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Melting Beeswax Bodies: The Queen Bee, the Hive, and Identity in Women's Writing

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MELTING BEESWAX BODIES: THE QUEEN BEE, THE HIVE, AND IDENTITY IN WOMEN'S WRITING

Leigh Johnson  May 2005  65

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The works examined are poetry by Emily Dickinson, Sylvia Plath, and Audre Lorde, novels by Starhawk, *The Fifth Sacred Thing*, and Sue Monk Kidd, *The Secret Life of Bees*, and a drama by Elizabeth Bussey Fentress, *The Honey Harvest*.

In looking at how the women writers construct identity using bee imagery, I propose that they actually subvert the societal devaluation of women. The beeswax bodies represent gendered constructions of how women should behave. The characters “melt” these bodies by refusing to fit the mold and by redesigning the mold to fit themselves.
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Introduction

*You gave us the bumble bee who has a soul*
--Carl Sandburg, “Letters to Dead Imagists: Emily Dickinson”

“The bumble bee who has a soul” appears in writing by women as early as Emily Dickinson’s poetry and continues to the contemporary novel *The Secret Life of Bees* by Sue Monk Kidd. Carl Sandburg sees this revelation of the soul as a gift. What if this gift—this soul—that the bumblebee has is an infusion of the author’s soul? The blurring of boundaries between the bee and the writer creates a subversive, surrealistic expression of independence. Why does Dickinson present the worker bee as a male instead of the biological truth that the workers are female? Does Sylvia Plath resist a psycho-biographical interpretation to her bee poems, even as she inherited a beekeeper’s personality from her father? How do Lily and Madrone find connection to their deceased mothers in Kidd’s *The Secret Life of Bees* and Starhawk’s *The Fifth Sacred Thing*? The coincidence that Plath cannot kill her father, yet the bees kill Mel’s invalid father in Liz Bussey-Fentress’s play *The Honey Harvest* is intriguing. The exploration of these questions leads to a more compelling question: is it possible for a bee image to build a positive female identity for the speaker in a poem or the character in a novel or play?

I will argue that using the bee image allows women writers to challenge the dominant paradigms that constrict their writing by creating a place (the hive) where women are the more powerful sex, creating the possibility for affirmation of the female identity. Poetry by Dickinson, Plath, and Audre Lorde predominantly reveals the subversive quality of the bee image, while Kidd’s *The Secret Life of Bees*, and Starhawk’s *The Fifth Sacred Thing* explore more fully the potential for synthesizing the bee image with the female identity. New directions in using the bee image appear in
Bussey-Fentress’s *The Honey Harvest* as a way of simultaneously questioning the validity of the bee image and reaffirming its significance.

If Joan Riviere’s theme in her 1929 essay “Womanliness is a Masquerade” is correct, and “all femininity involves a masquerade” (Murfin and Ray 127), then how can the female writers create an identity that stands up behind the mask as real? Margaret Dickie argues that in the poems of Plath and Elizabeth Bishop, the act of observing the bee “is looking into neither nature nor human nature; it is rather a surrealistic experience in which the distinctions between human and natural beings, even between subject and object, are blurred” (134). Therefore, the bee image for the women writers could represent the process of rejecting the masquerade in uncertainty of what reality (surreality) exists without the mask. The selected literature creates a persuasive journey of questioning and reconciliation of the feminist identity.

The first chapter, “Unveiling the Hive,” explores how Emily Dickinson, Sylvia Plath, and Audre Lorde subvert the bee image to create a female identity. I start with poetry because chronologically these women are the first to use the bee image, and they employ the metaphor in rich ways that appear again in subsequent chapters. Each poet uses the image differently, but they all perform subversive actions on the hive and the patriarchal perception of the female body.

Dickinson’s poetry largely ignores the hive, instead focusing on the bee in nature. Separating the bee from the hive, and allowing a single bee to flourish challenges the perception that a bee must be part of a hive in order to be complete. Her bees do not suffer loneliness even though they are alone in nature. Also, Dickinson’s representation of the bee reveals the injustices women suffer because they are female. She deliberately
makes her worker bees masculine—distorting a scientific truth in order to question the reality of men and women’s freedom in society. Unlike the other writers, Dickinson does not deify the queen bee, but she does affirm women’s ability to make their own reality. The last bee image in Dickinson’s work strips power from the male bee and bestows power of creation on the female flower.

Sylvia Plath also challenges the sanctity of the hive, and she writes the speaker as the queen bee, a being full of matriarchal power. Six of Plath’s poems employ the bee image to explore destruction, resurrection, and transformation. “The Beekeeper’s Daughter” is markedly different from the others because she composed the poem several years before the other Bee Sequence poems. Plath moves from viewing the hive as a male dominated place that consumes women’s work to seeing the hive as a place for the matriarchal construction of the queen bee’s resurrected power. The power inside the hive emanates from the female body.

Audre Lorde begins with the assumption that the hive is a place where female power inherently exists, with the male-orchestrated destruction of the hive in “Bees” as an attempt to vanquish that power. Lorde’s challenge emerges as one of the female voice. What outlets do girls have to create a voice when their possibilities for expression fall victim to patriarchal influences? Because Lorde refused to ignore parts of her identity to make other people more comfortable, she embraced all aspects of the female body. Refusing to sacrifice the self subverts the dualistic images that demand choice between opposites. Lorde’s poem asks readers to create dialogue.

In “Possibilities for Healing,” the second chapter, Starhawk and Sue Monk Kidd create these opportunities by taking off the mask of femininity and looking more deeply
into the construction of gender and identity. The novelists need to remove men from the discussion, at least temporarily, in order to explore the implications of the female body.

Starhawk’s novel *The Fifth Sacred Thing* takes place in a utopian society where women and men have equal responsibilities, gifts, values, and respect. By equalizing the relationship between men and women, Starhawk is able to discuss the female body without attempting to define it in opposition to the male body. In the dystopian locations in the novel, police enforce rigid gender roles, causing the protagonist, Madrone, to have to rely on her female body to channel power she gains from the bees. Bee images in *The Fifth Sacred Thing* remind Madrone of the utopian society she values and enable her to access power from within as she saves victims of dystopia from the patriarchal society that threatens to destroy them. She does not refuse the company of men; rather, the relationships in the novel stem from a desire to unite through similarities instead of exploiting differences.

Sue Monk Kidd physically removes the protagonist, Lily, from male dominated society in *The Secret Life of Bees*. Lily moves in with three beekeeping sisters, who grant Lily the freedom to explore her needs and develop her talents with the bees. Caring for the bees spurs Lily into caring for herself and affirming her identity. Neither novelist advocates a male-free society, but both release their female protagonists from the bonds of dualistic thinking. The characters do not have to wear the mask of femininity while they discover relationships with their mothers, develop perceptions about themselves, and embrace an affinity for working with bees.

In “New Frontiers” I analyze a new drama, *The Honey Harvest*, for its reconciliation of the positive applications of the bee image with the overtly dark
implications of identity without community. If the novelists remove the men to allow the protagonists time to look in a mirror without a mask, then Elizabeth Bussey Fentress gives her heroine a trial by fire. Mel, caring for her psychotic father, learning from a male beekeeper, and rebuffing her persistent next-door neighbor, has her hands full of men. The only women mentioned in the play are the ones Mel needs to get back to—her dead mother, the lady beekeeper from her childhood, and the queen bee, which arrives in a cage. Mel has to set herself free. She does not have time to think deliberately through her challenges; she must jump into them and look for answers later.

Interestingly, the action of the play develops similarly to Plath’s development of the Bee Sequence, with a “Bee Meeting,” “Arrival of the Bee Box,” “Stings,” a “Swarm” and “Wintering.” Mel emerges from her cage in Act 3, yet at the end of the play, she seems no closer to an answer than she had in Act 1. Fortunately, she has honey to sustain her through the winter.

The concluding chapter will return to the underlying reasons for the need to blur boundaries and draw implications for the future of writing that utilizes the bee image. Subversive actions on the hive and the patriarchal perception of the female body assist the characters in developing identity in a secure environment. For the characters in each of these works, beekeeping plays a central role in their growth and identity development.
Chapter 1

Unveiling the Hive

In order to unveil the hive, the poet must first perceive the hive as a place where she could dwell. Through the process of blurring boundaries between female and male, gifts and coffins, and comfort and threats, Emily Dickinson, Sylvia Plath, and Audre Lorde use the bee image to create a female identity—an ambiguous one for Dickinson, a positive one for Plath, and an all-encompassing one for Lorde. The methods for their survival appear in the bee image.

Emily Dickinson uses the bee image frequently in her poetry. In 1775 poems, the bee image occurs twenty times. In nineteen of these bee image poems, Dickinson refers to female worker bees with a masculine pronoun. (Very little imagery of the hive occurs in Dickinson’s poetry; in fact, the only mention of the hive is in the same poem in which she refers to the worker bee with a feminine pronoun.) My study examines the poems that emphasize the worker bee’s freedom of movement, especially poems 211, 213, 230, 661, 869, 896, 1224, and 1755.1 The other poem, 676, features the female bee. Poems 211, 213, and 1224 describe the bee’s love for flowers and portray a passive flower receiving a bee lover. Poem 230 contains more disturbing imagery of an inebriated bee that beats his wife. The speaker’s obsession with the bee’s freedom of movement and choice of flower partner appears in poems 661, 869, and 896. I present other Dickinson poems to help explain the meaning of the bee poems. In-depth examination of poems 676 and 1755 more fully explore Dickinson’s use of the bee symbol.

Perhaps the strangest, and most subversive, image in Dickinson’s poems containing bees is her presentation of worker bees as male bees, an image that enables her

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1 The poems’ numbers follow Thomas Johnson’s arrangement in The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson.
to play with both the bees and gender boundaries. This willful contradiction of biology blurs the boundary between male and female and challenges the view of women as creatures who should stay indoors. Dickinson’s bees are as androgynous as the speaker. The speaker, jealous of the bee’s freedom, subverts the male image and wonders if she could be the queen. More precisely the “male” worker bee has freedom to explore the world that should belong to the “female” worker bee.

Jealousy of the bee’s flight is complicated by the scientific reality that the females are the ones that should have the ability to go out and explore. By making the bee male, Dickinson imagines a non-threatening—for the patriarchy—stereotypical image of a male choosing his path and doing what he desires, yet in the real bee world the female sex has this power. The jealousy then stems from the idea that bees have liberated the females. Bees do not worry about “pedigree” (1627 1) and “lineage” (3) of the flowers they pollinate, which are merely foolish obstacles “on spangled journeys” (5) to “more essential thing[s]” (8), the honey they will collect for the propagation of the hive. The bees actively pursue the passive flowers, and Dickinson describes the flower’s acquiescence as “Withstand[ing] until the sweet Assault” (1224 5) is complete, and the bee “victorious tilts away / To vanquish other blooms” (7-8). The active bee conquers the passive flowers. The flower cannot imagine a world in which she is free from assault. Dickinson continues this disturbing abuse metaphor by making the bee a cavalier suitor, completely unconcerned if he causes the “Harebell [to] loose her girdle” (213 1). The bee who “live[s] by the quaffing” (230 1) of honey and may “‘beat’ [his] ‘Wife’” (8) the clover later suffers. The bawdy tone of the bee’s manly behaviors becomes darker when the bee is “‘Found dead’—‘of Nectar’ / By a humming Coroner” (230 16-17). Other bees
will find the fallen bee; will they continue to sexually abuse the clover and drink honey without moderation?

