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Animals, Cross-species Empathy, the Reduction of Animal Suffering in Sylvia Plath's Poems

Honours Project

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Introduction

In Sylvia Plath's poems, a variety of intense emotions are apparent, which may be due to the large number of sepulchral images. Among different kinds of images, animal images always catch the attention from both readers and scholars. In this project, I would like to focus on Plath's poems, in the category of non-insect poems and insect poems, based on the theoretical framework that when showing empathy for non-human animals, distinction can be seen between insects and non-insects, and argue for an alternative reading of Plath's animal-related poems- through the narration of certain non-human animals, Plath is striving to perform empathy straddling different species, which not only verifies some mainstream empathy theories in the realm of animal studies, but also direct readers' attention to animals' suffering as well as the inspiration of the subsequent altruistic behaviour for the purpose of reducing animals' agony.

Sylvia Plath's critical reception

Generally speaking, Sylvia Plath is regarded as a suicidal poet. Meanwhile, however, it seems to become trendy to seek positivity in Plath's poems, in which implications have been drawn on how human beings can survive in the world. For example, Pamela Annas argues that the majority of Plath's poems reveal the potential transformations as a person realises that his or her identity is actually imposed by the external world (13). Similarly, Susan Bassnett argues that Plath's poems demonstrate how she was fighting against the pressures from the external world, as a female writer who is eager to express herself (118). Their arguments underscore the human-oriented implications in Plath's poems, by revealing how individuals can thrive regardless of adverse circumstances.

Animal imagery has been frequently mentioned in studies with regard to Plath's poems. For instance, bee sequence is often seen as a reference to Plath's self-discovery journey (Jill 119). In a similar vein, Jessica Lewis Luck interprets the bee sequence as a progression, from an individual passively accepting things imposed by the exterior culture, to an individual displaying more resistance through a self-exploration (287-88). Some scholars choose not to focus on certain animals, but on animals as a whole. For instance, with an animism approach, Marjorie Perloff postulates that in Plath's poems, the angst emotions are expressed effectively when the boundary between human beings and animals dissolves. Human beings can be reduced to animals or things, and "identify imaginatively with the life of animals" (57).

In previous research regarding Sylvia Plath, the focus is exclusively on humans, with scant attention paid to non-human animals. Even though animals do appear in some scholars' study, they tend to treat animals as literary techniques suggesting something about Plath's life, instead of focusing on how Plath casts her eyes on animals and becomes their human company.

Empathy

The analysis of Plath's poems in this project will be based on cross-species empathy, elucidated by Danielle Sands. His theory is an extension of Amy Coplan's interpretation of empathy in general. According to Coplan, empathy refers to "a complex imaginative process in which an observer simulates another's situated psychological states while maintaining clear self–other differentiation" (5). She also contends that performing empathy entails three indispensable parts, namely, "affective matching, other-oriented perspective taking and self-other differentiation" (6).

In terms of affective matching, Coplan summarises that in the field of empathy studies, two types of emotions can be regarded as empathetic emotions, including the identical emotions (i.e. when the target is mistreated, the observer experiences the same mistreat-driven emotions, such as fear or sorrow) or reactive emotions (i.e. when the target is mistreated, the observer experiences emotions such as anger or pity) (6-7). Coplan herself endorses the identical emotions more than reactive emotions. In addition, she further contends that the aforementioned affective matching will be invalidated unless it is generated in a specific manner, which is the other-oriented perspective-taking (7).

