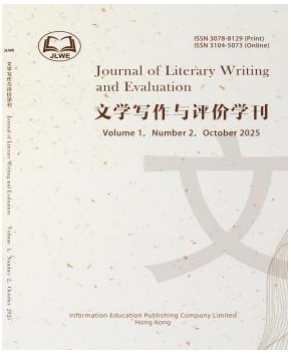

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The Feminist Analysis of Visual Features in Sylvia Plath's Bee Poems

Liu Shanni, Chen Xi

Abstract: Including five interlinked works featuring "the queen bee" and a female speaker, The Bee Poems of Sylvia Plath are significant late works of hers. Although embodying a profound feminist critique through visual modes that disrupt patriarchal narrative structures, The Bee Poems are often read autobiographically similar to her other confessional poems. This paper explores the visual dimensions of these poems through three distinct visual perspectives: panoramic scenes, foreground compositions, and close-up images. Drawing on W.J.T. Mitchell's visual theory and Laura Mulvey's concept of the "male gaze," this paper reveals how Plath transforms traditional ekphrastic modes into feminist interventions. The poems first depict a patriarchal world in which female beauty and fertility are objectified with three panoramas. Second, The Bee Poems trace the speaker's growing feminist awareness and identification with collective feminism through three foregrounds. Third, these poems enact a symbolic demystification of patriarchy with four close-ups. Through these visual strategies, Plath reclaims the female gaze and reconstructs poetic space as a site of resistance.

Keywords: Sylvia Plath; The Bee Poems; Visual Features; Feminism

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题目：论西尔维娅·普拉斯《蜜蜂组诗》的女性主义视觉特征

摘要：西尔维娅·普拉斯的晚期的重要诗作《蜜蜂组诗》包含五首以“蜂后”和一位女性叙述者为核心的，相互关联的作品。学界常将其与普拉斯的其他自白诗相提并论，并对其进行自传性解读，忽略了该组诗所蕴含的深刻的女性主义批判和其挑战了传统父权叙事结构的颠覆性视觉模式。本文从全景、前景和特写这三个独特的视觉视角，探讨《蜜蜂组诗》的视觉维度。基于 W.J.T.米切尔的视觉理论和劳拉·穆尔维的“男性凝视”概念，本文揭示了普拉斯如何超越传统的“艺格敷词”模式并将视觉写作与女性主义相结合。首先，组诗通过三幅全景图描绘了一个女性之美与女性生育能力被物化的父权世界。其次，组诗通过三个前景构图，阐述了诗中的女性叙事者日益增强的女性主义意识及其对集体女性主义的认同。最后，组诗通过四组特写图像，象征性地实现了对父权制的祛魅。通过这些视觉策略，普拉斯夺回了女性凝视权，并将诗歌空间重构为一个抵抗父权的场域。

关键词：西尔维娅·普拉斯；《蜜蜂组诗》；视觉特征；女性主义

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The personal themes in Plath’s poems like the Natiz father image in “Daddy”, the abortion reference in “Barren Women” and the suicidal implication in her “Edge” boost her reputation as a “confessional poet”. Often focusing on extreme moments of individual experience, Plath’s poems align closely with that of Robert Lowell (her professor) and Anne Sexton (her classmate)[①].The form of Plath’s poems, to a great extent, follows the structure of the lyric tradition, with their musicality, personal themes, narrative quality, and rhythmical lines. What differentiates Plath from other confessional poets lies in her aesthetic mastery of always transcending realistic materials into aesthetically organized lines. It is not only attributes to her metaphor-imbued and musicality-internalized poetic language, but also the rarely known fact that Plath used be to a visual artist long before she was a poet. The painting techniques such as the use of frame, perspectival deepening and compositional design with color scheme[②] are automatically combined with her writing technique in her poetic creation. To describe visual scenes or objects that are absent from the readers in poetic language, according to Greek tradition, is called “ekphrasis.” As Fan Jinghua (2007, p.207) argues, “In the late phrase poems, in which Plath builds more and more on discrete images to transcend mimetic similitude, the ekphrastic principle is an internalized method...” This internalized ekphrastic principle combined with Plath's feminist spirit in the creation of The Bee Poems.

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① Sexton’s and Lowell’s speakers have companions and interlocutors; the world they inhabit is realistically peopled.” See Hedley, Jane (2020). *I made you find me: The Coming of Age of the Woman Poet and the Politics of Poetic Address*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press:71.

② Fan Jinghua put forwarded that “the use of frame, perspectival deepening and compositional design with color scheme are three primary visual art techniques Plath uses in her poems until her creation of the eight art poems.” qtd. in Hedley, Jane (2020). *I made you find me: The Coming of Age of the Woman Poet and the Politics of Poetic Address*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press: 21.

