

MIRROR – SYLVIA PLATH

POEM 14

PAGE 31





PRE-READING

- Why do we use mirrors?
 - What do mirrors represent/symbolize?
 - Can a mirror ever lie?
 - Who was Narcissus? / What is a narcissist?
 - The modern mirror – is it a true reflection?
- 

BACKGROUND

- “Mirror” is a short, two-stanza poem written in 1961.
- Sylvia Plath was living in England with her fellow poet and husband, Ted Hughes, and she had already given birth to their first child, Frieda.
- This was a stressful time for Plath. As a first-time mother, she was on the way toward fulfilling her love for her partner, but deep inside she dreaded the idea of ever growing old and settling down.



BACKGROUND

As a teenager, she wrote in her journal:

- "Somehow I have to keep and hold the rapture of being seventeen. Every day is so precious. I feel infinitely sad at the thought of all this time melting farther and farther away from me as I grow older."

And again, later:

- "I am afraid of getting older. I am afraid of getting married. Spare me from cooking three meals a day—spare me from the relentless cage of routine and rote."
- Sylvia Plath's poem has her hallmark stamp of powerful language, sharp imagery and dark undertones. Together with unusual syntax, no obvious rhyme or meter and an astute use of enjambment, "mirror" is a personification poem of great depth



MIRROR – SYLVIA PLATH

- 1 I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions.
2 Whatever I see I swallow immediately
3 Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike.
4 I am not cruel, only truthful,
5 The eye of a little god, four-cornered.
6 Most of the time I meditate on the opposite wall.
7 It is pink, with speckles. I have looked at it so long
8 I think it is part of my heart. But it flickers.
9 Faces and darkness separate us over and over.
- 10 Now I am a lake. A woman bends over me,
11 Searching my reaches for what she really is.
12 Then she turns to those liars, the candles or the moon.
13 I see her back, and reflect it faithfully.
14 She rewards me with tears and an agitation of hands.
15 I am important to her. She comes and goes.
16 Each morning it is her face that replaces the darkness.
17 In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman
18 Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish.



SUMMARY

- This poem relies on personification to convey the message.
- Personification – similar to a metaphor where two ideas are compared. Human characteristics are given to non-human things. (Revise metaphors and similes.)
- The mirror in this poem is given many human characteristics, firstly the ability to speak about itself in the first person: “I am silver and exact”.
- The poem describes what the mirror is thinking, the mirror justifies itself, form opinions and shows some empathy for the reflected person.

SUMMARY

Stanza 1:

- Describes the mirror, it doesn't tell white lies – it's truthful and exact, but not cruel.
- It lacks human qualities such as sympathy and empathy. Only concerned with its unwavering commitment to truth. It shows no warmth. It is too perfect to be human.

Stanza 2:

- This woman is not very happy with her reflection as shown in the lake, so she tries to find a light (a candle or the moon) that will obscure the reality of the reflection.
- In the last two lines of this poem, we see why this woman is so upset: in her watery reflection, her past is drowning, and a horrible future is rising to meet her.

COLOUR KEY

- PURPLE – FIGURES OF SPEECH
- GREEN – EXPLANATION
- RED - DEFINITION

STANZA 1

1 I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions.
2 Whatever I see I swallow immediately
3 Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike.
4 I am not cruel, only truthful,
5 The eye of a little god, four-cornered.
6 Most of the time I meditate on the opposite wall.
7 It is pink, with speckles. I have looked at it so long
8 I think it is part of my heart. But it flickers.
9 Faces and darkness separate us over and over.

1. *I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions.*

- “I” – personification - mirror is given the human quality of the ability to talk
- “Exact” – metaphor - like a machine. It makes no errors (perfection)
- Repetition of “i” – shows the pride of the mirror. Almost arrogant.
- “Preconceptions” – prejudice/assumptions
 - mirror reflects what is shown)



2. *Whatever I see I swallow immediately*

3. *Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike.*

- “See” & “swallow” – personification - the reflection becomes part of the mirror. The mirror is constantly aware of people/objects to reflect “immediately”.
- “Just as it is” - committed to show only the truth.
- “Unmisted by love or dislike” – unmindful/unaffected by human emotions

4. *I am not cruel, only truthful -*
5. *The eye of a little god, four-cornered.*



