempt “to gain power over antagonistic self and ingrained prejudices.”³

Returning to *The Arrival of the Bee Box*, Plath emphasizes her fascination to the power through positioning the speaker as the one who has the authority to lead the bees, symbol of the racially oppressed, to the freedom. The lines “Tomorrow I will be

³ “Sylvia Plath’s technique aims at desacralizing and then reconfiguring the symbol of femininity to gain power over antagonistic self and ingrained prejudices. Through the metaphors of dissolution she creates a revolution in the post-war perception of women[...].”

MOLDOVEANU, Daniela. “Sylvia Plath’s War Metaphors or How Female Confessional Poetry Changed Public Perception of Women’s Personal Identity.” *Philologica Jassyensia*, vol. 15, no. 1, Jan. 2019

sweet God, I will set them free.”, shows her reliance on her privileged racial identity to empower herself in the face of conflicting identities and the male chauvinistic society.

B. Ambivalent Attitudes toward Authority: Identity as the Oppressed

On the contrary, the poem shows another aspect of the speaker’s identity by showing that she also belongs to the weak at the same time, that ultimately, she is no different from the bees that she keeps.

I lay my ear to furious Latin.

I am not a Caesar.

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.

Despite the phrases we already analyzed that claim her power and ownership,

there is a sense of uncertainty and anxiety within the stanza. While she threatens the bees by saying that she is not going to feed them, she simultaneously defends herself by saying "I am not a Caesar." Caesar, used with an article "a", in this line, symbolically refers to people with absolute power. Speaker's implication that she is not supreme power suggests that there is someone else, the real "Caesar" who holds the true power in the society. About the uncertainty of the ownership, Janine Rogers and Charlotte Sleight comments that:

The problems of ownership are essentially mereological anxieties concerning the boundaries between bee, hive and beekeeper, and these anxieties go deeper still, as the poet muddles her identity, becoming one of the bees herself. If she is one of them, how can she possibly own them? (12)

The text explains that the speaker shares the identity of the weak with the bees and that this fact arouses her to feel fear and anxiety toward her racially derived authority and ownership, acknowledging that she is not able to be an ultimate power holder in the society.

Apparently, her identity as a woman is what marks her position in the society as the weak. The fact that she is a female is complicatedly entangled with her fear toward the violent bees and the ironical feeling of weakness. This is evidently represented in the sixth stanza where she reveals her identity through metaphors of laburnum and

cherry blossoms. She says "I wonder if they would forget me / If I just undid the locks and stood back and turned into a tree." Considering the previously discussed identity of a white female represented through laburnum trees, it is reasonable to assume that she is expressing her anxiety raised from weak part of her femininity which makes her social position precarious. The image of her being completely hidden by the trees can be interpreted as allusions to the Greek myth of Daphne and Apollo where Daphne turns into a tree to escape from Apollo. The male figure intimidating Daphne is reflected in the way speaker tries to hide, revealing her sexual identity and this shows a strong gender hierarchy where female is oppressed by the male. The idea is intensified in the seventh stanza.

They might ignore me immediately

In my moon suit and funeral veil

I am no source of honey

So why should they turn on me?

Tomorrow I will be sweet God, I will set them free.

Here, "moon suit" and "funeral veil" again remind the images of laburnum tree that connotes image of feminine identity. What is more important is that the image of death is entailed within the metaphors of feminine identity such as "funeral veil". This suggests extreme fear and the loss of power in being a female inside the male dominant society which leads her to lose control over the bee box. Therefore, instead of claiming her power and sustaining her authoritative voice, she eventually implores that she is not the one to be blamed for social suffering of the bees by saying that she is "no source of honey". Despite the fascination and aspiration toward the authority, she realizes that she cannot fully sustain her power and even feels unstable in the face of other minority because of the fragility of her gender position.

