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An Ecofeminist Analysis of Nature Imagery in Sylvia Plath's Ariel

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Abstract: Sylvia Plath's *Ariel*, characterized by dark themes, idiosyncratic imagery, and raw emotional intensity, holds an enduring fascination for readers and critics alike. While much scholarship has examined this collection through a psychoanalytic or biographical lens, this research seeks to uncover an underexplored dimension of *Ariel* — its ecofeminist undertones. The abundant nature imagery provides a particularly rich source for the investigation of her pre-ecofeminist consciousness. This research adopts a mixed-methods design that combines a corpus-based approach with an in-depth analysis of representative imagery. Excel-based calculation results show that the relatively large presence of nature imagery infuses *Ariel* with a riveting, dreamy atmosphere. The textual analysis further reveals that Plath's subtle interweaving of the female experience and the natural world resonates with ecofeminist notions of patriarchal oppression and mutual liberation. By unearthing the ecofeminist dimensions of *Ariel*, this research aims to provide fresh insights into this masterpiece while shedding light on the richness and complexity of Plath's thematic concerns and poetic expression.

Keywords: Sylvia Plath, nature imagery, ecofeminist analysis

1. Introduction

Sylvia Plath has long been hailed as a feminist icon and 'literary symbol of the women's rights movement' [1]. Since her shocking suicide in 1963, critics have rushed in to interpret the diversified roles Plath played throughout her short but eventful life: a sensitive daughter living under the shadow of her dead 'Nazi' father, a devoted wife and mother turning into a proto-feminist martyr after her husband's betrayal; and a gifted poet trapped in a patriarchal literary culture that denigrates women's creativity. In a confessional vein, her intimate life experiences pour into her poems, captivating readers with the harrowing depiction of female rage and despair. *Ariel* (1965), a semi-autobiographical account of her marriage and motherhood, provides prosperous source for investigating Plath's pre-ecofeminist consciousness. Characterized by intense compression and musicality, this widely celebrated poetry collection has generated a wealth of critical analysis with interdisciplinary approaches. Early critics integrated a psychoanalytic perspective to uncover her trauma and mental breakdown, which allows readers to gain a deep understanding of her inner world.

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More recently, scholars have examined Plath's exploration of gender, nature, and power dynamics through a feminist ecocritical lens. Her poetry, particularly the posthumous collection *Ariel*, has been shown to exhibit ecofeminist tendencies through the use of vivid images of plants, animals, and landscapes to empower women while expressing concerns and dismay over assigned gender roles. Research shows that the ecofeminist consciousness of Plath's poetry can be attributed to 1) her father, Otto Plath, a biologist and entomologist, who later figured as 'an oppressive presence' and 'a major image of persecution' in the well-known poem *Daddy*; 2) her tumultuous marriage to fellow poet Ted Hughes, a passionate advocate for nature, whose infidelity triggered Plath's emotional turmoil; 3) the pioneering ecofeminist Rachel Carson, whom Plath mentioned in letters to her mother and her journal entry; and 4) the emergence of the modern environmental movement and the second-wave feminism in the 1960s [2-4]. The intersection of Plath's work with feminist ecocriticism can offer fresh and valuable insights into her poetic engagement with gender and nature, shedding light on the ways in which Plath challenges traditional gender roles, patriarchal oppression, and ecological exploitation. Ecofeminist analyses of Plath's poems are most commonly performed using quantitative methods, and a narrow method may restrict the interpretation of her work. As computer-aided research has made remarkable achievements in the field of poetry studies over the past decade, this paper seeks to conduct a mixed-methods analysis of nature imagery in *Ariel* to demonstrate the relevance of ecofeminist thought to Plath's work. It is hoped that this study not only enriches our appreciation of *Ariel* but also contributes to the broader discourse on ecofeminism and its relevance in poetry studies.

