



A Study on the Natural Imagery in Sylvia Plath's Poems from the Perspective of Dark Ecology

Geng Yiwan

School of Foreign Languages, Southwest Jiaotong University, China

Received: 02 Jan 2025; Received in revised form: 06 Feb 2026; Accepted: 09 Feb 2026; Available online: 13 Feb 2026

©2026 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— This study examines the natural imagery in Sylvia Plath's *Ariel* through the lens of dark ecology, a theoretical framework developed by Timothy Morton. The research investigates how Plath's portrayal of nature goes beyond the traditional romanticized depictions, presenting nature as a dark, uncanny force that mirrors her broader ecological concerns. By applying Morton's concept of dark ecology, which challenges anthropocentric views and emphasizes the interconnectedness of all beings, this study explores how Plath imbues natural imagery with both beauty and menace, illustrating the agency of nonhuman entities. The research focuses on how Plath's work disrupts conventional understandings of nature, urging a recognition of its autonomy and complexity. The study highlights how her poems reflect an understanding of nature's dark side, urging a shift in perspective toward coexistence and mutual respect. The findings suggest that Plath's poetry reveals a profound ecological awareness, advocating for a more respectful and balanced relationship between humans and nature. Ultimately, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of Plath's ecological thought, offering new insights into her use of natural imagery as a vehicle for environmental and philosophical exploration. Through this analysis, Plath's work is revealed as a commentary on humanity's relationship with nature and the need for ecological consciousness in the face of environmental crises.



Keywords— Sylvia Plath, natural imagery, dark ecology.

I. INTRODUCTION

Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) is an industrious and brilliant American poet. Awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1982, several years after her death, she is regarded as a representative of confessional poets for her writing is quite intense, direct and violent. Because of her unique writing talent and her great contribution to the development of confessional poems, critics regard Plath as a "unique" poet and at the same time, take her as "convenient examples of new trends in American and English contemporary poetry" (Uroff 1977: i). Sylvia Plath's poem collections include *Ariel* (1965), *Crossing the Water* (1971), *Winter Trees* (1972) and *The Collected Poems* (1981). She also wrote an autobiographical work called *The Bell Jar* in 1963, the year she passed away. Among those works, *Ariel* was first published in the U.K. in 1965, arranged and edited by her husband Ted Hughes. In this poem collection, there are a

number of natural imageries, through which the various depictions by Plath can be easily found, and along with the sequence of poems, Plath's ecological thought becomes more and more explicit. This study takes *Ariel: The Restored Edition* as the research object to focus on Plath's descriptions of nature.

Plath's whole life was full of misfortune, and she suffered from manic depressive psychosis. The abrupt loss of her father when she was just eight years old left a profound impact on her. Her marriage to Ted Hughes came to an end because of betrayal, making her a single mother taking care of two children. All the experiences led to her suicide in 1963. Her life has provided her with a great source of inspiration and evoked her deep thoughts about life. Most of her poems embrace such themes as death, rebirth, emotional depression and loneliness, conveying conflict and passion directly. Her despair of life and

uncanny misery were demonstrated through her poems, resorting to several particular images. According to a Chinese scholar Zhao Zheng (2008), in the 224 poems Ted Hughes collected in *The Collected Poems* by Sylvia Plath written from 1956 to 1963, one can easily find a long array of titles and lines when Plath turns to the sun, the moon, the sea, the trees, the flowers and the bees for her poetic voice.

The prominence of these natural imageries may even be expressed in such titles as poetry collections *Crossing the Water* (1971) and *Winter Trees* (1971). What's worth mentioning is that her usage of natural imagery is quite different from that of poets during the Romantic Period, who mostly took that imagery as metaphor to indicate their own life and hope, but she preferred to endow seemingly original imagery with insightful even paradoxical connotations, which may break readers' conventional understanding and association of the objects. What's more, Plath's depiction of natural imagery implies her contemplation and comprehension of the relationship between humans and nature, which mainly refers to the idea that human beings are supposed to accept the mystery and strangeness of nature and show great respect to nature. This research delves into the natural imagery appearing in *Ariel: The Restored Edition* (2010) and aims to figure out her unique understanding of nature.