Even though Dickinson uses the masculine pronoun, is the bee female? H. Jordan Landry discusses how the Puritan discourse “insists on perceiving the female body in delimited ways, particularly as feminine and heterosexual” and argues that the only way out of the rigid Puritan conception is “the creation of alterior imaginary bodies”; Dickinson, he continues, “lesbianize[s] the process of conversion” (43). While Landry suggests the bee poems serve to create a “lesbian male bee, [a] feminine phallic body” (49), actually the triangle established by the speaker, the bee, and the flower is an ambiguous, androgynous love triangle. The speaker calls the bee male, yet the bee is female; by comparing herself to the bee, the speaker is also perceived as a confusing mix of male and female. In Dickinson’s poetry, flowers are female. Dickinson, rather than lesbianizing the bee, speaker, and flower, removes gender from the sexual process. If gender is socially constructed, Dickinson refused to restrict herself to only one gender.

A bee in the hive must work ceaselessly; otherwise the other bees will force her out of the hive. A woman forced to work—produce children or keep house—in the service of a man has less freedom than a bee who stores up honey for her own consumption during the winter. As the speaker in poem 661 points out, unlike a bee, a human female cannot “marry whom [she] may / and dwell a little everywhere” (6-7); rather she is a “Captive” (17) in a “Dungeon” (18) without any of the freedom of the bee. While Dickinson never married, she did caution other women against marriage, including her warning her future sister-in-law against marrying her brother. The freedom that the bee has to enjoy a brief marriage with a flower and the easy disentanglement from the
partnership prefigures a world wherein women have more power in sexual and reproductive choice and can be more independent.

Contrasting the flowers with the bees establishes tension between active and passive movement, which Dickinson then explores as a path to the realization of imagination’s power. An additional product of this tension is synergy, which develops between the hive and the outside world. The bees can move freely outside the hive, yet the hive is an enclosure that provides sustenance and structure. The worker bees can fly around and actively pursue the passive flowers, while the female worker bees stay in the hive to brew honey. The only poem in which Dickinson identifies the bee as female is 676. In this poem, placed here complete, the female is inside the hive:

Least Bee that brew—
A Honey’s Weight
The Summer multiply—
Content Her smallest fraction help
The Amber Quantity—

The female worker bee makes honey in the hive for the entire hive’s consumption. The bees that collect the pollen do so to bring it back to the hive. By referring to the bee in the hive as female, and the carousing bee as male, Dickinson gives the bees artificial gender roles. However, this poem leads to synergy with the other poems in that Dickinson shows that society accepts women working within the home, yet the work outside the hive is just as important and also conducted by females in the bee world. By exposing this dichotomy, Dickinson subverts her contemporaries’ conception of “separate spheres” for men and women. The female bee actively makes honey. Even the “Least
Bee” (1) can work for the good of the hive. The realization that “Her smallest fraction helps” (4) paves the way for imagination to increase the “Amber Quantity” (5).

Noticing the categorical implications of biological sex, Dickinson chooses to subvert rigid delineations in favor of creating a more inclusive way for humans to love and enjoy the body of another. The flower and bee, and the ambiguity that surrounds the actual biological sex of them, appear in the complete poem 1755, as the speaker quips,

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.

The Clover, in this undated poem, has more power than the bee. The Clover has self-efficacy that the bee does not have. Since Dickinson has consistently portrayed the flowers as female, and the bees as male, she may indicate here that the male presence is not necessary for the female figure to achieve her potential. While Dickinson probably was not championing a purge of masculinity, she does affirm a woman’s power to create her own miracles. The “revery” of the poem literally could be a breeze that blows the pollen. The Clover seems to be waiting for the appearance of the bee, until she awakens to realize the “revery” she needs is within herself. The Clover in this poem is very different from the flowers in the other, perhaps earlier, bee poems, in that the bee does not steal what he needs from it. Similarly, Dickinson’s poem 1072 in which she exults “Title Divine—is mine!” (1) celebrates her realization that she has a superior position to those women with ordinary marriages. Other women marry, but the speaker in 1072 has
been “Betrothed—without the swoon” (6); if she does not have “revery,” she certainly has assurance that she has all she needs, without the male presence. The clover is still passive, but the active agent—the bee—can be replaced with revery. The realization that she does not need a male bee to make a prairie means that revery—imagination—can provide a more fulfilling experience for the clover. Not only can revery take over for the active bee but also it can create an entirely new world, in which the clover can beget a prairie.

The role of the queen concerns Dickinson, for the worker bees, even as they enjoy freedom in the meadow, must serve the queen bee. What responsibilities must a queen have? Dickinson regrets that women marry for their “Dimity Convictions—” (401 5). The institution of marriage causes women to be “Born--Bridalled--Shrouded-- / In a Day—” (1072 10-11). The queen of the house is little better than a horse. Her wedding day starts her new life (born), unflinchingly ties her to her husband (bridalled), and kills her independence (shrouded). A woman, or queen bee, must give up not only her independence but also “The Playthings of her Life” (732 2). She must dedicate her life to her hive and forget about ever experiencing the fun things the worker bees do—choosing a flower, floating on the air, and quaffing honey for pleasure. If she laments the loss of any of these things, she must keep silent. A queen is “Nobody”—she has no life apart from laying eggs for the hive. In this light, poem 288—“Nobody”—takes on an entirely new meaning. The queen bee cannot go out of the hive; she must be cared for by her ring of attendant bees and lay eggs for “an admiring Bog” (288 8). In some poems Dickinson combines natural imagery with sexual imagery to create a surreal experience with a male bee that reaches the female flower to be “lost in [her] Balms” (211 8). The sexual
expression shows that Dickinson does not adhere to the strictly virginal image the literary canon once marked out for her.

The queen bee’s role is similar to the human wife’s, but Dickinson rejects the subservient roles available to her, while reimagining the worker bee as male. She knows that female bees in her poems are stifled by their domestic roles, either as the queen, or as (in the only mention of a bee as female) brewers of honey (676). Unlike the other writers in this study, Dickinson views the bees outside the hive. She does not focus on the hive as a place of political ambition for the queen or as a place of transformation of the bees. The bees’ activity is oriented to the natural world; they float “Upon a Raft of Air” (661 14), “brew— / A Honey’s Weight” (676 1-2), and a bee is both “blameless” (869 1) and a “Traitor” (896 2). The bee that experiences freedom, satiation, and forgiveness has the opportunity to separate from the hive, yet rely on the hive for life. Observing the bee collecting pollen from myriad flowers allows the speaker to grasp only the external, more masculine freedom of the bee without probing the intricate, internal responsibilities the female worker bees have to the hive. Giving the worker bee freedom to love, to move, and to fly is a subversive technique to focus on what women should have, but lack due to societal restrictions. The ways in which women are restricted appear in a more personal reflection in Sylvia Plath’s poetry.

Plath lost her father to death at age eight, her sanity for a short time in a breakdown at age twenty, and her husband to a Russian woman at age thirty-two. Plath’s poetry is dark, and she has good reason for that. Most scholars would not attempt to say that Plath optimistically faced the world around her, but she did incorporate some
elements of the positive in even her most enigmatic and dismal work. While Plath
dwelled in darkness, she struggled to access the light. Other scholars focus on the events
of Plath’s life as they analyze her poetry. While understanding her trials in life is
valuable, much more occurs in Plath’s inner mind than examining her relationships with
her husband and father could explain. The bee sequence reveals the inner duality—a life
and death struggle—that leads her to believe that the positive is possible. The Bee
Sequence helps explain how even in light of her suicide, Plath’s poetry reveals her
optimism.

A poem that informs the Bee sequence without being directly included is Plath’s
eyearly poem “The Beekeeper’s Daughter.” The poem relies on Daddy to create the hive,
to protect the isolated queen in the “Easter egg / Under the coronal of sugar roses” (19-
20), and to keep her “heart under [his] foot” (7). David Holbrook believes that “the
possibility of resurrection lies for Sylvia Plath in her union with the father” (213);
however, the actual resurrection occurs when Plath asks herself if she can be a beekeeper
without Daddy. “The Beekeeper’s Daughter” tries to assert the power of the queen
against the “Hieratical […] maestro of the bees” (5). Plath sexualizes the hive, but it
seems as if she is merely echoing the sentiments of the father figure. The focus on the
“many-breasted hives” (6) and the drones “potent as kings / To father dynasties” (11-12)
indicates that the queenship is secondary to the male presence in the hive. Only after the
speaker enters the poem as a presence—“Kneeling down / I set my eyes to a hole-mouth
and meet an eye / Round, green, disconsolate as a tear” (16-18), can she exert her own
interpretation of the inner-workings of the hive. Significantly, she looks inside the hive,
even as the father solely observes the outside. If, as Lynda Bundtzen suggests, the hive
was her “father’s house” (177), can she make the hive belong to the queen? Can she experience the queen? Looking in the eye of the queen, Plath blurs the boundary between herself and the queen. She announces after seeing the queen, “Father, bridegroom, in this Easter egg / Under the coronal of sugar roses / The queen bee marries the winter of your year” (19-21). The marriage is sweet and full of the promise of Easter, but the marriage signifies the winter—or death—of the father. A drone cannot stay in the hive through the winter, and Plath senses that she can separate the father from the hive. She creates space for her identity to evolve past the obsession with Daddy and mature.

Susan Van Dyne, tracing the composition of the bee sequence, notes that Plath struggled with a name for the group of poems, almost selecting “The Beekeeper,” in this way “self-consciously echoing a change in her role” (101). The tendency in Plath scholarship to assign a psychobiographical interpretation to Plath’s poetry does not do justice to Plath as a poet. The critics’ obsession with Daddy borders on the Elektran, while Plath has moved on. As Dickie points out, she has claimed her own identity and an ability to “try out all possible female relationships: daughter, sister, mother queen” (141). Part of the subversive technique is allowing all of these identities to exist simultaneously; in this way she defies patriarchy by having “these female identities slide into each other to differentiate themselves from the father/maestro” (141). Plath’s bee poems embrace these identities and cast them in a positive—for Plath—light. Plath does not rigidly define her identity; rather she creates “a surrealistic experience in which the distinctions between human and natural beings, even between subject and object, are blurred” (134). Plath’s relationship to the queen bee provides a measure of her possibility for rebirth and allows her to conceptualize herself as a powerful presence.
The bee poems establish and maintain progression toward the resolution of conflict within Plath. To trace the journey, with a positive end in sight, it makes sense to begin with the first poem in the sequence, “The Bee Meeting.” In the poem, the speaker first discovers the mystery of the bees. She meets the bees, and while she knows they are dangerous, they fascinate her. The speaker must forge an identity for herself, reconciling what others demand of her and what she wants for herself. The villagers alienate her because she is not dressed like them, which makes her feel even more alone on her path. Plath has no armor to shield her as she searches for self. She has “no protection” (3), which sharply contrasts with the others, “all gloved and covered” (4), and she wonders, “why did nobody tell me?” (4). She feels exposed and thinks that no one can love her or accept her (6); she has failed to meet the villagers’ expectations for her, devastating her perception of her real self. Feeling that she has disappointed others aligns with a common theme in Plath’s poetry. In another poem from Ariel, “Sheep in Fog,” she sees that “People or stars / Regard me sadly, I disappoint them” (2-3). She cannot overcome their prejudice and win them to her point of view as “They threaten / To let me through to a heaven / Starless and fatherless” (13-15). Plath’s identity, when others cloud her view of it, eludes her understanding.

