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EN 112

Critical Essay

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“Mirror” by Sylvia Plath

Mirrors are a part of everyday life for most people. We just glance into them on our way out the door, and many are consumed by them. An ordinary object. Sylvia Plath wrote a poem about a mirror, but she looked deeper than a mirror goes and explained to us what a mirror really does. Plath is a famous author and poet from the 1950s and 60s. She was institutionalized twice during her life for severe depression and attempted suicide, which she successfully committed three days after writing this poem. In “Mirror”, Plath puts her self in the mirror’s place, and describes what the mirror would see when Plath is looking into it.

The first lines of “Mirror” give the reader a vision of the harsh-looking glass. “I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions. / Whatever I see I swallow immediately” (1-2). Plath is giving a visual of this shiny mirror that doesn’t blur reality. The mirror cannot know what it is looking at, so it cannot judge her. But, as she describes in line two, the mirror engulfs her image and self when she looks into it. Line three, “Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike”, tells the reader that no matter what Plath feels towards her reflection, the mirror will not change what it shows. “I am not cruel, only truthful, / The eye of a little god, four-cornered”(4-5). Plath is telling us that the mirror is square, like a box she would put herself into. She called it an eye of a god because it is revered by many people, and sometimes rules one’s life. She goes on in lines six through nine to talk about how the mirror sometimes has nothing to look at but the opposite wall and how it seems to have become part of the mirror itself. The flickering she refers to is the people and objects that place themselves in front of it for a moment in passing. “Faces and darkness separate us over and over” (9). The mirror is telling us that faces and night separate it from its heart, the wall. In these first

nine lines of poem, Plath is trying to convey many different meanings. Mirrors are cold with blue and silver colors, while the wall across from it is pink and light. Many people think Plath suffered from bi-polar disorder, so perhaps the contrasting colors represent her and her mood swings.

Another thing I found was “I” was used eleven times throughout the poem, and there are eleven letters in “Sylvia Plath”. I think it symbolized Plath as the mirror, and that she is the poem itself.

The second half of the poem is much deeper and more complex than the first nine lines. She gives us almost a riddle of lakes and liars. In lines eleven and twelve, Plath introduces a lake. Lakes reflect images much like mirrors, but they have a depth that mirrors don't. The woman mentioned could very well be Plath herself, looking for herself, for her happiness. Line thirteen calls the moon and candles liars. The moon only comes out at night and usually candles are used in the dark. Plath must be suggesting that since they only come out at night, and go away very quickly, they must lie to her and to human existence. Moonlight and candlelight can also change the way things can be seen. They change the light to twist objects into lies. Liars tend to hide their faces or mouths, but the moon or candle light are being shone in the lake at night, but hide during the day. Reflections are trapped into telling the truth. The mirror and lake both tell the truth, unlike the moon and candle. Plath must have felt trapped in her self, and wished she could lie to herself and hide away when things got bad. Plath goes on to tell us that the lake would reflect the woman's back, faithfully. When the woman, or Plath, turned on her own reflection, the mirror was still there reflecting what it saw. “She rewards me with tears and an agitation of hands”(15). Agitation of hands could be that the woman was splashing her own reflection in the water, upset with what she saw. Tears could be from the woman herself, or from rain. The woman was punishing the lake for being truthful and faithful. But she comes back in line sixteen. The woman's reflection is very important to her, even if she hates it. She would come every morning, to replace the darkness which was the only thing the lake could see at night. This is very much like Greek myth of Narcissus. Narcissus was very handsome, and stared at his reflection for so long he fell into the lake he was staring into and drowned. Plath supposedly would often add mythological elements to her writings, and the myth of Narcissus fits very well into “Mirror”.

“Mirror” seems very self-loathing, especially in line eighteen: “In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman.” Plath is explaining here that she hates herself for growing older, and leaving her younger body. I also think that it could be she killed her younger self in the lake, and every day, a part of her older body dies too. The last line of the poem, “Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish” (19), is explaining that she repeatedly goes to that lake to look at her aging face. I believe the terrible fish is a dead, or very ugly fish. Dead fish, because dead fish rise to the surface eventually after growing old and dying, the surface in which her reflection shone.

I believe that “Mirror” is a poem that Plath wrote to express how much she hated growing older, and how much a mirror can confine a life. She was trying to convey that they are only a reflection, and that it isn’t going to change no matter how often we look or much we wish it would. Overall, Plath’s personal experience and mental illnesses played a large part in this poem, and in turn gave us as readers something to think about. Its obvious how much looks and mirrors play into our social norms and everyday life, and how much they can control a human mind. Sylvia Plath knew this, and gave us a taste of her knowledge of humans and life.

Bibliography

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Appendix

Mirror

- 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.

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