The poems of Sylvia Plath have been widely discussed by scholars since the end of the 20th century, and both researchers abroad and at home have paid great attention to Plath's *Ariel*. On the one hand, by taking close reading as the main approach, critics explore themes such as life and death, trauma, escaping and imprisonment, and highlight imagery of nature, color and paintings, as well as some medical imagery in poems. Besides, writing techniques are also noticed and studied by professionals, who analyze such techniques as Plath's poems as metaphor, Ekphrasis, and her adoption of myths and other art forms related to Plath's creation poetics. On the other hand, critics excavate Plath's poems from various perspectives, especially from feminism and ecofeminism. In addition, since Plath has a miserable life and suffers from neurosis and psychosis, a great number of scholars aim to penetrate Plath's inner anxiety and conflict through psychoanalysis. They dig deeply into the connection between Plath's life attitude and her poems.

It is worth mentioning that scholars at home and abroad show great interest in the natural imagery in Plath's poems. Regarding overseas studies, Perloff (1970) concludes that the animism expressed through Plath's poems discloses that human beings are inanimate and unreal while everything non-human is intensely alive, vital and potent. Perloff's research shows Plath's emphasis on

nature and things/objects. Ragaišienė (2009) interprets the tree symbolism in Plath's poems from the perspective of ecofeminism and reconsiders the binary opposition of nature and culture, as well as female and culture. Ragaišienė (2009) finds out that the image of the tree indicates females' self-identity and great hope for the relocation of nature/culture hierarchies and a delineation of potentialities for alternative visions. What's more, domestic studies are taken to concentrate on the ecological depiction in Plath's poems. Zhu (2006) is the first domestic scholar to underscore the ecological awareness of Plath and its link with her female identity. He notices the interconnection of *Silent Spring* and Plath's poems and points out Plath's ecological awareness and self-anxiety during her lifetime. Liu (2011) explores the image of blackberries in Mary Oliver and Sylvia Plath's poems, drawing a conclusion that images show multi-level meanings in their poems. She also advocates that Plath's usage of image embodies the feature of the freedom and openness of image meanings. Zhao (2008) and Qian (2018) further continue the analysis of the nature writing of Plath's poems from the perspective of ecofeminism and seek the intercommunity of females and nature, finding that the nature writing in Plath's poems indeed demonstrates the female condition in patriarchal society.

Most of these studies connect Plath's poems with her ecofeminist thoughts, while few studies have delved into the dark natural imagery solely and explained its deep function of implying Plath's ecological worries. Based on the previous research, this study further focuses on the darkness and strangeness of nature imagery and explores Plath's ecological thoughts through analyzing the nature imagery by adopting the theory of dark ecology.

This study takes Timothy Morton's theory of dark ecology as a theoretical basis, which is formally put forward in *Dark Ecology* (2016). According to *The Langman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (6th Edition), "dark" means "mysterious", "evil" and "no light". While in Morton's use of "dark", the word is synonymous with "weird", "strange", "uncanny" and "shadow", with deeper connotation (Morton 2016). Dark ecology originally comes from Morton's critical comment on "Deep Ecology", which takes human superiority and "anthropocentrism" over nature for granted, as Morton (2016: 26) argues. Holding this belief, Morton tries to construct a new understanding of environmental aesthetics, which mainly consists of three philosophies.

First of all, Morton (2016: 138) declares that dark ecology is "without Nature", where Nature means "agrilogistics" (Morton 2016: 55), which regards human presence as more important than any other quality, then aggravates the nature-agriculture split. He disproves this