She has to find herself without allowing others to preclude her perception. The tone of “The Bee Meeting” closely resembles the tone in an earlier Plath poem, “The Disquieting Muses.” In both cases the speaker feels trapped by what others have demanded from her. By dressing her as the other beekeepers, Plath thinks, “they are making me one of them” (“The Bee Meeting” 22), just as when her mother makes her take ballet and piano lessons, she thinks that her mother tries to make her fit the model of
all the other little girls (“Muses”). The young girl visited by the Disquieting Muses accepts them and accepts herself while vowing that “no frown of mine / Will betray the company I keep” (56). With this vow, she remains true to her convictions and disregards society’s judgment for her gift/curse—the presence of the muses.

In “The Bee Meeting,” Plath makes the commitment to understand her identity even if she becomes vulnerable in the process. She knows that she cannot escape the ultimate destiny in store for her: “I could not run without having to run forever” (33). By making the commitment, she accepts the challenge to discover the meaning of life or death for her. She begins to identify with the queen bee in her search for her own identity. The journey will not be easy, and either as herself or as the queen bee she will have to endure the villagers or the worker bees. Neither can satisfy her; she must learn to satisfy herself. The beginning of the journey to self-discovery is difficult. She looks on as a third party, wondering, “Whose is that long white box in the grove, what have they accomplished, why am I cold?” (55). The box is her new residence—the place where she will discover her identity, have her rebirth, and triumph over the ones who have hurt her—as the later Bee poems show. Resolving the duality in her head is difficult for Plath at the beginning of her journey; however, the commitment she makes solidifies a positive step toward delving into her self to shed light on thoughts and feeling. The synthesis of positive and negative correlates to a struggle between life and death. She gives a hopeful sign that she will resolve to succeed in the process of reconciliation.

In the second poem, “The Arrival of the Bee Box,” the speaker receives her bees. Their arrival causes her to question the commitment to beekeeping she made in “The Bee Meeting,” but she takes the bees as a way of accepting the challenge to unlock the secret
of her identity. Raising the bees will allow her to fulfill a need to mother another living being. The inside of the box is “appallingly” noisy (17), filled with “maniacs” (23), and “dangerous” (6). Plath fears these things reside in her. If she can get control over the aspects of her life that fill her with dread, she can be her own mother and her own father, just as she is, according to Van Dyne, the mother and father of the bee box (107). As in “The Beekeeper’s Daughter,” the speaker in “Arrival” puts her “eye to the grid” (11), but she cannot identify the queen immediately; instead she sees the “swarmy” (13) bees in a mass without individual identities. They appear as a “Roman mob” (18) to her, “Black on black, angrily clambering” (15)—noise she does not understand because she is “not a Caesar” (21). She doubts that she can feel affection for these bees or they for her. They may bring out her fears rather than assuage them.

She fears discovering the darkness within herself, but she harbors the desire to mother and nurture the bees. She considers whether she will renege on her commitment to them by starving them and allowing their death (25), but she reaffirms her vow to undertake the uncertain journey set before her. When she begins to empathize with the bees by wondering “how hungry they are” (26), they become real for her. She cannot ignore them and knows that “Tomorrow [she] will be sweet God, [she] will set them free” (35). Because she is not a “source of honey” (33)—sustenance—for them, she realizes that it is not rational for her bees to “turn” on her (34). In the same way, she will not allow her darkness to feed on her fear. The last stanza of the poem stops abruptly after one line, signifying that there is unfinished business in the poem that she must address in a future poem. If “the box is only temporary” (68), then she must open it and continue with the project she has chosen. “The Arrival of the Bee Box” reinforces that Plath
accepts the challenge before her. While the hobby holds danger and uncertainty, she
again exhibits a hopeful countenance to carry her through her travels.

The turning point of the Bee sequence occurs in “Stings,” in the resurrection of
the queen bee, with whom she identifies, as the true self, which can never completely die.
The early language in “Stings” reveals that Plath has overcome the part of herself that
feared the bees in that she trusts them enough to gather the honey “bare-handed” (1),
exposing the “throats of our wrists” (4). Her fears will not sting her; she hides nothing
from them. She has fulfilled her commitment to love and respect the bees with her care
for them—“with excessive love I enamelled it [the hive]” (10). Through this love, she
has conquered her fear of the bees. Almost surrealistically, she transcends from
gathering the honey to residing inside the hive as the queen bee. Asking the question, “Is
there any queen at all in it?” (15), she becomes the queen, finally triumphing over the
villagers that held her back in “The Bee Meeting,” and her fears of self-discovery evident
in “The Arrival of the Bee Box.” She rises above the women who have tried to tie her to
domesticity. Her victory over those who have hurt her evolves as she realizes that she
can discard their plebian ideas in favor of her true self. This knowledge causes her
“strangeness [to] evaporate” (26). She has seen too much in life to play the game of the
“open cherry, the open clover” (300—according to Kroll, this is all that interests the other
women around her (149). Like the Velveteen Rabbit, she has become real—found the
true self—when “her long body / Rubbed of its plush” (17-18) appears shameful to others
but signifies loving reality to her.

In “Stings,” she begins her triumph over the men that will culminate in “The
Swarm.” The queen will not condescend to wasting her life to ensure that one man dies,
but the composite father/husband onlooker—the scapegoat—suffers at the hands of the bees who expose him as a fraud (41-50). She knows from the easily fooled workers and scared scapegoat that nothing is worth sacrificing one’s life (Broe 151). His retreat signals that the bees have won, and because the queen motivates the bees’ behavior, she, too, has won. She cannot waste her time dying, because she has “a self to recover, a queen” (52). In the last lines of the poem, as the queen recovers her self, powerful positive and negative images permeate, showing that the recovery is painful and contains the same contradictions she has tried to reconcile from the beginning of the sequence. Images of retribution—the “lion-red body” (55), and “red / Scar in the sky, red comet” (57-58)—show the power backing the queen in her resurrection. As she flies over the “mausoleum, the wax-house” (60), where she once lived as a prisoner, the queen has undergone a rebirth and achieved a victory over the life where others tried to contain her. “Stings” also signals, as Edward Butscher notes, “the abandonment of the Jew-victim role” in that “the persona has risen above the machine” (345). The speaker has matured and can reconcile complexities within herself. In “Stings,” the queen casts off the death that would have buried her alive as she goes in search of her true self. Her rebirth is both delicate—she has “wings of glass” (55)—and powerful—she is “flying / More terrible than she ever was” (56-57). Dual images compete in this poem with light and dark, and tenderness and fierceness, defining her rebirth. The duality leads to ambiguous conclusions. Does the rebirth mean death? Has she gained new life? Because dual images appear, does that mean life and death harmonize in the rebirth? One certain conclusion remains that the recovery of the true self “Stings,” necessitates the rejection of the false self, which Plath has done through embodiment of the queen. The beekeeper is
no longer the sweet God of “The Arrival of the Bee Box”; she has allied with the queen, and they rule together, breaking the ties that would bind them to inconsequential lives.

“The Swarm” continues to affirm what the speaker learned in “Stings.” As the speaker steps back in order to see the swarm, she sees that there is a distance between her and the hive that did not exist in the previous poems. The general with his hands which “are not hands at all / But asbestos receptacles” (53-54) directs the bees into their new hive after they have swarmed. The speaker, in “The Arrival of the Bee Box,” maintained that she was “not a Caesar” (22), but she could be “sweet God” (35). The queen bee and the speaker are distant from the action in this poem. The speaker observes the general’s directions, thinking,

How instructive this is!

The dumb, banded bodies

Walking the plank draped with Mother France’s upholstery

Into a new mausoleum. (46-49)

As fascinating as the conquering of the swarm and placement into a new hive is, the queen is unconcerned. Bees swarm when they are overcrowded. The queen bee remains in her hive. The other hive will not have a queen yet, and the speaker need not worry about competition because the general has removed the virgins that would have killed her (55). Plath uses the image of the worker bees as troops—fools—blindly going where someone stronger and more willful has told them to go. This reliance on another person creates the probability of manipulation. The worker bees lose the struggle with the general because he is able to bring them back from their desertion of the hive. The “last badge of victory” (41) for the hive fails, and the general “knock[s] them into a cocked
straw hat” (42). The worker bees’ attempt to fly away is futile. Unlike the queen in “Stings,” they do not fly in triumph; they will return to the hive having been defeated in their “notion of honor” (56). However, the speaker and the queen are above both the general and the other bees because they maintain their distance from the manipulation the general performs on the others. The queen’s existence confirms the victory; therefore, she controls the decision regarding whether they have won.

“The Swarm,” with its distancing mechanism and disdain for those who would blindly follow a leader, aligns with “The Moon and the Yew Tree.” The speaker in “The Moon” distances herself from the churchyard where she stands because she “simply cannot see where there is to get to” (7). Religion holds no appeal; “the saints will be all blue” (31) and cannot satisfy her needs for warmth and understanding. If religion is the opiate of the masses, Plath prefers to remain lucid. The moon, “bald and wild” (34), nevertheless is her mother (17). She respects the power of the moon as a figure, but even it remains at a distance. She alone must go through life and find “where there is to get to” (7), if indeed, there is anywhere to get to. The general may manipulate the bees, but the queen will not succumb to his maneuvers. She leads her own existence, but even that cannot save her without outside help. This question of whether the queen can survive is the first indication that the victory she has won may not fill the emptiness that the darkness leaves in her mind.

The most important poem in the Bee sequence is “Wintering,” which holds the key to understanding and placing in context the rest of the poems, because one may interpret the poem positively or negatively. Either interpretation shows that Plath built to a conclusion in the final poem. She intended “Wintering” to be the last poem in *Ariel*—
her last words to the world. If “Wintering” is positive, then Plath created the other poems to progress toward an understanding of her reconciliation with the hopeful possibilities in life or after. If “Wintering” surrenders to a pessimistic view of the world, Plath has fallen into despair and lost the will to continue. The end of the story is not a surprise; Plath committed suicide before she published Ariel, but this end does not dictate that the poems are negative. She saw a hopeful glimmer, which she wrote about in her poetry. To view “Wintering” as a positive poem suggest that despite her suicide, Plath saw a possibility of optimism at lease in her poetry and in the trajectory of Ariel.