The Bee Poems refer to five poems by Plath that use bumblebees and the female subject as their main image. This poetry series forms the culmination of her final poetry collection, *Ariel*, which was considered to be her most mature work. The five individual bee poems are: “The Bee Meeting” , “The Arrival of the Bee Box”, “Stings”, “The Swarm”, and “Wintering”. The visual techniques like parallax, perspective and compositional color scheme can be found in The Bee Poems align closely with Plath's feminist creating tendency. While previous studies on The Bee Poems tend to relate Plath’s poems to her autobiographical experiences: for instance, Susan Van Dyne (1993,p.143) argued that The Bee Poems is “an extended autobiographical narrative for Plath” and a “rework of her earlier psychodrama,” like that in her “Electra on Azalea Path,” criticisms like these often overlook the feminist essence and visual techniques applied on The Bee Poems.

Introduction

The explicit and superb visual quality was found to be one of Plath's pioneering writing techniques. As Tracy Brain (2014, p.48) argues, “Plath’s *Ariel* poems flight at the moment that naturalistic perspective is dismantled and she finds a way to mobilize in her poetry a painter's understanding of the ineluctable presence of the surface.” The fact that Plath devoted herself to visual arts from her early years is merely known. Magazines such as *Leaves from a Cambridge Notebook* and *American in Paris* have witnessed Plath's intricate visual arts drawings. Kathleen Connors (2007, p.2) noticed Plath consciously combining poetic writing with visual arts: “As a child, she considered a poem she had written or transcribed to be complete when illustrated by a picture.”

Critics, including Hedley, Hughes, Alfred Alvarez, Kroll, and Wei Lei, recognized the ekphrastic impulse in Plath’s poems. However, in modern times, ekphrasis was criticized as gender-infected[③] for “female otherness is an overdetermined feature in a genre that tends to describe an object of visual pleasure and fascination from a masculine perspective.”(Mitchell 1994) Historically, ekphrasis has been dominated by male perspectives, and thus often avoided by female poets due to its alignment with voyeuristic and patriarchal modes of seeing. Such instances can be found in John Keats’ “Ode on a Greek Urn” and Wallace Stevens’ “Anecdote of a Jar,” where the speaker imposes a controlling gaze upon a feminized object: an urn frozen in time, or a landscape subdued by the presence of a man-made vessel. Plath broke this male-centered and voyeurism-intended exclusion of ekphrasis by infusing visual writing with playing what Laura Mulvey (1975, p.12) called the “male gaze”: “Women’s desire is subjected to her image as a bearer of the bleeding wound, she can exist only concerning castration and cannot transcend it.” In applying this gaze and daring to break the “pleasure expectation” comes from it, Plath refused to be passively objectified. She counter-romanticized cultural myth of women’s beauty and fertility. In The Bee Poems, she internalized male gazes and mirrored them back with women’s desire as freedom seekers to transform from “the gazed” to “the gazer.” Plath practiced this technique for a long time since her early ekphrastic works like “The Disquieting Muse” and “Perseus: The Triumph of Wit over Suffering,” just to name a few. I agree with Fang Jinghua’s arguement that

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③ Mitchell and Heffernan both have argued that the relationship presupposed by ekphrastic writing between poetry and painting is often implicitly and sometimes explicitly gender inflected. See Mitchell, Thomas (1994). *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 132.

Plath had internalized the ekphrastisis and adopted it as her creative model. Without this understanding, it is impossible to completely understand how Plath represent a anti-patriarchy picture in her Bee Poems.

This study focuses on two central research questions. First, what visual traits The Bee Poems represent? Second, how the visual writing intertwines other aesthetic techniques contribute to the feminist essence of The Bee Poems? To solve these questions, the main body of this paper has been divided into three parts relates to three different visual creative technique Plath adopted in The Bee Poems correspondingly.

1. Panorama: The Patriarchal World Outlook

In Plath's Bee Poems, panoramic visual frames are employed to depict an outward, seemingly objective world structured by patriarchal ideologies, where the female subject is placed within a mise-en-scène designed for surveillance, control, and aestheticized domination. Visuality in The Bee Poems is dynamic, more like a movie instead of a painting in a traditional ekphrastic sense. As a wide-angle view or representation of physical space, the panorama is widely applied in photography, film, and painting.

The closer the viewer is to the object, the more emotionally engaged the response tends to be. Alternatively, the audience tends to be more objective when one observes objects further away. More details are emphasized in the former situation, and more geographical surroundings would be involved in the latter case. Therefore, I argue that the three panoramic pictures Plath describes represent an objective patriarchal world outlook.

