

Here is my honey-machine': Sylvia Plath and the Mereology of the Beehive.

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‘Here is my Honey-Machine’: Sylvia Plath and the Mereology of the Beehive

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Abstract

This article discusses Sylvia Plath’s ‘bee poems’, a short poetic sequence in her posthumous collection *Ariel*. These poems have been predominantly

treated in relation to the most common themes in Plath scholarship: gender, psychology and what one might term the interpretative trap of biography. By approaching Plath's bee sequence through poetic form and the history of entomology, however, we aim to reframe its interpretation. Bees, which had been the subject of her father's scholarly study as well as her own amateur efforts, are suggestive of many of Plath's important themes—gender, identity, family and so on. But as this article principally examines, their hive identity also provided her with a powerful means of examining her poetic practice. To focus upon Plath's examination we employ the concept of mereology, the study of wholes and parts. Honeybees—whose individual existence is defined in relation to the whole of the hive—naturally placed the theme at centre stage in Plath's poems. Together with their 'outlier' texts, the bee poems address the 'wholes' of poems and their 'parts' of words, the 'whole' of tradition and the 'part' of the poet. This article first focuses on the poetic sequence—of which the bee poems are an example—as a mereological question of literary form. Then, via a discussion of entomology that was contemporary to Plath, it treats apian self-organization as a possible model for poetry, and its implications for the question of authorship and reputation.

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