MIRROR BY SYLVIA PLATH -COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS

Context:

Sylvia Plath's Mirror explores themes of identity, self-perception, aging, and the search for truth. The poem is a dramatic monologue delivered by a mirror, which is personified as an objective observer, reflecting the reality of those who gaze into it. Plath uses the mirror as a symbol for selfexamination, focusing particularly on a woman's relationship with her changing image as she ages. The mirror's perspective is both detached and honest, offering a stark contrast to the illusions people create to avoid confronting their own reality. The poem can be seen as a meditation on the inevitability of aging and the difficulty of accepting oneself.

STANZA BY STANZA ANALYSIS

Lines 1-3:

"I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions. / Whatever I see I swallow immediately / Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike." The poem begins with the mirror's declaration of its own nature. It describes itself as "silver and exact," emphasizing its clarity, precision, and objectivity. The mirror claims to have "no preconceptions," meaning it does not judge or interpret what it reflects—it merely shows reality as it is. The phrase "I swallow immediately" suggests that the mirror absorbs everything instantly and without bias, presenting the truth "unmisted by love or dislike." The mirror's detachment underscores its role as a passive, impartial observer, reflecting the world without emotion or personal involvement.

Lines 4-5:

■ "I am not cruel, only truthful, / The eye of a little god, four-cornered." Here, the mirror asserts that it is not "cruel," though its honesty may be harsh for those who look into it. Its purpose is not to hurt but to present an unvarnished truth, free from distortion. The phrase "The eye of a little god" elevates the mirror's role, suggesting that it has the power of divine sight, able to see everything without bias or error. The mirror's "four-cornered" shape reinforces its structural stability and objectivity, as it remains constant and unchanging in its reflections.

Lines 6-7:

"Most of the time I meditate on the opposite wall. / It is pink, with speckles. I have looked at it so long / I think it is part of my heart." These lines describe the mirror's daily routine of reflecting the "opposite wall." The wall, "pink with speckles," is a mundane object that the mirror has "looked at so long" that it has become familiar and almost intimate, to the point where the mirror considers it "part of my heart." This personification suggests that even though the mirror is objective, it develops a kind of attachment to what it regularly reflects. The wall, with its pink hue, evokes a sense of warmth or life, in contrast to the cold, metallic nature of the mirror.

Lines 8-9:

■ "But it flickers. / Faces and darkness separate us over and over." The constancy of the wall is interrupted by the "flickering" of people passing by or the onset of darkness. The repetition of "faces and darkness" suggests that the mirror's connection to the wall is often disrupted, perhaps by the movement of life and the passing of time. This disruption represents the transient nature of life and the fact that the mirror's purpose is not only to reflect still objects but also to capture fleeting moments of human interaction. The "faces" suggest the presence of people who look into the mirror, while the "darkness" implies the times when the mirror reflects nothing at all.

Lines 10-11:

"Now I am a lake. A woman bends over me, / Searching my reaches for what she really is." In these lines, the mirror's identity shifts from a "four-cornered" object to a "lake." The lake metaphor introduces fluidity and depth, contrasting with the rigidity of the mirror's previous form. The woman who bends over the lake is searching its depths, metaphorically looking for her true self. The lake symbolizes the complexity of self-reflection, suggesting that one's true identity is not merely on the surface but hidden in deeper layers. The woman's search for "what she really is" reflects a desire for self-understanding, but it also implies that such understanding may be elusive or difficult to attain.

Lines 12-13:

■ "Then she turns to those liars, the candles or the moon. / I see her back, and reflect it faithfully." The woman, dissatisfied with what she sees in the mirror (or lake), turns to "those liars, the candles or the moon." Candles and moonlight symbolize softer, more flattering light, which creates illusions and distorts reality. In contrast, the mirror represents unvarnished truth, while the woman seeks comfort in the gentler, more forgiving light of candles or moon, which metaphorically "lie" by obscuring flaws and creating illusions. However, the mirror "reflects faithfully"—even when the woman turns away, the mirror remains honest, showing her reality as it is.