Firstly, the description of the meeting of the subject and the villagers in "The Bee Meeting" displays a panoramic picture:

> Who are these people at the bridge to meet me? They are the villagers
> The rector, the midwife, the sexton, the agent for bees.
> In my sleeveless summery dress, I have no protection,
> And they are all gloved and covered. why did nobody tell me?
> They are smiling and taking out veils tacked to ancient hats.
> ...
> Which is the rector now, is it that man in black?
> Which is the midwife? Is that her blue coat?
> Everybody is nodding a square blackhead, they are knights in visors,
> Breastplates of cheesecloth knotted under the armpits.
> Their smiles and their voices are changing. I am led through a beanfield. (Plath, 1981, p. 211)[④]

Though this scenario is narrated through the perspective of the subject, the portrait of the other side of the bridge, the details of the villagers' clothing, and their actions are vividly represented. The panoramic framing of the villagers operates as the "male gaze," a psychological mechanism that reduces the female speaker to a sexualized object ("nude chicken neck") within a patriarchal mise-en-scène. This scenario exemplifies what Laura Mulvey terms "to-be-looked-at-ness," a central feature of the male gaze in classical visual culture.

[④] Plath,Sylvia(1981). *Collected Poems.* Edited with an introduction by Ted Hughes. London: Faber and Faber. 以下引文只标注页码，不再一一说明。

According to Mulvey, women in dominant cultural representations are positioned as passive spectacles, their bodies displayed not for their own agency but for the erotic contemplation of a male viewer. In "The Bee Meeting," the speaker's vulnerability: her "nude chicken neck" and her "sleeveless summer dress" render her legible not as a subject but as an object in a patriarchal scene. Her visibility becomes a mode of subjugation.

The villagers' "square blackheads" function as a collective surveillance apparatus, their "gloved and covered" bodies contrasting with the speaker's exposed "sleeveless summer dress" to enforce what Mulvey calls the "male gaze." The three villagers symbolize the sacred trinity in the Christian belief, a typical patriarchal semiotic. By situating a midwife between a rector and a sexton, a birth-fertility-death linear life model applies its misogynist gaze upon the speaker. As a common American girl wearing a summer dress, the persona perfectly fits the "housewife image" when painted as a "nude chicken neck" with "no protection." She has been gazed at by all the villagers and is expected to satisfy the erotic pleasure of patriarchy.

Plath is an expert in noticing this gaze, for she mentioned in her journal: "I am part man, and I notice women's breasts and thighs with the calculation of a man choosing a mistress ... but that is the artist and the analytical attitude toward the female body." (Plath, 2000, p. 74) Among all the characters who emerged in this first meeting, the subject am the only persona exposing my "nude neck" and being "calculated" while everyone else is covered like "knights in visors". In the first panoramic picture, the female body is sexualized. The "strangeness" the subject felt identified with the whole female group in the middle of the 20th century: "They could desire no greater destiny than to glory in their femininity."(Friedan, 1982, p. 15) The subject must feel protected in the kitchen when my femininity (in keeping men, breastfeeding children, and doing laundry) is showing. When the subject is out of the kitchen to the other side of the bridge, the speaker's sexualized female body wins her the "smiles" of villagers and an experience of taking control in the patriarchal world: they are "buttoning the cuffs at my wrists" and "making me one of them." (p. 211) With this opportunity, the subject is enabled to seek how the patriarchal institutions operate.

The adoption of different colors is worthy of analysis in this picture. There is a secretary in white, a midwife in blue, and the rector in black, and almost every villager is "nodding a square black head."

White refers to something exempted from stain, and it always reminds one of purity, divinity, and perfection. The secretary in white dresses me by "buttoning the cuffs at my wrists and the slit from my neck to my knees." The secretary's "whiteness" aligns with mythologized purity as a patriarchal technology "naturalized" construct that disciplines the female body ("buttoning the cuffs") into docility. Plath subverts this by later associating white with the "fashionable straw hat," a hollow signifier of rejection to assimilation.

The color black is a frequently appearing image in Plath's works. Man in black is one of the most classic images in Plath's poem: a man wearing black shoes who tramps the speaker for 30 years and "Bits (Bit) my pretty red heart in two" (p. 245) in "Daddy"; in "Man in black", an all-mighty man wearing a black coat, black shoes, and black hair, powerful enough to "Fixing (Fixed) vortex on the far Tip/ riveting stones, air, All of it, together." (p. 89) Examples of the man in black in Plath's late poems are countless, and all of them constitute a spiritual god, in front of whom the subject is pale and powerless.

