

Winter Trees as the Symbol of Female's Self: Reading Sylvia Plath's "Winter Trees" through an Eco-feminist Perspective

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Abstract

This paper examines the interrelation between poetic experience, expression, womanhood, and creativity with the natural symbol as mentioned in "Winter Trees" by Sylvia Plath. In "Winter Trees," Plath presents the images or set of winter which itself represents the darkness and pessimism. Plath also seems to compare herself to trees in the winter which stands for her hardships as an emerging female writer in a male-dominating writing tradition. In so doing, the poem reveals a hidden eco-feminist awareness shared by both her biographical as well as ecological symbols related to womanhood and nature. Thus, the poem is an interaction between womanhood and ecological identity.

Keywords

Winter Trees, female's self, Eco-feminism, womanhood, creativity, ecology

"Winter Trees" and Eco-feminism

In Sylvia Plath's poem "Winter Trees," the speaker draws a comparison between herself and the barren trees of winter. This comparison suggests a sense of barrenness, infertility, and the struggle for survival. The image of the tree in the poem serves as a reflection of the poet's own experiences of agony, suffering, frustration, depression, alienation, and the insecurity she faces as a female author. Despite these challenges, the speaker transcends the harshness of winter and holds onto hope for the arrival of spring. This parallel between the emerging self of a female author and the existence of trees in the winter landscape connects the themes of personal growth and the cycles of nature within Sylvia Plath's poem "Winter Trees."

The image of the tree assumes significant importance in Plath's poem, as noted by Irena Ragaisiene in her analysis. Ragaisiene suggests that Plath's preoccupation with trees and their roots symbolizes her entanglement in the chaos of the unconscious mind, which is metaphorically represented by the roots themselves (31). This implies that Plath never fully realizes a harmonious self, akin to a fully-grown tree. Ragaisienė further draws a connection between Plath's fascination with trees and Carl Jung's concept of "The Philosophical Tree." According to Jung, the symbol of the tree represents psychological development and can be understood within the context of mythological and alchemical parallels (Jung 272-73). Plath's exploration of the tree symbol reflects her psychological journey and her search for meaning and self-realization.

However, beyond the personal and psychological dimensions, this paper aims to explore the symbol of "winter trees" in the context of women's existence in society through the lens of eco-feminist criticism. Eco-feminism, rooted in the 1960s with Rachel Carson's influential book "Silent Spring," encompasses the intersection of environmental concerns and feminism. It challenges the traditional binary oppositions between nature and culture, as well as between women and men. The eco-feminist

perspective recognizes the interconnectedness between women and the natural world, asserting that women should not be considered inferior due to their association with nature.

By applying eco-feminist principles to the analysis of Plath's "Winter Trees," we can uncover deeper layers of meaning. The image of the barren winter tree may be seen as a metaphor for the struggles and challenges faced by women in society. Just as the tree endures the harshness of winter, women often navigate through adversity, oppression, and societal expectations. The poem captures the resilience and hope that exist within women's experiences, suggesting that they, like the trees, can transcend their circumstances and anticipate the arrival of brighter times.

Plath's exploration of the tree symbol in "Winter Trees" resonates with eco-feminist ideals, emphasizing the need to break free from the oppressive narratives that subordinate both women and nature in a single stroke by lumping them together and depriving them of autonomous agency. Eco-feminism provides a framework to analyze and critique societal structures that perpetuate the subordination of women and the exploitation of the environment. It encourages a reevaluation of the relationship between women and nature and converts their "inherently" negative interconnectedness into positive agency to resist the androcentric biasedness.

Thus, "Winter Trees" by Sylvia Plath intertwines the personal struggles of the female poet with the symbol of trees in winter, reflecting themes of suffering, hope, and survival. Through eco-feminist analysis, the poem takes on a broader significance, highlighting the parallel existence of women in society and their connection to the natural world. Plath's fascination with trees and the symbolism associated with them aligns with Carl Jung's concept of psychological development and resonates with the eco-feminist critique of oppressive binary oppositions by examining the symbol of "winter trees" through an eco-feminist lens.