Coplan categorises perspective-taking into two forms, namely, self-oriented and other-oriented perspective-taking. Both forms concern experiencing the target's feelings and thoughts, but the difference is that the former adopts the observer's point of view, which Coplan points out to be human beings' usual way of imagining others' mental state due to the assumption that we bear no significant differences with others, while the latter adopts the target's point of view and is deemed more accurate and sufficient. Therefore, Coplan also advocates a more substantial proportion of other-oriented perspective-taking in order to yield empathy (9-10). In a similar vein, when examining which perspective can induce better empathy, Jean Decety and Andrew N. Meltzoff compare first-person perspective-taking and third-person perspective-taking, reaching a conclusion that the former will surpass the latter in terms of immediacy as well as the consistent perception of the anguish experienced by others (76). It is important to point out that successfully performing other-oriented perspective-taking is a challenging feat that "requires at least some knowledge about the target" (Coplan 12). In addition, what to pay attention to during other-

oriented perspective-taking also matters. Decety and Meltzoff argue that paying attention to others' feelings and reactions, rather than "passive viewing" (76).

It is worth noticing that empathy also has its limitations and traps. The improper empathy performing may lead to insufficient moral behaviour that aims at reducing others' plight, or even immoral behaviours altogether. It is reminded by Coplan that it is not easy to always show genuine empathy, because of the inevitable differences among individuals, and therefore, it is wise to admit our insufficiency in showing genuine empathy, rather than pretending to know other individuals in a fine-grained manner (56). Besides the awareness of such gaps, it is also essential to admit the existence of self-other differentiation, the third crucial element in the framework of empathy constructed by Coplan. Coplan deciphers self-other differentiation as the awareness that the target is detached to the observer, with a series of features differing from the observer (16). Decety and Meltzoff also substantiate Coplan's belief by suggesting that the assimilation of self and others can result in not only personal distress, but also the undermining of altruism (73, 76). When illustrating the definition of personal distress, Coplan distinguishes it with empathic distress, elucidating that despite both involving the observers' negative emotions, personal distress will instigate the alleviation of negative emotions, while empathic distress will not direct the observers' attention to their own, but make them continue focusing on the target individual (56). In short, the presence of distress can be seen in genuine empathy, yet it should be about the target's distress, not the observer's.

An extension: cross-species empathy in animal studies

Not only does Sands see the feasibility of applying an empathy approach to animal studies, he also justifies the importance of doing so. Cross-species empathy is deemed possible due to the striking number of similarities between human beings and non-human animals, in the aspect of physiological features. In terms of the physiological features, Derrida Jacques posits that human beings and non-human animals have "shared vulnerability", as both can be exposed to the threats from fatality (qtd. in Sands 15). In addition, showing empathy for animals can be conducive to justice, such as the reduction of animal suffering, a bleak phenomenon ubiquitous in the anthropocene age (56).

When the target becomes insects, empathy-casting will become significantly different and difficult. Sands hypothesised that insects can typically thwart humans from acting empathy, due to features completely different from human beings (156). Lori Gruen also points out that the absence of sentience in insects is another key factor in the failure of empathy-performing (qtd. in Sands 157). However, according to Sands, regardless of all kinds of difficulties, it will be wise for human beings to show empathy with insects, as they are the indicators of the natural environment and can therefore shed light on solving environmental issues (157).

It seems reasonable to deduce that the manner in which human beings cast empathy for insects should be altered. Sands argues that one thing that thwarts humans' empathy-performing is the disgust feeling that is inevitably provoked by the perception of the "distance" between humans and insects (173). However, instead of focusing on the elimination of the disgust feeling altogether, Sands suggests that we decipher the underlying meaning of disgust, based on the assumption that the disgust shown for insects can be an indicator of humans' psychic

environment, to give a specific example, the eagerness to repress strangeness (156, 174). In addition, as mentioned earlier, a successful perspective-taking requires acquiring some knowledge about the empathised, as well as the heed to the feelings and reactions, both of which can yet pose a challenge on empathising with insects, due to the striking differences between humans and insects, together with an absence of sentience. In light of the above, I infer and stress that when performing empathy towards insects, matters needing attention are as follows, some overlapping with general principles put forward by Amy Coplan. First of all, the courage to unravel the hidden meaning of negative emotions aroused by the interaction with insects, not restricted to disgust only. Second, striving to familiarise oneself with the empathised. Last but not least, the frankness of admitting that we cannot always achieve genuine empathy, but a proximity is plausible and desirable.