- “I am not cruel” - justifies itself. Doesn’t soften truth even if painful
- “Only truthful” – personification - telling the truth
- “Eye of the little god” – Metaphor: an all-seeing minor deity (god) having the ability to control objects/ people standing in front of it. Almost makes it impossible to pass by without stopping.
- Lines 1-5: the mirror is given a cold, unfeeling personality

6. *Most of the time I **meditate** on the opposite wall.*

7. *It is pink, with speckles. I have looked at it so long*

- “Meditate” - to think deeply
- “The opposite wall” - this is a permanent fixture; what the mirror sees most of the time.
- “I have looked at it so long – mirror has served its function for a long time

8. *I think it is part of my heart. But it flickers.*

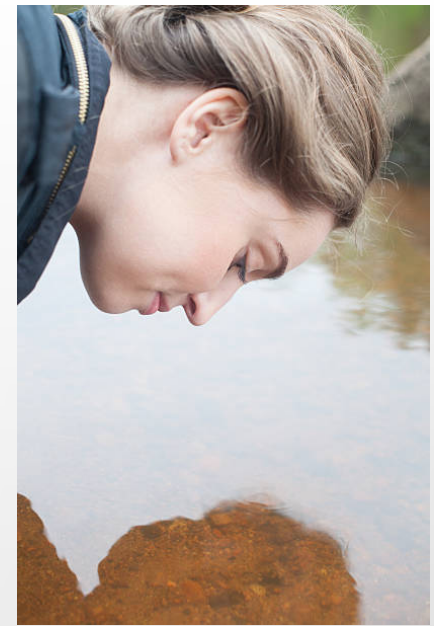
9. *Faces and darkness separate us over and over.*

- “I think it is part of my heart.” - mirror seems to now fall in love.
 - Changes from an exact truthful machine to a feeling thing with emotions
- “But” – contradiction
- “flickers” – to switch on and off
- “Faces and darkness” - *At times there are people and nighttime that cause that the mirror to no longer see the wall*

STANZA 2

10 Now I am a lake. A woman bends over me,
11 Searching my reaches for what she really is.
12 Then she turns to those liars, the candles or the moon.
13 I see her back, and reflect it faithfully.
14 She rewards me with tears and an agitation of hands.
15 I am important to her. She comes and goes.
16 Each morning it is her face that replaces the darkness.
17 In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman
18 Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish.

10. *Now I am a lake. A woman bends over me,*
11. *Searching my reaches for what she really is.*



- “Now i am a lake” – metaphor - mirror reflects but now as a lake.
- “A woman” - specific face, not just plenty of faces.
- “Searching my reaches for what she really is.” -> woman is examining not only her outer features but also her inner turmoil when she sees her ageing self in the reflection.

12. *Then she turns to those liars, the candles or the moon.*



- “Those liars” - contradictory to mirror’s exactness and truthfulness
- “Candles or the moon” - not well lit, the reflection won’t be so true. It gives a mysterious atmosphere. It lacks clarity and hides the truth

13. *I see her back, and reflect it faithfully.*

14. *She rewards me with tears and an agitation of hands.*

- “reflect it faithfully.” - mirror does not change its role, reflects exactly what it sees
- “Rewards” – irony - the mirror feels that even if the woman’s angry it shows it has fulfilled its role.
- “Tears and an agitation of hands” - the woman is upset about the reflection she sees.



15. *I am important to her. She comes and goes.*

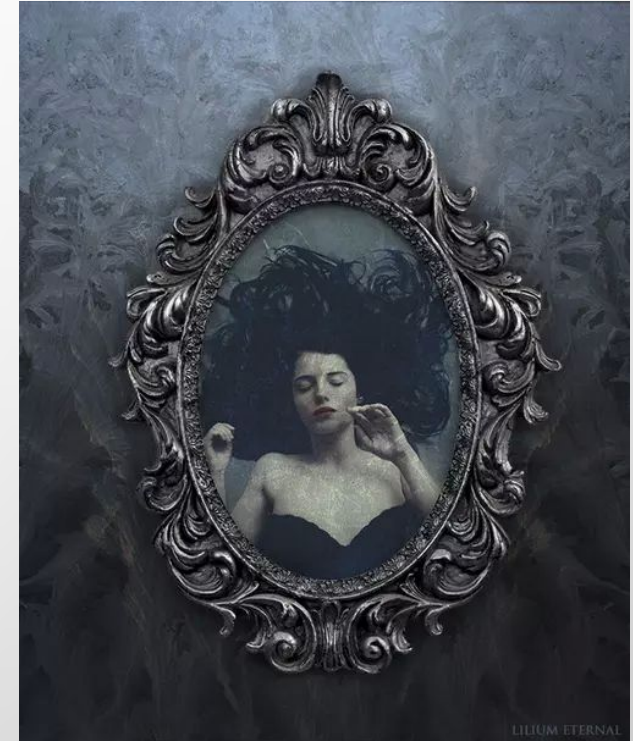
16. *Each morning it is her face that replaces the darkness.*