opinion and insists that there is no "Nature" standing opposed to human and human beings and nature are all in coexistence. After that, he interprets coexistence further and believes the idea that humans could shape nature is a kind of inner reflection and aesthetic fantasy of human beings about nature. Ecology should first separate "Nature" from this kind of imagination of human beings (Zhang 2018). So it is unavoidable to accept and face the dark side of nature directly. Furthermore, Morton (2016: 147) acknowledges that "There are no subjects and (non-OOO) objects anymore, just various kinds of specter". OOO refers to object-oriented ontology, which developed from a deep consideration of the implications of Martin Heidegger's version of modern Kantian correlationism (Morton 2016: 16). What he emphasizes is that dark ecology is not merely reversing the positions of environment (object) and human (subject), but paying close attention to nonhuman agency. If one deprivatizes correlationism, one arrives quickly at some idea that everything has agency, everything is "alive", possibly "conscious" (Morton 2017: 56). At last, the answer to the question about the ecological view is provided. Human and nonhuman entities are together in a "mesh": a sprawling network of interconnection without center or edge (Morton 2016: 81). The "gap" (Morton 2016: 17) between the human and everything else can't be filled in, and the real ecological refers to keeping a respectful distance from nature.

Based on this theory, this study explores the dark side of nature depicted in *Ariel*, and then examines the nonhuman agency expressed through imagery in detail. Finally, this study tries to get a clear understanding of Plath's ecological view, which is facing the dark side of nature directly, accepting the agency of nature, taking nature as a stranger and showing humans' respect for it, and finally coexisting with nature in a big and uncanny "mesh".

II. THE DARKNESS OF NATURAL IMAGERY

Plath's depiction of natural imagery embodies a kind of duality. On the one hand, the natural imagery becomes the personal inner reflection of nature, bearing her beautiful vision on the nonhuman entities. On the other hand, the darkness and corruption of natural imagery occupy an essential position in her poems. Before discussing the description of the dark side of nature, it is necessary to mention that Plath is also trying to impose human imagination on nature.

It can be found that a few natural images in *Ariel* keep the traditional connection with human activities and their values of existence are decided by the poet

according to her current emotions. Actually, those images stay unknown and "mysterious" (Morton 2016: 55), on which human beings impose their own understandings and forcefully interpret them as holding different meanings. In the lines of "Our cheesecloth gauntlets neat and sweet, The throats of our wrists brave lilies" (Plath 2010: 107), Plath is describing the action of moving beehives. The lilies mentioned here are added with the word "brave", which symbolizes Plath's life attitude at that moment. In her poems about bees, she gains insights into the significance of female life from observing bees:

It is almost over.

I am in control.

Here is my honey-machine,

It will work without thinking,

Opening, in spring, like an industrious virgin

To scour the creaming crests

As the moon, for its ivory powders, scours the sea.

A third person is watching.

He has nothing to do with the bee-seller or with me.

Now he is gone (Plath 2010: 108)

The life of hope is projected onto the bees, and bees and flowers are connected to the vitality of spring. The natural imagery here indeed serves to express the poet's delight and joy. By the way, there is always the "presence" of the human "I", which further clarifies the anthropocentrism and humans' inner mental projection on nature. In the poem called *Nick and the Candlestick*, Plath considers "rose" as a symbol of love, "Love, love, I have hung our cave with roses, With soft rugs" (Plath 2010: 63). Except for love, "roses" are depicted as something erotogenic, which implicitly shows Plath's eros desire and pursuit of love. Besides, "roses" also play the role of decoration, hanging in the cave.

Although some imageries carry Plath's aesthetic fantasy, quite a lot of natural imageries expose their darkness and rot directly. Just as Morton writes, "A rigid and thin concept of Life is what dark ecology rejects" (Morton 2016: 137). Plath reveals the diversity of nature, and breaks the stereotype of original perception and description of nature and makes a rudimentary expression of her "Ecognosis" (Morton 2016: 5), which is explained by Morton as a kind of knowing and coexisting, and it is like being accustomed to something strange. He believes the whole nature is strange for human beings, let alone the darkness of it. Plath portrays these aspects explicitly and

confronts them face-to-face. In the poem called *Ariel*, Plath writes at the beginning, "Stasis in darkness. Then the substanceless blue Pour of tor and distances" (Plath 2010: 47). This not only indicates Plath's preference for the color of black, but it also describes the profound and strange nature.