2. Research Questions and Methodology

The research seeks to address the following two questions: 1) What proportion of nature imagery (including images of plants, animals, natural objects and scenes) is used in Plath's *Ariel*? 2) What images the poet evokes can best reflect her ecofeminist consciousness? To answer these two questions, this research employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating qualitative and quantitative methods to uncover the ecofeminist dimensions of Plath's *Ariel*. In the first stage, Microsoft Excel was used to analyze a corpus of 40 poems in the 2004 edition of *Ariel*. The reason for choosing the restored edition is because her husband, Ted Hughes, editor of the 1965 version, made extensive changes to Plath's original manuscript by altering sequence and content choices, thereby downplaying certain themes. The 2004 edition – the voice of her true self – 'brings us back and closer to the way Plath wanted her work to appear' [5]. After importing all 40 poems in Excel, the next step was calculating the proportion of nature imagery used in *Ariel*. Specifically, three types of nature imagery – plant imagery, animal imagery, and imagery of natural objects/scenes were identified and annotated. A selection bias may exist due to subjective human judgment. The following table shows the imagery annotated in the corpus:

Table 1: Annotation of nature imagery.

Types of imagery	Annotation
Plant imagery	PI
Animal imagery	AI
Natural objects/scenes	NO/S

The COUNT function in Excel was used to count the number of plant imagery, animal imagery, and imagery of natural objects/scenes respectively. Finally, the division was performed to calculate the percentage of nature imagery in the 1733 lines (title included) of 40 poems.

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Table 2: Proportion of nature imagery.

Types of imagery	Total number	Proportion: Number of imagery/ 1733 lines (Round to 1 decimal place)
Plant imagery	90	5.2%
Animal Imagery	81	4.7%
Natural objects/scenes	150	8.7%
Total nature imagery	321	18.5%

Results show that nature imagery accounts for around 18.5% of the total lines, indicating the indispensable role it plays in *Ariel*. Unlike traditional nature poetry, which is imbued with an idyllic serenity, Plath tends to use idiosyncratic, violent images of outer nature to mirror tensions in her inner nature [6]. These images infuse *Ariel* with a dreamlike atmosphere and a profound sense of despair and anguish. Specifically, natural objects/scenes such as moon and sea take up around 8.7% of the total lines. The moon – one of the most frequently recurring images in *Ariel* – is more of a malicious, threatening presence that symbolizes barren coldness and indifference. Plant imagery makes up around 5.2% of the total lines. Her plant world is also insecure and bizarre, which conveys perfectly her feelings of desolation and melancholy. Animal imagery accounts for around 4.7% of the total lines. It is still worth noting that in *Ariel* Plath identifies with more powerful animals (e.g., God's lioness and bee queen) instead of the victimized prey images that occur frequently in her previous works. Using various fascinating nature images, Plath explores a wide range of themes, including death, rebirth, and identity. While she may not have explicitly identified as an ecofeminist, the recurring association between femininity and nature in her poetry speaks to central ecofeminist concerns. In the next section, this study selects some representative nature imagery for in-depth analysis in order to reveal the ecofeminist consciousness in *Ariel*.

2.1. The Elm Tree and the Silent Woman

The Plath's 1962 poem 'Elm' is permeated with a blend of feminist anguish and environmental concerns. Situating this work within a broader cultural and historical context could enable a deeper understanding of her ecofeminist undercurrents. Echoing the environmental concerns that emerged in the 1950s and early 1960s, Rachel Carson, a pioneering ecofeminist and author of the groundbreaking tome *Silent Spring* (1962), brought an environmental awakening to the general public and the literary world. Although 'Elm' was written several months before the publication of *Silent Spring*, scholars have traced the influence of Carson's earlier works on Plath's writing. In letters to her mother in 1952 and 1958 and her journal entry in 1952, Plath specifically mentioned enjoying reading Carson's works [4]. Plath shares Carson's concern over the destructive effects of pesticides and industrial chemicals on wildlife and the entire ecosystem. Tracy Brain points out that in the thought-provoking line 'Or shall I bring you the sound of poisons?', Plath preempts *Silent Spring's* central metaphor – the 'sound of poisons' is deadly silence [7]. The elm tree is gendered as female, recounting its suffering: the rain sucked in by its 'great tap root' is toxic as a result of industrial pollution, and the 'big hush' which follows the disappearance of animal noises is the 'fruit' of the rain along with the 'arsenic' it bears. The poison is suggestive of acid rain. Rain used to be life-giving, but acid rain is an insidious killer of trees and other living things. The 'snaky acids' flow down 'its strangle of branches' to the absorbing roots in the soil, creating a hell-like environment. Apart from acid rain, the elm also 'suffered the atrocity of sunsets.' She cries: 'My red filaments burn and stand, a hand of wires. Now I break up in pieces that fly about like clubs.' The scene is eerily reminiscent of a nuclear explosion. Plath more than once expressed her concern

