5-2023

Tell the Bees that Transcendentalism is Lost: The Search for the Lost Transcendental Space in the Bee Poetry of Emily Dickinson and Sylvia Plath

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A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Department Name

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in English

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by

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May 2023

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Keywords: bees, bee poetry, ecocriticism, transcendentalism, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Emily Dickinson, Sylvia Plath

ABSTRACT

Tell the Bees that Transcendentalism is Lost: The Search for the Lost Transcendental Space in the Bee Poetry of Emily Dickinson and Sylvia Plath

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Ralph Waldo Emerson's bee poem, "The Humble-Bee," expresses the nineteenth-century transcendentalist philosophy of finding wholeness and oneness in nature while Sylvia Plath's twentieth-century bee poems function as a response to Plath's feelings of alienation and repression, indicating that transcendental peace is lost in the postmodern era. Emerson's poem indicates the spiritual fulfillment found through observing bees and highlights the harmony between humans and nature, but women of the nineteenth century find difficulty achieving this same level of freedom; Emily Dickinson reclaims the language of transcendentalism in her bee poetry to explore a world otherwise denied to her. The effects of the industrial revolution then sparked a mass disconnect between humans and nature, a disconnect reflected in the bee poetry of Sylvia Plath; she rejects the inherited tradition of transcendentalist poetry by using her bee poems to demonstrate discomfort within nature and society.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this project to my family: to my husband, Mason Duncan, for his encouragement, friendship, and love; to my grandmother, Lumme, for fostering my passion for learning; to my mom for listening to countless hours of thesis draft readings; and to my late stepfather, fellow adventurer, beekeeper, and friend of nature, for introducing me to the world of bees and providing inspiration for this project.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A special thank you to my thesis chair, Dr. D. Michael Jones, for sparking my interest in poetry. Thank you for your kind support and encouragement, your helpful advice that shaped my focus, your patience, and your tolerance of my constant bee puns. I truly appreciate you guiding me through this daunting process. Thank you to my readers, Dr. Scott R. Honeycutt, and Dr. Jesse K. Graves, for your valuable insights into bee poetry and for directing me to resources that greatly influenced the project. I cannot imagine a better group of mentors, and I appreciate each of you tremendously.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

In “Stings” (1962), Sylvia Plath writes, “I am in control. / Here is my honey-machine, / It will work without thinking” (32-4). The hive is the equivalent of an industrial machine that engages in mindless and soulless production, and the speaker establishes that she is “in control” of this machine, suggesting that any power has been removed from the bees (32). The human beekeeper controls the bees and steals their honey, but the bees continue their mindless production in service of the entity presiding over them. Plath’s bee poetry serves as an example of the postmodern condition of suffering at the hands of capitalism and the loss of transcendental thought. Because of these conditions, Plath’s bee poems are infused with industrial language that sets her poetry apart from Emily Dickinson’s or Ralph Waldo Emerson’s. The bees’ condition expressed through this industrial language speaks to the grim reality of humans living in the twentieth century.

In the early nineteenth century, the transcendentalists viewed nature as essential to their spiritual and philosophical growth, and Emerson demonstrates this closeness with nature through his poem, “The Humble-Bee” (1839). In his poem, the wild bumblebee is a masculine, “yellow-breeched philosopher” and a free explorer of the natural world (53). He is capable of thought, reason, and leadership, and Emerson seeks to “chase thy waving lines,” suggesting not only the bees’ ability to provide spiritual guidance but also Emerson’s own free movement within the natural world as a male subject (8). The women of the nineteenth century, even female transcendentalists like Margaret Fuller, found difficulty experiencing this male subject position advocated by the male transcendentalists and devised a way to retool transcendental language to suit their purposes.

Margaret Fuller and Louisa May Alcott use the language of transcendentalism to touch on the "busy bee" ideology of the nineteenth century, an ideology that advocates for women to be constantly engaged in domestic tasks in order to be "kept from mischief" (Fuller 258). Alcott critiques this domestic labor in her *Flower Fables* (1854), and her queen bee says that "'if our home is beautiful, we have made it so by industry'" (35). The home can only be beautiful by constant domestic labor, and her bees are never allowed to rest in pursuit of this goal. Alcott uses nature and transcendental language in her work to challenge women's domestic positions and their subsequent lack of freedom.

Similarly, Dickinson repurposes transcendental language and crafts an imaginative feminine space in her poetry where she explores a world of freedom, and she creates a masculine bee in the subject position who traverses freely across the landscape. Her imagination becomes a window into this position. In "His Feet are shod with Gauze," written approximately ten years after Alcott's *Flower Fables*, Dickinson writes, "Oh, for a Bee's experience / Of Clovers and of Noon" (7-8). Similarly, in "Could I but ride indefinite," which appears around the same time, she muses, "I said 'But just to be a Bee' / Upon a Raft of Air" (13-4). She seems to desire the male subject position her masculine bee occupies, and she imagines herself in this position. In the same poem, she writes, "What Liberty! So Captives deem / Who tight in Dungeons are" (17-8). She indicates her feeling of imprisonment as a woman in society and the domestic sphere, but she uses her poetry to escape into an imaginative world where she has freedom.

This bee poetry comes from New England poets who lived or had strong ties to the area, and the region has its roots in transcendentalism. Emerson was born in Boston, Massachusetts in 1803 and lived in Concord, Massachusetts until his death in 1882; Dickinson lived her entire life in Amherst, Massachusetts, from 1830-1886; and Plath was born in Boston in 1932 and lived

there until 1959 when she moved to England with her husband. Plath's bee poetry was produced in 1962 while she was in London, but her strong connections to New England remain. In *Transcendentalism in New England* (1876), Octavius Brooks Frothingham explains that transcendental thought appeared elsewhere, but

> in New England, the ideas entertained by the foreign thinkers took root in the native soil and blossomed out in every form of social life. The philosophy assumed full proportions, produced fruit according to its kind, created a new social order for itself, or rather showed what sort of social order it would create under favoring conditions. (105)

In other words, the romanticism that generated transcendental thought could not become transcendentalism outside of New England. Many similarities exist between Emerson, Dickinson, and Plath, and in *This Was a Poet* (1938), George Frisbie Whicher explains that "the implication that Emerson created a point of view which other writers adopted is simply untrue"; instead, "the resemblances that may be noted in Emerson, Parker, Thoreau, Emily Dickinson and several other New England authors were due to the fact that all were responsive to the spirit of the time" (198; 199). In *Emily Dickinson's Home* (1967), Millicent Todd Bingham agrees that Dickinson "was a part of her time. And she thought, as she said, 'New Englandy.' Even though these thoughts reached into the furthest recesses of human experience, her point of departure was always an inveterate New Englandism" (29). The "spirit of the time," as Whicher puts it, is also a spirit of locality (199). New England is the home of transcendentalism, which maintains its influence over the region and its poets.

Between the late nineteenth century to early twentieth century, the industrial revolution, and subsequent changes in agriculture, impacted and threatened the bees' environment, even in New England. Bees are extremely important to the ecosystem and losing them would be

devastating. Through their production of honey, they provide the service of pollination, and Noah Wilson-Rich, the founder and Chief Scientific Officer of The Best Bees Company, explains in *The Bee: A Natural History* (2014) that "an astonishing range of fruit and vegetable crops are 90 percent or more reliant on insects for pollination. The yield of these crops would decline to less than 10 percent of its current level, if bees disappeared" (96). The impact of such a disappearance would be catastrophic, and humans depend on bees for life to continue. Also, without bees, there would be no honey, and in *The World of Bees* (1965), Murray Hoyt states that "honey has been noted as a source of quick energy. It is absorbed into the bloodstream faster than any other sweet" (24). The benefits of eating honey outweigh those of other sweeteners, and honey never spoils. Without bees, agricultural production would plummet, and we would not have delicious honey; unfortunately, the immense agricultural demand has resulted in honeybee farming, which has threatened other bee species because the honeybees in their much larger numbers are outcompeting the other species for resources.

The same economic greed that threatens multiple bee species also threatens honeybees. In *Silent Spring* (1962), an early commentary on environmental concerns, Rachel Carson identifies the growing threat on bees, specifically in the form of harmful pesticides used to rid farmlands of intrusive insects, and she explains that DDT (dichloro-diphenyl-trichloro-ethane), a chemical used as an insecticide, wiped out an entire bee population in 1957 (160). She writes that a beekeeper in New York State

> lost 800 colonies after the state had sprayed a large area. So widespread and heavy was the loss that 14 other beekeepers joined him in suing the state. . . . Another beekeeper, whose 400 colonies were incidental targets of the 1957 spray, reported that 100 per cent of the field force of bees (the workers out gathering nectar and pollen for the hives) had

> been killed in forested areas and up to 50 per cent in farming areas sprayed less intensively. (160)

While the state intended to rid the agricultural area of harmful insects, thereby producing more product for economic gain, they inadvertently threatened the bee population. The man who lost all of his bees writes that "'it is a very distressful thing . . . to walk into a yard in May and not hear a bee buzz'" (qtd. in Carson 160). This was a devastating loss that speaks to the priorities of agriculture: make more money and disregard how nature might be injured. There is another chemical, called Parathion, which is "one of the most powerful and dangerous" organic phosphorous insecticides (29). Honeybees that come into contact with it will "perform frantic cleaning movements, and are near death within half an hour" (29). These types of chemicals introduced new challenges to bees, ultimately leading to the destruction of many populations; devastatingly, human value for economic profit now overrules any value for nature.

Simultaneously, humans also began to suffer during the industrial age with feelings of alienation, drawing a parallel between human and bee suffering caused by economic greed. Nature becomes a space of loss rather than transcendental fulfillment, and in this twentieth-century lost transcendental space, Plath does not craft an imaginative world of freedom; instead, she explores her position as a beekeeper, occupying the position her father once held and controlling the bees she owns. Plath writes several bee poems, known as the bee sequence, in her *Ariel* collection. The bee sequence poems appearing in this collection were written in 1962, but the collection was not published until 1965, two years after Plath's death. In "The Arrival of the Bee Box," she writes, "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" (23-5). She invents a subject position for herself, an active role where she makes decisions and chooses the fate of the bees. She can

choose to order them, send them back, or let them starve; she even thinks, “Tomorrow I will be sweet God, I will set them free” (35). As the beekeeper, she holds all the power, but she feels uncomfortable in this role. In “Stings,” she wonders, “Will they hate me,” and she accepts culpability for the bees’ suffering in “Wintering” by writing that the bees must “make up for the honey I’ve taken” (28; 26). The guilt that surrounds her role as beekeeper creates a painful fragmentation for Plath’s speaker across the bee poems.

Emerson’s bee is a wild bumblebee, and Dickinson likely writes about similarly native bee species visiting her garden, but Plath’s bees are domesticated honeybees. According to Wilson-Rich, honeybees are not native to North America but were “introduced to the New World by Europeans in the seventeenth century as a means of sustainable food production” (17). These honeybees are now “the most widely used commercial pollinator” globally, and they have largely driven out the native bee populations, becoming eventual colonizers of the Americas like the humans who brought them (185). A species of bumblebee, the apple humble bee, “has not been seen since 1864,” so it is likely that Emerson’s humble bee has also vanished (189). While Emerson’s and Dickinson’s bees are male subjects freely exploring the natural, mostly unaltered, landscape, Plath’s bees are female objects consistently under the control of the beekeeper in an industrial age where honeybees dominate and native bees suffer; however, the honeybees are controlled by the beekeepers, and Plath simultaneously identifies with the beekeeper and the bees she possesses, specifically the queen bee, who is threatened constantly by usurpation and death. In “Stings,” Plath writes that she has “a self to recover, a queen,” but the queen then soars “over the engine that killed her,” suggesting a loss of identity (52; 59).