Plath's views on performing empathy

It is evident that Plath also demonstrates the importance of showing empathy for both human beings and non-human animals, which herself continuously practises. In one of her journals written between July 1950 and July 1953, with no specific dates indicated, she expresses her concern for humans' suffering brought by seemingly justified and glorified wars, as well as people's unawareness of this woeful fact, "When I think of that little girl on the farm talking about her brother- 'And he said all they can think of over there is killing those god-damn Koreans.' What does she know of war?" (Plath and Karen 46).

Besides human beings, Plath's empathy for non-human animals is also explicit. In a journal written on July 1st, 1958, Plath recounts the experience of encountering "a humped, short-

legged, stump-tailed rattish-faced creature" when she takes a stroll with her husband Ted Hughes (398). Plath fails to identify what kind of creature it is, and the creature is described as a strange-looking one, which echoes the alienation of certain kinds of animals and the potential difficulty in performing empathy. However, this does not impede Plath from trying to gain a better understanding of the creature in front of her. She first shortens the distance between the creature and human beings by endowing the creature with human characteristics-"like a mother full of babies", and then confessed "I longed to pat it, to feed it a leaf, to make it somehow apprehend our love", which shows a stark contrast with her husband, who has a desire to dominate the creature by making an attempt to catch it (Plath and Karen 398-99). This anecdote reveals the feasibility of analysing how empathy for animals is shown in animal imagery in Plath's poems, as well as her wish for a better animal-human relationship.

When performing empathy, Plath herself also endorses the arousal of emotions and other-oriented feelings. On January 4th, 1958, Plath wrote in her journal, stressing that "the emotional, feeling drench of wonder goes-in our minds we must recreate it…Be a chair, a toothbrush, a jar of coffee from the inside out: know by feeling in" (Plath and Karen 307).

The danger of dissolving the boundary between human beings and animals can also be attested by a piece of writing Plath recorded on August 28th, 1958, which appeared to be a piece of news about an old man in Central Africa who ambushed passers-by on a path and justified his crime by claiming that his urge of killing people was generated by his transformation into a lion from time to time (Plath and Karen 417). This incident foregrounds the potential danger brought by the complete removal of the boundary between human beings and non-human animals.

Sands also sheds light on an alternative interpretation of various literary techniques in literary works, which is, instead of regarding animal-related metaphors or allegories as apparatus that serve the sole purpose of speaking for abstract emotions and experiences in the human world, it is suggested that we see animals as "being-with" (181), which makes it plausible that we address animals in Plath's poems as characters, without making excessive connections with Plath's personal life.

In view of the above, I would like to delve into cross-species empathy in Plath's poems. In this process, by elucidating how the narration made by the human narrator in three poems echoes the aforementioned empathy theories. To be more specific, in the poem with non-insect animals, I would like to point out clues of three indispensable elements in genuine empathy, and argue how the bleak experience of the narrator herself can be conducive to empathy-casting. In bee poems, I will continue seeking the clues of genuine empathy, yet at the same time acknowledging the inevitable challenges as well as the concomitant coping strategies. In all poems, I will pay attention to occurrences of alliteration, as they highlight and connect humans' behaviours, animals' suffering and empathy-related emotions.

Given that the focus is animal suffering and the emotions involved can be melancholy, it remains possible to perceive Plath's empathy as sympathy. However, in this essay, the theoretical foundation will be empathy rather than sympathy. When giving an illustration of empathy, Dan Batson also suggests the distinction between sympathy and empathy, which is, empathy can induce various feelings, with sympathy being one of them, which indicates that empathy is a

more inclusive concept than sympathy (60). Other examples of empathy-induced feelings provided by Batson include distress and sorrow, which can be palpable in Plath's poems as well. Therefore, in this essay, I will foreground empathy theories while regarding sympathy as a by-product of empathy, mainly due to the inclusiveness of empathy and the variety of empathy-related emotions in Plath's poems.