The subject held a love-hatred feeling towards the man in black, just like "Every woman adores a Fascist." (Plath, 2000, p. 221) The man in black in Bee Poems continues its image in "Daddy" except a more powerful rector who is in charge of people's spiritual world. And the subject, like the speaker in "Daddy", is passively put on a "black veil" with a "white Italian hat." (p. 211) It means the speaker faces the temptation of the benefits patriarchy endows a docile woman (all-gloved, protection). Because the blacks are "making me one of them (one of the queen-bee killers)" while protecting me from being stung. Everybody except me is a "Square black head" (p. 211), constituting the patriarchy, so the subject is alone at the deciding moment of choosing whether to be assimilated.

The second panoramic picture appears next to the first one in "The Bee Meeting" in a more metaphorical way. After the speaker was covered and gloved, the subject was "led through a bean field":

> Strips of tinfoil winking like people,
> Feather dusters fanning their hands in a sea of bean flowers,
> Creamy bean flowers with black eyes and leaves like bored hearts.
> Is it blood clots the tendrils are dragging up that string?
> No, no, it is scarlet flowers that will one day be edible.
> Now they are giving me a fashionable white Italian straw hat
> And a black veil that molds to my face, they are making me one of them.
> They are leading me to the shorn grove, the circle of hives.
> Is it the hawthorn that smells so sick?
> The barren body of hawthorn, etherizing its children. (p. 211)

Critics (Brain, 2001; Knickerbocker, 2009) suggested that Plath held an intense consciousness of ecology. Not only did Plath embody the ecological consciousness Rachel Carson advocated in her *Silent Spring,* but she also "uses nature imagery to externalize her inner life." (Brain, 2014) The images of plants are largely involved in this poem, displaying the outlook of the patriarchal world from the perspective of a female persona. The field of beans symbolizes the human world. According to *The White Goddess*, "the bean is traditionally associated with ghosts" (Grave, 2013, p.223), and there is a record of a belief that the souls of the dead reside in beans. In this panoramic picture, the colors of beans, bean flowers, and hawthorn are vividly presented. The edible scarlet flower and the barren body of the hawthorn stand out. The beauty(scarlet) of an unmarried woman and the fertility of a housewife (motherhood institution) are the social assessments of women. Before being eaten up, it is the responsibility of the bean flower to maintain its scarlet texture, which symbolizes the red-lip image of an attractive woman fitting the erotic expectation of male pleasure. Plath's "edible" flowers mirror the speaker's sexualization, while the hawthorn's "etherizing" scent chemical weapon against its own "children" parodies patriarchal motherhood's self-destructive demands. It reminds me of Plath's "Childless Woman": "The womb rattles its pod...This body, This ivory Ungodly as a child's shriek...My funeral, and this hill and this gleaming with the mouths of corpses." The images of death surround the barren woman. In this picture, the fertility of bean flowers/women is described in a way that caters to patriarchal expectations and preferences.

The third panoramic picture is in the "Stings" painting, the beekeeping scenario of "the man" and the subject. As both Hughes and Otto Plath are beekeepers, it is reasonable to regard this man as the husband or father image in many of Plath's poems. This picture of two people, a couple maybe, managing their bees fits the traditional expectation of society, in which the female role always offers "excessive love" to "enameled" bee cups.

Through these three panoramic pictures, the patriarchal outlook is represented objectively. This is a world in which women's beauty and fertility serve the needs of men. The compliments women get are around the necessity of male preference: excessive love, edibility, and a shining appearance. Through the opportunity of experiencing the privilege of patriarchy as a woman, the subject realizes the truth and starts to reject being gazed at and take subjectivity back.

2. Foreground: The Female Internal Gaze

Foreground imagery in The Bee Poems functions as a liminal space between internalized oppression and emerging self-awareness, where the female speaker begins to redirect the gaze inward and interrogate the structures that have rendered her voiceless.

Mitchell views images as "utterances" that communicate meaning. The foreground often plays a critical role in establishing the narrative or thematic focus of the image. By drawing immediate attention, it anchors the viewer's gaze and sets the stage for interpreting the rest of the composition. The foreground serves as the first point of contact, creating a pathway for the viewer to enter the image and navigate its deeper layers. Though objects painted as the foreground are not the focus, mostly, they serve to invite viewer engagement, mediate the reality and the scene, amplify the layers of paintings, balance the whole picture, and offer background information, among others. There are several foregrounds: bokeh foreground, guided foreground, framed foreground, and medium foreground. The Bee Poems adopts three kinds of foregrounds to represent the growing path of the feminist consciousness of the poet.