This loss of identity coincides with the loss of the transcendental space in the postmodern era, and Mary Oliver identifies the loss of transcendence in her poem, “Honey at the Table”

(1978). She writes that honey "fills you with the soft / essence of vanished flowers," and she describes how the taste transports the taster past the forest floor, over pawprints of animals and crushed bees to the original source of the honey (1-2). Each image shows the absence of something in nature, but honey is "a taste / composed of everything lost, in which everything / lost is found" (13-5). Even the bee who could have been the guide in Emerson's poem is missing, indicating the lost transcendental space; however, instead of simply being the product of mindless industrial labor, the honey itself provides a conduit for spiritual awareness and indicates the search for lost transcendence within the industrial world, but this search for transcendent potential eludes Plath's bee poetry.

The human and bee relationship established by Emerson consists of a subject-to-nature relationship impossible to achieve by Dickinson, who creates an imaginative relationship with the bee that allows her to explore a world inaccessible to her, and the relationship between Plath and her bees is that of possessor and possessed. Sometimes Plath's speaker functions as the controlling force over the bees, and sometimes she exemplifies solidarity with the bees' suffering. This shifting human and bee relationship signifies the changing dynamics between humans and nature in the hundred years between Emerson and Plath, specifically through the growing value of capitalist interest over the environment. The bee poetry from the early nineteenth century represents the male-centric tradition of using nature to find wholeness and oneness, and the twentieth century demonstrates a shift in using bees in poetry as a response to the feelings of alienation and exhaustion from the endless toil in the capitalist system. While Dickinson can embrace transcendentalist ideas in her poetry, Plath totally rejects it, suggesting the total loss of transcendentalism in the postmodern era.

CHAPTER 2. THE TRANSCENDENTALIST HUMAN AND BEE RELATIONSHIP

The New England tradition of "telling the bees," a practice that invites bees into the mourning process, demonstrates the bond between bees and their keepers and the overall relationship shared between humans and bees. Like the New Englanders, the transcendentalists understood the importance of bees, and Emerson's poem, "The Humble-Bee," indicates the spiritual fulfillment found through observing bees and highlights the harmony between humans and nature; however, Emerson offers a male-centric version of transcendentalism that promises complete freedom and access to the natural environment. Although female transcendentalists existed, the women's writings of the same period demonstrate a different understanding of bees, specifically viewing bees through the lens of the nineteenth-century "busy bee" ideology, which condemned idleness, particularly the idleness of women, who were taught to be constantly engaged in domestic labor. Through this lens, the hive represents the home, and the bees in the hive represent the oppressed women of society. Emerson's idea of transcendentalism does not allow space for women's experiences because, unlike the male transcendentalists, women's freedom is limited, and the bees that appear in women's works challenge traditional transcendental thought by reflecting the societal limitations placed on women. For Emerson, the bee is a male philosopher; for the women, the bee is a female domestic laborer. In Emerson's view, the worker bee has the potential to be a male subject, offering language for women writers to retool for their purposes, although this does not become apparent until Dickinson, who also creates male bees in the subject position. The female transcendentalists use transcendental thought to attack the Puritan image of the industrious woman, revising the male ideas from transcendentalism to serve a different purpose. The women use the language of transcendental

nature to speak against patriarchal limitations, allowing nature to become a safe space to explore their concerns.

The New England custom of "telling the bees" demonstrates bees' significance to humans and involved beekeepers informing their bees of important news, particularly of marriages and deaths in the family. In the case of death, the bees would be approached with reverence and quietly told the news to allow them to mourn with the rest of the family. In "New England Funerals" (1894), Pamela McArthur Cole writes, "I know a few persons who remember seeing it done in 1842" (219). However, in *The Honey-Makers* (1899), Margaret Warner Morley reveals that "the bees must *still* be told of a death in the family in many parts of Europe and in certain out-of-the-way places in our own country, where in earlier days the custom was general" (339; emphasis added). Morley indicates that the practice was still happening in rural areas up until 1899. In his "Telling the Bees" (1954) article, C. W. Hagge explains that telling the bees is "from the forgotten rural years when almost every family kept bees" and the tradition "held that the bees must be told when a member of a family dies—and the hive draped with a shred of black—lest the bees leave their hive" (58-9). In "Telling the Bees: A Swarm of Facts, Folklore, and Traditions" (2019), Tim Clark similarly describes the practice: according to tradition,

> it was critical to tell the bees of a death in the beekeeper's family. Many tales have been told of colonies leaving the farm or dying off if they were not told, especially when the beekeeper himself or herself died. A family member (some stories specify the youngest child or the oldest female relation) had to gently knock on the hive and announce, 'The Master is dead.' Then she or he would beg the bees not to leave the farm. Often the hives were decorated with black crepe for the funeral. (165)

The carefully orchestrated practice was used to prevent the bees from leaving the hive, and beekeepers often "sang to their bees to prevent them from swarming" (Clark 165). According to Murray Hoyt, swarming is "a natural instinct of bees. It is the colony's reproductive urge. The colony divides and makes two" (78). Swarming itself can be inconvenient to beekeepers who desire to produce endless honeyflow, and their bees do not always swarm to a convenient location belonging to the same beekeeper. Preventing a swarm is something beekeepers are keen to do; however, Hoyt explains that while swarming is a natural phenomenon, "'swarming out' . . . describes the entire colony coming out and absconding, usually because of disease or other intolerable conditions in their hive or tree, and moving en masse somewhere else" (78). Swarming out would be much more devastating to the hopeful beekeeper, and the New England beekeepers were likely trying to prevent swarming out rather than natural swarming when telling the bees and asking them not to leave. This distinction is significant as swarming out only occurs due to "disease or intolerable condition," indicating that the death of a family member would be intolerable, and the New Englanders hoped to entice the bees to stay by keeping them informed and singing to them (78). The bees and the New Englanders are connected through grief, and Wilson-Rich contends that "the lives of the beekeeper and the bees are intimately intertwined, and this ritual marks the loss of that connection between human and bee" (99). Allowing the bees to be a part of the grieving process suggests a deep love, respect, and bond between humans and their winged companions.

This connection between humans and bees is also reflected in New England literature, specifically in the poetry of John Greenleaf Whittier and Lizette Woodworth Reese in their poems both titled "Telling the Bees." Whittier begins his "Telling the Bees" (1858) with an explanation of telling the bees and writes that it is

> a remarkable custom, brought from the Old Country, formerly prevailed in the rural districts of New England. On the death of a member of the family, the bees were at once informed of the event, and their hives dressed in mourning. This ceremonial was supposed to be necessary to prevent the swarms from leaving their hives and seeking a new home. (186)

While this description aligns with the others, Whittier's explanation is cited by multiple sources on telling the bees, indicating that Whittier provides one of the only thorough accounts of the practice. His poem follows the speaker who is returning home after some time away, but he notices that "nothing changed but the hives of bees" (36). Because the practice is associated with the death of a loved one, this line is significant; it suggests that the bees are physically altered by the death of a human, solidifying their connection with each other. Whittier's speaker then reveals,

> Before them, under the garden wall,
> Forward and back,
> Went drearily singing the chore-girl small,
> Draping each hive with a shred of black. (37-40)

As scholars have noted, the distinct singing to the bees and covering the hives in black marks the ritual. The chore-girl performs the task "drearily," indicating that the death has also affected her, and she shares her grief with the bees, and she orchestrates the ritual by interacting with the bees (39). She is a "chore-girl," suggesting her domestic role, and she connects with the bees, who also exist within the domestic space (39). Whitter, perhaps unintentionally, touches on the parallel between women and bees and their shared domestic relationship. The speaker goes on to explain,

Trembling, I listened: the summer sun

Had the chill of snow;

For I knew she was telling the bees of one

Gone on the journey we all must go! (41-4)

In this passage, the speaker's use of the word "we" suggests that humans and bees alike must go on the final "journey," drawing a parallel between the experiences of humans and bees (44). Not only are the two creatures connected through grief, but they are also connected in their existence: their lives and their deaths. Upon hearing the chore-girl's song, the speaker believes that Mary's grandfather has passed away, but he notices that "with his cane to his chin, / The old man sat; and the chore-girl still / Sung to the bees stealing out and in. (50-52). The bees' movements create a breathing motion that mirrors the girl's breath as she sings. The final stanza reads:

And the song she was singing ever since

In my ear sounds on:—

"Stay at home, pretty bees, fly not hence!

Mistress Mary is dead and gone!" (53-6)

In this stanza, the speaker learns that Mary, and not her grandfather, has died, and this information is not revealed until the final line of this final stanza, suggesting the slow reception of the news by the speaker. Because her name is the only detail Whittier provides about Mary, her name functions as a description of her: the name carries biblical connotations of innocence and purity, indicating her high morality. The characters of the poem are devastated by the tragic loss of such a woman, and the song of the chore-girl begs the bees to "fly not hence," trying to prevent them from swarming out in their grief over Mary's passing (55). Morley explains that in Germany, those telling the bees would implore them: "Little bee, our lord is dead; leave me not

in my distress" (339). Not only do the humans and bees share their grief, but this translation also suggests that the custom involved seeking connection and comfort through the bees. Additionally, the bees are instructed to "stay at home," enforcing their role in the domestic environment (55).

In Whittier's poem, the interaction between the girl and the bees functions to maintain domestic wholeness in the face of loss, and Lizette Woodworth Reese's "Telling the Bees" grapples with the same domestic wholeness in the face of losing a matriarchal figure approximately thirty years later; however, it highlights the same human and bee relationship, but especially the woman and bee relationship, found in Whittier's poem. The similarities between the poems are numerous, including the fact that both speakers learn of the death of a loved one through a feminine figure telling the bees. Their speakers receive the information at the same time the bees do, bringing the bees into the mourning process and enforcing the importance of the relationship between humans and bees. At the end of her first stanza, Reese writes, "The tears adown her cheek did run, / Bathsheba standing in the sun, / Telling the bees (3-5). Like Whittier's speaker, Reese's speaker has come upon a scene of mourning without knowing the context. Reese's speaker has discovered Bathsheba in her grief and notices that she has brought her heartache to the bees. The second stanza reads:

> My mother had that moment died;
> Unknowing, sped I to the trees,
> And plucked Bathsheba's hand aside;
> Then caught the name that there she cried
> Telling the bees. (6-10)

The speaker is “unknowing” of her mother’s death, like Whittier’s speaker was unknowing of Mary’s, until she hears the name spoken to the bees and a distinctly feminine voice that informs them (7). This suggests that the bees take priority in receiving the information, and the speakers are left in the dark until the moment the bees learn of the unfortunate deaths. The feminine figures telling the bees unintentionally tell the speakers the same information at the same time, highlighting the human and bee connection, but the bees were given priority in receiving the news.

The last two lines of the poem read: “I think I see Bathsheba yet / Telling the bees” (14-5). These lines establish that the speaker is recalling the memory of the incident, but Bathsheba is not remembered for telling the speaker of the news; she is remembered for telling the bees. Whittier’s speaker similarly remembers that “the song she was singing ever since / In my ear sounds on” (53-4). His speaker, like Reese’s, remembers the bees being told the information not himself receiving the information. Reese’s speaker repeats the line, “telling the bees,” three times, emphasizing its significance to the poem and reiterating that the bees are intentionally told the information while the speaker unintentionally overhears it. Telling the bees takes priority over telling the humans, but each receives the information simultaneously so that their grief begins at the same time, enforcing the connection between humans and bees.