Poems with Non-insect Animals

"The Rabbit Catcher" is frequently studied and largely regarded as a poem that epitomises the denouncement of the mistreatment in a relationship. Christina Britzolakis argues that in the context of "discredited mythodology of 1950s femininity", "The Rabbit Catcher" illustrates the "black comedy of sexual relations", which foregrounds "victim plots" (113-14). What underlies her interpretation is that this poem distils females' submission and suffering in an unsatisfactory marriage that entails power imbalance between females and males. The last stanza seems to be a convincing proof, with Diane Middlebrook arguing that in the last stanza, Plath makes an analogy between her being suppressed by Hughes and the rabbit being snared by the hunters' traps (167). In light of the above, it seems reasonable to conclude that the scholarly focus of "The Rabbit Catcher" is the representation of Plath's interpersonal relationship with her husband, and in this manner the delineation of the victimised rabbit is reduced to the employment of a metaphor. In the following part, I would like to interpret this poem from a cross-species empathy lens, by putting more emphasis on how Plath strives to empathise with the rabbit's woe, as well as interpreting the last stanza as an auxiliary means of yielding a more comprehensive and accurate empathy, instead of self-pity. In addition, the adoption of alliteration is visible, in the

form of fricatives. Plath makes this choice probably due to the word “death”, in which a fricative sound exists.

The fricative sound appears at the very beginning of the poem, with the narrator describing the place in which she is taking a stroll as “a pla**ce** of for**ce**”, endowing the poem with an oppressive tone (Plath 193). The delineation of the setting is unravelled with the narrator feeling “the wind gagging [her] mou**th** wi**th** [her] own blown hair/Tearing off [her] voi**ce**”, and the narrator seeing the “black **s**pike**s**” of the malign “gor**se**” (193). The use of a series of fricative sounds not only brings forth the shared vulnerability, but also accentuates the precarious situation, as if a snake is hissing somewhere, which further arouses anxiety and worry from both the narrator and the readers, which is a sign of identical emotions, as the narrator imagines that the rabbit is likely to feel anxious and worry if it is also aware of the fatal danger. Besides the auditory effect, the shared vulnerability is also supplemented by the verb “gagging”, a typical action in life-threatening situations such as kidnapping. Together with the aforementioned alliteration, it signifies that humans, similar to non-human animals, can also be exposed to the loss of lives, which prepares a foundation for showing empathy with the tragedy happening to the rabbit. Moreover, the items seen by the narrator also suggest that the narrator is gradually embarking on taking the perspective of the rabbit. To be more specific, the narrator shifts her eyesight from the sea to the plant (gorge). It is indicative of the narrator casting her eyes on the rabbits’ habitat, and striving to experience the rabbit’s trajectory herself, as a rabbit usually lives in places without too much water but with an abundance of plants. Seeing the “malignity” further confirms the extent to which the narrator takes the rabbit’s perspective, given that plants, being almost harmless to human beings, can indeed be a danger to the rabbit, as some traps may exist in the disguise of

them. The fricative sound and emotion arousal appear more frequently as the narrator further imagines the rabbit's death, evident in "**s**immering", "**s**nares almo**s**t effa**c**ed them**s**elves…**sh**utting on no**th**ing", and "the ab**s**en**ce** of **sh**riek**s**", which seems to underscore how effective and determined human beings can be when killing animals (193-94). The self-other differentiation is the most evident in the last two stanzas, in which the narrator ceases to take the rabbit's perspective, but starts viewing the situation from the perspective of mankind, first a hunter in the second last stanza, then herself in the last stanza. Herein, the narrator demonstrates the self-other differentiation-a rabbit will not be able to imagine a human's situation, but another human can. The hunter has a "**s**till bu**s**yne**ss**" when waiting for the rabbits, a kind of insidious excitement that shows a stark contrast with the rabbit's suffering, accentuating again human beings' brutally treating animals (194). Echoing "know by feeling in" said by Plath herself (Plath and Karen 307), instead of directly assuming the hunter's feelings and emotions, the narrator shows some uncertainty with "I felt", manifesting her confession that she may not be able to perform the definite empathy (Plath 194).

