

## Reflections of Self and Other in Sylvia Plath's "Mirror" Imagery

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### Abstract:

Though Sylvia Plath never realized her youthful wish to walk into the mirror like Alice (Plath 1982:181), she reflected upon the possibility in a good number of her poems. Sylvia Plath's recurrent employment of the images of "mirror," "moon," and "candles" indicates the connotative significance which she invests in the imagery and symbolism concerned with self-reflection. Essentially, Plath's use of reflective objects and images exhibits her persona's search for self-recognition. While experiencing a conflict between rejection or acceptance of "self" and "other's" definition of identity and autonomous perception, the woman artist endeavours to achieve self-engendering by refuting the objectified identity imposed on her by the male dominated culture. This study concentrates on Plath's use of reflective images which imply her process of arriving at a liberative and realistic definition of the female self.

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Sylvia Plath's poem, "Mirror," symbolizes the troubled self of the woman, especially the woman artist who has to reject the given masks imposed on her by the patriarchal society and see herself as an artist and an individual. The mirror imagery in Plath's poetry, therefore, signifies the consciousness of the woman-speaker who verbalizes the creative process of a woman artist in the domain of male-dominated literature. The woman artist has to resist the critical and judgemental male gaze to arrive at her own autonomous self-expression.

Freedman believes that, "Plath uses mirror as a symbol of female passivity, subjection, and Plath's own conflicted self-identity caused by social pressures to reconcile the competing obligations of artistic and domestic life" (Freedman 1993:152). The mirror represents the unfeeling male view of a woman and what is socially expected of her: possessing an idealized beauty and ever-lasting youth. As the persona ages over the years, the mirror cruelly reflects the changes in her appearance. Age becomes the persona's defect and shortcoming and thus her source of anxiety and dismay. The mirror projects what is thought of the woman as she grows older. It claims to reflect the truth, and by implication, the representation of the patriarchal perception of a woman's existence, her worth only as a beautiful object, and her worthlessness when she is no longer young and beautiful. Against the male's definition of womanhood, which idealizes beauty and youth, the persona looks inside to discover the true self, what she was as a person and what she has become, maturing by age. The woman's autonomous identity and perception of self are, therefore, in conflict with the stereotype of the dominant male society. The tension increases as the persona is perplexed by this identity crisis. If she chooses her inner self and her own independent definition of identity, when looking in the mirror, she no longer sees the beautiful girl, but the terrible fish.

The mirror is an object which reflects both the persona's subordinate role and the urgency of her repressed speech. Freedman maintains that, "when the mirror announces its identity, it shows an active speaker and it is not a passive reflector anymore and is rebellious to the traditionally assigned roles of woman" (Freedman 1993:157). It is, indeed, the persona, the woman in the mirror, who rebels against the established image of idealized womanhood. The terrible fish is the persona's demon, the critical gaze which views her as aging and ugly. As Freedman states, "The fish is the woman as autonomous person and author. It is the role rejecting woman/mother who, even as she proclaims her

acceptance of the task, refuses passivity to mirror, man, infant or whatever else is set before it" (Freedman 1993:166). The persona confesses the bitter reality of her present existence: "In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman / Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish." The terrible fish, then, is the projection of the woman's multi-dimensional identity: the socially imposed identity in conflict with a confused, self-searching identity, in a quest for confirmation. Yet, the mirror refuses to comfort the woman by announcing its indifference and impartiality: "I am silver and exact. I have no preconception."

The persona is marginalized as the mirror, "The eye of a little god," assumes its power as the centre of consciousness. The woman is desperately trying to identify her true self through this reflection, yet the mirror controls her self-perception by insisting that it is truthful and discreet: "Whatever I see I swallow immediately." This conflict and the woman's anxious demand for a true reflection of her very self are further silenced by the mirror:

A woman bends over me,  
Searching my reaches for what she really is.  
Then she turns to those liars, the candles or the moon.

I see her back and reflect it faithfully.  
She rewards me with tears and agitation of hands (Plath 1981:173-74)

The outcome of this search is the persona's passive presence and her inability to confirm her own identity as Donna Richardson asserts: "the final image of the poem reinforces the dehumanizing effect of committing one's identity to the shallow truth of physical appearance" (Richardson 1991:194). This indicates the complete erasure of the woman's true identity and the confirmation of an imposed identity, a dehumanized version of self, a suppressed recognition of the male gaze. It denies the woman any degree of self-awareness to face her natural aging process realistically. So, the mirror not only shows the woman's loss of youth and beauty, but it also indicates her loss of the power to express her identity in her own terms against a dictated perception of physical appearance.

While the mirror is insistent on its faithful reflection of the woman's appearance, the woman is searching for her inner self, a search coldly dismissed by the mirror which boasts of its power over her: "I am important to her." The woman's helpless dependence on the mirror's definition of her identity generates the source of complication for the persona's quest for autonomy. However, the woman is acutely conscious of her current state of being: "In me an old woman / Rises toward her day after day like a terrible fish." Susan R. Van Dyne points out that, "in the dichotomizing of that body between the drowned but desirable young girl and the hideous spectre of death in the terrible fish we detect the bias of the male gaze, the flaw in the mirror that would represent itself as God" (Van Dyne 1993:87). Only by moving past the critical gaze of the masculine perception can the woman progress towards the development of an autonomous self.