Reese’s female figure who tells the bees has her own biblical significance. Unlike Mary who carries biblical connotations of high morality, Bathsheba’s character in the bible functions as a disrupter of the domestic. David becomes infatuated with Bathsheba after seeing her bathing on the roof, and he sends for her to begin their adulterous affair. David then orders Bathsheba’s husband to the frontlines of the battlefield to have him killed and afterward marries the widowed Bathsheba. David’s infatuation with Bathsheba leads to infidelity and murder, so the presence of

Bathsheba's name within this poem is significant to the idea of domesticity. Combined with the loss of the matriarchal figure, Bathsheba brings the news of the lost domestic space. In this poem, the bees are not instructed to "stay at home" as in Whittier's poem but are simply informed and allowed to judge for themselves if they should stay (55). Reese challenges the domestic within her poem while Whittier enforces it, indicating an early difference in the relationship between bees and men compared to the relationship between bees and women.

The Transcendentalist Bee

The New England transcendentalists also recognized and appreciated this relationship between humans and bees, specifically man and bees, because they recognized and appreciated the relationship between man and nature. Professor of American Studies at New Bulgarian University and scholar of American transcendentalism, Albena Bakratcheva, explains in *Visibility Beyond the Visible* (2013) that the transcendentalists believed in a "truthful simplicity of a life both spiritual and beautiful, in the blessed abundance of nature. The Romantic gaze of the Transcendentalists saw in the correspondences between man and nature the possibility for individual fulfillment – for both spiritual and artistic . . . accomplishment" (16). In other words, man's relationship with nature becomes a source of spiritual fulfillment for the transcendentalists. In his prominent essay, "Nature," Emerson muses that "the sun shines today also. There is more wool and flax in the fields. There are new lands, new men, new thoughts. Let us demand our own works and laws of worship" (181). This free-thinking advocated by the transcendentalists attempted to carve out a new spirituality found through reverence for nature. Bakratcheva writes that "Emerson took the Puritan emphasis on shaping and building moral character and refocused it upon a supra-institutional, free-spirited poetic praise of God in man. The church temple was left behind and a new temple opened its gates – the temple of Nature, of

American nature" (88). This new type of worship provided the transcendentalists a way to find spiritual fulfillment in the American wilderness—a new worship for free-thinking people, who had access to the vast landscape.

Along with the idea of nature becoming a place of worship, it also becomes a place of direct communion between nature and the human soul. Emerson writes that "the greatest delight which the fields and woods minister, is the suggestion of an occult relation between man and the vegetable. . . . Yet it is certain that the power to produce this delight does not reside in nature, but in man, or in a harmony of both" (185). The delight is produced by the relationship between the human and nature, a harmony which creates an effect "like that of a higher thought or a better emotion" (185). Spiritual fulfillment can only be achieved through the direct communion with nature, and Lawrence Buell, a Professor of American Literature whose research specializes in transcendentalism, explains in *Literary Transcendentalism* (1973) that "the Transcendentalist was no more deeply interested in spirit and nature, however, than he was in the human consciousness which experiences their power and the relationship between them" (263). The human consciousness observes and admires the unique relationship between human and nature, and Emerson ruminates that "nature always wears the colors of the spirit," suggesting that nature becomes a mirror to one's emotions because the human observes himself in nature (185). Another scholar of transcendentalism, Harold Clarke Goddard writes in *Studies in New England Transcendentalism* (1960) that "through the beauty, truth, and goodness incarnate in the natural world, the individual soul comes in contact with the appropriates to itself the spirit and being of God" (5). For the transcendentalists, there is an essential quality found in nature that cannot be found elsewhere, and nature becomes a philosophical and religious teacher and a place of spiritual fulfillment, highlighting the harmony between humans and nature.

Henry David Thoreau also recognized the harmony between humans and bees and identifies the spiritual fulfillment of being in the bees' presence. On April 28, 1860, Thoreau writes in his journal that

> as you stand by such a willow in bloom and resounding with the hum of bees in a warm afternoon like this you seem nearer to summer—than elsewhere. . . . The air is not only warmer and stiller—but has more of meaning or smothered voice to it, now that the hum of insects begins to be heard. You seem to have a great companion with you. Are reassured by the scarcely audible hum, as if it were the noise of your own thinking. It is a voiceful and significant stillness—such as precedes a thunderstorm or a hurricane. . . . You are sensible of a certain repose in nature. (63)

In this passage, Thoreau equates the sound of the bees to the sound of the mind and senses that the companionship between man and bees leads to feelings of peace. By desiring to be "nearer to summer," Thoreau seeks to be present in the moment, and the bees' hum grants him this peacefulness (63). The bees enhance nature by giving it "more of meaning or smothered voice," and the silent reverence with the bees allows him to commune with nature, indicating the bees' importance to the transcendental philosophy (63).

Because the transcendentalists relied heavily on nature to achieve spiritual wholeness, they likely recognized that bees are essential to the continuation of nature and the sustenance of human life. Wilson-Rich explains that ninety percent of fruit and vegetable crops rely on pollinators like bees (96). Bees also bring color and beauty to the world through their pollination of flowers. In his poem, "The Humble-Bee," (1839) Emerson acknowledges nature's dependence on bees:

> And with softness touching all,

Tints the human countenance

With the color of romance,

And infusing subtle heats,

Turns the sod to violets (23-7)

By ensuring food supplies and the existence of many plants and trees, bees "perform their greatest service to man" (Hoyt 37). Their service arguably extends to the transcendentalist philosophy: without bees, nature would not exist, and the transcendentalist's spiritual fulfillment in nature would vanish; therefore, while bees are most importantly essential to the continuation of life, they also ensure the existence of the transcendentalists and their spirituality.

Like Thoreau, Emerson reflects a reverence for nature and bees and demonstrates the seeking of the self through a relationship with both. In "The Humble-Bee," Emerson addresses the wild bumblebee, "Let me chase thy waving lines; / Keep me nearer, me thy hearer, / Singing over shrubs and vines" (8-10). This passage reinforces the transcendentalist idea that observing nature, symbolized by chasing the bee, will lead to fulfillment. He also writes, "Wait, I prithee, till I come / Within earshot of thy hum" (17-8). Emerson establishes in these lines that his communion with the bee is anticipated and essential to his development, and he eagerly awaits the lesson the bee will teach him. Emerson continues by explaining that the bee is

wiser far than human seer,

Yellow-breeched philosopher!

Seeing only what is fair,

Sipping only what is sweet. (52-5)

This passage reflects the transcendentalist idea that nature is a philosophical and religious teacher, and Emerson humanizes the bee by giving him these roles. In the poem, the bee teaches

Emerson how to commune with nature, demonstrating Emerson's reverence for bees and the relationship bees share with humans. Additionally, Emerson's bee functions as an extension of Emerson's mind rather than a symbol for the domestic; in this way, Emerson rescues the bees from domesticity, but women are excluded from his reading of the relationship between man and nature.

The Reclaimed Transcendental Bee

Margaret Fuller was a female transcendentalist and navigated the primarily male-dominated philosophy with relative ease; however, she recognized that women of the nineteenth century were generally denied the same freedom as their male counterparts and lacked access to the natural landscape. According to Paula Blanchard, author of *Margaret Fuller: From Transcendentalism to Revolution* (1978), Fuller was a friend of Emerson's, but she recognized the societal limitations faced by women as she needed Emerson's "helping hand" when trying to "gain entrance into the male literary world" (101). Fuller repurposes transcendental thought for her own goals, and she uses her position in the transcendental circle to identify men's inherent dominance and control over women and female subjugation, a state of being that limits personal freedom. In *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845), Fuller writes that "the gift of reason, man's highest prerogative, is allotted to [women] in much lower degree; that they must be kept from mischief and melancholy by being constantly engaged in labor, which is to be furnished and directed by those better able to think" (258). Fuller points out that any woman can recall "words which imply, whether in jest or earnest, these views or views like these" (258). She identifies men's control over women's time, namely a woman's engagement in domestic labor, and the woman must be kept busy to avoid "mischief and melancholy" (258).

This avoidance of idleness calls to mind the nineteenth-century "busy bee" ideology, and Sarah Lahey explains in "Honeybees and Discontented Workers" (2012) that "the bee became increasingly popular in nineteenth-century children's and juvenile literature as a pedagogical tool for encouraging proper behavior in young adults" (136). For example, Harvey Newcomb writes in *How to Be a Lady* (1852) that "by seeking to act discreetly, wisely, and correctly, in every place, you will be constantly forming good habits. Like the busy bee, you will suck honey from every flower" (14-5). Newcomb's definition of "good habits" includes remaining busy like a bee (14). Lahey points out that Newcomb's ideology is "capitalizing on the female-gendered worker bee" (136). Indeed, worker bees are females, and this distinction is significant to Newcomb's comment as it draws a parallel between the bee's endless labor and the endless domestic labor of women. In this way, the bee is not associated with the transcendental philosophical instruction for women but with an industrious work ethic that serves the domestic sphere.

Louisa May Alcott identifies and responds to this work ethic in many of her works, including her collection of short stories and poetry, *Flower Fables* (1854). Alcott's father, Amos Bronson Alcott, was part of the transcendental movement. Frothingham argues that "if among the representatives of spiritual philosophy the first place belongs to Mr. Emerson, the second must be assigned to Mr. Amos Bronson Alcott" (249). Alcott's influence within the transcendental movement no doubt had an influence on his daughter who adopted her father's opposition to "unfair working conditions in factories and other industrial settings; and following Emerson, she idealized a world in which individuals could pursue a vocation that brought spiritual fulfillment" (Lahey 134). Perhaps she also idealized a world where women could pursue a vocation outside of the home. Despite her familiarity with and proximity to the transcendental movement, Louisa May Alcott is not considered a transcendentalist. Instead, her work uses

nature and the language of transcendentalism to challenge societal expectations of women and highlight women's lack of freedom within society and nature. Lahey explains,

> Although typically understood as endorsing the 'busy bee' ethos of her day, Alcott's fiction also provides an ideological critique of nineteenth-century laboring habits. In her stories . . . she ponders what happens when a reasonable work ethic gives way to oppressive labor conditions. (133)

By examining Alcott's bee characters, a clearer understanding of Alcott's opinions about the "busy bee" ideology, oppressive domestic labor conditions, and unfair societal expectations of women are made clear. Alcott's *Flower Fables* contains several bee characters, and in "Lily-Bell and Thistledown," a short story appearing in the collection, the bees sing the following song:

> Awake! awake! for the earliest gleam
> Of golden sunlight shines
> On the rippling waves, that brightly flow
> Beneath the flowering vines.
> Awake! awake! for the low, sweet chant
> Of the wild-birds' morning hymn
> Comes floating by on the fragrant air,
> Through the forest cool and dim (1-8)

This first half of the bees' song expresses the beauty of the natural world, and the bees repeatedly tell each other to awake in order to experience this beauty. The description is reminiscent of Emerson's "Humble-Bee" poem which also expresses the natural wonder of blooming flowers and gloriously inhabited landscapes. However, the last half of the song reverses the meaning of their urgency to awake:

Then spread each wing,

And work, and sing,

Through the long, bright sunny hours;

O'er the pleasant earth

We journey forth,

For a day among the flowers (9-14)

The last lines of the song become about the endless toil the bees will experience in the natural environment. Although the bees admire the beauty of the landscape, they see their "day among the flowers" as hard work rather than pleasurable observance (14). Although the bees are part of nature, they are not allowed the transcendental peace to fully enjoy it. This lack of freedom within the natural world indicates a parallel between women and bees: although women are part of the world and society, they are not allowed the full freedom to enjoy it.