The first framed foreground is set in "The Arrival of the Bee Box". It pictures a peeping scenario towards the bee hives. The subject holds intense curiosity about the existential crisis of the bees after sharing the pain of the queen bee at the end of "The Bee Meeting" ("What have they accomplished/ Why am I cold?" (p. 212) Through the framed "little grid" on the box, the narration of the interior scenery showcases how the inner feminist self of the speaker is awakened by abjection:

> There are no windows,
> so I can't see what is in there.
> There is only a little grid, no exit.
> I put my eye on the grid.
> It is dark, dark,
> With the swarms of African hands
> Minimized and shrunk for export,
> Black on black, angrily clambering. (p. 213)

The interior scene in the bee box is pictured as "dark" and unorganized. The feeling I have of this box is it is "dangerous" and "furious". Sleigh (2011, p.299) believes that the majority of human society is socialized through "emotional residues" like bees and ants, namely instincts. As he holds "crucially, these instincts were constructed as feminine." Bees and ants are social animals and governed by their queens; therefore, they are organized through feminine instincts. However, the fact that the subject observes the bee group as unorganized is to deny the value of those feminine instincts. The poet even adopts the racist expression to describe the bees as "African hands" to devalue the femininity of the bee groups.

Ironically, the reason the subject spends a night with the bee box is to wait for the honey. At the starting point of shaking off patriarchal chains, the subject took the misogynist perspective to regard the bee groups unconsciously. It is the feeling that the speaker finds mostly impossible that constitutes "myself". According to Julia Kristeva (1982, p.5), "the abject simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject, one can understand that it is experienced at the peak of its strength when that subject, weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside, finds the impossible within; when it finds that the impossible constitutes it's very being, that it is none other than abject." The more the speaker finds bees appalling, the more likely her true self has hidden within them. "The swarms feeling," the "darkness" and "the box with little grid" are generated from chains of patriarchy to guarantee docility of the bees. Therefore, it is the chains that limit existing space of women appalls the speaker and by "abjecting" them the speaker constitutes her real self-women who never give up seeking freedom even in a dark box for they "shrunk for export."

The whole process of abjection and self-constitution is a struggle. The speaker keeps oscillating between a patriarchal accomplice and an awakening feminist. The bees are unable to fly out without the speaker's permission; therefore, the subject thinks "I am the owner" while they are just "a box of maniacs." However, as a member of the female group who starts to introspect the patriarchal institution, the subject cannot help but empathize with them when the subject is immersed in observing the bees: "I wonder how hungry they are." (p. 213)

After the whole process of observation of bees and introspection of the female group, the subject decides to let the bees out: "Tomorrow I will be sweet God, I will set them free. / The box is only temporary." (p. 213) Through the action of letting bees out, the subject frees her ambivalence towards the patriarchy and female groups as well. The subject realizes the feminine power of bees: they produce honey, and they can sting (the power of fertility and applying counter-gaze). But the subject fails to identify herself with the bees for the subject is afraid of being stung:

> 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? (p. 213)

At the first stage of female intergazing, the subject discovers the feminine power and starts to empathize with the bee groups. However, the subject still puts herself on the opposite side of the bees.

The second foreground composition appears in “Stings” when the subject witnesses the honey-drudging scenes of bees:

> I stand in a column
> Of winged, unmiraculous women,
> Honey-drudgers.
> I am no drudge
> Though for years I have eaten dust
> And dried plates with my dense hair.
> And seen my strangeness evaporate,
> Blue dew from dangerous skin.
> Will they hate me,
> These women who only scurry,
> Whose news is the open cherry, the open clover? (p. 214)

Behind the column, the subject witnesses the industriousness of honeybees: “unmiraculous women.” These honeybees are described as “women” and “unmiraculous”, equal to the female group in human society. While gazing upon the honey drudgers, the subject starts to take an inner gaze at herself. By simultaneously being a subject and an object of gazing, the speaker destroys the possibility of being otherized. The subject immediately denies the fact that the subject is a honey-drudger, which is, in fact, the process of abjection, the emphasis of her previous pain of year-long toilsomeness: “Though for years I have eaten dust /And dried plates with my dense hair.” There are two Biblical illusions involved: in Genesis, the serpent that tempted Eve to eat the apple suffered from the punishment of walking with its belly and eating dust; in the New Testament, Mary Magdalene, who was originally a sinful prostitute, becomes a follower of Jesus. She anointed Jesus's feet and dried them with her hair. By identifying with these two bible images, the subject victimizes herself by suffering from the invisible stress society exerts upon the female group. Here, Mulvey’s concept of “fetishistic scopophilia” becomes relevant—not in its original cinematic context of male pleasure, but as a mechanism the speaker attempts to subvert. Fetishistic scopophilia refers to the process by which female bodies are fragmented, idealized, and eroticized to alleviate castration anxiety, transforming the woman into a reassuring, consumable image. In Plath’s poetic frame, however, the female subject refuses this dynamic: she resists idealization, asserts labor (“eaten dust,” “dried plates with my dense hair”), and confronts the cost of domestic servitude without aesthetic embellishment. Thus, the gaze becomes reflexive and critical rather than objectifying.