In another poem, Plath depicts "Nigger-eye/Berries cast dark Hooks Black/sweet blood mouthfuls, Shadows. Something else" (Plath 2010: 47). These words illustratively present the primitive image of berries, which are flowing with red and dark juice. Even though it is the most authentic state of berries, this kind of portrait endows the nonhuman entity with a strange and mysterious power. And the poet does not show any repulsion of this darkness, however, she accepts these uncanny natural imageries with a calm and composed attitude. Zhang (2022) accounts for this awareness in her words, and he thinks dark ecological thought can be concluded as a profound criticism of the existing ecological consciousness. It exposes the illusions of those inherent ecological thinking habits by delving into the shadows and backlights of other ecological consciousnesses. For this reason, Plath's confronting the darkness of nature contributes a lot to building up the "Ecognosis". The following is another example:

Strips of tinfoil winking like people,

Feather dusters fanning their hands in a sea of bean flowers,

Creamy bean flowers with black eyes and leaves like bored hearts.

Is it blood clots the tendrils are dragging up that string?

No, no, it is scarlet flowers that will one day be edible. (Plath 2010: 102)

Through these depictions, as if the bean flowers were staring at the poet with their black eyes, combined with their white petals, and the strong contrast between black and white in the night sky adds an uncanny atmosphere to nature. Besides, the use of simile unfolds humans' subjective projection onto nature. In the poem called *The Moon and the Yew Tree*, Plath describes "The moon sees nothing of this. She is bald and wild. And the message of the yew tree is blackness and silence" (Plath 2010: 84). The strangeness and mystique are completely expressed. Except for exposing the intuitive darkness of the natural imagery, the poet presents the decay of nature, which is probably affected by ecological damage:

Or shall I bring you the sound of poisons?

This is rain now, this big hush.

And this is the fruit of it: tin-white, like arsenic

I have suffered the atrocity of sunsets.

Scorched to the root

My red filaments burn and stand, a hand of wires.

Now I break up in pieces that fly about like clubs.

A wind of such violence

Will tolerate no bystanding: I must shriek.

...I am terrified by this dark thing...

That sleeps in me;

All day I feel its soft, feathery turnings, its malignity. (Plath 2010: 40-41).

Some critics generally take this poem as evidence of Plath's schizophrenia and use it to prove that she is extremely depressed and seriously lacking in satisfaction (Holbrook 1976: 105). It is indeed a reasonable comprehension. While this study prefers to connect the poem with Plath's environmental awareness. Zhu (2006) believes that it can be seen that *Elm* describes the radioactive hazards and the effects of chemical substances on an elm and a woman by comparing it with Carson's *Silent Spring*, published in 1962, the time when Plath wrote this poem. This explanation provides a great foundation for this study. In the Cold War period, the United States and the Soviet Union detonated many super nuclear bombs in the atmosphere, causing a serious threat to the ecological environment and human survival.

Based on the background information, it is possible to believe that Plath not only describes the darkness of nature, but she also unfolds her worries about ecology in the poem. There is "sound of poison" from the elm, and the sound makes the earth into a "big hush", leaving no more animation and vitality but something "like arsenic", keeping corroding the land. Even worse, the "sunsets" give up their gentleness and carry out atrocity. Some scholars consider it a metaphor, which compares the soot in the chimney to the yellow color of sunset (qtd. in Brain 1998: 149). "My red filaments burn and stand, a hand of wires. Now I break up in pieces that fly about like clubs," furtherly demonstrates the situation of a nuclear explosion, which splits "I" apart. The nonhuman entity nuclear weapon is produced by humans, and vice versa, giving rise to trouble and destroying the coexistence of humans and nonhuman (nature). Whether the dark thing is created by humans or not, it exists with humans in the big

“mesh” and influences nature and “sleeps in me” from the beginning to the end.

Nature is full of darkness, corruption and myth, and Plath unmask the philosophy in her writings. Even though she puts her own imagination on the natural imagery, she finally accepts the ruined nature and gives up the romantic nature. What's more, she sees the agency of nature, because at least in this poem, the elm is able to speak.