This parallel between women and bees demonstrates the same oppressive labor experienced by both, and the bees all serve the same entity: the hive, a microcosm of society, where women are forced into domestic labor in the home. Apart from a couple of male drones required to mate with the queen, bee colonies are made up entirely of females: the queen and her worker bees. From this perspective, a hive seems like a powerful feminist symbol where males have no power and are only necessary for reproduction; however, this powerful symbol falls away when considering that all members of the colony toil in service of the hive, the structure that drives their efforts. Alcott's queen bee explains, "'We do not spend the pleasant summer days in idleness and pleasure, but each one labors for the happiness and good of all. If our home is beautiful, we have made it so by industry'" (35). This passage is reminiscent of the angel in the house, and the bees' song and labor represent the nineteenth-century 'busy bee' ideology,

specifically the women who must constantly be engaging in domestic tasks, like cooking and sewing, and making the home a sanctuary. As Margaret Fuller mentions, women "must be kept from mischief and melancholy by being constantly engaged in labor" (258). The "busy bee" ideology functions as a way to limit women's mobility. Like their connection to human grief, bees also connect with women's lack of agency. The hive, like society, is not a safe space, and it creates systems of oppression for all its female members.

CHAPTER 3. EMILY DICKINSON'S ANTI-DOMESTIC BEE

While Fuller and Alcott see the bee as a domestic laborer and Emerson sees the bee as the masculine philosophical mind, Dickinson sees the bee as the material explorer and conqueror of the non-domestic world. Dickinson's bees inhabit a mystical, anti-domestic space, and Dickinson accesses this world through her imagination. Although Dickinson writes from the physical restriction of her home, and the societal restriction of her gendered existence, she finds freedom by imagining it. Dickinson uses the language of transcendentalism and repurposes it for her own goals: to explore a world in poetry that is otherwise blocked to her. The imaginative feminine space that she crafts through her bee poetry becomes the only source of freedom from her societal limitations.

Although not considered a transcendentalist, Dickinson resembles Emersonian thought in her nature poetry. Dickinson's bee poems establish that she, like Emerson, found value in nature, and Mary James Power explains in *In the Name of the Bee* (1943) that Dickinson had "deep reverence" for bees (63). In her poem, "The Pedigree of Honey" (c. 1884), Dickinson writes,

> The Pedigree of Honey
> Does not concern the Bee –
> A Clover, any time, to him,
> Is Aristocracy –. (1-4)

Like in Emerson's "The Humble-Bee" (1839), the wisdom of the bee is highlighted to demonstrate the intellectual authority the bee holds over human minds, specifically the bee's appreciation of life's simple pleasures. In his poem, Emerson contends that the bee is "wiser far than human seer" because the bee is "seeing only what is fair, / sipping only what is sweet," indicating that the bee lives a simple life by not desiring unattainable things (52-5). Similarly,

Dickinson's poem establishes that a simple clover is equal to any flower because the bee finds all he needs from the clover; all pollen will make honey, so the "pedigree," of the source does not matter (1). Both Emerson and Dickinson masculinize the bee, allowing him to become, as Emerson writes, a "yellow-breeched philosopher," who is both humble and wise (53). While Dickinson's masculine bee is granted freedom of the natural world, he settles his expectations on the simple clover, indicating that Dickinson grapples with her own feelings of dissatisfaction.

Dickinson's experience as a woman in the nineteenth century inherently sets her apart from Emerson, who never needed to grapple with his place in society. In *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone de Beauvoir states that "humanity is male, and man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself; she is not considered an autonomous being. . . . He is Subject; he is Absolute. She is the Other" (26). While Emerson occupies a free subject position, Dickinson inhabits the position of Other where freedom is limited to her. De Beauvoir also writes that "women's own successes are in contradiction with her femininity since the 'real woman' is required to make herself object, to be the Other" (323). Her success, spiritual or otherwise, is always undermined by her position as object, and she is denied a subject position. Woman's otherness to man would prevent her from feeling the full liberation of transcendentalism, and access to the natural landscape is limited to her; before she can foster the spiritual relationship, she must first grapple with her otherness and lack of agency. Emerson easily experiences his selfhood in his relationship to nature as a subject, but a woman's idea of self would be filtered through a man's idea of her, always reaffirming her object position in relation to the man's subject position and leaving her one degree removed from transcendental spiritual oneness.

Dickinson also encounters hurdles unknown to Emerson by choosing to be a woman poet in the nineteenth century. According to Elsa Greene in "Emily Dickinson Was a Poetess" (1972),

unlike Dickinson, "Emerson was not raised to celebrate piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity as divinely commanded attributes of himself. He was not taught that God would punish men who preferred the pen . . . to the broom" (67). Emerson existed in a world of total freedom while Dickinson existed in a world of restrictions, and by "simply *choosing* the vocation of poetess, Emily Dickinson risked psychic and social penalties unknown to her masculine predecessors" (Greene 67). In *Emily Dickinson* (1986), Cynthia Griffin Wolff agrees that "in mid-nineteenth-century New England, any woman who wished to be a poet was forced to think with brutal honesty about the implications of her gender" (169-70). Wolff writes that Dickinson

> confronted a painful double bind when she fixed upon her vocation: on the one hand, she could become a strong poet only if she was assertive and used language forcefully; on the other hand, in the mid-nineteenth century, the mores of Amherst—indeed, of America in general—did not condone assertiveness or outspokenness in women. (170)

Male poets would not have to navigate these concerns, and Dickinson's relationship to her art would be inherently different from Emerson's because she possesses less freedom and less respect as a writer. Instead of outspokenness in her poetry, Dickinson relies on imaginative navigation of the natural and social world to subtly indicate her feelings of inferiority.

In an attempt to embrace a subject position in nature, Dickinson creates an awkward subject position. She uses nature as a place of exploration, stretching muscles she cannot ordinarily stretch, but her poem, "The bee is not afraid of me" (c. 1859), demonstrates her reluctance to enter and freely enjoy the natural environment in the same way Emerson can. She attempts to explore that natural environment as a subject, but she fumbles around, feeling awkward and out of place. She writes,

> The bee is not afraid of me,

I know the butterfly;

The pretty people in the woods

Receive me cordially. (1-4)

In Emerson's verse, he follows the bee without reservation, but Dickinson feels compelled to tell the reader that her presence does not cause the bee to be afraid, permitting herself to view the bee. Her hesitancy suggests her fear within the natural environment. Emerson is assumed to be familiar with the nature he observes, but Dickinson must assure the reader that she "know[s] the butterfly," indicating her desire to establish credibility (2). She seems to desire being received "cordially" by nature but feels she must first deny her lack of disturbance to the environment (4).

While Dickinson certainly captures the beauty of nature, she seems to be hesitant to participate in it. Her next lines demonstrate that she feels rejected by nature: "The Brooks laugh louder when I come, / The Breezes madder play" (5-6). Although these lines appear to suggest that her presence controls the brook and breeze, this growing activity likely indicates her feeling of displacement within the natural space, and the brooks' laughter enforces nature's reluctance to accept her and its antagonism toward her presence. De Beauvoir writes that "it is very difficult for women to assume both their status of autonomous individual and their feminine destiny; here is the source of awkwardness and discomfort that sometimes leads them to be considered 'a lost sex'" (324). Dickinson seems to be grappling with his notion of awkwardness in her poem through her speaker's discomfort within nature, and her awkwardness stems from attempting to be a subject within Emerson's idea of nature. Dickinson's final lines ask, "Wherefore mine eyes thy silver mists? / Wherefore, Oh Summer's Day?" (7-8). These lines indicate that she feels blinded within the environment and unable to navigate it properly, an experience with nature

much different from Emerson's. Because the idea of transcendental nature has already been defined by men like Emerson, Dickinson cannot find a comfortable place within it.

The way that Dickinson discovers she can navigate the environment freely is by creating an imaginary feminine space in her poetry that allows her to escape the awkward subject position. Instead of attempting to be a subject within a world already defined by men, she becomes a subject through her imagined natural environment, and her bees function as her imaginative avatars in a world otherwise denied to her. Dickinson's poem, "To make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee," which appeared around the same time as her other bee poems, indicates an existence of an imagined outside world within the mind. The poem reads:

To make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee,

One clover, and a bee,

And revery.

The revery alone will do,

If bees are few (1-5)

In this poem, the prairie can exist by two methods: the first, by the relationship between the flower and the bee; the second, by imagining it. Dickinson suggests that the prairie can exist without the bee by creating it within the mind, granting her the power of godly creation through imagination. Instead of adhering to the idea that "man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself," Dickinson defines herself as a subject within her imagined feminine space (De Beauvoir 26). John Felstiner writes that Dickinson "liken[s] the imagination to bees," indicating that bees and the mind have equal power in creating a prairie and drawing a parallel between Dickinson and bees and the imaginative possibilities the bees grant her (81).

One of the bees Dickinson imagines is a wild bee that she has elevated to a religious status, mirroring the transcendental ideas of nature but creating a comfortable spiritual place for herself. In "The Gentian weaves her fringes" (c. 1858), Dickinson writes, "An aged Bee addressed us – / And then we knelt in prayer" (10-11). The bee is either officiating a worship service or the bee is being worshiped, and Bakratcheva maintains that in transcendentalism, "the church temple was left behind and a new temple opened its gates – the temple . . . of American nature" (88). Through this lens, Dickinson's bee inhabits the purest transcendentalist sphere, either worshiping or being worshiped in nature. She finishes the poem by writing,

> In the name of the Bee –
>
> And of the Butterfly –
>
> And of the Breeze – Amen! (16-8)

In "Expression and Sublimation" (1981), Lois A. Cuddy asserts that "the bee is designated as God—Father in a secular Sign of the Cross" (28). In this reading, the bee replaces God in the holy trinity, elevating him to the highest religious status, and the earlier passage is transformed: unlike the impossibly distant God of Christianity, Dickinson's "Bee addressed us" directly, suggesting that Dickinson feels more seen by nature than by organized religion (10). New England's Puritan past still haunts Dickinson's present: Millicent Todd Bingham explains in *Emily Dickinson's Home* (1967) that "the long shadow of Jonathan Edwards, distant from 1850 in years but not in influence, still lay dark over Amherst," and fear was "rooted in the knowledge that God is everywhere and knows everything we do" (32-3). This fear fosters an inhospitable environment; therefore, Dickinson creates a new religious environment through her mystical bee. Mary James Power concludes that Dickinson "signed a friendly alliance with nature" through her

nature trinity, suggesting that Dickinson adopts the ideas presented in transcendentalism to imagine a safe religious space (63).