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over the possibility of nuclear attacks in her journals. She renders the experience of war-time fear and horror imaginatively. The elm's 'shriek' evokes unbearable pain and signifies a feminist protest against nuclear weapons and radioactive contamination. By depicting the aftermath of nuclear fallout, Plath illustrates the devastating effects of patriarchal violence and atrocities on the ecosystem.

Regarding: Plath uses three pronouns throughout the poem: 'she', 'I', and 'you'. The feminization of the elm tree is evident in Plath's use of the pronoun 'she' in the first line. One can either interpret the speaker and the listener as separate personas or the divided selves of one identity. 'Elm' can be seen as an animistic dramatic monologue in which Plath enters into the soul and speaks in the voice of the elm tree. The poem was written before the final break-up of Plath's marriage with Hughes, which documents her traumatic experience as a victim of male betrayal. Plath pours out her anguish and resentment in a shockingly powerful way, producing a rich array of dark images and allusions that make her pain into poetry. Images of poisonous rain, atrocious sunset, and violent wind constitute the direful world Plath lives in after learning of Hughes's infidelity. The 'arsenic' carried by the rain is the by-product of the poisonous relationship that drives her to the edge of madness and results in a 'big hush' of nothingness. As the controlling image of the poem, the elm tree merges with the female persona, speaking to the inmost depths of Plath herself. By connecting the elm's suffering to the emotional turmoil experienced by the woman, the poem draws parallels between the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women. Ecofeminists believe that women and nature are both victims of a patriarchal system that dominates, oppresses, and exploits nonmale beings. As Irene Diamond and Gloria Feman Orenstein state in their 'Introduction' to *Reweaving the Wounds*: 'Ecofeminism seeks to reweave new stories that acknowledge and value the biological and cultural diversity that sustains all life [8]. These new stories honor, rather than fear, women's biological particularity while simultaneously affirming women as subjects and makers of history.' The ecofeminist approach to addressing patriarchal autocracy focuses on revising nature and women as powerful forces. In 'Elm', the patriarchal ideology that underpins the cultural construction of toxic masculinity is exactly the leading cause of the elm and the woman's sufferings. The poem indicates an implicit ecofeminist dialogue about the interconnected fates of women and nature. It ends with the triple repetition of 'that kill,' implying the death of the elm tree. But in the meantime, it is associated with rebirth and renewal. Grisafi notes that 'For Plath, the ritual of dying must occur in order for the fullest version of the self to be triumphantly reborn' (p.50) [9]. With the death of her desperate, frightened, superficial self, she experiences a kind of inner rebirth with greater power than ever.

2.2. Portrayal of Motherhood in 'Morning Song'

'Morning Song', a poem written shortly after the birth of Plath's daughter, explores the conflicting ideologies of motherhood and selfhood as well as the tension and stresses caused by conventional gender-role expectations. Through the use of various captivating natural and cultural images, Plath paints an intimate portrait of a young woman navigating the transition to motherhood for the first time. A particularly striking animal image Plath uses to express her complex emotions towards maternity is the cow. Upon hearing her baby's cries, the persona 'stumble[s] from bed, cow-heavy and floral' in her 'Victorian nightgown'. The vivid adjective 'cow-heavy' evokes the picture of an out-of-shape, clumsy post-birth mother hurrying to feed the newborn breastmilk. In a self-deprecating tone, she compares herself to a cow. Gone are the slim figure and the sexy nightdress; her swollen body is trapped in the awkward nightgown. Even more annoyingly, she remains imprisoned by the domestic sphere, leaving little time for self-contemplation and writing. Plath confessed in her journal in 1951 [10]:

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I am jealous of men – a dangerous and subtle envy which can corrode, I imagine, any relationship. It is an envy born of the desire to be active and doing, not passive and listening. I envy the man his physical freedom to lead a double life – his career, and his sexual and family life.