“Wintering” contains images and elements that make it positive. While Bundtzen believes that the Christmas roses are really poisonous poinsettias (181), the “Christmas roses” (49) instead could be the delicate flowers that need excessive love and care to bloom in the winter. This interpretation would indicate that the bees, far from dying, receive a miracle in the appearance of the flower to inspire them to last until the spring. While there are negative images in “Wintering”—the dark cellar, “rancid jam” (8), the claustrophobia of being in the room (12)—David Holbrook suggests that the placement of the cellar in the heart of the house, representative of the inner goddess, redeems the darker symbols (227). The goddess may have departed, but honey resides in the cellar to sustain the speaker until she can retrieve her balance and embrace her inner heart. She revels in the triumph of the women—the “Maids and the long royal lady” (39) who “have got rid of the men, / The blunt, clumsy stumblers, the boors” (40-41). Women are the only sex strong enough to endure the winter—“to enter another year” (48). Plath knows that the bees “taste the spring” (50), a hopeful sign that they can continue into the next year to repeat the cycle.
Just as the bees must strive to survive the winter, the rook has to endure the rainy day in “Black Rook in Rainy Weather.” Because the animal/weather correlation exists in both poems, statements in “Black Rook” may illuminate “Wintering.” While she feels that she needs something else in the scene, she “can’t honestly complain” (13) about the “mute sky” (13), “minor light” (14), or “spotted leaves [that] fall as they fall” (9). A sense of peace exists in the poem with her reaction to her surroundings that signifies Plath’s satisfaction with her life at that moment. The rook continues “Arranging and rearranging its feathers in the rain” (3), showing that he has not given up. The sighting of the rook is a kind of miracle for Plath, as its shine causes her to “haul / My eyelids up, and grant / A brief respite from fear”(29-31). Both poems allow for and contain the possibility of miracles. Fear subsides to make way for hope. Making it through the rain and making it through the winter takes one step at a time. She indicates that the bees and the rook can continue to try. She too can see the light at the end of the tunnel and accept her situation. While the imagery is not marble halls or diamond sunbursts, it is a healthy attempt to move forward.

The sequence concludes with “Wintering.” If the poem is positive, and hopeful emotions occur in all the previous poems, then why does Sylvia Plath not subscribe to the light she sees at the end of the tunnel? She has found in herself the queen bee and feels superior to the drones and villagers; she has had her victory over the ones who hurt her and the general who commands them. She has been reborn, and all she has to do now is last out the winter to continue the process in the spring, which she can taste coming. She has the evidence that there is a possibility for a happy ending. She wants to end the book of poetry with the hopeful call. However, since she has reached the self-discovery she set
out to find from “The Bee Meeting,” perhaps that was the end in itself. Tasting the spring and flying away could be the indication that she has reached the peace she needed to finally transcend the world she lived in to “recover” her true self from another place. The other bees may kill the queen, but she can control her resurrection and find her true self. This knowledge prompts her to kill the false self without the interference of others. The end of the sequence may show that the hope Plath has found is the possibility of the aloof queen bee’s victory, however impossible it may be for Plath to execute in real life.

Clearly, how one interprets “Wintering” creates a backdrop to understand the rest of the poetry. “Wintering” holds hope that Plath believes she has recovered the true self and transcended the restrictions others attempted to place upon her. While the ominous images shadowed most of the positive nuggets, dark and light create a duality—a tension between survival and death—within Plath as she struggles for self-understanding.

Audre Lorde was a fighter, and even though breast cancer did kill her, it did not stop her from questioning what we as a society lose by our complacency. Why did the doctors want her to wear a pink prosthesis against her white scar against brown skin? Why should women wear a prosthesis when the absence of one would let another women know she is not alone? Lorde’s style did not make it easy for others to politely applaud at the end of her speeches—she was not content to ignore the scars; rather she revealed the ways in which seeing scars opens the mind to beginning to heal the scars. Speaking, thereby seeking connection to others, is a way to heal. Lorde’s 1972 poem “Bees” exposes the cost of silence and the power of an all-encompassing vision of sisterhood.
“Bees” opens with children on a street outside a schoolyard. The boys discover a beehive and immediately begin to destroy the hive. Soon the school guards come to their aid, completing the destruction. When the hive has been decimated, the girls standing apart do not understand, and one girl wonders if they could have learned honey making from the bees, and struggles to “understand / her own destruction” (26-27). Several questions emerge from the poem. What compels the boys to destroy the hive? How do the bees react? What are the lessons the girls learn? Most importantly, what have they lost in the destruction process?

For Lorde, having an identity means having a complete identity—not denying the parts that society marginalizes. For the hive, this means the ability to embrace all parts of the hive and all the bees that contribute to its function—the queen, drones, and workers. (In the next chapter I will explain how Starhawk’s novel attempts to create a utopian world where one can embrace all the aspects of the hive.) Irony in “Bees” occurs in its setting; the students are at school where they should have positive learning experience, yet the school guards condone the destruction of the beehive. In school, the girls cannot learn to speak when they must stand “Curious and apart” (20). Rather than being a safe place to affirm the formation of identity, the school robs the girls of their voices. Only after the men and boys have left the scene can one girl speak, and her speech laments the destruction of the hive.

The bees cannot defend the hive, because it is winter and they are slow; the girls cannot defend themselves against the destruction, because they must “look on in fascination learning / secret lessons” (21-22) about the power men have over women. The girls lack voice and the bees lack the ability to fight back. One bee’s attempt to
defend the hive is a futile path “into quicker destruction” (10). One bee’s power of speech is not enough to defend the hive; however, would more voices in the way of stings have called off the assault? If Plath is concerned that Daddy has his foot on her heart, the boys in Lorde’s poem stomp the hearts out of an entire colony of female worker bees. Lorde describes the boys as “becoming experts” (17) in their destruction of females. The school guards execute a more disturbing violence against the hive with the phallic “long wooden sticks” (12) they use to “beat the almost finished / rooms of wax apart” (14-15). The “fresh honey” (15) that “drips down their broomsticks” (16) is similar to the blood that would accompany rape. The school guards have violated the sanctity of the hive, the boys rejoice in their role in trampling the bees, and the girls must witness violence against the female.

The girls see themselves in the hive; knowing that the secrets of the hive have been lost in this instance leads to desolation. However, hope exists in the poem. As the girl exclaims, “‘We could have studied honey-making!’” (19), she realizes that there was inherent value in the hive, a value that could be recreated and perpetuated if the girls could only have access to another intact hive. Imagining the continuation of the poem, based on Lorde’s other works, it is possible that the girl’s anger at the destroyed hive would, as Margaret Morris suggests anger does, allow her “to assert her own existence in the face of an oppression that demands silence and servitude” (171). If Lorde can use her anger and the power of her body to confront and challenge the dominant paradigm, the girl in the poem could become a force for social change in the wake of her awakening. The girl expropriates the image the boys have desecrated by finding the positive in what had been perceived as dangerous. Resisting the reduction of complexities into binary
opposites, the girl approaches higher order thinking that dwells in the possibilities of unification.

The process the poets navigate in order to present a bee image that reflects the intricacies of their identities empowers the female body to be capable of more than the opposite of male. She can be complete with a conglomeration of identities. Emily Dickinson in her stark contrast between the male worker bee and the female flower establishes a dualist view of nature. However, she changes that view by highlighting the importance of the imagination in creating new worlds. Sylvia Plath shows the tension between light and dark, optimism and pessimism, and beekeeper and bees kept in her Bee Sequence. The positive imagery in the sequence indicates that Plath can look beyond the dualisms to carve out space for her ambiguity. She refuses to fit herself into the hive—coffin—where she thinks other people want her to be; instead, she creates her own interpretation of her identity and power. Audre Lorde exposes the hypocrisy of dualisms in that they end up harming both the silent, denigrated minority and the majority’s potential. By continually reaffirming the status quo, the majority refuses to meet a challenge or think creatively about situations. “The Bees” gives the minority a voice and points out how the event could have had a different conclusion. If the majority had valued the others, the entire group could have learned together.

The poets point out how negotiating dualisms can trap a woman in an identity that is more defined by what it is not than by what it is. The alternative to dualism is a different value system. Dickinson moves to value the imagination as an alternative to the passive/active dichotomy in men and women’s relationships. Plath delineates her own
struggle with duality and cannot resolve how to unite her own comfort with ambiguity with the world’s intolerance for it. Lorde refuses to deny her identity, and probes the implications of devaluing the feminine principle. In the next chapter, I will explore how the unification and integration of different aspects of identity allows the protagonists to access the power of the female principle within themselves—heretofore disregarded.
Chapter 2
Possibilities for Healing

Although D.H. Laurence argued for exploding a bomb under the novel to make the genre more philosophically interesting, he could not have foreseen how women writing about “the idea of ‘mental utopia,’ women’s spirituality, ecofeminism, and [...] women’s experience of madness” (Fancourt 95) would establish a sub-genre that enables women to explore consciousness and female bodies by creating a safer environment for the characters to grow. The two novels I examine, Starhawk’s *The Fifth Sacred Thing* and Sue Monk Kidd’s *The Secret Life of Bees*, feature women on the verge of discovering the power within themselves, independent of others’ influence. Honeybees play a pivotal role in leading the characters through their internal journey. They allow the women to heal, assuaging the pain of a society disdainful of women and the hurt of a mother’s death. In ancient Egypt, honey was used to embalm the dead, preserving them for eternity; more recently, alternative healers have noted honey’s use as an antiseptic; I will argue that the authors use honey and bees to heal in a metaphorical sense as well, creating a connection to the female body that the protagonists need in order to positively identify themselves as women.

In Starhawk’s visionary utopian/dystopian novel, *The Fifth Sacred Thing*, California in 2048 contains the peaceful, environmentally conscious North and the mercenary, religiously ruled South. While the North does have problems, the members of that society reconcile their issues in the community Council. In the South, the Millennialists and the Stewards control the government and every aspect of the citizens’ lives. The destruction wrought by the last century means that scarce resources must be
divided somehow between people. Medical technology in the North relies on herbs, medicines, and the movement of *ch'i*. Doctors in the South, all white men, manipulate the human body with immunoboosters and other artificially produced drugs. Madrone, a healer from the North, travels to the South to assist the resistance movement. While in the South, Madrone discovers an alternative healing power in honeybees, which lend their healing capabilities to humans who can understand the inner workings of the “bee mind.” Bee healing occurs as certain women—the Melissas—give themselves to the bees and harness their healing power. While men in the South benefit from the healing, they have little power to create their own healing from the bees. As Madrone develops her talent for bee healing, she closely identifies herself with the bees and accesses a natural power within herself.

To the uninitiated, the appearance of bees brings good luck and hope. During his escape from the Southlands, Bird, Madrone’s friend and partner, hears the loud humming of bees “as if he had stumbled into the sacred orchard of the Shining Isles” (69). The opening between the two worlds that the bees allow him to access gives Bird the strength to continue his journey North. This is the novel’s first indication that bees can provide a source of healing. Bird is a Northern citizen, who lives with Madrone upon his return from the South. As a healer well versed in alternative therapies in the North, Madrone uses movement of energy fields and clean water, fresh air, and positive surroundings for her patients’ convalescence.

However, Madrone’s first experience with bee healing comes as a surprise to her. Noticing the lack of materials, especially water, needed for healing, Madrone realizes that honey could work as an antiseptic. She sees an ill man on the ground completely covered
with bees; he is enchanted so that he won’t react to the bees in constant motion around him and somehow anger them. The bees will then respond to his needs and supply the necessary medicine. In awe, Madrone realizes that she will need to learn how to utilize bee healing. Madrone’s first step to identifying herself with the bees occurs when she understands that the bees “had become his aura, his vitality, and their movements were shifting and sustaining his energy field much as she would have used her hands and her own spirit power to strengthen his link to life” (203). She is a healer; the bees are healers; she will become a bee, or they will become part of her.

The initiation into the bee world leads Madrone through stages of fear, acceptance, and gathering of power. She goes reluctantly with the Melissa, the bee woman, to the cave where the other bee women live, referring to the bees as “the sisters.” Madrone realizes that undergoing the ritual with the Melissa will mean that she cannot “hold on to herself unchanged” (225). She will have to change to adapt to the bee part of her mind; the bee mind will allow Madrone greater healing powers. As Madrone accepts the bee power, she feels herself transform into the queen and then a drone (226). She identifies with all aspects of the hive and embraces all sexes and duties of the bee world. Power comes to Madrone in the ritual when she awakens to new scents and tastes in her own body that she had not known before. These new scents become the backbone of Madrone’s healing powers in the South, when she calls up the cure within herself and passes it on to her patient, by creating a medicine out of her sweat, mixing a drop of sweat with honey, and feeding it to the sick person.