While using the bee to reject the limitations of traditional religion and embracing the expansive possibilities of transcendental spirituality, Dickinson also identifies with the bee's frailty. In Dickinson's "His Feet are shod with Gauze" (c. 1864), the bee can experience spiritual fulfillment, but he has limited defenses against the harsh world. The first stanza reads:

His Feet are shod with Gauze –

His Helmet, is of Gold,

His Breast, a Single Onyx

With Chrysophrase, inlaid. (1-4)

This stanza establishes religious significance by drawing connections to the bible, which instructs Christians to "put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil" (*King James Bible*, Ephesians 6:11). In the biblical passages, there exists "feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace," a "breastplate of righteousness," and the "helmet of salvation" (Ephesians 6:14-7). The bee's physical structure is described through biblical language, elevating the bee to a religious status, but his stature and protection are meager. Instead of protective footwear, he wears "Gauze"; instead of a full breastplate, he wears a "Single Onyx" (1; 3). He is compared to a Christian armoring up for God, but he remains a small, defenseless creature like Dickinson, suggesting that traditional religion cannot solve for her feelings of displacement in society.

The transcendental-like spirituality that she establishes in "The Gentian" provides Dickinson more comfort and allows her a more expansive view of herself. In *Introduction to Emily Dickinson* (1947), Henry W. Wells explains that "with peculiar insight she realized that a

microscopic vision most readily leads to infinity" (38). In Dickinson's examination of the microscopic, she expands it to be universal, eternal, and infinite, and her bee in "His Feet are shod with Gauze" functions as the microscopic subject reflecting universality. In their valuable contribution to feminist criticism, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar focus their attention on women writers of the nineteenth century and agree that "Dickinson insistently described herself as a tiny person, a wren, a daisy, a mouse, a child, a modest little creature easily mastered by circumference and circumstance," and bees are just the type of "modest little creature" Dickinson relates to (587). Like the bee, she sees herself as small yet expansive, a microscopic creature in a subject position. In *Lyric Time: Dickinson and the Limits of Genre* (1979), Sharon Cameron asserts that Dickinson "rescues the bee from . . . triviality" by allowing him to become more than a bee, but she also rescues herself from the triviality of the female object position (9).

Flowers and Bees

Another of Dickinson's crafted bees is her anti-domestic bee, and she uses this bee as an explorer of the anti-domestic world, an imagined place in nature full of possibility and danger. Cuddy states that "what she could not admit to herself or say publicly she projected to the bee and thereby sublimated feelings and needs that would have otherwise been unendurable. Her bee, more than any other symbol, expresses her deepest anxieties related to identity and sexuality" (27). Dickinson's bee and flower poetry provides her an imaginative space that allows her to discuss taboo topics like sexual desire and explore the outside world freely. In *The Gardens of Emily Dickinson* (2004), Judith Farr emphasizes that Dickinson "contemplated the sexual arena of her garden daily. There, the careers of flowers and the dramatic career of the bee as their lover/propagator commanded her attention" (196). According to James R. Guthrie in "Darwinian

Dickinson" (2007), this expression of the relationship between bees and flowers was "a familiar theme in nineteenth-century women's writing" because of the "gender inequities that underlay nineteenth-century courtship protocols" (73-4). Guthrie explains that Dickinson

> usually portrays her feminine-gendered flowers as passive recipients of the active, masculine-gendered bee's transient affections. Flowers' rooted existence, a metaphor for women's relegation to the domestic sphere, contrasts with bees' far-ranging travels from the hive, which stand for men's engagement with a wider world of civic duty and work. (74)

The flowers must remain in place while the bee has the freedom to travel freely with all flowers available to him, and Dickinson seeks to identify with both. Cuddy contends that Dickinson "desired both submission and authority and wished to both female flower and male bee" (28). According to Wilson-Rich, "pollination occurs when male pollen grains from the anther of a flower are transferred to the female stigma. . . . Bees do not intentionally provide pollination services. They do it by incidentally brushing pollen grains off an anther and transferring it to a stigma" (48). The process of pollination that occurs between bees and flowers is accidental, but it makes for a powerful metaphor for female submissiveness and masculine dominance for women writers of the nineteenth century.

Although Dickinson follows the nineteenth-century trope of the bee-flower relationship by suggesting her own feelings of powerlessness and lack of agency within a patriarchal society, she "often depicts congress between bee and flower as if it were human sexual intrigue," indicating her interest in exploring the topic without restriction and desire to occupy both subject and object positions (Far 184). In her poem, "Like Trains of Cars on Tracks of Plush" (c. 1872),

Dickinson uses the relationship between the bee and flower to demonstrate a masculine conquest of the female. She writes,

> Like Trains of Cars on Tracks of Plush
> I hear the level Bee –
> A Jar across the Flowers goes
> Their Velvet Masonry
>
> Withstands until the sweet Assault
> Their Chivalry consumes –
> While He, victorious, tilts away
> To vanquish other Blooms. (1-8)

These first two stanzas set up the dichotomy of the female and male experience: the female, symbolized by the flowers, is passive and "withstands" the "assault" while the male, symbolized by the bee, takes on an active role with his "victorious" ability to "vanquish" the female (5; 7; 8). She uses the term "velvet masonry" to suggest female fragility and vulnerability, and she uses the word "jar," perhaps indicating that the bee's presence is jarring to the flowers (4; 3). Farr explains that in an attempt to steal nectar, the honeybee will sometimes harm the petals by "biting through and destroying floral tissue" (184). The visit from Dickinson's bee "consumes" her flower's "Chivalry," suggesting that part of them has been destroyed through the transaction (6). He is an unwelcome visitor who maintains control over the interaction. In *How to Be a Lady (1852)*, when Harvey Newcomb writes that women must be "like the busy bee" and "suck honey from every flower," he intends to promote domestic labor, good habits, and self-improvement

(15). However, Dickinson's bee performs this task as an anti-domestic and unrestricted subject and allows Dickinson to explore the topic of sexuality as both subject and object.

In a letter to Dr. and Mrs. Holland in 1860, Dickinson writes that "blossoms belong to the bee," suggesting that she submits to the nineteenth-century courtship practices established in her poetry; however, in her poem, "The Flower must not blame the Bee" (c. 1860), Dickinson reclaims control for the flower (145). The poem reads:

The Flower must not blame the Bee –
That seeketh his felicity
Too often at her door –

But teach the Footman from Vevay –
Mistress is "not at home" – to say –
To people – any more! (1-6)

In this poem, the flower has the option of sending the bee away by instructing the footman to tell the bee she is "'not at home'" (5). In the natural world, flowers do not possess the ability to send bees away, and they cannot leave home; however, Dickinson plays with the potential of flowers actually leaving, granting them freedom within her poetry that does not exist within the world. This poem expresses Dickinson's anti-domestic desire to say she is also "not at home," and she creates an imaginative space where female agency is not only possible but enacted (5).

By sending the bee away, the flower chooses her own destiny and maintains her perfection in the process. Farr explains that "flowers must escape certain marauding bees if they intend to be whole and beautiful" (184). However, in her poem, "Did the Harebell loose her

girdle" (c. 1860), Dickinson positions the harebell as a willing participant in the bee's advances. The first stanza reads:

> Did the Harebell loose her girdle
>
> To the lover Bee
>
> Would the Bee the Harebell *hallow*
>
> Much as formerly? (1-4)

Guthrie writes that "Dickinson's message here is a familiar one: a seduced woman risks forfeiting a man's respect" (74). The flower exhibits agency by willingly receiving the "lover Bee," but she risks her reputation, indicating the double standard placed on women in the sexual arena (2). However, Dickinson does not give the harebell much choice because "any avid gardener such as she was would have known that for pollination to take place at all, the harebell *had* to loose her girdle" (Guthrie 75). If the footman in "The Flower must not blame the Bee" were to always send the bee away, the flowers would cease to exist. Guthrie asserts that Dickinson would have been familiar with the fact that "bees and flowers benefit equally from pollination" (75). Therefore, Guthrie assumes that Dickinson's "bee-flower poems are less likely to focus upon gender inequities or to deprecate woman's condition, tending instead to strike a note that is comic, whimsical, or playful" (75). Arguably, the poems can accomplish both motives at the same time. While Dickinson is aware that flowers must withstand the bees' assault for the existence of flowers to continue, she can also point out the unfair nature of such an arrangement. Like flowers, a woman of the nineteenth century must remain bound to her domestic existence and wait for a man, who has much more freedom than her, to court her, marry her, and impregnate her. All of this is done for the continuation of the same society that

perpetually keeps her and future generations of women in their places. Compared to the flower's stasis, Dickinson's bee, like Emerson's, possesses ease of access and freedom.

The Bee as Male Subject

Because of the bee's ability to navigate the world in the subject position, Dickinson identifies with and desires to become the bee, and she takes the subject position for herself. In her poem, "Over the fence" (c. 1861), she indicates her desire to be a male subject. She writes:

> Over the fence –
> Strawberries – grow –
> Over the fence –
> I could climb – if I tried, I know –
> Berries are nice!
>
> But – if I stained my Apron –
> God would certainly scold!
> Oh, dear, – I guess if He were a Boy –
> He'd – climb – if He could! (1-9)

Dickinson recognizes that she "could climb" the fence but never does because "if I stained my Apron – / God would certainly scold" (4; 6-7). Cuddy argues that in this poem, "the fear of losing security struggles with the desire for freedom" (28). However, it heavily indicates the fear of judgment for escaping the domestic environment. Within the confines of the fence, God cannot scold, and from a place of safety, she can imagine the strawberries and freedom on the other side. Dickinson's poetry functions as a protective fence she will not climb over.

Instead, she uses her imagination to explore outside and desires to take the place of the bee, her imaginary explorer. While carrying spiritual significance, her poem, "His Feet are shod with Gauze," also expresses Dickinson's desire to experience life as a bee does. In her last stanza, she writes "Oh, for a Bee's experience / Of Clovers and of Noon" (7-8). She establishes the bee's freedom within the natural world and longs to experience it too. Cameron speculates that Dickinson "conceives of immortality . . . as 'noon,'" indicating that she connects the bee to immortality, eternity, and spirituality, but the bee has the added benefit of occupying a subject position (1). The bee takes on a masculine persona as vanquisher of blooms, and Dickinson longs for that kind of freedom and power. Her poem, "Could I but ride indefinite" (c. 1862), also indicates the desire for a bee's experience. The first stanza reads:

> Could I but ride indefinite
>
> As doth the Meadow Bee
>
> And visit only where I liked
>
> And No one visit me (1-4)

This stanza identifies the bee's freedom through the use of the word "indefinite" (1). There is no limit to the freedom the bee experiences, and Dickinson separates herself from the flower that was visited by the bee, instead identifying with the bee who has full access and freedom in the environment. This grants her an imagined transcendence through her repurposing of transcendental language. In the next two lines, Dickinson writes, "And flirt all Day with buttercups / And marry whom I may" (5-6). These lines resemble Dickinson's lover bee, who takes on a masculine role and maintains the choice to marry whomever he pleases, a choice unavailable to most nineteenth-century women. The next lines read, "And dwell a little everywhere / Or better, run away" (7-8). These lines reiterate the bee's freedom to go anywhere

he pleases, and the idea of running away would be preferable to staying put. Like with marriage, which Dickinson chose not to participate in, running away from confinement is better than settling. Dickinson reiterates the desire to become the bee by writing, "I said 'But just to be a Bee' / Upon a Raft of Air / And row in Nowhere all Day long" (13-5). In this passage, "nowhere" becomes a replacement for everywhere, highlighting the bee's endless freedom and mobility while pointing out her current stasis (15).