There is ambiguity in the last stanza, due to the use of the pronoun "we", which is widely regarded as Plath and Hughes, partly explaining why scholars tend to interpret the last stanza as insinuating Plath's marriage failure. However, there is a possibility that "we" can refer to the rabbit and the narrator. Therefore, I would like to offer two alternative interpretations, both of which can be of some value to cross-species empathy.

One interpretation dovetails with the common practice- "we" being referred to as Plath and Hughes. Therefore, "relationship" means romantic relationship by default, a perilous one as well,

with the existence of “tight wires”, “pegs” and “ring sliding shut” (194). According to Judith Butler, who expands the scope of human vulnerability from the physical body to social life, human beings are bearing the exposure to the relationships with others, as well as the risks of violence and losses brought by such relationships (qtd. in Sands 17). In light of this, the narrator is trying to simulate the rabbit’s situation by reflecting on her own social vulnerability-She may not know the exact experience of physical fatality, but she knows mental fatality, which is being killed by “the constriction” (Plath 194).

Another interpretation does not involve much reference to Plath’s personal life, but what is being described throughout the poem- “we” being referred to as the narrator and the rabbit, and the relationship is interpreted as the cross-species one. The striking resemblances between humans and non-human animals are like the “tight wires” that keep them together. “Pegs [that are] too deep to uproot may be humans’ long-standing desire to conquer and torture animals, which has been somehow normalised (194). However, there are many preventions like “a mind like a ring sliding shut on” the narrator’s appealing for more care and less suffering administered on animals, which is “some quick thing” that can barely last long (194). The adverb “also” in the very last line makes the narrator’s appeal reach a crescendo-if we human beings keep killing animals using the constriction, we will “also” be killed in the future (194).

Bee Poems

In terms of bee poems, I choose the first two poems in the bee poem sequence, because by comparing them, the correlation between genuine empathy and the three key factors coined by Amy Coplan will be made more apparent. In addition, given that these two poems depict the

narrator's fresh encounter with the bees, with an irresistible antipathy towards insects, which sets an authentic context for the difficulty in performing insect-oriented empathy.

Christina Britzolakis provides an interpretation of both poems. She suggests that in "The Bee Meeting", the narrator is regarded as "pupil and sacrificial victim", while "The Arrival of the Bee Box" epitomises one of Plath's poems that "entail an ambiguous identification with figures of victimised racial otherness" (118-119). A shift in the role of the victim can be seen in Britzolakis's analysis (from the narrator herself to the other). Therefore, I argue that in the comparison between two poems, a progression can be observed in how Plath performs genuine empathy for bees, as well as the appearance of a better self-other differentiation and the subsequent altruistic actions. In addition, similar to "The Rabbit Catcher", the employment of alliteration can also be observed in two bee poems, in the form of the repetition of /i/ sound, which forms ingenious connections between minute details of empathy-casting and the outcome.

"The Bee Meeting"

In "The Bee Meeting", preliminary empathy with the bees can be seen. Interestingly, despite being surrounded by a group of bee experts, the narrator manages to avoid being fully immersed in the noises and chaos caused by the operation of the beehive, which makes it possible for her to keenly observe and record the bees' unpleasant experience of being disturbed and dominated against their will.