- “She comes and goes.” - The woman cannot stay away she has to see the ageing process in a hope that it has changed.



17. *In me she has **drowned** a young girl, and in me an old woman*

- **Metaphor** - compares disappearance of woman's youth to someone drowning; over the years the woman has watched her reflection in the lake change. It is no longer youthful – the young girl is now dead and drowned in the lake.
- As the young girl drowns, an old woman rises closer to her every day, her fate of getting older draws closer every day.



17. *In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman*

18. *Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish.*



- Simile - “Like a terrible fish”- the woman is trapped in the lake of time and there is no beauty left, just an ugly, monstrous looking fish.

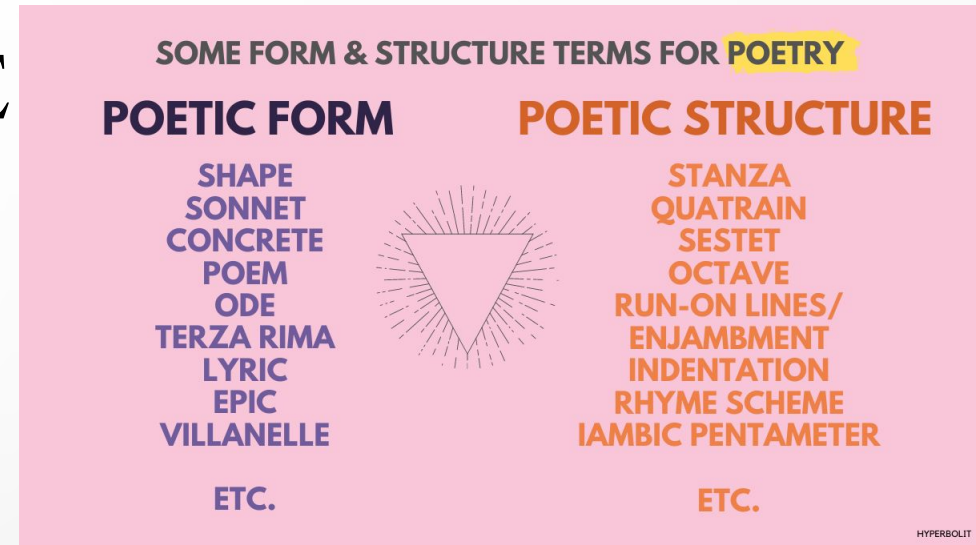
ALLUSION - NARCISSUS

- [Narcissus](#) was a hunter in greek mythology, son of the river god [cephissus](#) and the nymph lirioppe. He was a very beautiful young man, and many fell in love with him. However, he only showed them disdain and contempt. One day, while he was hunting in the woods, the oread nymph [echo](#) spotted him and immediately fell for him. When [narcissus](#) sensed that someone was following him, [echo](#) eventually revealed herself and tried to hug him. However, he pushed her off and told her not to disturb him. [Echo](#), in despair, roamed around the woods for the rest of her life, and wilted away until all it remained of her was an [echo](#) sound.
- [Nemesis](#), the goddess of retribution and revenge, learned what had happened and decided to punish [narcissus](#) for his behaviour. She led him to a pool; there, the man saw his reflection in the water and fell in love with it. Although he did not realise in the beginning that it was just a reflection, when he understood it, he fell in despair that his love could not materialise and committed suicide.
- <https://www.Greekmythology.Com/myths/mortals/narcissus/narcissus.Html>
- This is where the word narcissist originated from and a narcissistic personality disorder.