Magic, according to Starhawk, is the ability and process of changing consciousness at will. At the beginning of her initiation, the Melissa urges Madrone to
“Let go” (225) of her body and the fear of surrendering to the impulses of the bees. Just as Plath internalizes the power of the queen bee, Madrone feels the power and the temptation to fly away over the hive. As Plath morphs into the queen bee in “Stings” and sees herself as the queen flying “Over the engine that killed her—/The mausoleum, the wax house” (59-60), she asserts the queen’s power to overcome adversity. Madrone draws power from the bees because their world provides an alternative to the dystopian reality of the South. She solidifies her identification with the bees, but the Melissa warns her to “never make the mistake of thinking you control them” (229). The sting Madrone receives becomes her “bee spot,” both the secret to her healing power and the manifestation of completing an initiation into the bee world. The recipient must suffer a sting in order to understand bees; ironically a bee must die to administer the sting. Complete immersion into the bee world would mean that Madrone could not rejoin society; so, when she seems in danger of staying in the bee world, the Melissa pulls her away from the bee mind and teaches Madrone to switch back and forth at will between her Madrone mind and the bee mind. Madrone’s ability to internalize all members of the hive—worker, drone, and queen—grants her access to the power of the bees.

If all those that understand the bee mind are women, and in order for a man in the South to be healed by bees he has to be under enchantment, then the bees assisting Bird as he travels home indicate that Bird, even as a male, can connect to multiple identities in himself. Bird, like all Northern citizens, does not rely on gender roles to define his actions. For example, Bird does not believe that women cannot do the same tasks he can, and he does not believe in heterosexism, shown through his sexual relationships with men and women. The bees primarily respond to women and women-identified men, just as
women closely identify with the hive—the queen and the women worker bees. In the hive, a worker bee must leave of her own accord when she can no longer work, or the others will chase her from the hive. The hive values all workers equally without having found a way to care for the older members in a blend of good and bad reality. In the South women are only useful for working or beauty, which undermines the value of women in society.

While distinctions between her utopian and dystopian communities are numerous, the novel resolves the dualisms by having the utopian society break down racial and gender stereotypes. In the North, the members of society agree to value all the work equally and to take care of the old. Gender rules in the North do not exist, and women and men have an equal number of options. Subverting gender roles means that women and men from the North can access both sexes within themselves to embrace a wider range of understanding. Bird, who is one of the Northern community leaders, can thus hear the worker bees and gather hope and strength from them, and Madrone can feel connected to the queen and the drones from the hive, enhancing her ability to sink into the bee mind.

Furthermore, as Donna Fancourt argues, “Starhawk relies on the oppositions between the Good Reality and the Bad Reality to sustain the conflicts within the narrative” (107). The conflict between the “Good Reality” of the North and the “Bad Reality” of the South create a challenging space for Madrone to negotiate her identity and place. She believes utopia—freedom from racism, sexism, heterosexism, and class systems—can exist, but her work takes her to a place where each of the above is practiced with a vengeance.
Madrone only gradually comes to realize the bee mind’s healing power. She must trust her healing in order to learn more about what she is able to create. When Madrone goes to find Beth, her friend and fellow rebel against the Southern government, at the house where nurses live during their training, she encounters a woman who has had a botched abortion. Madrone discovers that she can “turn her own sweat into the homeopathic drop that changed and cured” (321). Her ability to infuse honey with healing powers, through her sweat, allows her to access a part of the bee mind and become completely immersed in the bee identity. Madrone has internalized the bee’s abilities and by doing so, has created a smoother connection between her own mind and her bee mind, making it easier to switch between them and draw upon the strengths of one while in the other. She continues to retain her power for healing and augments her talent with the bee’s instinct.

As Madrone becomes more like the bees and can generate their power within herself, she taps into a force that will eventually save her own life. Madrone escapes the police in the South only to find herself in the ocean, unable to get to shore. She relaxes into the pulse of the waves and tunes into the sounds of “the hum of a thousand bees” (373). As her bee mind absorbs her, Madrone unites with her bee identity and calls the bee woman—Melissa—to her. A boat approaches with the Melissa on board. The bees come to Madrone as she floats, and she collapses her identity into theirs, giving off the call for assistance. The Melissa calls the bees back from Madrone by closing her eyes, and Madrone comes back into herself. The presence of her bee mind leads Madrone to realms of healing she did not know existed. By merging her identity with the bees, she gains a power of natural healing unprecedented even in the North.
After Madrone recognizes the power of her bee mind, she proceeds to exert some, though not overt, control over her use of bee healing. She uses her bee identity to heal those closest to her, Katy and Bird. Katy, a friend and rebel in the South, is pregnant and has been captured by the Southern government when Madrone attempts to rescue her. As Katy and Madrone escape from the hospital, Katy is dreadfully ill. If the bees swarm to attack the sickness in Katy, Madrone realizes they could destroy her. Harnessing the power of her bee identity, she extends the image of “the brood queen, she who must be protected at all cost” over herself and Katy (396). The pregnant Katy is similar to the brood queen. Madrone shifts the focus of the bees to the real threat, the men bearing down on the women from behind. The transfer of the bees’ anger from the sick woman to the attacking men signifies a shift in Madrone’s ability to harness and focus the bee energy within herself.

The other challenge Madrone faces in her bee healing is Bird’s sickness. Because she cannot physically go to Bird, who is in prison, and rearrange his ch’i, Madrone sends the bees to seek him out and help him gather strength. She gives signals to them “that the stink of rot and fear was scent-tagged as something desirable” (463), and they would surround Bird with their power. The bees inspire Bird to sing and enable him to chase “the ghosts out of his head” (466). Madrone sends the bees to a place of darkness and decay—where they would never choose to go—and they are able to create hope out of the despair Bird feels. The bee that stings Bird during the countdown makes the ultimate sacrifice to allow Bird to have his life back. A bee that stings will die, yet the bee prevents the death of Maya, Bird, and all the people of the North with her selfless action. The manipulation of the bees is another power Madrone has created within her bee
identity. She has accepted part of the bees, and she has infused them with part of her identity. Both are able to extend beyond their traditional boundaries to achieve miraculous results.

A challenge to Madrone’s healing powers occurs after she returns to the North to find it under attack by Southern troops. A tribal leader tells Madrone to find strength enough to treat River, a deserter from the Southern army. She knows that she must stay out of the bee mind with him, she says, “because I would sense this man’s disease and sting him to death to protect the hive” (446). River’s contamination by the drugs given to him in the army, and the state of mind he must be in as a Southerner, combined with his withdrawal from the drugs and fear of capture, make his case one of the most difficult Madrone has ever encountered. Madrone’s realization of the limitation of her power, both individually and within the bee mind, allows her to choose appropriate courses of action for healing. She chooses to heal River with her more traditional methods of sensing and moving his energy field, instead of taking a risk with her bee mind.

The power within the bee mind allows Madrone to access greater levels of healing than she consciously knew she had. The formation of a bee identity creates a partnership between Madrone and the bees. Even though she cannot totally control the bee impulses, she can choose how to utilize her bee power. Madrone’s bee mind saves more than the people she heals; it also saves the society she loves. Madrone, by accessing the bee mind, has found power in herself that she did not know she had. She had the training she needed to internalize all the bees in the hive, in order to enter her bee mind. As the queen bee, Madrone can direct the actions of others to help save the hive. As a worker bee, she heals other injured workers. As a drone, Madrone learns the importance of small actions
to the overall workings of the society. Her utopian society can function, and Madrone has created power, not seized existing power.

The utopian landscape of the North in *The Fifth Sacred Thing* contrast with the dystopian South creates a dichotomy in which Madrone must use her healing powers to lead her people—and those from the South who she can—toward wholeness and expressions of the feminist utopian ideal. Lyman Tower Sargent identifies two types of utopian literature—"body utopia" and "city utopia"—with the former encompassing the psychological characteristics of the protagonist and the latter focusing on the ideal state. Feminist utopias, such as Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time*, tend to fit the "body utopia" category because they probe definitions of private space rather than public space. While Starhawk carefully constructs a utopian society and explains how the society functions, the focus of the novel is less on the city’s action and more on the individual growth Madrone undergoes. While *The Secret Life of Bees* by Sue Monk Kidd takes place in the past, and makes no claims to be utopian, the novel traces a young girl’s, Lily, journey to an internal utopia that she finds in the "green space" of Tiburton, South Carolina. The novel has utopian elements that allow Lily the freedom to develop her own language. Lily’s self-discovery can only occur in her utopian adventure with a beekeeper, in which racial and sexist societal constructions break down.

Lily’s uncomfortable adolescent existence in Sylvan, South Carolina, leads her to search for a way out of her experiences. Because Lily believes she killed her mother accidentally with a rifle, she cannot come to terms with her mother’s memory. Lily’s father, T. Ray, doesn’t believe in “slumber parties or sock hops” (8) and cares very little about raising a teenage girl; instead he hires Rosaleen to cook, clean, and care for Lily,
yet Rosaleen cannot mother Lily in the way she knows the girl needs to be mothered. Lily is comfortable neither at home nor at school. At school, she remains outside the hive her classmates have constructed; she is certainly not the queen-bee of the social order in the school, and even more importantly, she is not a worker or a drone. She has no identity at school to balance her lack of love at home. She describes her feelings about school: “I worried so much about how I looked and whether I was doing things right, I felt half the time I was impersonating a girl instead of really being one” (9). Because she wants to be a “girl” but does not know how to execute the process, Lily is left in an asexual, amorphous realm without either the self-assured guidance from within, or a positive, encouraging external influence, both of which Madrone has. Lily must navigate the world for herself and create her identity. Lacking encouragement from the adults in her life, she takes matters into her own hands.

Before Lily can escape from her unfulfilling daily life, she must determine how much she trusts and is trusted by Rosaleen, a problematic character. In other novels, Rosaleen would fulfill a stereotypical Black Mammy role, but in The Secret Life of Bees, the relationship between Lily and Rosaleen approaches equality. Rosaleen still, though, is Lily’s only mother figure. Neither one has affection or reverence for T. Ray, even though he is Lily’s father and Rosaleen’s employer. Both characters reject the racist society that promises African-Americans the right to vote, yet makes the actual voting impossible. When Rosaleen attempts to obtain her voter registration card, she is immediately arrested. Rosaleen’s arrest provides the catalyst Lily needs to leave T. Ray, Sylvan, and the grossly unfair and stifling dystopian society she inhabits. Assisting Rosaleen in breaking out of jail, against Rosaleen’s wishes, Lily hopes that together they
will travel to Tiburton, South Carolina, in search of her mother’s history. While Kidd resists the portraying them in the stereotypical Mammy-Child relationship, the two have little power due to Southern society’s norms of race, gender and age.

