

After the Bomb: Plath: 'The Arrival of the Bee Box': worksheet

This poem is part of a group of poems about bee-keeping, including 'The Bee Meeting' about an initiation into bee-keeping ('they are making me one of them'). The initiate/speaker has a sense of being made to be 'the magician's girl who does not flinch' but may or may not be the object of a murderous conspiracy. 'Stings' sees the speaker's imaginative merging with an old queen bee allows her a resurrection: 'more terrible than she ever was'. 'The Arrival of the Bee Box' has perhaps the most lucid narrative lines of the group, but its simplicity belies its complexity.

While the title tells us that what has arrived is a 'bee box', the speaker seems less sure. Make a list of some of the things that *could* be in the box. Looking at these as a list, what kind of pattern emerges?

Which images, metaphors and diction mention or allude to death?

Which images, metaphors and diction reassure the speaker that she is in control of this 'box of maniacs'?

How does metaphor work here (thinking back to discussion of 'Words')? How are the bees imagined metaphorically, and how does that shift during the poem? What does that shifting suggest about certainty and uncertainty?

In terms of the poem's anatomy of power and powerlessness, identify moments where the speaker assumes power and moments where she expresses her fear.

Looking at the use of the word 'I', consider how many of the I-statements are negative, or negated (later, we'll discuss the idea of negation from a psychoanalytical point of view; its capacity for avowal and disavowal). For now, examine the balance between assertion and its undermining.

Consider the poem's structure, and discuss the position of its last line in terms of themes of power/powerlessness, assertion, un/certainty and fear.

Literal and figurative aspects – biographical connections in that Plath's father, Otto Plath, was a scientist who wrote about bees: *Bumblebees and their Ways*. Plath kept bees during time living in the country in Devon. However, her poetry transforms these triggers into a much more complex and vibrant imaginative scheme. Note the wording of her warning in the BBC Orr interview that personal experience is not the key to her poetry, nor should, as a writer, one's own experience become a 'shut box and mirror-looking, narcissistic' thing.

Several critics' views on the poem are collated at:

http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/m_r/plath/arrival.htm