C. Conflicting Identities and Power Dynamics

Based on the analysis of the two conflicting identities of the speaker, readers are able to confront interesting insight for people who resists against the authority such as chauvinism and white supremacy. The speaker's ambivalent behavior toward the bees that stems out from conflicting identities suggests paradox and confusion toward the power she possess. This is well explained by Jessica Lewis Luck who is cited before in this article:

The speaker's understanding of her relationship to this complex and dangerous

image of the mind is vexed. She is both fascinated-"I can't keep away from it"-and terrified-"I have simply ordered a box of maniacs" (11. 8, 23). She feels that she has some power over it, that she is the owner, but also that it is in some ways completely beyond her control. (9)

The people who are vexed with the conflicting ideas of power and identities, are easily engaged in the attitude or language of the authority when they are in the situation where they have chance of possessing more power than other people just like the speaker. The attitude of the speaker trying to threaten the bees while she is also the weak reflects that even the people who are against the authority are ironically strongly attracted by the power of the conventional society. To be more specific, the female speaker who is oppressed by males is willing to exert her racially advantaged position to claim the ownership over the other minority, the black people.

The political message that is implied in this context is that the ironical attitude that is taken by the speaker makes it really hard to overturn and change the society as there are too many people who have ambivalent identities. When they try to use their position as the authority, completely unaware that they also belong to the oppressed in different aspects and power dynamics, to abuse the other minority, it creates a chain of vulnerability where everyone is vulnerable and unable to be in unity to fight for the real authority, the ultimate "Caesar".

This is well expressed in the last line that of the poem where the speaker says, "The box is only temporary." The line itself can be interpreted in two different ways. One interpretation is that it suggests the frightening image of bees escaping the bee box and harming the speaker, who is, in another aspect, the weak just like the bees. The absence of mutual communication between the weak, and their desire to imitate the authority in front of the weaker, make it difficult for society and the conventional social hierarchy to change.

The another interpretation is that the speaker realizes that her exertion of power toward other minority is futile and destructive and that she decides to take an action to free them. The format in which this one last line is written as the last stanza of the poem, detached from the other stanzas, delivers the idea of turning point, a possibility that she would be in unity with other minorities. This reconciliatory interpretation of the last line is suggested again by Jessica Lewis Luck:

Unlike the speaker of "The Bee Meeting,"⁴ who remains panicked in the face of the hysterical bees, the speaker here is more reasonable and hopeful about her relationship to the box and its crazy contents: "I am no source of honey / So why should they turn on me?" (11. 33-34). Rather than performing passivity in the face

⁴ Plath, Sylvia. *The Bee Meeting*, *Ariel*. 1965

of the swarm, this speaker takes action, deciding to nurture the box/mind, despite its uncontrollable and unfathomable nature: "Tomorrow I will be sweet God, I will set them free. // The box is only temporary" (9)

Although the line has room for two completely different interpretations. There is a common ground in that the two interpretations are arousing consciousness toward the destructive chain of minority against minority that stems out from the complexity of the identity. Resisting the conventional society and appealing solidarity among the diverse minorities are inherently difficult in the society. However, people still have to realize this difficulty and empower themselves by forming diverse and tolerant unities among themselves.

IV. Political Message sent through *The Arrival of the Bee Box*

In conclusion, Plath's *The Arrival of the Bee Box*, despite traditional prejudices that her poems are too private and personal, sends strong political message to the readers of the modern society. It presents the speaker who has ambivalent and different identities to make her position very complicated and ambiguous in the social hierarchy. As a white, the speaker feels superiority and power over the black people. She borrows the language of the authority to intimidate them and show her ownership

and control over them. However, ironically, she asserts herself as a victim of the social hierarchy at the same time. She feels fear toward the bee box and her position, saying she is not the one who possess complete power in the society. This anxiety revealed is strongly related to her identity as a female in the society where females are oppressed by the males.

These ambivalent attitudes and identities that speaker suggests a problem that we face in our society when the oppressed people try to resist the authority and claim their own rights. The attraction toward the attitudes and languages of the conventional power triggers the dissolution of the solidarity among the socially discriminated people and create a barrier in breaking down the conventional authority as a whole. In this context, *The Arrival of the Bee Box* is meaningful in that it provides readers to think about the direction that they should take in the process of fighting for their own rights in the society where everyone has ambivalent and conflicting identities. Necessity to have insight that everyone can be victims of the authority from many different aspects, to acknowledge their own tendency to abuse the power in front of another weaker and the effort to refrain from this are suggested clearly through the speaker who is in the state of confusion with her a mixed and contradictory voices.

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