III. THE AGENCY OF NATURAL IMAGERY

In Plath's poems, there are a number of natural images that are endowed with agency, and they are not just symbols of personification, but become entities that may hurt and attack human beings. If the early reception of Plath is governed by a subject-centric way of reading, there is at the same time an attempt at negating this label of confessional poetry by stressing its more thing-oriented qualities. From Morton's point of view, it is a kind of object-oriented ontology view that all beings have agency, even mind (Morton 2017: 59). It also refers to something like an animism—an awareness of nonhuman agency, consciousness, affect, significance beyond the human (Morton 2016: 94). Admitting the agency of nonhuman entities does not mean simply regarding nature as the subject, but it holds the belief that there's no binary of subject and object. Showing respect to the nonhuman agency could be beneficial for humans to form a proper ecological understanding. It is evident that Plath is consistent with this philosophy.

In the poem called *Tulips*, Plath describes how the strong red color of “tulips” has hurt her directly like a shining sword and the glance from the tulips makes her feel uneasy and worried. They are given a completely opposite appearance from the traditional imagery of affection, becoming fear-inducing as if hiding some deep and unnamed dark force:

The tulips are too red in the first place,
they hurt me.

Even through the gift paper I could hear
them breathe

Lightly, through their white swaddlings,
like an awful baby.

Their redness talks to my wound, it
corresponds.

They are subtle: they seem to float,
though they weigh me down,

Upsetting me with their sudden tongues
and their color,

A dozen red lead sinkers round my neck.
(Sylvia Plath 2010: 31)

The red color radiated from the “tulips” is interpenetrating in the poem, causing a sudden and strong effect on the poet. Since the world in the poet's vision is totally gloomy, such a violent and bloody existence brings her a stabbing pain, especially through the striking contrast between white and red. What's more, despite the fact that the “tulips” are nonhuman entities, the poet describes them standing as human beings, with the capability to breathe and tongues to phonate and even talk. Plath makes use of personification to portray the “tulips” as an ice-cold and pernicious entity, taking actions driven by premeditation like humans. The “tulips” in Plath's poem even have eyes and they watch “me” with inexorability, and they take the agency to stare at “me”. The eyes of tulips and the eye of the sun have taken up the surrounding space, as if they are squeezing “me” until there is no room for “me”. Acting as a confronting force, these “tulips” set the “me” into self-doubt and self-denial, desiring to “efface myself”. There is a fierce contrast between them. The redder and stronger the tulips are, the paler and weaker “I” am. The nonhuman agency breaks the fantasy of the human, and shows the unknown, mysterious side in front of “me”.

The tulips should be behind bars like
dangerous animals;

They are opening like the mouth of some
great African cat,

And I am aware of my heart: it opens and
closes

Its bowl of red blooms out of sheer love
of me.

The water I taste is warm and salt, like
the sea,

And comes from a country far away as
health. (Sylvia Plath 2010: 32)

These lines come from the final part of the poem *Tulips*, where the “tulips” are shaped into a highly threatening symbol, transformed from traditional representations of beauty into “dangerous animals” lurking in the shadows, ready to strike. And their blossoming flowers are skillfully likened to some “great African cat” preparing to hunt, adding a layer of profound terror to the entire poem. Under these circumstances, the poet's subjective initiative is greatly diminished, and her consciousness gradually awakens, according to Zeng (2008). While this study delves into the ecological transformation of the poet. She does not become subject or object, while she figures out the coexistence of human and nonhuman entities with awareness of nature's cruelty. Just

like Wei (2013: 135) mentions, neither the trees nor the flowers welcomed her arrival. They ignored her and gave unfriendly warnings. The poet is reflecting that perhaps her arrival has disrupted the peace of the forest, which has led to nature's indifferent treatment.

The wind gagging my mouth with my
own blown hair,
Tearing off my voice, and the sea
Blinding me with its lights, the lives of
the dead
Unreeling in it, spreading like oil.
I tasted the malignity of the gorse,
Its black spikes,
The extreme unktion of its yellow candle-
flowers.
They had an efficiency, a great beauty,
And were extravagant, like torture.
(Sylvia Plath 2010: 19)