Eco-feminist criticism emerged as a significant theoretical framework in the 1960s, with Rachel Carson's groundbreaking book "Silent Spring" catalyzing the environmental movement (Zhang 800). Carson's work not only raised awareness about the harmful effects of pesticides but also paved the way for the expansion of feminism into the realm of ecology. It was in 1974 that French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne coined the term "Eco-feminism" in her book "Le Féminisme ou La Mort" ("Feminism or Death"), further solidifying the intersection of feminist and ecological concerns.

In subsequent years, numerous scholars brought together the realms of ecology and feminism, leading to the development of Eco-feminism as a theoretical insight. Works such as Rosemary Radford Ruether's "New Women, New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation" (1975), Susan Griffin's "Women and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her" (1978), and Carolyn Merchant's "The Death of Nature: Women and Ecology and the Scientific Revolution" (1980) were instrumental in shaping the early discourse of Eco-feminism. These works explored the intertwined relationship between women, nature, and patriarchal structures, shedding light on the oppressive ideologies that perpetuated the exploitation of both women and the environment.

In 1998, Greta Gaard's publication, "Eco-feminist Literary Criticism: Theory, Interpretation, Pedagogy," marked a significant milestone in the establishment of Eco-feminism as a distinct area of literary studies. Gaard's work not only solidified the legitimacy of eco-feminist analysis but also opened doors for further exploration of eco-feminist perspectives in literary criticism.

More recently, eco-feminist critiques have expanded their scope by incorporating interdisciplinary approaches, combining philosophical, religious, political, sociological, legal, and psychological analyses. These critiques have actively addressed the plight and suffering of women in the face of climate change and environmental crises. Greta Gaard, in her work "Eco-feminism and Climate Change," challenges the dominant discourse surrounding climate change, which is often marked by ideologies of domination, exploitation, and colonialism (20). Gaard argues that women, due to their subordinate position in society, are particularly vulnerable amid climate crises. This recognition of the disproportionate impact of environmental issues on women underscores the evolving nature of Eco-feminism as a theoretical framework.

At its core, Eco-feminism seeks to dismantle oppressive binary oppositions between nature and culture, as well as between women and men. It advocates for a reversal of these power dynamics and connects women's identity with mother nature, emphasizing their inherent worth and equality. By embracing the association between women and nature, Eco-feminism challenges the notion that women and nature are inferior and provides a framework for understanding the complex relationship between women and the environment.

Considering its emphasis on the interconnections between women and nature, Eco-feminism offers a suitable framework for analyzing literary works and their treatment of the woman-nature relationship. Through an eco-feminist lens, the symbolism of "winter trees" in Sylvia Plath's poem can be explored about women's existence in society. The barrenness and struggle portrayed by the trees align with the challenges faced by women, while the hope for spring symbolizes resilience and growth potential. Plath's fascination with trees, their roots, and their symbolic significance aligns with the broader concepts explored within Eco-feminism, as Irena Ragaisiene suggests in her analysis. In this sense, eco-feminist criticism emerged in the 1960s as a response to the growing environmental movement, and it gradually developed into a distinct field of study.

Quest for Female's Self in "Winter Trees"

The poem "Winter Trees" by Sylvia Plath delves into the quest for female selfhood amidst a patriarchal society, utilizing vivid natural imagery to portray the struggles and challenges faced by women. Plath's poem begins with the line "The wet dawn inks are doing their blue dissolve" (Plath 257). This initial image of dewdrops on the trees sets the tone for the poem's exploration of the female experience. Traditionally, dewdrops have been viewed as a beautiful and poetic image by male poets, but Plath, as a feminist poet, subverts this notion and associates the dewdrops with the oppressive treatment of women in society. She perceives the dewdrops as a melancholy sight, suggesting that the patriarchal culture seeks to obscure the natural essence of women, just as the dewdrops veil the trees.

Plath's choice to describe the trees as "lifeless and spectral" (Plath 258) and obscured by fog serves as a powerful critique of the objectification of women. The fog represents the stifling effect of patriarchal culture on female agency and self-expression, rendering women as mere sketches, devoid of their inherent vitality and individuality. Plath contrasts this portrayal with the romanticized image of a bride under a white lacy veil, which symbolizes the commodification of women and their reduction to objects of desire. By presenting this veiling as a form of defamation, Plath rebels against the patriarchal norms that seek to confine and control women.