Lines 14-15:

"She rewards me with tears and an agitation of hands. / I am important to her. She comes and goes." The mirror's reflection provokes an emotional response from the woman. She "rewards" the mirror with "tears and an agitation of hands," indicating frustration or sadness at the truth it reveals. Despite this, the mirror is "important" to her, as she continually returns to it, suggesting that, though painful, the truth is something she cannot avoid. The woman's repeated visits to the mirror symbolize the inevitability of self-examination and the ongoing struggle to come to terms with one's true self, especially in the face of aging and changing identity.

Lines 16-18:

"Each morning it is her face that replaces the darkness. / 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 poem's final lines focus on the passage of time and the inevitability of aging. Every morning, the woman's face "replaces the darkness," suggesting that she begins her day by confronting her reflection in the mirror. The line "In me she has drowned a young girl" implies that the woman has lost her youthful self, which has been submerged or "drowned" in the mirror's reflection. The "old woman" who now "rises toward her day after day" represents the inescapable reality of aging, which the woman must face each time she looks into the mirror. The comparison of the old woman to "a terrible fish" evokes a sense of dread and horror, as the woman is forced to confront the inevitability of her aging and mortality.

Key Themes

The Search for Identity and Self-Perception

- Throughout the poem, the woman's interaction with the mirror reflects a deeper search for self-identity. She looks into the mirror not just to see her physical reflection, but to understand "what she really is." However, the truth that the mirror presents—particularly the truth of aging—provokes a sense of dissatisfaction and discomfort.
- Quotes:
- "A woman bends over me, / Searching my reaches for what she really is."
- This line captures the woman's desire for self-understanding and her use of the mirror as a tool for self-reflection.

The Inevitability of Aging and Mortality

- The poem highlights the inevitability of aging, as the woman watches her youthful self "drown" in the mirror and an old woman rise toward her "like a terrible fish." The mirror's reflection becomes a symbol of time's relentless passage, forcing the woman to confront the physical changes that come with age.
- Quotes:
- "In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman
 / Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish."
- These lines encapsulate the theme of aging and the woman's struggle to accept the changes in her appearance and identity.

The Contrast Between Truth and Illusion

- The mirror in the poem prides itself on its truthfulness, reflecting reality "exactly" and without distortion. However, the woman seeks comfort in "those liars, the candles or the moon," which represent softer, more flattering light that obscures the harsh truth of aging. The poem contrasts the mirror's uncompromising truth with the illusions people create to avoid facing reality.
- Quotes:
- "Then she turns to those liars, the candles or the moon."
- This line highlights the woman's preference for illusion over the harsh truth reflected by the mirror.

Mood of the Poem

The mood of Mirror is contemplative, melancholic, and tinged with a sense of inevitability. The mirror's calm, objective tone contrasts with the woman's emotional response to her reflection, creating a sense of quiet sorrow as she confronts the truth of aging. The mirror's detachment heightens the emotional impact of the woman's struggle with her own changing identity.

LITERARY DEVICES

Personification

■ The mirror is personified throughout the poem, given human qualities such as the ability to "swallow" images and to reflect "faithfully." This personification creates a sense of intimacy between the mirror and the woman, as though the mirror is a passive but powerful observer of her life.

Metaphor

■ The shift from the mirror to the lake serves as a metaphor for self-examination. The lake represents depth and complexity, suggesting that the woman's search for identity goes beyond the surface and into the deeper, hidden aspects of herself.

Imagery

■ Plath uses vivid imagery to convey the passage of time and the woman's emotional reaction to her reflection. The "terrible fish" that rises toward the woman is a haunting image that evokes the fear and horror of aging.

Contrast

The poem contrasts the mirror's objective truth with the woman's emotional turmoil, as well as the truth of the mirror with the illusions created by the "liars, the candles or the moon." This contrast highlights the tension between reality and the desire to escape from it.

Conclusion

Sylvia Plath's Mirror is a powerful meditation on self-perception, aging, and the search for identity. Through the personification of the mirror, Plath explores the complex relationship between truth and illusion, as the woman confronts the unchanging reality reflected back at her. The poem's vivid imagery and melancholic tone convey the inevitability of aging and the emotional struggle that comes with accepting one's changing self. Mirror stands as a poignant reflection on the passage of time and the difficulty of reconciling one's inner self with the external image presented to the world.