Fortunately, the Rosaleen/Lily relationship does not follow the Jim/Huck relationship in which the African-American character disappears upon the protagonist’s completion of the growth process; rather, Rosaleen is very much still part of Lily’s life, even through the end of the novel, when Lily looks at Rosaleen and the beekeeping sisters and realizes she is lucky to be around “All these women, all this love” (299). Lily’s journey is not complete without Rosaleen’s continued presence in her life—not as a mammy, but as an older woman friend who still has many experiences to share with Lily. Furthermore, Rosaleen is never sexualized or objectified as a way of representing her physical presence. While Lily looks to Rosaleen for sympathy in her relationship with her abusive father, she does not commodify Rosaleen as a source of “authority, morality, strength, and love that seem to be embodied by black women” in white women’s writing, as Kelly Reames discusses (6). Kidd’s treatment allows and encourages Rosaleen to grow in the novel. She becomes a woman-identified woman through her relationship with the beekeeping sisters, and by the end of the novel, she has safely achieved the goal that landed her in jail. The idea of woman-identified woman appears in feminist writing, and sometimes is used to refer to a lesbian, and the novel is coy regarding Rosaleen’s sexuality. However, in using the term to describe Rosaleen, I

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want the term to more closely follow Alice Walker’s term “womanist,” a “black feminist,” as well as “a woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually” (xi). She has a political consciousness, validated by her voter-registration card. Kidd makes Rosaleen multidimensional, breaking out of the stereotype of the black mammy.³

While Rosaleen’s relationship with Lily has multiple levels of connection, Lily’s memories of her mother pale in comparison. However, they loom in importance to her. Lily’s connections to her mother include a pair of gloves, a picture, and a label with a painting of the Black Madonna. Her mother named her Lily Melissa, a coincidence given the later development of beekeeping and honey making. In ancient Greece, another name for Aphrodite was Melissa or the queen bee. Obvious connections arise in her name—Lily for the flowers bees draw pollen from, and Melissa, like the Melissa in *The Fifth Sacred Thing* who introduces bee-healing to Madrone—and cement Lily’s interest in beekeeping. Lily’s mother loved the beekeeping sisters and gave her child a name that would remind her of them. Lily must find her mother so that she can ascend to her position as a queen bee in charge of her identity and her life. The bees call to Lily from inside the walls of her bedroom, suggesting a sexual awakening that will accompany her spiritual quest to find her mother and her identity. Her naïveté leads her to compare the bees’ presence to “the angel Gabriel appearing to the Virgin Mary, setting events in motion” (2). The undeveloped voice within Lily needs to connect to her mother so that she can complete the transition from childhood to adolescence and nascent independence.

Lily understands that her biological sex makes her inherently different from her father and the men around her, but she does not understand what it means to create a

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³ One problem that remains is that Kidd never addresses the implications of racial difference for Lily as a white adolescent developing her identity in a community of black women.
strong woman’s identity. Lily even admits to “pretending” to be a girl. The only aspect of her body that she connects to womanhood is menstruation, which she uses to manipulate others, remarking, “It had been my experience for nearly a year [living with her father] that uttering the words ‘female trouble’ could get me into places I wanted to go and out of places I didn’t” (161). Her first comparison to the bees occurs when Lily discovers her chance to escape T. Ray. The “jar is open” (41) meaning that Lily can leave her father—inadvertently taking a cue from her mother—and find sympathy for bees. Lily will not be trapped in the Bell Jar; she had opened the jar for the bees she had caught, and now she must open the jar for herself. However, Lily’s full realization that she can be a strong woman does not come until she has spent time with the beekeeping sisters, who not only care for each other but also celebrate Our Lady of Chains, an old masthead from a ship, by finding the spirit within a goddess figure. Finding the heart from Our Lady in the bees and within herself leads Lily to reconcile with her past and provides hope for her future desires.

Just as the North is utopian for Madrone and her comrades, Tiburton, South Carolina, becomes a utopia for Lily and Rosaleen. They are able to enter into the beekeeping sisters’—May, June, and August’s—home as though there were no color division between Lily and the women. However, Lily is not ready to face her quest; she lies to August, the oldest sister and beekeeper, about where she comes from and where she is traveling to, but August knows Lily will tell her what she needs eventually and Lily intuitively senses that August “saw right through [the lie]” (74). Like the green world in Shakespeare’s plays, Tiburton provides an open, natural space where Lily can begin to work out what she needs. While she relaxes into herself, she learns the process of the
bees, slowly becoming able to express the relationship with the bees in sensual terms. From focusing on the buzzing of the bees and the “clouds of bees [that] rose up and flew wreaths around [August’s] head” (67), Lily realizes that the process of caring for bees requires both suspension of fear and a veil. She learns August “didn’t like swarms” (93), “women make the best beekeepers” (143), and if bees are not working, “you can bet their queen is dead” (287). Working with the bees at August’s side gives Lily the opportunity to suspend gendered and racial spaces and create her own space.

Lily’s initiation into the bee world moves more slowly than Madrone’s, perhaps because the only life Lily will save is her own. She dons the veil, and rather than being “Born—Bridalled—Shrouded” in a day, like Emily Dickinson’s speaker, she is able to grow behind the beekeeping veil finding that “if this was a man’s world, a veil took the rough beard right off” (92). While this sentence could mean that Lily hides behind the veil, she needs the veil to allow her to see the world through different eyes. She sees the connections between the bees and her life without someone telling her who she must be. She gradually becomes comfortable with the bees, even determining that she can accompany Zach, August’s teenage boy assistant, to the remote farms. As they harvest the purple honey, a valuable, rare variety, Zach lifts her veil and delivers a taste of honey to her lips from his fingers. Suddenly, Lily becomes aware of the sensory details surrounding the hives, and begins to describe the events differently, leaving her eyes on him as “bees swirled around [their] heads with a sound like sizzling bacon, a sound that no longer registered as danger” (126). Lily’s sexual awakening comes from a boy removing her veil, but it also comes as she has begun to trust the women she lives with.
Bird supports Madrone, from a distance, in her quest through the South, and Zach leads Lily into a better understanding of her potential for danger and safety.

As Lily and August check on the hives, they notice that the bees create music to cool the hive by fanning their wings, which Lily describes as a vibration that felt like “the music had rushed into [her] pores” (148). The bees coming out of the hive bump Lily’s forehead, precisely the place where Madrone receives her “bee spot.” As the movement of the bees causes Lily to slip into a reverie, she enters into a bee mind, and sees her spirit dancing with the bees in “a bee conga line” (150). As she moves through a dream state with the bees, she can see her mother, and feel the bees “caressing [her] in a thousand places” (151). As she finally feels like part of the “bee sisters,” August brings her back into her body by calling her name. Lily cannot extend the safe elation of her initiation into sustaining her through the uncomfortable conversation she knows is coming when she finally tells August the truth about who she is. She is afraid to know what August will tell her about her mother, so Lily leaves the questioning process incomplete for the evening.

While Tiburton seems like a utopia, Lily can go on pretending that she does not need to find her mother and resisting growth. However, when reality disrupts the utopia, Lily must face her own insecurities and discover her mother’s history. Zach’s racially motivated arrest threatens to destabilize the “family” Lily enjoys being a part of. May, an overly sensitive character, feels acute pain when other humans suffer. Her discovery of Zach’s predicament dislodges her sanity, and she goes to the creek to drown herself. While sad, Lily finds the rituals associated with the sisters’ house comforting. Celebration and grief call for ritual. August, Zach, and Lily share the process of covering
the hives with a square of black cloth, hoping to, according to August, keep the bees from “swarming off when a death took place […] to ensure that the dead person would live again” (205). (The same ritual appears in The Honey Harvest when Ed tells Mel that the bees need to know that Pop has died.) The ritual seems to allow the bees to participate in the mourning that the family experiences.

As Lily understands that she cannot continue to pretend that she lives in a body utopia of her own psyche, she opens up to August, finally asking to hear her mother’s story. Lily slowly turns her private space into a space that can accommodate her mother’s memory, August, Rosaleen, and Zach. August reluctantly tells Lily that her mother did leave her at the same time she left her husband, but she notes that when her mother died, she had gone back to collect Lily to come live with the bee sisters. Lily responds by throwing jars of honey at the Black Madonna, but ultimately she wishes the “black Mary statue would open up, just over her abdomen, and [she] would crawl inside to a hidden room” (260). Obviously, Lily wants to return to her mother, but she must find the strength to forgive her mother for the depression that caused her to run away. Slowly Lily begins to wear her mother’s brooch that August had saved. Rosaleen fills in the gaps of the rest of the story for Lily and they maintain a connection. Our Lady of Chains becomes the queen bee as the women circle around her “like bee attendants” (269) and rub honey into the wood, preserving her for another year. This ritual comforts Lily, and she draws strength from being with the other women rubbing honey into the wood. As they rub, Lily notices that the statue was “covered with hands, every shade of brown and black, going in their own directions” until she realizes that they have caught each other’s motion and “all our hands fell into the same movement” (270). Lily stops
seeing the world in terms of opposites—black and white, old and young, depression and health—and even though the women are smearing honey on a representation of a body, they incorporate an important aspect of feminism, according to Ana Castillo, by claiming something for themselves—the “integration of the mind, soul, and body” (143). Lily develops comfort with her body, her soul blossoms, and she understands her mind as she learns the process of beekeeping.

Lily emerges from her imagined utopia in Tiberon by experiencing reality—arrest, death, and abandonment—but she regains her identity by connecting with the other women, especially the Black Madonna. Even when a hive has lost its queen and Lily and August must replace the queen so the bees do not “stop work and go around completely demoralized” (286), Lily knows she can replace the queen—her mother—with herself. When T. Ray appears demanding to take Lily back to Sylvan, and threatens to kill her, August steps in with a face-saving proposition that the women need Lily to become the apprentice beekeeper. Once again, the bees have come to Lily’s rescue, but, more importantly, the women have created a bond that incorporates their differences and the interests they share. Rosaleen and Lily stay in Tiberon, no longer looking for utopia, but having found home.

Lily and Madrone have found the ability to heal within themselves. Once they are able to treat themselves, they can begin to work with others. Madrone realizes her limitations in addition to her strengths. Lily’s attempts to heal others do not reach the societal level that Madrone’s do, but she can help heal the Southern discriminatory society by working with Zach at the recently integrated school. Lily and Madrone have, as Fancourt mandates women in utopian novels do, experienced the process of “altering
states of consciousness” (95). Entering the bee mind gives the characters the ability to create their own utopias. Lucy Sargisson suggests, as characters in a utopian world, they are able to represent the female because the genre allows women, both characters and authors, “to dance differently to the same tune, which is language; and to foresee the previously unforeseeable” (229). Since feminist critics have been concerned with language and woman’s ability to express herself in language created by men, the utopian construct allows her to manipulate that language to suit herself. Even as bees dance to communicate, knowledge of the language of bees gives Lily and Madrone the ability to create a new dance.
Chapter 3
New Frontiers

*The Fifth Sacred Thing* and *The Secret Life of Bees* each focus on one woman’s process of identity creation. Both Lily and Madrone have the luxury of exploring in utopia—a place where the female presence has intrinsic value. However, in *The Honey Harvest* by Elizabeth Bussey Fentress, Mel has to discover what is important to her by eking out her identity in a male dominated world. She must take care of her invalid, psychotic father and resolve her childhood relationship with her neighbor. Her choice to keep bees is a way of erecting a threatening physical barrier between the men in her life and herself; they are afraid of the bees. Mel’s only mentor and intellectual equal is Ed, an aging beekeeper who helps her with her hive. The ways in which Mel grows by taking care of the bees allow her freedom to make her own choices. The play’s action follows the process Sylvia Plath describes in the Bee Sequence; Mel experiences “the bee meeting” and “the arrival of the bee box” in ways similar to Plath. “Stings” do not result in Mel’s triumphant embodiment of the queen bee, even though she does get stung. Mel captures “the swarm” without a general. Preparations for “wintering” release Mel from her cage, but do not give her the certainty she thought they would.