The third foreground composition sits in “The Swarm.” This is a medium foreground: the war between Napoleon’s army and the bees serves as a foreground to the feminist movement in the real world. This is the only bee poem in which the speaker is not involved; the third-person perspective has been adopted instead. But who is observing the scene and making the comments? The subject. She serves as the invisible narrator

of the story. “The Swarm” is a dream-like scene and creates a sacred space for the subject to gaze inside the female group and thus to prove the absurdity and fidelity of the patriarchy.

> Somebody is shooting at something in our town-
> A dull pom, pom in the Sunday street.
> Jealousy can open the blood,
> It can make black roses.
> Who are they shooting at?
>
> It is you the knives are out for
> At Waterloo, Waterloo, Napoleon,
> The hump of Elba on your short back,
> And the snow, marshaling its brilliant cutlery
> Mass after mass, saying Shh! (p. 216)

If the “grid” in “The Arrival of the Bee Box” stages a self-critical gaze, and “Stings” doubts the deceptive patriarchal discourse, “The Swarm” escalates this dialectic: the third-person “medium foreground” (Napoleon’s war) becomes a “meta-commentary” on feminist movements’ “absurdity” under patriarchy. The image of “shooting” articulates the focus of this poem on war. Involving Napoleon’s army, an important historical and patriarchal icon, “The Swarm” intends to aggrandize the war between the bees and Napoleon. “Jealousy can open the blood” is an accusation of Napoleon's army, for they are jealous of the honey that the bees can produce (the power of fertility). At the end of the poem, Napoleon “is pleased with everything” for he wins “tons of honey”. It is the patriarchal mindset to find self-value by winning a war. Therefore, even though the narrator is hidden in “The Swarm”, the war between Napoleon’s army and the bees serves as a patriarchal medium fostering a foreground to evaluate the female group. The bees are depicted as “dumb”, “dismembered”, “banded,” and “intractable” while the men are “grinning” and wearing their “steel arcs”. It restores the feminist reality where women take much fewer positions in important fields and the historical reality in which women's wisdom is shadowed.

> In the furnace of greed. Clouds, clouds.
> 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.
>
> It thinks they are the voice of God
> Condoning the beak, the claw, the grin of the dog
> Yellow-haunched, a pack-dog,
> Grinning over its bone of ivory
> Like the pack, the pack, like everybody. (p. 217)

Beneath the indifferent narrative of the embarrassing situation of bees towards the army, the narrator represents her empathy with the bees. For she is well aware of the feminist power. Plath mentioned in her journal that

she is more talented in creativity and would be more prestigious given freedom and encouragement from the institution like men. The depiction of the dumbness of bees mirrors that of Napoleon's army. They take out the avant-garde weapon to fight against the dumb bees and are nearly "killed":

> How instructive this is!
> The dumb, banded bodies
> Walking the plank draped with Mother France's upholstery
> Into a new mausoleum, an ivory palace, a crotch pine.
>
> The man with gray hands smiles-
> The smile of a man of business, intensely practical.
> They are not hands at all
> But asbestos receptacles.
> Pom! Pom! 'They would have killed me.'
>
> Stings big as drawing pins!
> It seems bees have a notion of honor,
> A black intractable mind.
> Napoleon is pleased, he is pleased with everything.
> O Europe! O ton of honey! (p. 217)

Through the patriarchal medium, the narrator witnesses the fall of the bees. However, the creativity and perseverance of the bees stand out even more as hard as Napoleon's army tries to defeat them. The hump-like "drawing pins" bees leaving on the army manifest their initial victory. The picture in "Wintering" demonstrates the spring-tasting moment of the bees, implying their consistent struggle.

Through these three foregrounds, Plath dramatizes the speaker's growing capacity for feminist introspection and solidarity, laying the psychological groundwork for visual demystification in the close-ups that follow.

3. Close-ups: The Demystifying Moments

Close-up visualizations in The Bee Poems magnify the emotional and symbolic details of feminist rupture, presenting moments of confrontation, suffering, and transformation that disassemble patriarchal myths from within. In scenography, the close-up allows the painting of more details in the picture compared to the panoramic and foreground. Mitchell discussed how close-ups operate to focus the viewer's attention on specific details, creating a sense of immediacy and emotional engagement. This contrasts with the expansive detachment of panoramic views. Close-ups often function to intensify the viewer's experience, whether by invoking emotional responses or directing their gaze toward an important aspect of the image. Mitchell's exploration of power in visual forms suggests that close-ups exert control by narrowing the viewer's focus and magnifying specific details.