Words Plath feels a simmering sense of injustice around traditional gender roles. Her poetic talent is not inferior to that of Hughes, but trivial household matters hamper her creative flow and kill her slowly inside. She looks and walks like a cow, providing the baby with milk day in and day out. Both cows and women have long been regarded as exploitable resources and manipulatable objects. In religious mythology, women and cows are sacrificed in order to appease the gods in times of war and drought. Cows lose their instinct for freedom due to long-term domestication, and women lose confidence in their intellectual abilities because they fail to free themselves from domestic drudgery. Both are forced to become birth-giving and nursing machines. Ecofeminists have noticed that the ideology which authorizes the oppression of women and nonhuman animals is the same. As Gruen [11] notes, 'The categories woman and animal serve the same symbolic function in patriarchal society. Their construction as dominated, submissive other in theoretical discourse (whether explicitly so stated or implied) has sustained human male dominance' (p.61). Animals are tethered to the home shelter in order to satisfy human needs; women are confined to the domestic realm of child rearing and homemaking so that men can rule the business, political and literary world. The devaluation of both women and animals and the idealization of sacrifice as a virtue further strengthen patriarchal domination. A hatred of male authority pervades Plath's poetry and journals, mingled with negativism and self-hate. She also struggles with mixed feelings of love and hate for her own mother: 'My mother had sacrificed her life for me. A sacrifice I didn't want… I think I have always felt she uses me as an extension of herself.' The love-hate relationship continues to exist between Plath and her baby. In contrast with the sweet and tender images used to describe her newborn, Plath uses the cow image to mock herself. Her self-devaluation and self-deprecation cause readers to ponder the patriarchal expectations of motherhood.

The absence of father/husband is the underlying cause of her desolation. Alone on the journey, Plath finds it difficult to negotiate between selfhood and motherhood and strike a balance between her two identities – mother and poet. Epstein [12] points out that rather than brimming with 'culturally mandated' joy over the arrival of the newborn, the persona feels emotionally disconnected from her baby and fears her sense of self could be effaced: 'I'm no more your mother / Than the cloud that distills a mirror to reflect its own slow / Effacement at the wind's hand.' Plath compares the relationship between mother and baby to that between a cloud and the mirror pool it generates. The image of the cloud being dissipated by the wind emphasizes the mother's sense of disconnection with her child – just in the same way as the child witnesses the mother aging, dying, and being erased from the child's life. Plath takes a subversive look at motherhood, considering 'mother' a passive vehicle, a natural carrier, and merely a means to an end. The baby 'took its place among the elements'; she belongs to the world beyond her mother's influence. Plath's sense of the child's otherness and separateness leads her into a quest for selfhood. She realizes the link between sacrificial motherhood and the repression of selfhood. The negative imagery used to describe herself exactly reflects Plath's conflicting emotions about motherhood.

2.3. Bee Sequence: Empowerment and Transcendence

The *Ariel* collection culminates in a sequence of four bee poems: 'The Bee Meeting,' 'The Arrival of the Bee Box,' 'Stings,' and 'Wintering.' Plath's fascination with the bee image is rooted in her life experience. Beekeeping had been Plath's amateur endeavor as well as her father's academic specialty, which provides fertile ground for the investigation of important themes. In her earlier poems, Plath tended to use the imagery of tame, domesticated prey animals (e.g., sheep, cow and cat) – whose traits are culturally associated with femininity – instead of the imagery of aggressive

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masculine predators. In the bee sequence, she seeks to explore non-victim empowerment by identifying herself with the bee queen, a powerful animal exhibiting feminine and masculine characteristics. By employing the bee imagery, Plath breaks away from a system of binary opposites and creates 'a surrealistic experience in which the distinctions between human and natural beings, even between subject and object, are blurred' [13].