I saw *The Honey Harvest*’s debut at Kentucky Repertory Theatre, in Horse Cave, Kentucky in August 2004. As the play opens, Mel has just retrieved her father, Pop, from a veteran’s psychiatric hospital, where he had received electroshock therapy. He speaks slowly and has significant short-term memory loss. Mel’s slovenly neighbor P.J. comes over frequently. They had been friends when Mel was a child. As the play opens Mel is putting together a new hive. Within moments, P.J. appears asking about “killer bees,”
sipping from an open can of beer, and calling Mel “babe” (2). Throughout the play, Mel spends very little time alone on stage. While dialogue drives the action in a play, Mel needs time to think about what she wants and how she can work out her plans. Every time she has a moment to think in the play, her father appears (or sometimes disappears) or P.J. arrives wanting to “hang out.” P.J. does not help Mel figure out what she wants; instead, he reminds her of their past—pointing to the shed with “Remember when we played ‘doctor’ in here?” (6), and calling her “Scab Eyes” (75)—and getting stung by the bees when he continues to wear dark colored clothes. Ed, the best beekeeper in Wisconsin, helps Mel with her hive, but he also interrupts her thoughts. The action breaks Mel’s concentration and continues to throw her off-balance.

In her struggle with putting together the hive and trying to rebuild her life, Mel seems trapped. She wants to be a science teacher in the city, not taking care of her father on the outskirts of town. Mel develops a relationship with the queen bee as she “studies the queen in her small cage” (33). Thinking of the cage as a “little compartment for safekeeping” (33), Mel romanticizes the queen’s position. Mel can release her from the cage into the hive, which is another type of cage. Mel gives the queen a name—“Queen Melissa” (34)—both naming her after herself and unwittingly recalling the Greek tradition of Melissas, in which the goddess Aphrodite assumed the name and the role of the queen bee. This naming relationship establishes a connection between Mel and Queen Melissa. Mel is in a cage as well; only she cannot easily release herself, because of her caretaker role for her father. While she loves her father and wants to help him get better, giving up her life in the city and pursuit of her dreams, for Mel, means that she is trapped. For instance, Mel becomes frustrated with Pop when he is unable to strike a
match and light the smoker. She, like Sylvia Plath, has put her life on hold for Daddy, and she confronts him, asking, “What are you going to do differently so that you don’t get sick again and I can get on with my life?” (39). Mel is too caring and hopeful to say “Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I’m through” (“Daddy” 80). While Mel loves her father—he is her only remaining family, as Lily’s father is in *The Secret Life of Bees*—he cannot help her; in fact, he creates an additional burden on her.

Mel wants to experience community. She had wanted to be a teacher and get involved in a school community. However, in caring for her father, Mel becomes increasingly isolated, as she must take care of his mental as well as his physical needs. Her father cannot even remember how Mel’s mother died, so she has to reconstruct the story for him. Mel and her mother had gone to a nearby farm to buy honey from the Honey Lady. The woman invites Mel to listen to the bees sing, but Mel cannot hear them. The bees had stopped singing signifying bad times ahead. As she and her mother left the Honey Lady’s farm, Mel’s mother “turned the wrong way at the end of the lane […] that semi…it…it came out of nowhere” (20). Mel looks at keeping bees as a way of bringing back good times for her and her father. Hoping the bees will sing, Mel looks to reconnect with her mother and assuage the painful memory of her mother’s death. As Mel sets up the hive, her father regains a childhood memory. She hears him say that he had been stung by a bee as a child, but Mel is in the workshop when Pop continues, “I couldn’t breathe. I passed out” (22). Mel’s father’s allergy to bee stings establishes tension in that someday Mel may have to choose between keeping bees—her homage to her mother—and protecting her father’s health.
Mel views the hive as a community where the drones, workers, and the queen can live in harmony, each fulfilling a role in the hive. However, unfortunately, Mel does not have the kind of relationships she needs. P.J. is too immature to be her confidant, and in her relationship with her father, Mel has had to assume the nurturing, parental role. She wonders about going into a store “and there are other people there but you don’t have any relationship with them? You know—you don’t care that they’re there?” (27). However, this dynamic changes for Mel when she picks up her bee box from the post office. Every person in the room reacts to her acquisition of a bee box, and she feels that they “instantly became part of the same colony” and that people “need each other and we should do a better job of taking care of each other” (28). Like Madrone, Mel feels the need for a community she can both create and value. Mel has spent so much time taking care of others, she has not had the opportunity to be cared for. Starting the hive allows Mel to take care of animals that in a way gives her something in return. She envisions honey on her toast in the winter as a manifestation of the care the bees have given her.

Mel’s father cares about her when he is lucid, but he does not have the capacity to help her. Pop’s vision of where he would like to live—a peaceful place where he can recover his mental capacity and memory—includes “apple trees” because they would “be good for Mel’s bees” (48). She is part of his plan, but he does not know how to express himself. He has not internalized the importance of the bees because he refers to “Mel’s” bees not “our” bees. He does grant Mel ownership over the hive, but he cannot give her independence from him. She must stay and take care of him. When Mel goes to capture the swarm, he begs her not to, saying, “They’ll hurt you” (94). Pop acts as though he
were protecting Mel, but he actually wants to protect himself from being stung and suffering an allergic reaction.

A father figure occurs in Ed, the beekeeper who helps Mel with her hive. He has all the characteristics Mel wishes her father still had, and he can provide guidance for her with the bees. Ed can read the mood of the hive. He is in touch with the feminine power of the hive in terms of the queen bee. He provides reasons—"when they get crowded, they swarm" (67)—for his thoughts and offers Mel his help—"Give me a call if you see them clustering on the front" (67). Because he is an expert, Ed’s comments are important to Mel. When Ed inquires about Mel’s name, she tells him it’s short for Melissa. His note that “Melissa is the Greek word for honeybee” (68) reinforces her identification with the queen bee.

Ed’s advice steadies Mel and gives her the confidence to capture the swarm by herself. If Mel’s father had not disappeared as she tended the bees, trying to convince them not to swarm, she might have been successful. However, as she tries to find Pop, he reenters the backyard and observes the bees swarm. The process fills him with fear, and when Mel returns, Pop has lost the language to tell her that the bees have gone; instead he cries, “EEEEEEEEEEE” and “WHOOOOOOO” (72). Mel cannot understand until P.J. arrives to tell her that the swarm of bees has landed in his apple tree. Ironically, Pop had envisioned apple trees in his idyllic environment because they would be good for Mel’s bees. The correlation between Pop’s unrealized vision, and the bees’ swarm suggests his inability to create anything for himself and calls into question Mel’s ability to save him or herself. Mel must capture the swarm and reaffirm her commitment to beekeeping and herself. Against Pop’s dire warnings, Mel goes to collect them.
Ed arrives to help Melissa with the swarm, but she has already gone with her wheelbarrow to retrieve them. Mel’s triumphant return with the hive occurs in front of Ed, Pop, and P.J. She tells them that she followed Ed’s advice and “shook [the limb] as hard as [she] could! And then there was a flash of lightening and more thunder and [she] shook the limb again and that whole swarm of bees just fell—HUMPH!—down into the hive body!” (97). Ed tells her she has faith, which she immediately proudly repeats to P.J. As she tells them about her achievement, they become her community. The only one not proud of Mel or sharing in her joy is Pop. His inability to articulate his emotions dampens Mel’s enthusiasm. He cannot have a positive reaction to her because he had been sure she was going to die from the bees. Mel decides to try to share more of her revelation with Pop and bring him into her bee life. She tells him that Melissa means bee, that she thinks she was “a bee in a past life” (99), and about the time she and a friend canned tomatoes from her garden making her believe that “the bee in [her] was storing food for the winter” (100). However, Mel’s attempt does not make Pop any more lucid; he fails to understand her relationship to the bees, and she fails to establish a connection between herself and her father.

Mel’s beekeeping becomes the success she needs. She has failed at helping her father get better, she could not save her mother, and she does not inspire P.J. to make a better life for himself. In Act 3, as the hive has grown, Mel has become more confident and starts to think the bees will begin to sing for her. Mel’s triumph is a positive step for her, but her need for healing is too profound for one successful event to qualify as a complete realization of identity. Unfortunately, Mel still “has the air of defeat about her” (110). She had prepared for the honey harvest and had expected everything to go
smoothly, but in her caged state Mel hates dealing with failure. The bees had stung Mel previously, but in Act 3, Mel believes that she has risen above ever being stung again. When a bee stings her on the day of her honey harvest, Mel feels that she “had set out to do something and […] failed” (114). Mel swears about the sting in her first use of bad language in the play, for it is “a kind of betrayal” (Bussey Fentress 1). Her insistence on the positive experience of beekeeping affirms her faith in herself, but it crumbles under the reality of the sting. As she and P.J. discuss the sting, P.J. realizes that the bees respond negatively to dark clothing, signaling his growth and allowing him to become a lighter presence for Mel. He can now take care of himself and need not burden her.

Mel understands the hive, signifying her growth also. She had been so forcefully optimistic about beekeeping that she didn’t stop to read the mood of the hive. Mel still wants to quantify her knowledge, but she accepts a more realistic view of the hive. She empathizes with the hive, explaining, “The bees could have lost their queen, or they might have a disease, or they might not like the weather. And if the bees are feeling mean, we then, going into the hive is not going to be a positive experience no matter how hard you try” (116). Her statement does not mean that going into the hive is a negative experience; instead, Mel has learned to set aside preconceived ideas about the hive and allow herself to be in tune with the bees. She accepts that she cannot force them to sing, even though she wants them to.

While Mel knows she cannot control the hive, she remains despondent about her honey harvest. Then, Ed’s appearance does for Mel what she has been trying to do for her father. He shakes her out of her darkness by reminding her, “You’ve got honey to harvest” (119), and she responds similarly to the way the speaker in Plath’s “Stings”
reacts to the knowledge she has “a self to recover, a queen” (52). As she and Ed prepare to harvest the honey, Mel believes the bees may sing. She still worries about her father, and now has power of attorney for him. Because he never realized his dream of his own farm Mel believes “He can’t create his own miracle” (124). Pop’s entrance onto an empty stage and the ensuing action shows that he has given up on miracles and dreams. In his depression, he tries to get the bees to sting him, and then tries to electrocute himself. While Mel harvests the honey, Pop disappears again. Ed discovers him “sitting beneath the most beautiful white pine in all of Southwestern Wisconsin” (136) dead. Pop’s heart attack frees Mel from her cage, but she, like the queen bee, cannot accept the freedom. “Mel’s journey was interrupted twice,” remarks Bussey Fentress, “once by her mother’s death and a second time by her father’s illness,” and while “the continuation of her journey awaits her in Milwaukee,” (1-2) Mel is not prepared for her sudden release from the obligations she had lovingly fulfilled. She could go back to the city and be a science teacher, but she would have to give up beekeeping and the farmhouse where she grew up. As a lone bee lands on Mel’s hand and Ed tells her that the Greeks believed “A soul who had performed a life acceptable to the gods was thought to make a ‘bee-line’ to the place from which it came” (140), she imagines that the bee is her father. Whether or not Mel believes the bee has Pop’s soul, she listens closely to the bee and discovers that it is singing. Mel believes that a singing bee means good times should arrive, and after harvesting the honey, and caring for the bees, Mel thinks she can start to make her own miracles—or at the very least, choices.