THEY CALL IT A
“SELFIE”
BECAUSE
“NARCISSISTIE”
IS TOO HARD
TO SPELL

STRUCTURE

- Short sentences:
- Give a clipped effect: matter-of-fact tone
- Simple sentences are read as statement of facts.
- The sentence structure assists in creating a picture of the mirrors personality.
- 2 stanzas
- 9 lines in each stanza



TONE AND THEME:

- Tone: melancholy and even bitter poem.
- Theme: the poem exemplifies the tensions between inner and outer selves, as well as indicates the preternaturally feminine "problem" of aging and losing one's self.

- What is the difference between tone and mood?
- **Tone refers to the speaker's or character's feelings/attitudes toward a subject.**
- **Mood refers to the reader's feelings.**
- What is theme?
- **Theme is the universal importance or truth to the reading.**
- Can a theme be expressed in one word?
- **NO! Theme is always expressed in a sentence. For example, one theme that Ishmael Beah says that he develops in his novel is "War destroys the culture of a community."**

Truth and appearances: Many people are very concerned about how they appear (seem) to other people. They try to disguise (hide) unpleasant parts of themselves or their personalities from others. They do not always want other people know the truth.



Don't like what you see in the mirror?
I bet it likes you less.



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Time and Ageing: One fact that all human beings share is that we all grow old. Beauty and youth are temporary. Women are taught they are beautiful only when they are young. Society puts a lot of pressure on women, in particular, to work hard at remaining youthful. Growing old is a reminder of time passing.



**Never reveal
your age!**

Reverse

- signs of sun damage
- enlarged pores
- wrinkles
- hyperpigmentation

With this pair, your skin will be
GLOWING!

Two bottles of skincare products are shown. The bottle on the left is labeled 'FAKE ID' and the bottle on the right is labeled 'YOUTH ADDLER KASIN'. Both bottles are silver and white.

QUESTIONS:

1. Discuss the poetic technique used in line 1. (2)
2. Explain what the mirror implies in line 4. (2)
3. Account for why the mirror “meditates” on the opposite wall? (2)
4. Explain why the mirror says “faces and darkness separate us **over and over**, line 9? (2)
5. Identify and explain the figure of speech in line 10 in terms of the poem as a whole. (3)
6. “She rewards me with tears and agitation”. Why does the woman react in such a manner? (2)
7. Discuss in detail the imagery used in lines 17 and 18. (4)
8. Comment on the effectiveness of having the mirror talk personally to the reader. (3)

[20]



RESOURCES

<https://owlcation.com/humanities/Analysis-of-Poem-Mirror-by-Sylvia-Plath>

<https://www.shmoop.com/study-guides/poetry/mirror-sylvia-plath/summary>

<https://poemanalysis.com/sylvia-plath/mirror/>

Form and Structure:

<https://hyperbolit.com/2020/07/27/whats-the-difference-between-form-and-structure-and-yes-they-are-different/>

Tone and Theme:

<https://slideplayer.com/slide/17185881/>



MEMORANDUM:

- 1.1. What is happening in line 2? (1)
The mirror is reflecting the object or person in front of it.
- 1.2. What human characteristics are given to the mirror? (2)
The mirror can see and swallow.
- 2.1 What does the mirror imply with “I am not cruel, only truthful” in line 4? (2)
The mirror does not feel bad that it reflects exactly what is seen.
- 3.1 Why does the mirror refer to itself as a “little god”? (2)
The mirror has some power over objects especially people, they dislike it and still return.
- 4.1 Explain the word “meditate” in line 6. (1)
To think deeply about something.
- 4.2 Why does the mirror “meditate” on the opposite wall? (1)
This is a permanent fixture and it is what the mirror see most of the time.
- 5.1 Explain why the mirror says “faces and darkness separate us over and over, line9? (2)
Everyday the mirror is separated from the pink speckled wall.
- 6.1 Identify the figure of speech in line 10. (1)
Metaphor
- 6.2 Explain the figure of speech closely referring to the poem. (2)
The metaphor refers to the mirror comparing itself with a lake that also reflects.



MEMORANDUM:

7.1 “She rewards me with tears and agitation”. Why does the woman react in such a manner? (1)

The woman is upset to see herself age.

8.1 Discuss the imagery in lines 17 and 18. (3)

The woman has been looking into the mirror from a very young age and now that she is getting older, she still looks into the mirror. Through the years she has become older “drowning” the image/reflection of the young girl.

9.1 What does the poet achieve by having the mirror talk personally to the reader? (2)

This draws the reader into the poem and makes it more personal.

[20]