Throughout the sequence, the speaker undergoes an epic transformation from a vulnerable victim ('disguised self') to a reborn phoenix ('true self'). The journey of self-discovery begins with 'The Bee Meeting,' where the speaker feels 'nude as a chicken neck' and alienated by villagers wearing proper suits. The physical nakedness triggers a sense of vulnerability that is exclusive to women. Upon realizing her marginalized status, she decides to conform to existing social norms and hide her true self under the 'black veil.' Once properly covered, she loses her individuality and becomes 'one of them'. They resemble ordinary worker bees living a collective life. In the meantime, the old queen bee is also in a vulnerable condition. Frank [14] argues that the nuptial flight 'acts to domesticate the queen, as she becomes the possession of the collective body of the hive' (p.83). Her destiny and safety are in the hands of the villagers. The images of the I-speaker and the queen bee merge as they both aspire to unleash their true selves. The climax occurs in 'Stings,' where the queen undergoes a resurrection from death. She escapes the domesticity of the wax house, rising like a phoenix reborn from its ashes:

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.

'The wax house' is a symbol of colonization. Plath feels similarly trapped in the postwar gendered expectations, viewing the domestic sphere as a site of colonization. She identifies with the queen in a quest for a triumphant transcendence. Only when she escapes from the wax society can she realize her true creative potential – 'I/Have a self to recover, a queen.' In the last poem, "Wintering," the female bees survive and they live in a world absent of patriarchal influence. Plath concludes on a hopeful note: 'The bees are flying. They taste the spring.' Plath deliberately arranged the order of Ariel to begin with the word 'love' in 'Morning Song' and end with the word 'spring' in 'Wintering.' Even when she dwells in the very depths of winter and struggles with depression and suicidal thoughts, she still believes there is light at the end of the dark tunnel. Drawing inspiration from the heart-shaking scene of the queen's resurrection and the restoration of peace after the female bees' survival, Plath discovers the poetic genius within herself. After completing the bee sequence, Plath wrote to her mother: 'I am a writer . . . I am a genius of a writer; I have it in me. I am writing the best poems of my life; they will make my name.' Her 'true self' as a poet finally emerges, glowing bright like a phoenix reborn.

Plath draws power from her association with the bee queen – nature lovers and ecofeminists have celebrated such a practice. While recognizing that the women/nature association has been used to exacerbate the devaluation and inferiorization of both women and nature, many ecofeminists view nature as an important source of female empowerment and the basis of a critique of patriarchal oppression [15]. Ynestra King states that ecofeminism recognizes 'the special strength and integrity of every living thing' [16]. In Plath's case, she internalizes the strength of the queen to explore her own independence and identity outside the domestic sphere. A perfect queen is both miraculous, fertile mother (who lays an incredible number of eggs in the hive) and independent dominator (whose performance determines the survival of a new hive). Plath once associated 'reproductive fertility with fertile poetry writing' in her journal entry [17]. The image of the prolific queen of an independent colony is a mirror image of the poet's own self. By infusing the poetic identity with the

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animal spirit, Plath seeks to realize self-transformation and transcendence from patriarchal oppression.

3. Conclusions

Sylvia Plath's *Ariel* stands as a crowning work in the canon of 20th-century poetry. She uses strikingly vivid nature imagery to convey the raw emotional intensity of her personal experience, which provides a fertile ground for the exploration of her inner world. While much scholarship has focused on her psychological struggles, this research aims to delve into its ecofeminist undertones. By utilizing a mixed-methods design that combines a corpus-based approach with an in-depth analysis of representative nature imagery, this study seeks to illuminate Plath's subtle interweaving of the female experience and the natural world. Excel-based calculation results show that nature imagery plays an indispensable role in the construction of the poetic world in *Ariel*. A thorough analysis of three important nature images – elm tree, cow, and bee queen – reveals that Plath's vivid portrayal of women's experiences as intertwined with the natural world resonates with ecofeminist ideas about patriarchal oppression and mutual liberation. In particular, the recurring motif of rebirth — often depicted through nature imagery — parallels the ecofeminist emphasis on the regenerative power of both women and nature. By examining Plath's *Ariel* through an ecofeminist lens, this research hopes to contribute to a richer, more nuanced understanding of this collection. It seeks to open new pathways to appreciating Plath's rich inner world and the beauty and complexities of her poetic expression.

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