Throughout the poem, Plath explores the connections between the growth rings of trees and the wedding rings of women, suggesting the societal expectations placed upon women to marry and bear children. She writes, "A woman's rose ring / Is the shut secret of her womb" (Plath 258). This parallelism draws attention to the pressure on women to conform to traditional gender roles, emphasizing the struggle faced by women in reconciling their aspirations with societal expectations. Plath's exploration of these themes demonstrates her ecological awareness and aligns "Winter Trees" with the principles of Eco-feminism, a theory that analyzes the interrelation between womanhood and nature under male domination.

Eco-feminist literary criticism, as discussed by Patrick Murphy, advocates for a reevaluation of the poetic tradition of the "pastoral," which often idealizes nature without genuinely engaging with its complexities (Murphy 25). It provides an interdisciplinary framework that challenges binary oppositions and explores the interconnectedness between womanhood and nature in a male-dominated society. Plath's "Winter Trees" exemplifies eco-feminist poetry as it scrutinizes the patriarchal system and its beliefs, questioning the objectification of women and highlighting the need for gender equality and environmental justice.

In Xiaohong Zhang's description of Eco-feminism as a hybrid feminist theory opposing male domination and prejudice, it becomes evident that Plath's poem encompasses the essence of ecological thought (Zhang 800). Plath focuses on the preservation of life, the fight against oppression, and the pursuit of integration. By shedding light on the entwined relationship between women and nature, she invites readers to reflect on societal norms that perpetuate gender inequality and environmental degradation.

"Winter Trees" serves as a vehicle for Plath to express her own experiences of agony, suffering, frustration, and alienation as a female author. The poem encapsulates the struggles faced by women in a society that seeks to confine them to prescribed roles and suppress their individuality. Through her powerful imagery and use of natural elements, Plath invites readers to challenge gender norms, contemplate the connections between women and the environment, and advocate for gender equality and environmental consciousness.

In this sense, "Winter Trees" is a poignant exploration of the quest for female selfhood within a patriarchal society. Plath's eco-feminist perspective, evident in her ecological awareness and critique of societal expectations, adds depth to the poem. By intertwining the struggles of women with the natural world, Plath encourages readers to question gender norms, challenge the objectification of women, and advocate for the preservation of both human and environmental life. Through the lens of Eco-feminism, "Winter Trees" emerges as a significant contribution to the dialogue on woman-nature relationships and the urgent need for gender equality and environmental justice. In short, the implication is that injustice to one leads to injustice for both; and justice to one could lead to justice for both.

Sylvia Plath's poem "Winter Trees" provides a poignant exploration of the quest for female selfhood within a patriarchal society, while simultaneously questioning the roles of duty and motherhood. Through her masterful use of tree symbolism, Plath sheds light on the suffering and hardships faced by women in their ordinary lives. By drawing parallels between the trees' experiences in

the winter season and the struggles of women, Plath aligns the poem with the principles of Eco-feminism, offering a powerful analysis of the interplay between women and the natural world.

In the opening lines of the poem, Plath sets the tone by describing the trees covered in frost: "The wet dawn inks are doing their blue dissolve" (Plath 257). The vivid image of the wet dawn inks dissolving into blue captures the melancholic atmosphere of the scene. Plath compares the trees' covered state to that of a bride under a veil, highlighting the hardships and suffering associated with marriage: "Whose bridegroom, frost, is kneeling by her bed" (Plath 258). This juxtaposition of the trees with a bride symbolizes the confinement and sacrifices women often face within the institution of marriage.

Plath further explores the challenges faced by women within the marriage system, emphasizing the burdens placed upon them. She writes, "This house has been far out at sea all night" (258), suggesting a sense of isolation and entrapment. The reference to the house being far out at sea conveys the idea of being adrift, disconnected from the mainland or the androcentric mainstream of society. Plath suggests that women are often confined within the four walls of their homes, cut off from the opportunities for self-realization and independence.