Because the play exposes so many of the same plot points that Sylvia Plath’s bee sequence does, I wondered if Bussey Fentress had based her play on Plath’s poems.
During an email interview on March 22, 2005, I asked Liz Fentress about Plath’s poems and she responded:

I think [Plath’s poems] are very dark. (There is a fair amount of reference to ‘dark’ and ‘light’ in the play—both in the text and in the costumes. I see the play as a journey from dark to light...) If Pop had the energy or interest to read poetry, he might identify with the central character in Plath’s poems. I don’t think Mel and Sylvia Plath are in the same place.

Mel determinedly puts a positive spin on her beekeeping experience throughout the play, such that she takes almost an opposite stance from Plath, who wonders if there is anything positive to draw from the experience. The darker aspects of beekeeping—stings—creep into Mel’s consciousness. In a different awakening, Plath slowly includes positive aspects of beekeeping into her poems, resurrecting the queen bee and creating honey. Even if they are in different places, Plath’s speaker and Mel experience some similar events in their beekeeping journeys.

In “The Beekeeper’s Daughter,” the speaker puts her eye to the hive where she can see the queen bee. This early, childhood connection to bees also appears in The Honey Harvest. As a child, when Mel and her mother go to the Honey Lady’s to get honey, the Honey Lady invites her to put her ear close to the hive to hear the bees singing, but the bees had “stopped singing” (20). Plath’s speaker and Mel both discover a sense of destruction in the hive; for Plath, the queen bee “marries the winter” (21), and for Mel, when the bees cease singing, it is “the beginning of bad times” (20). A similar event, with an opposite result, appears in The Secret Life of Bees, when Lily places her
ear near the hive and hears the bees cooling the hive. For Lily, however, the bees seem calm and disaster-free.

For Plath, “The Bee Meeting” signifies her strangeness and discomfort with the people around her. Similarly, as Mel dons her beekeeping clothes, Pop thinks she “looks scary” (14); her beekeeping veil, gloves, and shirt—all light-colored—probably remind Pop of the doctors in the mental hospital. Plath compares the beekeeping uniforms to doctors’ scrubs as they examine the hive for disease. Beekeeping becomes Plath’s alternative to running away: “I could not run without having to run forever” (“Meeting” 33); for Mel, keeping bees is her only potentially healing choice as well. She cannot escape taking care of Pop, and she wants him to get better, but beekeeping is the activity she must do for herself.

Both Plath’s speaker and Mel wonder if they will be able to release the bees upon “the arrival of the bee box.” The bees do not scare Mel in the way they do Plath, but she doubts her ability to release the bees: “all of a sudden I can’t remember how to do this” (33). For Plath, releasing the bees means that she is “sweet God” (35), but Mel cannot get the bees to go into the hive, which leads her to an existential crisis: “What am I doing?” (42). Mel’s commitment to beekeeping eases her need to care for her father; however, she takes a risks in beginning projects—beekeeping and fatherkeeping—she has no experience with. The strength to succeed must come from within Mel; Plath also must identify her internal strengths.

In “Stings,” the speaker completes the transformation into the queen bee, while in “The Swarm,” the queen and the speaker stand apart and watch the general capture the swarm. Mel’s relationship with the queen bee does not mandate her resurrection as the
queen, but she claims the queen early in the play by naming her “Queen Melissa” (34). While P.J. makes an interesting scapegoat, and indeed many bees die trying to sting P.J., he is not the sinister figure of “Stings.” Another option for the scapegoat is Mel’s father. Since he is fatally allergic to bee stings, if the bees were vengeful like the ones in “Stings,” then a bee that stings him would not die in vain. As the bees in “Stings” discover the scapegoat, “moulding onto his lips like lies / Complicating his features” (49-50), they still cannot kill him. In some ways, stinging the father would protect the hive by setting the queen—Mel—free, but if the queen gains freedom, she would desert the hive for the city. By not stinging the father, the bees ignore the fact his disease brings down the health of the community.

In order to have “the self to recover” (“Stings” 52), Mel must first overcome her doubts and capture the swarm. In “The Swarm,” the speaker and the queen wait, apart from the hive as the general, a man, performs the operation. Mel does not need a man to retrieve her bees; she has more power by returning them to the hive herself. Her triumphant execution of capture provides her the impetus to tell Pop about her identity as “a bee in a past life” (99). He cannot understand her, which means that she has transcended the mundane aspects of caring for him and has recovered a part of herself. Capturing the swarm gives Mel “faith” (97) in herself and in the hive. Mel starts to believe that she can be a successful beekeeper. According to Bussey Fentress, this realization is important for Mel because “she has been trying to save her father for five years, but she has failed and failed and failed and failed. She needs success.” Capturing the swarm is not an “intensely practical” (“Swarm” 52) event for Mel; instead, it is an intensely miraculous event in that she affirms her ability and her faith in herself.
The play ends before winter comes, but indications of the kind of hope found in Plath’s “Wintering” exist throughout the last act. As Mel tells her father about canning tomatoes and the excitement that came from knowing “that those tomatoes had come from my garden, out of the brown dirt, I had grown them, and they were in jars, ready to get someone through the winter” (99), she evokes a starkly different image than Plath does with her cellar containing “rancid jam” (8). In Plath’s poem, the jam had belonged to the last tenant and looks nothing like her honey: “Six jars of it, / Six cat’s eyes in the wine cellar” (4-5). The honey brings light to the cellar, reflecting light like an eye, giving Plath an incentive to go into the “the room [she] could never breathe in” (12). The honey draws her to the spring, and Mel’s envisioning honey on her toast as “something to look forward to” (6), suggests that honey can provide physical and psychological sustenance for the coming winter. In “Wintering,” the bees can “taste the spring” (50), but Mel’s father cannot imagine that he will ever get better in *The Honey Harvest*. His suicide attempts and then his peaceful death seem to verify Plath’s assertion that “Winter is for women” (42). Mel will regain her opportunities; indeed she has more options now that she has confidence in herself and has developed a penchant for beekeeping.

The light and dark imagery in both Plath’s bee sequence and *The Honey Harvest* enrich and invite comparisons. While Mel does not interpret her experience with the beekeeping process in the same way Plath’s speaker does, she physically encounters similar challenges. Mel’s growth in *The Honey Harvest* directly relates to her increasing ability to keep bees. While her future is uncertain at the end of the play, Mel seems to have come to terms with both her limitations and her capabilities. Maybe she never could cure her father, but she can make honey and she can take care of herself.
Conclusion

I have called this thesis “Melting Beeswax Bodies: The Queen Bee, the Hive, and Identity in Women’s Writing” because writing about bees enables the authors to question societal devaluation of women while affirming ways of valuing individual identity in their female protagonists. The beeswax bodies represent gendered constructions of how women should behave. The characters “melt” these bodies by refusing to fit the mold and by redesigning the mold to fit themselves.

Dickinson’s bees both are and are not female, though they have characteristics she knows every woman needs—Independence, efficacy, and the ability to create, whether it is poetry or honey. The flowers, which are all female, need not be passive receptacles for the active bee; instead, they can engage in journeys of the imagination to become their own agents for change. Dickinson melts the beeswax body that molds women into an object for their husbands’ service. Synergy develops between male and female identity, and Dickinson redefines the female as an active agent for her own pleasure and service.

Plath deconstructs Daddy’s hive and changes from “the beekeeper’s daughter” to a beekeeper and finally to the queen bee. Refusing to settle for a mundane existence, Plath’s speaker remolds her identity from the scared stranger of “The Bee Meeting” into a queen who can survive the winter to “taste the spring” (“Wintering” 50). The beekeeping process, rife with uncertainties and potential reversals of fate, necessitates the protagonist’s growth and connection to the bees.

Lorde’s “The Bees” speaks for the forgotten bodies. The bees are vulnerable in their hive hung perilously on the school grounds. Lorde identifies the bees (females) as dangerous beings that the authorities (males) must destroy. The reimagination of the
bees, and thus the potential for reaffirmation of a female principle occurs when the only 
girl with the courage to speak sees the value of the bees’ honey making. Perhaps the girls 
could retain the sweetness of their identities and revise societal norms to value their 
potential.

Starhawk challenges society’s view of women by creating an alternative, utopian 
society in *The Fifth Sacred Thing*. Gendered spaces do not exist in a utopia. When 
Madrone encounters strict gender rules in the South, she must remold both the Southern 
dictates and her own understanding in order to access power in a place where women 
have none. Madrone integrates the queen, the worker, and the drone within herself, just 
as she integrates her body, spirit, and mind regularly. Madrone’s ability to integrate sets 
her apart from the hive, while allowing her to embody all aspects of the hive.

*The Secret Life of Bees* directly addresses women’s place in Southern society. 
Lily must develop a way to live without focusing on what others tell her being a “girl” is. 
She remakes her identity with August, Rosaleen, and Our Lady of Chains’ help. She sees 
herself as a member of a hive—a place she can live comfortably within her identity—
when she is with the beekeeping sisters. They have, like Sylvia Plath’s bees, “got rid of 
the men” (“Wintering” 40) in order to create a place for women to identify with other 
women.

Elizabeth Bussey Fentress’s heroine is in a cage of expectations for saving her 
father, perfecting the beekeeping operation, and supporting her neighbor. Mel does not 
have time, as Lily has, to get comfortable with herself absent the men. She cannot melt 
the beeswax bodies, because the drive to succeed in her role is in her own mind. Mel 
must first unlock her memories of her mother and learn to rebound from failure, while
acknowledging her limitations, and then she may remake her role to suit her needs. At the end of The Honey Harvest, Mel can remake herself any way she chooses. She recognizes that her identity is now intertwined with the queen and the hive. She will have to reconcile her city longings with her rural pleasures in order to forge a complete identity for herself.

The protagonists’ identities become intertwined with the queen’s identity, which both allows the heroine to find value in herself and ties her to a concrete mooring in her world. She cannot float away from her responsibilities, because as the queen, her people need her to stay; however, having created her own interpretation of her identity, she is able to evaluate her responsibility to herself first. If the queen dies, the hive suffers. The protagonist must protect her identity from those who would wish to destroy her image of herself, which leads to finding and affirming the beneficial traits she has in common with the queen. The queen gives the protagonist a concrete symbol of power to remind her of her identity.

Not only must the protagonists affirm their identities but also they must find a place for themselves in the hive of their communities. They create hives in myriad ways. Even as most identify with the queen, they do not enter the same hives. Lily enters the woman-identified nurturing hive, whereas Mel still struggles to create a community she can love. Madrone saves her people, much as a queen would save her hive, while Lorde’s girls internalize the pain of the destruction of a hive. Both the queen bee and the hive become central features of a character’s identity. The internal and external identities point to the need for humans to develop both social and personal identities.
Further implications for studying bee imagery in women’s writing include exploring the aspects of personal and social identity formation. As the characters grow, somehow become the queen bee, and establish a hive, they reject the dominant paradigm telling them how “good” women should behave. They are able to reimage the parameters of what they are capable of and claim something for themselves.
Works Cited


Bussey Fentress, Elizabeth. Email interview. 23 March 2005.