These are the beginning lines of *The Rabbit Catcher*, the poet describes a hostile scene where the wind "tearing off my voice" and the sea "blinding me", leaving the smell of death. Despite wind and sea, the gorse shows its malignity to "me" together with its "black spikes", and all existence contains both beauty and torture, which are filled with tension. Plath does acknowledge the beauty of "gorse", but the beauty also marks potential danger and hostility. Again, the "yellow candle flowers" radiate their charming color and represent aggressive power. The nature in the poems of Plath releases its own strength and emotions like a human, and it also includes a mysterious and dark atmosphere, which may frighten humans. Even though Morton (2009: 160) believes nature is a mysterious harmony, a collection encompassing all the ugly, corrupt and sinister elements. Human beings need to expose these dark sides of nature, and Plath is doing so. Except for the wind and sea, "The moon, also, is merciless: she would drag me/Cruelly, being barren. Her radiance scathes me. Or perhaps I have caught her" (Sylvia Plath 2010: 41). In most writings, "I" am not welcomed by the nature, which takes its autonomy and agency and the nonhuman existence always has devastating power:

Of a snuffed candle!
Love, love, the low smokes roll
From me like Isadora's scarves, I'm in a
fright
One scarf will catch and anchor in the
wheel.
Such yellow sullen smokes

Make their own element. They will not
rise,

But trundle round the globe
Choking the aged and the meek,
The weak (Plath 2010: 99)

These lines describe the occasion where a woman starts the car, and at the same time, the long scarf around her neck is rolled into the wheel and she is hanged alive. The nonhuman entities include technological products, and they possess tremendous power. As a technological product, automobiles not only emit exhaust gases that pollute the environment and suffocate the "aged and the weak", but also can directly kill people. In the following lines, Plath directly mentions "Devilish leopard! Radiation turned it white/And killed it in an hour. Greasing the bodies of adulterers/Like Hiroshima ash and eating in. The sin. The sin" (Plath 2010: 99). "Hiroshima ash" and the imagery related to melting and forced welding once again breaks out into a dark killing force, and according to Zhu (2006), it reflects great concerns and worries about the impact of nuclear explosions on the human body during the Cold War.

As a human being, "I" am forced to face the malignity and apathy of nature and even hurt by these nonhuman entities. Plath points out the imbalance of human and nature and indicates that the traditional position of human and nature is unreasonable:

This is the light of the mind, cold and
planetary.

The trees of the mind are black. The light
is blue.

The grasses unload their griefs on my
feet as if I were God,

Prickling my ankles and murmuring of
their humility (Plath 2010: 83).

On the one hand, the "grasses" are "prickling my ankles" and vent their grief by making use of their strength. The poet admits the agency and animism of those tiny grasses and believes in the power of nature. On the other hand, human is considered as the "God", and the grasses are so tiny, only murmuring their "humility". These lines prove that there is an unbalanced relationship between human and nonhuman entities.

Through the previous analysis, it can be concluded that Plath is conscious of the ecological philosophy that natural existence possesses agency and is not an object completely controlled by human beings, offering a foundation for the later clarification of an

appropriate and balanced relationship between human and nature.

IV. THE MESH EXISTENCE OF NATURE AND HUMAN

It is evident that Plath unfolds the darkness and agency of nature through the previous analysis. These features violate the fantasy of nature that "deep ecology" upholds and reveal the essence of nature, provoking a revolutionary ecological thought. Except for the previous analysis based on her poems, Plath's ecological thoughts can be found in other materials, so this part will make more connections with Plath's other poems, journals and her life.

From the previous analysis, human beings are sometimes hurt by the nonhuman entities, as if human beings lose their subjectivity. While this kind of phenomenon is explained by Morton (2016: 9), who believes that human beings are "implicated" in the ecosystem, a "strange loop", and don't hold dominant rights in the ecological environment. The nonhuman entity in nature is called "Strange stranger" by Morton (2016: 18). It is familiar, which also means that it is uncanny (German, *heimisch*, "familiar" and "unfamiliar", "intimate" and "monstrous" at the same time). Human beings' observation of these "strangers" may always stay mysterious and strange. Nearness does not mean obviousness (Morton 2016: 11). After getting near to them, Plath seems to accomplish building up her unique "Ecognosis" of nature.