At the beginning, when realising the possibility of being stung by the bees, the narrator also suggests the shared vulnerability. The narrator employs a simile, "I am nude as a chicken neck",

which can be interpreted as the narrator making an attempt to familiarise herself with being an animal, by reducing herself to "a chicken neck" (Plath 211). Presumably, herein, the chicken neck refers to the edible part of a slaughtered chicken, as a "nude chicken neck" will not appear on a live chicken covered in feathers. The element of slaughtering strengthens the extent of vulnerability. The subsequent interrogation "does nobody love me?" appears to be the speaker's request for bee-repellent clothes, and alternatively, the accusation of the brutal slaughter, from the aforementioned chicken (211). Two lines together suggest both shared vulnerability and possibly an assimilation between human beings and non-human animals, as the identity of the inquirer seems ambiguous. However, the assimilation is dissolved in the next line, as "the secretary of bees with her white shop smock", in which another human fellow provides the narrator with protection against bees (211). In addition, it is also evident that the narrator strives to take the bees' perspective. For example, the narrator endows bees with sentience that is originally non-existent, as they can sense the smoke "roll[ing] and scarf[ing]", and think "this is the end of everything" (212). Also, it is important to note that the narrator's repulsion towards bees can also be seen, which largely lies in her fear for them, emphasised by her repetition of "my fear" in the second stanza (211).

More interestingly, Plath is striving to bring bees under the spotlight, with her strategic use of alliteration. Even when the narrator is depicting human characters' behaviours, bees' presence can also be detected. The occurrence of /i/ sound is throughout this poem, which inevitably draws readers' attention to the bees. At the beginning, when the narrator introduces the bee experts that she is going to meet, "Who are th**e**se p**eo**ple at the br**i**dge to m**ee**t m**e**? They are the/v**i**llagers" (211). The sound continues to appear as people are getting ready with their gears,

as can be seen in "sl**ee**veless", "buttoning the cuffs at my wr**i**sts and the sl**i**t from my neck to my kn**ee**s", "m**i**lkw**ee**d s**i**lk", "breastplates of ch**ee**secloth knotted under the armp**i**ts" and "this appar**i**tion in a gr**ee**n helm**e**t" (211). With the plentiful use of /i/ sound, the narrator is sending out a message that the protagonists are the bees, and the human characters are in fact foils who prepare themselves for their encounter with bees. Besides the declaration of bees being the protagonist, the repetitive use of /i/ sound can also intensify relevant emotions, as an indispensable element in empathy-casting. On the way to the place where beehives are located, the narrator is highly observant of the surroundings, endowed with emotions, such as "scarl**e**t flowers that will one day be ed**i**ble", "the hawthorn that smells so s**i**ck", and "its spik**y** armor**y**" (211). Despite being scattered in different stanzas, the recurrence of /i/ sound connects these images together, depicting a sense of ominousness, sadness and distress, which emotionally prepares both the narrator and readers for the unpleasant experience of bees that come later, and at the same time displays empathy showed with bees through affective matching. In the description of the final meeting with the bees, still, /i/ sound does not cease to appear. The bees appear with "h**y**ster**i**cal elast**i**cs", followed by the narrator's pondering on how to respond to the bees' "an**i**mos**i**t**y**" - she should stand "very st**i**ll" and be a "cow-pars**ley**" (212). Herein, the use of /i/ sound brings forth a juxtaposition of bees' emotions which are imagined by the narrator, and the narrator's sudden loss of emotions as the narrator is reduced to a plant. By presenting the bees as the one with richer emotions, the narrator not only accentuates the central role that bees play in this poem, similar to the beginning, but also reaffirms the feasibility of performing empathy for insects.

Such an auditory effect has been proven beneficial to the awakening of empathy from humans. When examining the installation of sounds that simulate honey bees' buzz in art museums, Lyndsey Copeland suggests that the use of sounds made by bees can lead to visitors' comprehension of parts of bees' lives, which further leads to cross-species empathy (19).