There are four close-ups in The Bee Poems, which are more emotionally involved than those of panoramic and foregrounds. Through these close-ups, the poet records how a woman living in a patriarchal world demystifies it.

The first close-up emerges in the first bee poem, “The Bee Meeting,” when the villagers bury a white, long grove:

> 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? (p. 212)

The “burying” moment awakes me by uncovering the truth that there is no difference between the queen bee and the speaker, for we would both be sacrificed once our values have been taken. The reason for using “long” and “white” grove is symbolic. If it was only the queen bee the grove is for, it does not have to be long. For the subject, she is buried with the queen bee by the patriarchy at the same time. Additionally, the speaker's “whiteness” (ignorance and obedience) is buried along with her body. The subject begins to realize the core of the patriarchy: imperialism. The “knives” pointing at the speaker, the magician girl at this moment is taken against the patriarchal icon Napoleon in “The Swarm”: “It is you the knives are out for/ At Waterloo, Waterloo, Napoleon.” (p. 217)

The second close-up is a sequence of two close-ups: the bees moldings onto the man’s lips while the queen bee flies up to the sky:

> In eight great bounds, a great scapegoat.
> Here is his slipper, here is another,
> And here, the square of white linen
> He wore instead of a hat instead.
> He was sweet,
>
> The sweat of his efforts was a rain
> Tugging the world to fruit.
> The bees found him out,
> Molding onto his lips like lies,
> Complicating his features.
>
> They thought death was worth it, but I
> Have a self to recover, a queen.
> Is she dead, or is she sleeping?
> Where has she been?
> With her lion-red body, her wings of glass? (p. 215)

After realizing the terrible truth that the subject have "eaten dust for years," the subject takes a step further in her feminist path. The subject makes a self-independent manifesto denouncing that "I am in control" to detach herself from the imperialist system. Suffering from years of oppression and sacrifice, the subject seeks "lex talionis" (An eye for an eye) to give vent to her anger. The "square of white linen" the man wearing reminds us of the "white Italian hat" the subject wore in "The Bee Meeting." Whilst critics argue the scene is a confessional writing referent to Ted Hughes's infidelity, I argue that this scenario demystifies patriarchal imperialism. The counter gaze is applied to a man, and thus, women are breaking up the "passive women" image. The man becomes the gaze bearer, and his pain of being stung is romanticized as having "sweet lips."

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

As the leader of the beehives, the queen bee is in control when the male beekeeper is stung by her allies. Following the patriarchal rules, she could have taken further revenge against the villagers trying to kill her, but she instead flies "over the engine that killed her". She is a "red scar, red comet in the sky," awakening the dulled world of women's/bees' inferior reality and representing a better solution towards gender inequality. The red scar was caused by the male gaze, and the queen bee exposes the cruelty of the masculine gaze in public rather than romanticizing it to fit the erotic expectations of men. The close-up of the queen bee's body functions as a "feminist counter-fetish" against what Laura Mulvey (1975, p.12) called the "fetishistic close-ups": fragments that simultaneously eroticize and dismember the female body by magnifying her trauma to expose patriarchal violence rather than masking it. Mulvey's "fetishistic close-up," a cinematic device used to eroticize and fragment the female body, is radically reappropriated in these moments. Plath's queen bee, with her "lion-red body" and "wings of glass," is not an object of visual pleasure but a figure of defiance and pain—a "red comet" that wounds the sky rather than adorns it. The close-up no longer aestheticizes the feminine but instead exposes the violence of aestheticization itself. By drawing attention to wounds, decay, and claustrophobic enclosures, Plath turns the visual regime against itself, crafting what can be called a counter-fetishistic gaze.