The poet continues to draw parallels between the trees and women's struggles, highlighting their resilience and enduring strength. Plath writes, "The night of cold extends its blank mirror" (258), indicating the harsh and unforgiving nature of the world women inhabit. Plath's use of the word "extends" implies the relentless nature of these challenges, as if the cold of the night stretched endlessly. However, despite the hardships, both the trees and women continue to persevere, waiting for the arrival of a more fruitful and fulfilling period: "And the silence mirrors its oppressor's face" (258). The oppressive silence reflects the dominance of societal expectations and norms, yet it also mirrors the resilience and determination of women to overcome these challenges. And, most importantly, silence, unlike voice, is not often constrained or sanctioned, and silence matters. This mattering is the only action it knows, reserving the right to resist the power even in a most inopportune and improbable moment. The materiality of silence, in contradistinction to the voiceless subaltern, is insuppressible and sufficient to claim its agency.

Plath further critiques the institution of marriage, which is a patriarchal construct, and its impact on women's lives. She views weddings as obstacles to a woman's success and individuality, as they often perpetuate patriarchal norms and expectations. Plath writes, "One has a cat's face / One a swimming-pool, one a maniac's soul" (258), depicting the diverse experiences and personalities of women forced into marriages. These lines suggest that women are reduced to mere objects, defined by their relationships or the roles they fulfill within the institution of marriage. Plath's choice to describe these qualities ascribed to women through vivid imagery reinforces her critique of the limited and confining roles imposed upon them.

By interweaving the hardships faced by trees in the winter season with the hardships endured by women in the marriage system, Plath emphasizes the shared struggles and oppression experienced by both nature and women. The poem acts as a bridge between Eco-feminism and women's quest for selfhood, showcasing the interconnectedness of women and the natural world, but this time around something positive to collaborate and defy both patriarchy and anthropocentrism. Plath's use of tree symbolism enables her to expose the patriarchal structures that relegate women to subordinate positions

in society. The poem calls for a reevaluation of societal norms and expectations, urging readers to challenge the binary oppositions that perpetuate gender inequality and environmental degradation.

Thus, Sylvia Plath's "Winter Trees" eloquently captures the essence of Eco-feminism and the quest for female selfhood within a patriarchal society. Through her skillful use of the tree as a figure of nature, Plath highlights the struggles and challenges faced by women, drawing parallels between their experiences and those of the natural world. By critiquing the marriage system and societal expectations, Plath confronts the obstacles that hinder women's self-realization and advocates for their freedom and equality. "Winter Trees" offers a powerful textual analysis that urges us to reevaluate our relationship with both nature and gender dynamics, making it a significant contribution to the discourse on Eco-feminism.

In the poem "Winter Trees," the poet delves into a profound analysis of the relationship between nature, women, and societal expectations. Through the utilization of vivid imagery and thought-provoking comparisons, the poet unveils the struggles faced by women within a patriarchal society while also highlighting their resilience and ability to create beauty despite the challenges they endure.

The opening stanza of the poem sets the stage for the subsequent exploration of the parallels between winter trees and women. The poet draws a comparison between the barrenness of the trees and the perceived lack of fertility in women. However, this connection is not solely focused on physical fertility but also extends to societal expectations and the role of women as mothers. The poet critically satirizes the notion that women's fertility hampers their professional careers, mocking the self-effacing but thankless sacrifices they make to continue the lineage of a patriarchal society.

In the second stanza, the poet employs biting irony, suggesting that winter trees, unlike women, do not have to undergo the pain of abortion or conceal the agony of being raped. Here, the poet confronts the harsh realities faced by women, addressing the societal pressures and challenges they encounter. By juxtaposing the trees' faithfulness with the alleged infidelity of women, the poet questions the prevailing stereotypes and perceptions imposed upon women. This critique sheds light on the tendency to blame women for their circumstances rather than addressing the underlying issues within society.

Furthermore, the poet delves deeper into the symbolism of winter trees, emphasizing their ability to endure the touch of footless winds, which bury them beneath the earth. Drawing an analogy, the poet laments the way women are also buried under societal expectations and reduced to mere reproduction machines. This portrayal of women as invisible within their own homes and society highlights the oppressive nature of the patriarchal dominance they face. The poet suggests that women, like bare trees or those without fertility, possess a strong sense of self and existence, de-essentializing the requirements of their role as mothers for agency.