At the beginning, her journal confirms the first philosophy of Morton, which presents human beings' imagination and fantasy projection on nature. She writes, "the ugliness which by man's sense of wishful thinking becomes a beauty, touching us all (Plath 2007: 40). The "clean unbroken sense that the rocks, which are nameless, the waves which are nameless, the ragged grass, which is nameless", are all defined momentarily through the consciousness of the being who observes them (Plath 2007: 95). Besides, Plath (2007:43) describes the strangeness of the ecosystem in her journal, "looking over, looking down into the windy blackness and not being quite able to make out, through the yellow, stinking mist, just what lies below in the slime, in the oozing, vomit-streaked slime". Plath's writing not only demonstrates the ugliness of nature, but it also indicates that Plath tries to figure out what lies below that blackness, however, because of nature's strangeness, it is hard to figure out nature completely. The agency of nature is also expressed through her journal:

Now I lay, burning, fevered with this disease, and the sun glared at me all at once, a lowering

orange eye, blank and mocking; it set on time, I clocked it. And again the dark eats at me: the fear of being crushed in a huge dark machine, sucked dry by the grinding indifferent millstones of circumstance (Plath 2007: 276).

The sunset glares at me" like an "orange eye", and the surrounding environment is full of darkness, devouring "my" energy. Again, the agency and aggressiveness subvert the Romantic and imaginative nature. After disclosing those dark aspects, the agency and strangeness of nature, there is a great need to explore an appropriate ecological awareness. Morton (2009: 184) points out that the ecosystem is interconnected in sum. Just as Chen (2024) explains, the world is composed of objects/things, among which the objects have relationships that are both strange and familiar to each other. The world is connected in the grid formed by such relationships.

Because of her experience of learning botany (Plath 2007: 81) and living in Preston (Plath 2007: 119), Plath has several opportunities for close contact with nature. During the period of strolling along the beach of Preston, she finds that, "From this experience I emerged whole and clean, bitten to the bone by sun, washed pure by the icy sharpness of salt water, dried and bleached to the smooth tranquility that comes from dwelling among primal things" (Plath 2007: 95). The "primal things" refers to the nature, which is dark, but pure and clean. After accepting the fact that it is ugly, Plath opens up a seemingly ideal condition to stay with nature, both human and nonhuman entities dwelling together in a mesh. The mesh can be understood through this philosophy: the combination of massive yet finite spatiality and massive and indeterminate time generates a very specific "game board" on which cooperation and its opposite play out (Morton 2016: 53-54). The hope of cooperation and harmonious coexistence of humans and nature is also indicated by her. She could not wonder only how she could ever bear to live anywhere else, away from the sea, the physical ease, the sun, the spaciousness (Plath 2007: 98). Human beings enjoy the beauty of nature and always keep a close connection with nature.

However, even human and nonhuman entities exist in the great mesh together, they do not cooperate all the time. The damage caused by human beings to nature is mentioned and criticized by Plath as well:

But the squirrels would still be there, and the birds. Long after, unless the smoke and the radioactivity (Oh, Marie Curie, if you could know!) got them. I can only hazard. In the back of my mind there are bombs falling, women & children screaming, but I can't describe it now. I don't know how it will be (Plath 2007: 42).

Just as the description in *Fever 103°* in the previous analysis, Plath reveals the worries and vigilance of environmental pollution and crisis. Most of them are brought by nuclear or radioactive weapons of war. When it comes to the entanglement of humans and nature, Plath tells the truth that no one knows what the world will be like. There is a sense of indeterminacy on the “game board”, indicating that human behaviors are closely connected to the nonhuman entities. A slight move in one part may affect the situation as a whole. Plath (2007: 22) deems “We’re still nothing but animals”. There is no definite boundary between humans and nature, because all are entities existing in the mesh.

By acknowledging the coexistence between humans and nature, Plath further sets up her ecological awareness, which is always keeping her respect for nature and admitting the independence of humans and nature. “On the short walk from here to the libe/ I drink the cold pure night air and the clear unbelievably delicate crescent moonlight with a greedy reverence” (Plath 2007: 213). It may be the prime attitude toward nature: admitting its darkness, recovering its agency, and keeping a respectful “gap” with nature. As Morton (2016: 17) says, “The gap between the human and everything else can’t be filled in, as racism tries to do”. For this reason, it is a must to keep “in-between” (Morton 2009: 106) state of entities, which emphasizes the coexistence and interdependence between people and others, which cannot be separated, but at the same time paradoxically maintains the interrelationship with others, rather than pursuing assimilation.