The issue of confirmation of self against the threat of erasure presents itself for the persona of "In Plaster" where she tries to confront her division into two selves: "this new absolutely white person and the yellow one" (Plath 1981:158-9). The persona's struggle culminates in her eventual rejection of the white and beautiful mask which covers her true self and threatens to annihilate the yellow and ugly body with its fallibilities and imperfection. As Elisabeth Bronfen suggests, the tension accelerates because these two selves cannot coexist peacefully: "while the old self realizes she is so dependent on this external role of perfection that she has quite 'forgotten how to walk and sit' without her, she also realizes that her immaculately refashioned self functions like her own coffin, threatening to cover her up entirely, fully to encase her and take her place". Eventually, the persona, in order to break the perfect image of purity and beauty, and to become her true self, needs to "avenge herself by escaping from this casement, allowing it to 'Perish with emptiness'" (Bronfen 1998: 89).

"Mirror" was composed in 1961, just before Plath's twenty-ninth birthday. The cleverly calm tone of the poem conceals the violence inherent in the images and theme of the poem. The poem reveals the tension of the violent confrontation of a number of forces. At the centre of this confrontation lies the persona's conflict with the mirror's control over her identity. The mirror claims objectivity and rationality by confirming that it reflects exactly what it sees. However, its reflection is concomitant to the patriarchal view of the woman's existence. Therefore, the persona is forced to see

her reflection as an ugly, useless object. The reflection denies the woman even her humanity and displays her as “a terrible fish.” The woman is shattered as, uncertain about her identity, she seeks approval from the mirror which stands for the patriarchy. Van Dyne comments on the woman’s loss of self-confidence in her perception of self as the mirror takes control: “Locating the centre of consciousness in the mirror marginalizes the woman; her presence in the mirror’s vision is intermittent, and then only as a reflected object. The source of the mirror’s image, the observing woman, does not exist as a subject at all” (Van Dyne 1993:88).

The source of problem in this poem is the woman’s absolute reliance on the mirror’s projection of her. The woman shows a desperate need to view herself through this reflection. The mirror, confidently, tries to control the woman’s concept of herself as expressed in the second stanza:

A woman bends over me  
Searching my reaches for what she really is  
Then she turns to those liars, the candles or the moon. (Plath 1981:173-74)

This conflict of subjective and objective realities, which reflects the persona’s internal conflict, develops further in the poem. The mirror represents rational and objective judgement: cold and cruel in its pronouncements. The woman is reduced to a dependent, marginalized victim. Her expectation about the reflection of her identity is subjective and impressionable. She is condemned to hear a dreadful death sentence as the mirror identifies her as “a terrible fish,” not even rendering her humanity. As Van Dyne asserts, “the terror of this vision is its reduction of woman to inexorably aging flesh” (Van Dyne 1993:88). The ultimate terror is the reduction of the woman to a silent, voiceless victim, suffering in isolation. The mirror defines the woman and interprets the woman’s definition of herself.

Eileen Aird asserts that, “Mirrors occur frequently in Sylvia Plath’s poetry but with a variety of meanings” (Aird 1973:106). Admitting the complexity of assigning a single meaning to mirror as a symbol in Plath’s poetry, Aird lists different representations of mirror in Plath’s poetry. In “In Midas’s Country,” for instance, mirror is used “as a visual image of the surface of a river” (Aird 1973:106).

But now the water skiers race,  
Bracing their knees. On unseen towlines  
They cleave the river’s greenish patinas;  
The mirror quivers to smithereens. (Plath 1981:99-100)

The ambivalence suggested in the poem is enhanced by the skiers’ intrusion into the static peaceful river, shattering the mirror-like surface of the river, “thus the image of the broken mirror reflects the destruction of spiritual as well physical calm” (Aird 1973:106).

However, in later poems such as “The Couriers,” (Plath 1981:247) and “Words” (Plath 1981:270), this destruction of peace is accepted and even celebrated as the persona exults in this confrontation:

A disturbance in mirrors  
The sea shattering its grey one  
Love, love, my season (Plath 1981:242)

In “Brasilia” the mirror reflects a state of safety and normality: “...leave / This one / Mirror safe, unredeemed / By the dove’s annihilation, / The glory, / The power, the glory” (Plath 1981:258). In “Totem,” the mirror suggests wisdom: “...and this is the surgeon: / One mirror eye- / A facet of knowledge;” the mirror is also associated with the monotonous, inevitable, unchanging process of living for the barren self, equipped with “folding mirrors” (Aird 1973: 107),

There is no terminus, only suitcases  
Out of which the same self unfolds like a suit  
Bald and shiny, with pockets of wishes,  
Notions and tickets, short circuits and folding mirror (Plath 1981:265).