Nevertheless, it seems far-fetched to say that this empathy-casting is achieving its goal, as no altruistic behaviours can be seen in the end, which may be owing to the large proportion of personal distress, instead of empathic distress, a crucial factor in genuine empathy. Both the repetition of "my fear" in the second stanza and the repetition of "I am exhausted" in the last stanza suggest that the negative emotions are mainly about the empathiser herself (the narrator), signified by pronouns "I" and "my" (211-12). However, it is not that the personal distress is valueless, as questions raised in the last two lines suggest the narrator's thoughts on empathy-casting. The first question- "Whose is that long white box"-seems to question whether humans are entitled and justified to declare their sovereignty in beehives, a place belonging to bees (212). The second question- "what have they accomplished"-seems to question whether it is imperative to administer such a turmoil in bees' residence (212). The third question is a bit complicated- "why am I cold" (212). At the superficial level, the question can be answered by the narrator's recurring fear in the poem. At the deeper level, it can be interpreted as another proof of the narrator's empathy with the bees. Tracy Brain, who interprets this poem with the cultural assimilation lens, contends that "cold" suggests the narrator's loss of abilities to give emotional responses, as she has been forced to identify herself with one member of the villagers (70). I think his interpretation is reasonable, yet I would like to offer an alternative reading by interpreting it as the narrator's affective matching-she imagines the bees to be numb towards the

attack from human beings, and she also feels it herself, which is another sign of empathy-casting. With the revelation and imagination of bees' feelings, three questions provoke the reconsideration of ethics of the human-bee interaction, and introduce a progression in empathy-casting in the poem that follows.

"The Arrival of the Bee Box"

In "The Arrival of the Bee Box", Plath continues displaying her empathy for bees, by taking the bees' perspective, even under the circumstance of bees being trapped in a box and therefore not visible. More importantly, the manner in which she shows her empathy has seen some improvements, which further induces the action aimed at reducing the plight of bees. Similar to "The Bee Meeting", the repetition of /i/ sound is also palpable, which connects the narrator and the bees in terms of shared vulnerability, the effort made to understand the target's situation and the clearer self-other differentiation.

In the first stanza, the narrator welcomes the arrival of the bee box with the action "ordered" and the perception "clean", which are both inclusive to human beings, also an indicator of self-other differentiation (Plath 212). However, the attention is immediately directed to the bees, with the appearance of /i/ sound in the description of the bee box, "the coff**i**n of a m**i**dg**e**t or a square baby". By using the sound to put together the live "midget" and the death-involving "coffin", the narrator suggests that bees and humans can both end up with death (212). Similar to "The Bee Meeting", there remains obstacles for the narrator to show empathy with bees. Her initial repulsion towards bees is invisible in the second stanza, in which she makes an attempt to stay away from the bee box, because "it is dangerous" (213). In addition, the container that confines

the bees poses another challenge, with “no windows”, “only a little grid” and “no exit” (213). Herein, the recurrence of /i/ sound stresses the amount of difficulty in observing bees. However, the readers’ attention is shifted to the narrator’s action immediately, which also shows a stark contrast with the noticed challenge, as /i/ sound continues in the next line, with the narrator taking the initiative to familiarise herself with the bees by “put[ting] my eye to the grid”, which seems to be a form of entering the bee box when there is “no exit” for bees (213). The narrator’s proactively watching despite the hardship demonstrates not passive viewing proposed by Decety and Meltzoff, as mentioned earlier in my literature review section. It is also worth noticing that herein, the narrator does not use both her eyes, but only one eye, which seems to insinuate and admit the inevitable limitation of performing empathy, which is, human beings can hardly get the whole picture of what animals are going through. In short, the first two stanzas, as well as the first two lines in the third stanza, form a suitable condition for the rational generation of cross-species empathy.