The third close-up shows up in "Wintering," depicting bees hibernating in a black room without any light:

> Wintering in the dark without a window
> At the heart of the house
> Next to the last tenant's rancid jam
> And the bottles of empty glitter-
> Sir So-and-so's gin.
>
> This is the room I have never been in.
> This is the room I could never breathe in.
> The black bunched in there like a bat,

No light
But the torch and its faint

Chinese yellow on appalling objects
Black asininity. Decay.
Possession.
It is they who own me.
Neither cruel nor indifferent,
Only ignorant. (p. 218)

Though many critics adopted psychoanalysis in understanding the "black room" here as Plath's unconsciousness (Luck, 2007). I argue its connection with Virginia Woolf's picture of a room of one's own. Surviving in the most terrible conditions, the bees are wintering in this black room room "I had never been" and "could never breathe in." Everything in this room is decaying and appalling. However, with the jam and the protective roof, it offers an ideal environment for bees to survive. The color black is iconic in Plath's works: in bee poems, black first emerges as a "man in black" in "The Bee Meeting", a rector belonging to the villagers. "Man in black" is one of the most classic images in Plath's poem: a man wearing black shoes who tramps the speaker for 30 years and "Bits (Bit) my pretty red heart in two" in "Daddy"; in "Man in black", an all-mighty man wearing a black coat, black shoes, and black hair, powerful enough to "Fixing (Fixed) vortex on the far Tip/ riveting stones, air, All of it, together." (Plath, 1981, p. 89) Examples of the man in black in Plath's late poems are countless, and all of them constitute a spiritual god, in front of whom the subject is pale and powerless.

The subject held a love-hate feeling towards the man in black, just like "Every woman adores a Fascist." The man in black in bee poems continues its image in "Daddy" except a more powerful rector who is in charge of people's spiritual world. The black room here continues Plath's inner fear of her spiritual father and patriarchy. Survival in winter does not refer to the final victory, for the black is still omnipresent. The speaker adopts another abjection in facing this claustrophobic room. Unlike Woolf's clean and bring a room of one's own, this black demystifies the feminist utopia and reveals the necessity of consistent material struggle. The last close-up emerges at the end of The Bee Poems:

Into which, on warm days,
They can only carry their dead.
The bees are all women,
Maids and the long royal lady.
They have gotten rid of the men,

The blunt, clumsy stumblers, the boors.
Winter is for women-
The woman, still at her knitting,
At the cradle of Spanish walnut,
Her body was a bulb in the cold and too dumb to think.

Will the hive survive? Will the gladiolas

Succeed in banking their fires
To enter another year?
What will they taste of, the Christmas roses?
The bees are flying. They taste the spring. (pp. 218-219)

It depicts the situation of bees in late winter and the start of spring. For bees, winter is the least productive season among the four. To survive in the winter, the bees normally huddle together in a ball to keep warm and may be fed (syrup) by beekeepers. Having been through all the wars, the sacrifices, and the industrious seasons, the bees "have got rid of the men" and show their feminist resistance. The detail of the "knitting" at the cradle of the Spanish walnut refers to the conventional picture of housewives. This image raises another question. If feminist freedom is what the bees are seeking, why do they return to being traditional housewives to knit? What differentiates these knitting women from passive housewives is that they are knitting for themselves rather than any men, for "they have got rid of the men." Their knitting allegorizes feminist resilience: dormant yet pregnant with the "spring" of collective insurgency.

However, as Luck (2007, p303) pointed out, "With its inclusion of both sexes (the hive could not survive the next spring without 'The blunt, clumsy stumblers') offers a much more fluid, less dichotomous notion of gender that begins even at the biological level of an organism." Therefore, when Plath imagines the promising ending of the beehives, she pictures the ending of both genders. Following the feminist path, she rejects the dichotomous perspective in evaluating gender issues. It is the imperial patriarchy that Plath is against, and both genders could be victims in this system. Critics noticed the sense of hope that "Wintering" represents; it is the notion Plath wants to convey in her original version of *Ariel* before Hughes' editing. Frieda (2004) asserts that the collection was intended to start with the word "love" and end with the word "spring", which is the last word of "Wintering."

These intensified, emotionally charged close-ups dismantle patriarchal visual codes from within, enabling the speaker and the reader to witness a feminist rebirth through symbolic exposure, reclamation, and rupture, culminating in a tentative but resolute emergence into spring.

Conclusion

By integrating W.J.T. Mitchell's visual theory and Laura Mulvey's notion of the "male gaze," this paper has examined how Plath's Bee Poems mobilize visual modes—three panoramic scenes, three foreground compositions, and four close-up moments—to articulate a feminist poetics. These visual strategies chart a progression: from the depiction of a patriarchal order in which women's bodies are aestheticized and instrumentalized, to the speaker's ambivalent yet evolving feminist consciousness, and finally to a demystifying rupture of patriarchal visuality. In this visual-feminist framework, Plath reclaims the gaze, challenges aesthetic traditions historically aligned with male spectatorship, and constructs an alternative mythology where the female subject both sees and resists being seen. Plath thus utilized the feminist "poetic features" in traditional male-centered ekphrasis writings and "transformed them as her own resisting tools."(Yan Jingwen 2025) The Bee Poems thus offer not only a poetic but also a visual insurgency against gendered systems of representation.

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