Her last stanza juxtaposes the idea of potential freedom with the image of imprisonment. She writes, "What Liberty! So Captives deem / Who tight in Dungeons are" (17-8). Freedom can only be dreamt of but never attained, and her sense of imprisonment could be connected to her reclusiveness. However, in "The Landscape of the Spirit" (1996), Suzanne Juhasz argues that unlike the transcendentalists, "Dickinson chose to keep to her house, to her room, to live in her mind rather than the external world" (132). By dwelling primarily in her mind, Dickinson sought "to achieve certain goals and to circumvent or overcome certain forces in her environment and experience that were in opposition to those goals—particularly, the expectations and norms that a patriarchal society creates for women" (132). Her mind becomes a safe haven where she can find freedom, a place behind the fence to imagine the outside world. Indeed, Dickinson "did not choose to live where men live, in the public world, or where women live, in the domestic world. She found another place, at once more private and expansive than either of the others: the mind" (Juhasz 137). Her existence within her mind granted her unlimited possibilities. Wells contributes that "her poetry explores attic and cellar, parlor, dining-room, kitchen, bedroom, closet, and hall. To her sensitive and sympathetic eye the view out her second-story window assumes almost infinite importance" (45). She writes of domestic spaces but elevates them to the infinite, rather than a place of entrapment, and she seems to see her reclusiveness not as an

imprisonment but as a place of keen observation of the world around her. From behind her fence, she is trapped within the domestic environment, but she chooses to transcend her environment by simply imagining the outside world in her poetry. She still experiences a physical imprisonment that the bee does not, and she "row[s] in Nowhere" through her existence within her mind (15). However, because she finds freedom within her imagination, perhaps Dickinson draws a parallel between the freedom she finds within her own mind and the freedom the bee finds in the physical world.

In another connection to wanting to be the bee, she seems to desire the bee's anonymity. In a letter to Mrs. F. S. Cooper in 1876, Dickinson writes, "The founders of honey have no names" (335). Dickinson's "I'm Nobody! Who are you?" (c. 1861) poem further establishes her desire to be hidden. Her desire to be the nameless subject emerges, and she rejects both gender and gender restrictions in this subject position. In her famous letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson on April 16, 1862, she politely asks, "Are you too deeply occupied to say if my verse is alive?" (253). Gilbert and Gubar explain that when Dickinson sent her letter, she "left the note itself unsigned, revealing her name only on a card which she included with the letter and poems in a separate sealed envelope. . . . Dickinson herself locked her own name up in a symbolic paper coffin" (555). This letter and her behavior indicate her desire to be simultaneously seen and not seen, known and not known. Like the bees who remain anonymous through their production of honey, Dickinson seems to wish for anonymity in her production of art. The world still desires and admires honey without having to know its founders, and Dickinson seems to desire a similar arrangement: admiration of her work without any attention for herself. The bee is no longer a male subject attempting to explore the world or conquer blooms; instead, the bee becomes a

nameless and genderless explorer of the poetic universe, reflecting Dickinson's own expansive and universal desires.

CHAPTER 4. SYLVIA PLATH'S POSTMODERN BEE BOX

When Dickinson writes, "Like Trains of Cars on Tracks of Plush / I hear the level Bee," she describes the peacefulness of the bee's existence, his transcendent potential through her imagination, and his nameless subject position that allows her to navigate the same space; on the other hand, Plath writes approximately one hundred years later in the "The Swarm" that her bees hold onto "their dream, the hived station / Where trains, faithful to their steel arcs, / Leave and arrive, and there is no end to the country" (1-2; 34-6). The industrial language used in Dickinson's poem is used for auditory purposes, but Plath's industrial language hints at the endless toil of capitalism. The hive becomes the train station, and the bees cannot leave the tracks, which are made of steel rather than plush. While Dickinson's bee is always the male subject, Plath's bees are always the female subjugated, and they exist in a world totally without freedom and are trapped inside the inescapable prison of industrialized labor.

Plath's relationship to bees differs greatly from Emerson's, who observes bees in the wild, or Dickinson's, who views the bees visiting her garden. Plath witnesses her bees from the vantage point of a beekeeper who owns her bees, specifically the human-controlled honeybees, an ownership that removes their wildness and freedom and highlights their possession in service of an entity, the beekeeper. As a beekeeper, Plath could witness firsthand the miracle of bees, from their effortless communication to their industrious work ethic, but she also draws parallels between the beekeeper's control over bees and the human condition under capitalism. Bees also provide Plath exceptional feminist imagery to work with, particularly through the queen bee who is a centralized figure and captive within the hive. Plath was likely inspired by bees and their enormous poetic symbolism for her poetry, and she wrote several bee poems. Plath's recognized bee sequence appears in her *Ariel* (1965) collection, and she wrote her string of bee poems in

October 1962 during a period of intense productivity. The bee sequence of poems includes "The Bee Meeting," "The Arrival of the Bee Box," "Stings," "Wintering," and "The Swarm." Some scholars debate whether Plath intended for "The Swarm" to be included in the collection, but there is a clear dialogue between the five poems: while the bees become captives to a male beekeeper in "The Swarm," Plath's female speaker of "The Arrival of the Bee Box" desires to "set them free"; while the hive in "The Bee Meeting" becomes a symbol for the subjugated female body, the bees within the hive in "The Arrival of the Bee Box" become the mind trapped within the same kind of female body; and in "Stings," "Wintering," and "The Swarm," Plath deals with the negative impacts of industrialization on bees, women, and industrial laborers, highlighting the suffering found in these conditions (35).

Additionally, Plath wrote "The Beekeeper's Daughter" (1960) as an early bee poem before the recognized bee sequence, and it provides commentary on her relationship with her father and sets up the reappearing beekeeper character of the bee poems: in "The Beekeeper's Daughter," the beekeeper is the father; in "The Bee Meeting," the speaker unwillingly becomes a beekeeper while male beekeepers supervise her transition; and in "The Arrival of the Bee Box," the speaker has embraced her role and "ordered this, this clean wood box /Square as a chair and almost too heavy to lift," suggesting the heavy burden of the beekeeper's role (1-2). Unlike Dickinson, Plath does not repurpose transcendental language; instead, she pairs her bees with the language of industrialization, demonstrating her feelings of displacement and discomfort with the transcendental notions of nature and society in the postmodern era.

While Emerson saw nature as a free and spiritual space, and Dickinson used transcendental language to access an imaginative subject position, Plath sees nature as an arena to tackle her relationship with her father and demonstrate the total inaccessibility of

transcendentalism to her. Plath's father, Otto Plath, was an entomologist whose "chosen field was bees," specifically bumblebees (Butscher 5). In his book, *Bumblebees and Their Ways* (1934), Otto Plath writes that "although bumblebees make very delicious honey, they usually store it in such small quantities, as compared with honeybees, that it would not be practicable to keep them for that purpose," but he highlights that "these industrious insects play an important, and in some cases indispensable, role in the pollination of many cultivated plants" (113). His fascination with bumblebees led to his research, he kept honeybees, and he recognized the importance of bees to plant life.

Plath's "The Beekeeper's Daughter" responds to her relationship with her father, the beekeeper, and Edward Butscher, author of *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness* (1976), explains that the poem "is unique because, for the first time, Sylvia gives public expression to the hate side of her relationship with her father" (238). In the poem, Plath addresses her father, calling him "hieratical in your frock coat, maestro of the bees, / You move among the many-breasted hives, / My heart under your foot, sister of a stone" (5-7). By calling him the "maestro of the bees," she signals his control of them, and the hives are "many-breasted" to indicate the bees' femininity, suggesting his patriarchal control of the feminine (5-6). Plath's heart becomes a "sister" to the stones her father tramples, indicating solidarity with nature in the suffering they each endure from her father (7). In "The Beekeeper's Apprentice" (1979), Carole Ferrier states that the father figure appearing in many of Plath's poems demonstrates the ways in which she "perceives and expresses" her "relationship to patriarchy" (204). Therefore, the sisterhood she creates with nature serves as a feminine force used to rage against patriarchal control, including the control of her husband. On June 15, 1962, in a letter to her mother about becoming a beekeeper, Plath writes, "The bees were furious from being in a box. Ted had only put a

handkerchief over his head where the hat should go in the bee-mask, and the bees crawled into his hair, and he flew off with half-a-dozen stings" (457). The bees' anger is turned against Ted Hughes, and in "Stings," she writes, "And here the square of white linen / he wore instead of a hat. / He was sweet," but eventually "the bees found him out, / Molding onto his lips like lies, / Complicating his features. (43-5; 48-50). Unlike the real events, the bees now seek revenge against Hughes for Plath's anger toward him; they are originally drawn to him because he seems sweet like honey, but after the bees discover the truth, they collectively attack. Plath identifies with a feminine nature to counteract "the evil of masculine domination over woman's freedom and identity" (Butscher 238). She uses nature to express her complicated feelings toward men that stems from her complicated relationship with her father.

Although the father-beekeeper image functions as an oppressive force in Plath's poetry, Plath herself was a novice beekeeper, and she establishes a tension in her poems between beekeeper as father and beekeeper as self, highlighting the impossibility of achieving a transcendental subject position. In the same letter to her mother, Plath boasts,

> Today, guess what, we became *beekeepers*! We went to the local meeting last week (attended by the rector, the midwife, and assorted beekeeping people from neighboring villages) to watch a Mr. Pollard make three hives out of one (by transferring his queen cells) under the supervision of the official Government bee-man. We all wore masks and it was thrilling. (457)

Plath goes on to fictionalize these events in "The Bee Meeting," demonstrating the significance of this moment to her poetry; the event marks the moment she transitioned from beekeeper's daughter to beekeeper. Ferrier explains that "in keeping bees, she seems to have at once identified with her father and assumed his former role (and with it his power)" (208). This

identification with her father grants her a subject position as a powerful masculine force and causes her to become a traitor to her sisterhood with nature. In "Stings," Plath writes, "I am in control. / Here is my honey-machine, / It will work without thinking" (32-4). She establishes that she, instead of her father, is now in control of the bees, and she takes on an aloof attitude toward the bees who will continue to work without revolting against her. However, her feminine alliance with nature resurfaces, and she asks, "Will they hate me" (28). This question indicates the speaker's guilt surrounding her domination of the hive's inhabitants and her role as masculine oppressor. Ferrier argues that Plath is simply "gaining symbolic control over her own life and actions" by becoming the beekeeper, but Plath also seems to recognize that with her power, she imposes on the bees the same subjugation she feels by her father (209). She must sacrifice her feminine solidarity to become a subject, but she does not seem comfortable with this exchange.

Plath's speaker senses her culpability in this oppressive system against the bees, and she considers setting them free in "The Arrival of the Bee Box." She writes, "Tomorrow I will be sweet God, I will set them free" (35). Her subject position allows her the option of freeing her bees, bringing her a step closer to reaching the transcendental ideal set by Emerson; however, she considers that letting them go is sweet but decides to put it off until tomorrow, closing the door to their transcendence and her own.

Bee Body and Hive Mind

Plath's bee poems identify the changing environment in the postmodern era that separates the bees' experience from Emerson's, and even Dickinson's, bees. By the time that Plath is writing her poems, industrialization has transformed the United States and ushered in a total collapse of agrarianism. The first poem appearing in Plath's bee sequence is "The Bee Meeting," which uses the hive as a symbol for the subjugated female body controlled by this industrial

society. The bees within the hive are simultaneously dangerous to the speaker and threatened by the villagers, and the speaker fears the bees' sting but fears the villagers more, indicating that there is no real place of safety for her, not in nature or society. Nature is not the safe space, physically or imaginatively, that it is for Emerson and Dickinson; instead, nature only exists as a place usurped by industry. Plath's speaker grapples with her physical existence within nature and society, highlighting the dangers and feelings of discomfort found within both. In the first stanza, Plath writes,

> 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. (1-5)

In this passage, the speaker suggests that she is vulnerable to bee stings on her bare arms while the villagers are protected by proper beekeeping gear. This vulnerability highlights her discomfort within nature. The villagers who conform to societal rules are protected, but the speaker's lack of protection signifies her vulnerability as a woman under society's control. Nature itself is dangerous, but the society the villagers represent is even more so. Plath's speaker calls these villagers "the agent for bees" to indicate they claim control over the bees, reflecting the lack of agency felt as a woman in society (2).