The narrator starts taking the bees’ perspective, but this time, besides visual sense (“black on black”), auditory sense is also employed (“clambering”, “swarmy”), which is another evidence of the endeavour to gain a comprehensive understanding of bees (213). Starting from the fourth stanza, the noise made by the bees becomes the centre of the narrator’s attention, as “the noise appalls me [her] most of all”. The feeling of being appalled is consistent with bees’ anger (“angrily clambering”), which is indicative of the existence of identical emotions. The existence of the identical emotions becomes the catalyst of empathy performing, as the narrator starts thinking about ways to set them free, as well as the further recognition of the insufficiency in performing empathy, due to the language barrier indicated by “unintelligible syllables” (213).

In the remaining part of the poem, a mixture of repulsion and care continues to develop and becomes the spotlight, as can be seen in the juxtaposition of "I need feed them nothing, I am the owner" and "I wonder how hungry they are. I wonder if they would forget me" (213). Such a paradox further justifies the congruence with Sands' argument about the predicament of showing empathy for insects. Interestingly, compared to "The Bee Meeting", in which the repetition of "I" implies the intense personal distress, the repetition of "I" in "The Arrival of the Bee Box" can be perceived as a sign of self-other differentiation, as it focuses more on things the narrator can do with bees and thoughts related to bees' feelings, as a human being with more capabilities ("hungry" "forget") (213). Another significant breakthrough can be seen in the reflection on the negative emotions aroused by the interaction with insects. After the narrator notices the chaos in the bee box, it is obvious that she is experiencing some kind of distress, evident in the statement "appalls me most of all" and the exclamation "but my god, together!" (213). Meanwhile, however, instead of being controlled by the emotions, she ponders on some famous wars in human history, which displays a mirroring between the disorganisation between bees and humans. Such a reflection makes the distress more like an empathic one than a personal one, as the narrator is trying to comprehend the bees' situation with historical events, which are typically regarded as less personal but more objective facts. Using events happening in humans' world to explain non-human animals' situations can be regarded as innovative and empathy-driven, as it reverses the usual practice mentioned by Sands, which is to downgrade animals as tools to understand sophisticated human world.

The /i/ sound becomes once again significant when the poem approaches its end, with the narrator making a final decision of how to react to the bees' suffering. This time, unlike the fear apparent in "The Bee Meeting", the narrator seems to gradually overcome the fear of encountering bees, as can be seen in her thoughtfulness before releasing bees. To be more specific, the narrator is thinking of becoming "a tr**ee**" with "pett**i**coats of the cherr**y**", and more importantly, she justifies that it is unnecessary to have personal distress at the contact with bees, by asking a rhetorical question, "I am no source of hon**ey**, so why should they turn on m**e**?" (213). Subsequently, the narrator transforms her empathy into altruistic behaviours. She regards herself as "sw**ee**t God" who "will set them fr**ee**", because "the box", the symbol of bees' suffering in a restricted place, "is only temporar**y**" (213). The repetition of /i/ sound serves two purposes. On the one hand, it links the altruistic behaviours and thoughts that are conducive to the elimination of personal distress, which foregrounds the necessity of less personal distress when performing empathy. On the other hand, it also puts emphasis on the self-other differentiation, in which the narrator lists things she can do to protect herself from the bees, as well as things she can do for the benefits of bees.

Conclusion

When encountering Sylvia Plath's poems rich in animal images, it is possible for us not to over-analyse how animals represent bits and pieces of her personal life, but rather, explore how her poems reflect the animals themselves. By adopting the cross-species empathy approach, it can be found that Sylvia Plath is showing empathy with animals in suffering, and she also manages to direct readers' attention to empathy-casting, with the clever use of alliteration. Even though sometimes showing empathy can be utterly challenging, especially when the targets are insects

with no sentience but a tendency to provoke repulsion, Plath still makes a good demonstration by striving to gain a better understanding of the targets, reflect on the similarities between human beings and animals, and last but not least, the courage to admit that we may not be able to perform perfect empathy, despite desirable. In terms of implications, future researchers may continue delving into the human-animal relationship in Plath's poems, as well as other poets who are passionate about animal writing. More effort can be made in discerning the connection between animal studies and feminism studies.

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