Ecological criticism, which examines the relationships between literature and the environment, can be applied to this analysis. Through the comparison of winter trees and women, the poet prompts readers to consider the ecological implications of gender roles and the impact of societal expectations on women's agency. The poet challenges the notion that women should be solely defined by their reproductive capabilities and highlights the restrictive nature of such expectations. By intertwining ecological criticism with feminist analysis, the poet advocates for the autonomous existence of women

within society and calls for a reevaluation of the patriarchal structures that hinder their freedom and self-expression.

The final stanza of the poem takes a more optimistic turn, celebrating the resilience and innate strength of women. The poet portrays women as beings full of wings and otherworldliness, embodying vigor and zeal in their pursuits of work, family, and relationships. Drawing upon the mythological figure of Leda, who, despite being raped, procreated the most beautiful woman in the world, the poet emphasizes that women possess the capacity to create remarkable beauty even in the face of adversity. This imagery challenges the narrative of victimhood often associated with women and instead highlights their ability to overcome obstacles and contribute to society in profound ways.

In essence, "Winter Trees" combines elements of ecological criticism and feminism to present a nuanced analysis of women's experiences within a patriarchal society. The poem critiques societal expectations, challenges stereotypes, and explores the inherent strength and resilience of women. By drawing parallels between winter trees and women, the poet underscores the need for autonomy, agency, and recognition of women's contributions beyond their reproductive roles. Through evocative imagery and thought-provoking comparisons, the poem encourages readers to reflect on the intersectionality of gender, nature, and society, ultimately advocating for a more inclusive and equitable future.

Conclusion

Eco-feminism, with its focus on the interconnectedness of gender and the environment, provides a lens through which Sylvia Plath's poem "Winter Trees" can be analyzed. Plath's comparisons between the struggles of winter trees and the plight of women within a patriarchal society offer insights into the themes of fruitlessness, darkness, and the resilience of female agency. By examining the poem from an eco-feminist perspective, we can better understand Plath's portrayal of women's experiences and her call for an autonomous female self.

The poem's portrayal of winter trees as barren and lacking in fruits serves as a metaphor for the fruitlessness and limitations imposed upon women within patriarchal societies. Just as the trees suffer through the harshness of winter, women endure the hardships of societal expectations and gender roles. Plath, as both the poet and a woman herself, uses these images to highlight her struggles as an emerging female writer in a male-dominated literary tradition. By aligning herself with the winter trees, Plath conveys the challenges she faces and the darkness she navigates as she seeks to establish her voice and creative expression.

Furthermore, Plath expands the comparison between winter trees and women beyond their reproductive capacities. Women, like the trees, are not limited to childbearing alone but engage in various forms of creative production. Plath suggests that women possess a reproductive power that extends beyond physical procreation, encompassing the generation of ideas, art, literature, and other creative endeavors. This perspective aligns with eco-feminist principles that emphasize the interconnectedness between women, nature, and creativity.

In presenting women's reproductive capabilities as multi-faceted, Plath advocates for an autonomous female self. The comparison of women with winter trees and the cyclical nature of the environment invites a closer reading through an eco-feminist lens. Plath urges us to recognize the inherent strength and resilience of women, who, like the trees, endure hardships and setbacks yet

continue to grow, adapt, and create. The poem prompts us to question and challenge the patriarchal structures that restrict women's autonomy and limit their contributions to society.

By integrating eco-feminist perspectives into the analysis of "Winter Trees," we gain a deeper understanding of the underlying themes and messages conveyed by Plath. The poem serves as a call to action, urging readers to embrace the interconnectedness of gender, nature, and creativity. Plath's use of imagery and symbolism invites us to reconsider the traditional roles and expectations placed upon women and to recognize their agency, resilience, and transformative power. Through the lens of Eco-feminism, we are prompted to reflect on the need for a more harmonious and equitable relationship between gender and the environment, ultimately fostering a more sustainable and inclusive future.

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