The villagers then begin to dress her in protective gear, making Plath's speaker complicit in the possession of the bees, but Plath's speaker does not feel comfortable in this role. She explains that "now they are giving me a fashionable white straw Italian hat / And a black veil that molds to my face, they are making me one of them" (21-2). In "Exploring the 'Mind of the

Hive'" (2007), Jessica Lewis Luck contends that the hive functions as a symbol for the self which becomes "a passive surface for culture to penetrate, shape, and direct, a model allowing little potential for self-assertion or resistance" (291). The speaker's assertion that she is being made one of the villagers suggests a lack of agency and forced conformity. Like the bees, she is powerless to resist the societal pressures that seek to change her, and she is shaped into a beekeeper under the villagers' supervision. Her mention of the "fashionable white straw Italian hat" hints at the consumer culture behind the poem which drives the villagers forward (21). Although Plath's speaker does not want to be made into "one of them," she is unable to resist the all-powerful force of consumerism (22).

The hive becomes a passive object also incapable of resisting the villagers, highlighting the connection between the hive and the speaker's body. Unlike Dickinson, Plath feminizes the bees and the hive by writing that "the white hive is snug as a virgin, / Sealing off her brood cells, her honey, and quietly humming" (34-35). The hive is referred to as "her," and Plath indicates that the hive is unsuspecting of the villagers' approach, referring to the hive as a "virgin" to suggest its innocence (35; 34). The idea of the hive being a virgin also contrasts Dickinson's masculine bees that engage in sexual activity and have the freedom to leave the hive; Plath's feminine bees are sexless and confined to one place, indicating the stasis and lack of agency of the female body. Luck explains that Plath's speaker "is becoming a cultural product as she passively submits to the shaping and directing power of the villagers. She therefore immediately identifies with the hive as the villagers approach it" (291). Because the villagers attempt to dictate the speaker's behavior, she sets herself apart from them by identifying with the hive. Plath's speaker, like the hive, is vulnerable to the villagers and becomes a passive victim of their actions.

The speaker's body and the hive remain frozen in place, indicating their entrapment. Plath writes, "I cannot run, I am rooted, and the gorse hurts me / With its yellow purses, its spiky armory. / I could not run without having to run forever" (31-3). Despite being protected by beekeeping equipment, which is strong enough to block bee stings, the speaker is hurt by a gorse, which is a flowering shrub with defensive thorns. Plath's speaker first expresses that she is "rooted," identifying with the plant itself, but she quickly separates herself from the plant by indicating that it hurts her and that she is caught in its thorns (31). Plath positions herself on the receiving end of the flower's attack, closely identifying herself with the immobile bee. She approaches the flower and bee relationship from a different angle than Dickinson: in Plath's poem, the bee is on the receiving end of the flower's attack, but the speaker herself relates to a bee trapped in the flower's grasp. The flower and bee relationship created by Dickinson consists of bees who are the masculine conquerors of female flowers, but Plath's bees are passive and take on the role of the immobile and injured flower of Dickinson's poems.

Because of the bees' passive role, Plath uses the hive as a metaphor for her speaker's body and the lack of authority she has over it. Although the speaker identifies with the hive, "her body is not for her a clear expression of herself; she feels alienated from it" (De Beauvoir 318). Plath's speaker feels alienated from her body, symbolized by the hive, because it is controlled by those in power. Additionally, Plath writes that "smoke rolls and scarves in the grove. / The mind of the hive thinks this is the end of everything. / Here they come, the outriders, on their hysterical elastics" (36-38). The smoke indicates that the villagers are sedating the bees, leaving them with little defense, but the ones who are not sedated become "hysterical," suggesting that some have the ability to fight back (38); however, the term hysteria historically dismisses women, indicating that although the bees are angry and willing to fight, their fight will not make a difference. The

bees have no agency or control of their situation, and they are dismissed as hysterical when they try to resist the villagers.

When Plath writes that "the mind of the hive thinks this is the end of everything," she suggests that although the hive is the body, the bees are the mind, and they are the ones being controlled; in her next poem, "The Arrival of the Bee Box," the bees within the hive function as a symbol for the imprisoned mind within the subjugated female body (37). Plath looks inward as the speaker "illustrates an interesting conflation of the bee box and the mind," the bee box being an artificial man-made structure like the female body has been shaped and controlled by society (Luck 293). The poem begins:

> I ordered this, 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. (1-5)

Luck asserts that "by ordering her own bee box, the speaker is taking on a more authoritative stance" over her mind and "implies that the subject initially sought the object lovingly" (294; Hart 565). She also becomes complicit in controlling the bees, despite her reluctance in the previous poem. In "The Arrival of the Bee Box: Poetry and Mental Mechanism" (1989), Melanie Hart identifies Plath's speaker as the subject in this poem and the bee box as the object, suggesting that Plath has successfully situated her speaker in the subject position; however, because the object functions as a metaphor for the mind, and the box is the controlled body, Plath's speaker remains trapped in the object position by society's standards.

Unlike Dickinson who uses her bees as imaginative explorers of the outside world, Plath uses her bees as prisoners trapped within the mind. In the second half of the stanza, she would assume the box is full of death if not for the loud noise coming from it, indicating that the activity in her mind reassures her she is alive; on the outside, the box resembles death, suggesting mental mobility within her physical stasis. In her next stanza, Plath writes:

> The box is locked, it is dangerous.
>
> I have to live with it overnight
>
> And I can't keep away from it
>
> There are no windows, so I can't see what is in there.
>
> There is only a little grid, no exit. (6-10)

De Beauvoir asserts that women "have learned to present [men] with an immutable smile or an enigmatic impassivity; they carefully hide their real feelings and behavior" (320); therefore, when Plath introduces that the box is locked, she suggests that her true, "dangerous" feelings remain hidden to preserve herself (6). In this particular case, the dangerous feelings are her negative emotions that society would dismissively deem hysterical. Ferrier explains that "the box of bees becomes a metaphor for the fertile, swarming, and potentially destructive chaos that the poet senses within herself," and her negative emotions must be kept concealed (209). Women are "taught from adolescence to lie to men, to outsmart, to sidestep them. She approaches them with artificial expressions; she is prudent, hypocritical, playacting" (De Beauvoir 320). Plath's speaker feels that her life is a performance, and there is "no exit" to the fragmentation this performance creates (10). Additionally, when Plath's speaker says that she "can't see what is in there," she suggests that no one else can see her mind either (9). The real workings of her mind are hidden and mysterious even to herself, reflecting the daunting navigation of nature Dickinson

grapples with; however, Plath's struggle with nature is internalized, indicating her internalized feeling of otherness. In the postmodern world, transcendentalist thought has evaporated, and economic greed has cultivated an environment where transcendental wholeness is utterly impossible, specifically for women who, like the bees, are disregarded, threatened, and suppressed.

The Queen Bee

Plath's queen bee becomes an emblem of the lost transcendental space that has been replaced by industry, and Plath uses industrial, rather than transcendental, language to describe the queen's condition. Plath's queen functions as a source of power within the hive, but she is ultimately a captive within the industrial system, having to continually lay eggs in service of the hive. Murray Hoyt explains that within the hive, the "workers rule," and the queen's business is "the laying of eggs. Her status is no more than that of an egg-laying machine" (39). Hoyt contends that "for the whole of honeyflow she would conservatively average 1,000 eggs a day. If she didn't, the hive would suffer and the workers or the beekeeper would get rid of her" (40). The inefficient queen must be replaced in service of the colony and constant honeyflow, highlighting that the honey-machine she serves takes priority over her; Plath seems to take this dynamic to heart, and she writes in "The Bee Meeting" that "the villagers open the chambers, they are hunting the queen. / Is she hiding, is she eating honey? She is very clever" (42-3). Hoyt states that "getting rid of [the queen] is called superseding if the bees do it, and requeening if the beekeeper does it" (Hoyt 40). The villagers appear to be requeening the hive, hunting the queen to get rid of her and replace her with a younger queen. Luck argues that the "speaker performs stereotypical feminine passivity . . . reflected in that of the old queen" which indicates that the speaker identifies with the queen and the queen's passivity (292). By opening the chambers, the

villagers take on an active role, and by hunting the queen they are looking for the source of the hive's power. By hiding, the queen hides her power like the speaker hides her mind in "The Arrival of the Bee Box." The hiding queen also suggests that "no matter what is done to the woman's body, her mind can merely slip away to some safe and protected place where she imagines herself as strong and powerful" (Luck 293). The speaker's imagined power equated with the queen's vulnerability suggests that she, too, feels vulnerable and powerless.

Plath demonstrates her feeling of power and powerlessness, creating a fragmentation of self by desiring to become nature while simultaneously seeking to hide from it and drawing a parallel between herself and the queen who hides from her colony and the beekeepers. In "The Arrival of the Bee Box," Plath writes, "I wonder how hungry they are. / I wonder if they would forget me / If I just undid the locks and stood back and turned into a tree" (26-8). She imagines hiding from the bees by transforming herself into a tree, indicating that she seeks refuge in nature from nature's creatures. Plath expresses a similar transformation in "The Bee Meeting" by writing, "Now I am milkweed silk, the bees will not notice. / They will not smell my fear, my fear, my fear" (9-10). This time, the speaker imagines she has transformed into a wild vegetable to hide from the bees, suggesting that she finds comfort in nature while simultaneously feeling afraid of it.

Like the queen who hides from her own colony seeking to overthrow her for being unproductive, the speaker feels betrayed by society. In "The Bee Meeting," Plath writes, "If I stand very still, they will think I am cow parsley, / A gullible head untouched by their animosity" (39-40). She hides from the bees' "animosity," by becoming cow parsley, otherwise known as Queen Anne's lace, which is reminiscent of the queen bee who hides within the hive (40). Like Dickinson, Plath's speaker expresses a sense of discomfort within the natural environment but

simultaneously wants to be absorbed into it and hide. In *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1994), Val Plumwood explains that

> to be defined as 'nature' in this context is to be defined as passive, as non-agent and non-subject, as the 'environment' or invisible background conditions against which the 'foreground' achievements of reason or culture (provided typically by the white, western, male expert or entrepreneur) take place. (4)

Because women are denied a subject position, she becomes the passive background for male activity. Women's virtues include "those of empathy, nurturance, cooperativeness and connectedness to others and to nature, and usually finds the basis for these also in women's reproductive capacity" (Plumwood 9). Like the queen bee, the speaker's body is subjugated, and society wants her to use her body as a tool for reproduction, leaving her wanting to hide rather than revolt. Rather than using her bees to critique domestic labor, as Alcott's bees do, Plath uses her bees as industrial laborers, toiling endlessly and mindlessly in service of production; because transcendental wholeness is denied in this type of society, Plath's hive becomes a machine where the queen is trapped and denied access to transcendence.