The mirror in "Morning Song" (Plath 1981:156-157) and "Childless woman" (Plath 1981:259) is connotative of female's desire to conceive. In "Morning Song," the cloud "distils a mirror to reflect its own slow / Effacement" (Plath 1981:157). However, in a much later poem, "A Birthday Present," the mirror suggests the persona's desire for death and is a symbol of death:

Do not be mean, I am ready for enormity.  
Let us sit down at it, one on either side, admiring the gleam,  
The glaze, the mirrory variety of it (Plath 1981:207).

Arid maintains:

The only general conclusion which can be drawn from the varied uses of the mirror as a symbol is that, as in 'A Birthday Present,' it usually represents an absolute state from which or in which the poet strives to find a meaning. This is the value which it conveys in the late poem 'Mirror' (Aird 1973:107).

The recurrent mirror imagery, ultimately, implies Plath's preoccupation with the notion of a divided self or the projection of two selves, the true self and an imposed version of self reflected through the mirror, moon, the male gaze, and finally the view of the patriarchal society. Elisabeth Bronfen elaborates on "Plath's exploration of the oscillation between longing for extinction and transcendence of the self," asserting that this struggle "translates into fantasies of transformation, of escape from constriction and engulfment, and of flight, where casting off outgrown selves and overused masks lead to naked renewal" (Bronfen 1998:64). The desire for a rebirth of the self, however, takes various shapes as the persona's ambivalent attitude towards her double tends to interfere with her attempts at self-awareness. Bronfen believes that "the dramatically protean resurrection of the self [is] so terrible that release from confinement is usually figured as a journey through death so that self-recreation and self-destruction are separated by a fine line" (Bronfen 1998:64).

Van Dyne sees "Mirror" and "Face Lift" confronting "what Beauvoir calls the 'carnal contingency' of the human subject" and "their bondage to perishable flesh a dreadful premonition of their morality" (Van Dyne 1998:87). However, women feel this confrontation more intensely as they see their diminishing youth and beauty "reflected through masculine aversion as well as their own anxiety" in a tale of "hidden violence" told by the mirror (Van Dyne 1998: 87).

Nonetheless, in "Face Lift" (Plath 1981:155-56), the persona takes control. While she is hostile towards her aging flesh, she claims that she is in charge of the situation by confirming she herself is responsible for this complex physical transformation. As Van Dyne argues, there is a certain degree of the speaker's detachment from her body and "a parodic self-awareness of the resurrected body as grotesque" (Van Dyne 1998:89). To control her body, the speaker needs to disassociate herself from it. Only through a violent transformation of her body, can the speaker renew herself and, thus, reverse the sentence pronounced in the "Mirror": "Now she is done for, the dewlapped lady / I watched settle, line by line, in my mirror - / Old sock-face on a darning egg" (Plath 1981:156). The woman looking in her mirror finds confirmation of a new self, as she is born again "as a baby."

Susan Van Dyne comments on the persona's attempt at regeneration in "Face Lift":

The emergent self as walking corpse, flinging off her 'mummy-clothes,' shares Lazarus's exhibitionistic bravado about her disfigurement [...] In managing her comeback the speaker pretends to reverse the mirror's sentence, but only by doing violence to an objectified, repulsive shadow self: [...] The close of 'Face-Lift' implies that the repeated death trance of feminine passivity is a temporary mask, as Auerbach argues, for the protean self, secretly incubated: 'Mother to myself, I waked in gauze, / pink and smooth as a baby.' This self-engendering gesture also previews Plath's Ariel poem of reincarnation. What makes the body intolerable in the later poems is its history of sexual suffering or maternal exhaustion (Van Dyne 1998:89).

The cycle of death and resurrection is enacted by the woman. She is the agent of death and rebirth: "Mother to myself, I wake swaddled in gauze, / pink and smooth as a baby." The persona comes out of the cocoon of feminine passivity and repression and creates herself in a self-fashioned manner. Van Dyne concludes that Plath's vision of self-incarnation is a bold and authentic one:

Rather than leave the body behind in search for spiritual transcendence, Plath insists she can remake it; she can deliver by her own violent agency an unmarked body innocent of, and sometimes immune to, conventional sexual inscription (Van Dyne 1998:89).

It is, however, a troubled incarnation. The persona, here, suggests doubts about her power to claim her own newly discovered self. This inner contradiction, so overwhelming dominant in "Mirror" as well, is Plath's "distinctive poetics of self-doubt" (Axelrod 1990:209).

Thus, the investigation into the Plath's employment of reflecting objects reveals that they display an array of significant connotative implications. In Freedman words, "much of Plath's poetry...is a mirror of the male text as mirror, a replication of the passive images caught on its surface" (Freedman 1993:160). Moreover, mirrors reflect reality from the objective male view, "a perfect reflection of the feminine ideal in male eyes" (Freedman 1993:161). However, Plath subverts the imposed version of feminine identity constructed by the patriarchy and exhibits the persona's genuine struggle to release herself from the bondage of idealized femininity through the incarnation of a self which is aggressively self-assertive. By renouncing the idealized image of womanhood imposed by the patriarch on her identity as a woman, Plath's persona regains the power to claim rebirth and self-confirmation.

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