V. CONCLUSION

As an outstanding poet in American literature, Sylvia Plath takes poems as an approach to speak out about her ecological concerns about the world. Even some scholars interpret some expressions into Plath’s inner conflict, but except for those self-related topics, Plath is positively concerned about her surroundings. During the Cold War era, she witnessed the poisoning of both humans and nature by radioactive substances and the cruelty of war. The harm caused by war is exposed through her writing, and the call for a mesh coexistence can also be found in her poems. It is evident to find her vigilance of environmental pollution and her ultimate ecological consciousness of revering nature.

Based on the previous analysis and the connection between Plath’s natural imagery and Morton’s dark ecology, this study discovers Plath’s unique and revolutionary ecological awareness, which directly faces the darkness of nature, acknowledging the agency of nature, and showing respect to nature on the “game-

board”. It is reasonable to believe that human and nonhuman entities were, are and will be involved in the same mesh and exist with each other. In order to construct a bright future for humans and nature, the foremost step is to abandon the excessively naïve fantasy toward nature and the ecosystem and to admit the uncontrollability of human beings on nature, finally forming a calmer and more sensible attitude toward nature.

REFERENCES

- [1] Brain, T. (1998). ‘Or Shall I Bring You the Sound of Poisons?’: Silent Spring and Sylvia Plath. *Writing the Environment: Ecocriticism and Literature*, 146-164.
- [2] Holbrook, D. (2014). *Sylvia Plath: poetry and existence*. A&C Black.
- [3] Morton, T. (2009). *Ecology without nature: Rethinking environmental aesthetics*. Harvard University Press.
- [4] Morton, T. (2016). *Dark ecology: For a logic of future coexistence*. Columbia University Press.
- [5] Morton, T. (2017). *Humankind: Solidarity with non-human people*. Verso Books.
- [6] Perloff, M. (1970). “Angst” and Animism in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath. *Journal of Modern Literature*. 1(1). 57-74.
- [7] Plath, S. (2007). *The unabridged journals of Sylvia Plath*. Anchor.
- [8] Plath, S. (2010). *Ariel: The restored edition*. Faber & Faber.
- [9] Ragašienė, I. (2009). ‘I am not a Tree with My Root in the Soil’: Ecofeminist Revisions of Tree Symbolism in Sylvia Plath’s Poetry. *Journal of Ecocriticism*, 1(2), 31-41.
- [10] Uroff, M. D. (1977). Sylvia Plath and confessional poetry: A reconsideration. *The Iowa Review*, 104-115.
- [11] 陈浩然. (2024). “黑暗生态学”的网格与共存逻辑. *英语文学研究*. (02). 1-12.
- [12] 刘慧卿. (2011). 作为充分能指与任意所指的诗歌意象——试析玛丽·奥利弗与西尔维亚·普拉斯两种不同的“黑莓”意象. *首都师范大学学报(社会科学版)*. (05). 152-156.
- [13] 钱亚萍 & 吴青青. (2018). 生态女性主义视域下西尔维亚·普拉斯与翟永明的诗歌书写. *中华女子学院学报*. 30(05). 69-75.
- [14] 魏丽娜. (2013). *普拉斯诗歌意象研究*. 杭州. 浙江大学.
- [15] 曾巍. (2008). 西尔维亚·普拉斯自白诗中的自我意识. *外国文学研究*. (06). 42-47.
- [16] 张进. (2022). 论幽暗生态学及其美学维度. *社会科学文摘*. (8). 45-47.
- [17] 张进 & 许栋梁. (2018). 幽暗生态学与后人文主义生态诗学. *中南民族大学学报*. (4). 95-99.
- [18] 赵征. (2008). 西尔维亚·普拉斯诗歌的生态女性主义解读. 湘潭. 湖南科技大学.
- [19] 朱新福. (2006). 在寂静的春天里创作的普拉斯. *外国文学研究*. (03). 108-114.