Plath connects herself to the queen's power and captivity while simultaneously connecting herself to the beekeeper who must keep the queen in her place. In "Stings," the hive functions as a mindless industrial machine, where women are the victims, providing a commentary on industrialization, and Plath creates a queen who has died from the hive's endless production of honey. Plath writes:

> Brood cells grey as the fossils of shells
> Terrify me, they seem so old.
> What am I buying, wormy mahogany?

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" (12-9).

The speaker is a beekeeper who is now taking part in replacing an old queen, but this process terrifies her. Again, the queen is hiding, and the speaker must wonder about her existence. Similarly, in "The Bee Meeting," the speaker notes that the queen "is old, old, old, she must live another year, and she knows it" (43-4). Meanwhile, "in their fingerjoint cells the new virgins / Dream of a duel they will win inevitably" (45-6). In both poems, the brood cells contain potential queens that will challenge and potentially kill and overthrow the old queen, demonstrating the lack of harmony between the females within the hive, a metaphor for the societal pressure women put on each other. In "The Bee Meeting," Plath's speaker explains that "the villagers are moving the virgins, there will be no killing" (49). While the villagers attempt to control the hive, they prevent a bee uprising against the queen, suggesting an alliance with the queen's power, but even this action is in service of the hive and not the queen who must continue to lay eggs to be valued in the industrial system. Because the speaker identifies with the queen, Plath examines women's similar pressure to reproduce to be considered valuable.

In "Stings," the queen is dead, and the speaker connects this to a death of the self, suggesting the loss of self within industrial society and the loss of the transcendental subject position that is denied to her as a woman in the postmodern era. The speaker ruminates, "I stand in a column / Of winged, unmiraculous women, / Honey-drudgers" (20-2). The worker bees, the

honey-drudgers, are the equivalent of powerless women, and the speaker establishes that "I am no drudge," equating herself with the queen who has already been deemed aging and powerless. There is no "woman" within this hive or society that receives full autonomy or respect. Plath writes,

> They thought death was worth it, but I
>
> Have a self to recover, a queen.
>
> Is she dead, is she sleeping?
>
> Where has she been,
>
> With her lion-red body, her wings of glass? (51-5).

She refers to the "self" as a queen, but the queen is missing and presumed dead, indicating the speaker's loss of self (52). Like in "The Bee Meeting" and "The Arrival of the Bee Box," Plath creates the image of a hiding queen, who in this poem flies on "wings of glass" suggesting her fragility (55). She hides for fear of being usurped, and the speaker identifies with the queen while she takes part in replacing her. She expresses,

> It is almost over.
>
> I am in control.
>
> Here is my honey-machine,
>
> It will work without thinking,
>
> Opening, in spring, like an industrious virgin (31-5).

The speaker establishes that she is "in control" of the machine that produces endless honey, perhaps identifying with the queen or the beekeeper (32). The industrial language used to describe this hive hints at its constant and mindless production. She also uses the term "industrious virgin" to show the hive's innocence and lack of awareness of the situation in which

it finds itself (35). This language also hints at domesticity, as the industrious virgin would be engaging in domestic tasks, trapped also in her oppressive position. The queen's death arises from her constant industrial labor:

> 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. (56-60)

The queen's flight suggests her rise to transcendence, perhaps indicating that she has escaped the exploitative system; however, she is revealed to be dead, and it was "the engine that killed her" (59). Perhaps she has indeed escaped alive but not with herself totally intact. She has either literally died, her vengeful ghost soaring over the hive, or she experiences a death of the self which allows her to escape. This loss of self opposes Emerson's subject-to-nature relationship where the self is valued and intact.

The engine that kills the queen or her identity is the honey-machine, the emblem of industry and endless honey production. The beehive, or "wax house," is then transformed from a factory-like setting into the image of death, or "mausoleum" (60). Similarly, in "The Swarm," the man who captures the bundle of bees will take them to "a new mausoleum," suggesting that any hive, and the forced labor and entrapment it brings, is the equivalent of death (49). Plath demonstrates that the endless production for consumer culture leads to the death of the self, and transcendent potential is lost in the postmodern world. On January 16, 1963, Plath writes in a letter to her mother that "I just haven't felt to have any identity under the steamroller of decisions and responsibilities of this last year, with the babies a constant demand" (495). She feels a loss of

her own identity under the pressures of work and motherhood, and her own writing becomes a source of her lost identity.

Plath relied on her writing to support herself after her separation from Hughes, and her endless toil reflects the endless toil of the hives in her poetry. On October 12, 1962, Plath writes to her mother that "every morning, when my sleeping pill wears off, I am up about five, in my study with coffee, writing like mad—I have managed a poem a day before breakfast" (466). It was during this time of intense writing that Plath produced her bee sequence. She expressed in another letter to her mother six days later, "I guess my predicament is an astounding one, a deserted wife knocked out by flu with two babies and a full-time job!" (471). Her health suffered significantly from her impossible schedule and the pressure to support herself and her children, and her bee sequence poems reflect her exhaustion. Ferrier contends that Plath's "beekeeping is a natural analogy for the craft of verse," and her constant production of poems in service of the capitalist system mirrors the bees' constant production of honey in service of the beekeeper (209).

Plath was familiar with the life and patterns of bees, and likely aware of the growing threat that bees were facing in the twentieth century, and Plath's poetry suggests that industrialization has caused an immense disregard for bees and women. In "Wintering," the bees simply try to survive through winter after having the product of their labor, honey, stolen from them, demonstrating the result of the endless and mindless activity of the honey-machine. In "Wintering," Plath writes, "I have my honey, / six jars of it, / Six cat's eyes in the wine cellar" (3-5). The honey-machine has produced the honey that now sits in her cellar, and for the speaker, "this is the easy time, there is nothing doing" (1). Ferrier explains that for Plath, winter serves as

"a period of very little productivity as far as poetry is concerned" (214). Winter becomes a time of rest from her intense production of poetry, just as the bees rest from their honey production.

However, Plath recognizes that despite the rest from their labor, "this is the time of hanging on for the bees" (22). The bees are "filing to the syrup tin / To make up for the honey I've taken" (25-6). Because their product has been taken from them, the bees struggle to survive during the winter and must depend on syrup for survival. They have been alienated from the fruits of their labor, and now "it is Tate and Lyle they live on, instead of flowers. / They take it. The cold sets in" (29-30). Tate and Lyle is a brand of syrup, and Plath indicates that the bees now ingest this artificial sugar to survive because their natural food source was stolen from them. Because of this struggle through winter, "on warm days, / They can only carry their dead" (36-7). They have been so extremely victimized by the system that they are dying, and Plath writes that

> 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—
> The woman, still at her knitting,
> At the cradle of Spanish walnut,
> Her body a bulb in the cold and too dumb to think. (38-45)

The bees now take on the domestic role of women, but they live in a society without men, indicating that they have created this system for themselves. According to Hoyt, male bees, called drones,

> are tolerated by the workers for a while because new young queens are to hatch and there must be drones for their mating. But in winter, when every ounce of food is tremendously important and there are no queens hatching, the males are forced outside to freeze or starve to death. (27)

In the hive, male bees are mostly considered inessential, and the female bees value their own survival more than the survival of the males. This elimination of males, including the male beekeeper, seems empowering, but Plath suggests that this cruel situation in which the bees find themselves is now perpetuated solely by the female bees and the female beekeeper.

By replacing the father/male beekeeper with the female beekeeper self, Plath claims the subject position originally denied to her, thereby becoming the oppressor. Plath's beekeeper self now contributes to the oppression she despised, and the all-female environment continues to perpetuate the constant labor of the honey-machine. According to Plumwood, "the story of a land where women live at peace with themselves and with the natural world is a recurrent theme of feminist utopias," but this type of utopia is usually based around "surviving against the hostile intent of men, who control a world of power and inequality" (7). In Plath's version of this "utopia," the males have no involvement in the suffering endured by the female bees and enforced by the female beekeeper (7). By Plath's speaker acknowledging the part she plays in controlling the bees' production, she confirms that women, as well as men, ensure the continuation of the capitalist system driving her poetry production. Plath's final line reads: "The bees are flying. They taste the spring" (50). While this feels like an optimistic conclusion where

the bees' suffering will end with the arrival of spring, Plath suggests that the exploitation of the bees in her poetry and the bee she keeps will continue; another winter will arrive, and their honey will be taken again. Plath suspects that her production of poetry will continue in the spring as well, but she took her own life in February 1963 before another period of painful productivity could arrive.

The impossibility of freedom for Plath's bees, regardless of the season, starkly contrasts Emerson's and Dickinson's bees who always find freedom in the natural world: Emerson and the bee he observes exist in the subject position, capable of free exploration; Dickinson exists in the object position as a woman in the nineteenth century, but her bees explore the natural world through her imagination, granting her a subject position through her imaginative bees; however, Plath's bees are always imprisoned by the manmade bee box, demonstrating that the idea of industrial labor dominates her poems, and Plath totally denies transcendent possibilities for herself and her bees in this industrial world. Plath indicates that developing a relationship with nature for spiritual wholeness in the postmodern era is impossible because all are subjected to relentless pressures, anxieties, and lack of connectivity which contradicts transcendental peace.

Like humans, honeybees suffer under these conditions because they have been historically exploited for their pollination services and honey production, leading to "calamitous losses of the western honey bee . . . at various times throughout history," including the 1960s when Plath was writing (Wilson-Rich 188). Recently, honeybee populations have been disappearing at an alarming rate due to a variety of pests and diseases brought on by the wide distribution of the western honeybee across the globe, and honeybees are also threatened by a condition known as colony collapse disorder (CCD), which is characterized by the "rapid loss of adult worker bees from an affected colony" (Wilson-Rich 202). Robert M. Nowierski, NIFA

National Program Leader for Bio-based Pest Management, claims in "Pollinators at a Crossroads (2021) that "no incidents of CCD have been reported in several years," but honeybee populations are at a historic low (Nowierski). The populations of other bee species, like the bumblebee, have also been in sharp decline over the last several decades because of climate change, urbanization, and mechanized farming, all of which threaten the bees' natural food sources.

The industrial language Plath uses in her poetry highlights the capitalist system she feels trapped in, and she draws a parallel between the bees' suffering and her own, reestablishing the human and bee connection set by John Greenleaf Whittier and Lizette Woodworth Reese in their "Telling the Bees" poems. From the early nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century, humans went from sharing important news with bees as if they were members of the family, allowing them to grieve and celebrate along with their beekeepers, to bees and humans sharing in their suffering under the industrial machine that always demands more production. The personal relationship is lost, but the shared emotion persists, indicating that a thread of tradition still infiltrates Plath's work and the work of other postmodern poets.

As Mary Oliver writes in "Honey at the Table" (1983), honey provides "a taste / composed of everything lost, in which everything / lost is found" (13-5). Although the honey reminds Oliver of everything lost from the natural world—the flowers that have "vanished" and the bees that have been "crushed"—the honey also provides a way to experience the lost transcendental space (2; 13). In her poem, Oliver demonstrates that transcendental peace must be sought "out the door" and "deep in the forest" by climbing "up some tree" in order to be found (5; 10; 11). The active role of seeking transcendence is what allows "everything lost" to be "found" (14; 15). Although Plath feels unable to achieve transcendence, and Dickinson feels unable to achieve Emerson's exact ideal outside of her poetry, poets like Oliver suggest that

transcendence, even in the postmodern era, is still possible for those who seek it. The world has changed drastically since Emerson's time, but a desire to connect to the natural world and with bees persists.

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