



Through the Looking Glass: A Discussion of Doubling in Sylvia Plath's "Mirror"

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The use of the double was common in Sylvia Plath's work. She focused on its use in her senior thesis at Smith, alluded to it throughout her poetry, and turned her personal experience into Esther Greenwood's story in *The Bell Jar*. The double, for Plath, is herself as individual and herself expressed in writing. Judith Kroll argues in *Chapters in a Mythology* that all of Plath's work is one great interconnected epic with herself cast as the heroine. Her husband, the poet Ted Hughes, has said that the apex of this doubling occurred when she finally unleashed the voice of the *Ariel* poems. To Hughes, that voice was a visible demon, and could be seen hovering around Plath as she posed for an artist during the couple's stay at the Yaddo artist colony in 1959. Hughes captured this event in his poem "Portraits": "this dead thing's immortal doppelganger."

In this paper I examine the poem "Mirror" by Sylvia Plath, which was written in October 1961 and appeared in *Crossing the Water*, one of two posthumous collections Hughes published from her leftover manuscripts. She did not deem it strong enough to make the cut for *The Colossus* or *Ariel*; however, in the overall scheme of her epic, it offers us insight into her struggles and demons.

Appearances can be deceptive, and Sylvia Plath was good at deception: her literary legacy is a chronicle of the nice face she put on for outsiders (*Letters Home*), the inner rage of her private thoughts (*Journals*) and the polished professionalism of her lacerating prose and poetry. Despite smiling through photographs as a leggy, All-American blonde, the fury and doom of her poems undermine the superficial exterior other people chose to perceive, or Plath herself chose to project.

Plath challenged the roles and mores of her time through her decisions and her work, kicking open the doors by just trying to survive. A child raised by a single mother, Plath was pushed to strive and over-achieve to not only prove herself but also to please her mother. She chose to put her poetry first, bypassing a successful career as a professor at Smith College to scrape by on grants, bursaries, and her benefactress's handouts. Despite being raised Unitarian,

she embraced the pagan and metaphysical, exploring the occult with her husband Ted Hughes. She lived a Bohemian life of contradictions as an arty poet yet a firmly American middle-class wife and mother. She met society's expectations of a woman in her position, but the double in her poems said exactly what Sylvia Plath really thought of society's expectations.

Plath's poem "Mirror" is an example of this doubling: it pulls together her opinions and displays them in full view while at the same time deceiving the reader by what she does and does not write. On the surface "Mirror" is one of her more accessible poems, it foreshadows the concept of the Male Gaze with its narrator; alludes to the fairy tale of Snow White, using the complicated relationship of mothers and daughters as a metaphor for her relationship with her mother Aurelia; and plays on the superstition of mirrors and the mythology of the Triple Goddess.

In the poem, a woman regularly consults a mirror for answers and is unhappy with the results. The symbolism in this straightforward image is rich. The mirror, which admits it is male by describing itself as "The eye of a little god, four-cornered," is the Male Gaze: it imposes its view on the woman and in so doing makes her the object (Plath 173).

The mirror claims it is without preconceptions, it swallows everything "Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike. / I am not cruel, only truthful", but it manages to communicate to the woman that what it shows her is not what she wants to see (173). It could, for example, show a girl turning into a woman, a woman turning into a mother, a woman growing and becoming wiser and enjoying the experiences that come with age – the life journey of a female; the basis of the Triple Goddess. It focuses on what undermines her confidence: when Plath writes "Then she turns to those liars, the candles or the moon" – the more flattering light sources that mask the horrors the woman thinks she sees in the mirror – the object of the poem only sees the signs of aging in her face, which she thinks devalues her (174).

Plath finishes the poem with: "In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman ... Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish", indicating that youth is prized, youth is beauty, and a woman who has aged is worthless (174).

In a society that wants its women to be homemakers and child carers – wives and mothers first, individuals second, if at all – a woman can only be fulfilled and call herself a success if she gets married and has a baby, usually a boy, and she can only do this well if she is pretty. Plath's mirror prizes the superficiality of appearances, and punishes her double for not measuring up,



despite its claim that it "is not cruel, only truthful" – as though a woman who fears that aging negatively affects her worth does not know how cruel "truth" can be. It is a self-flagellating poem. While Plath uses it as a comment on society, she also uses it to voice her insecurities, which she lets loose to batter her double.

The cruelty of "truth" is also evident in a biographical reading of the poem, in which the correlations to the Brothers Grimm's tale "Snow White" become clear on closer reading.

For a start, the mirror is *talking*. It also claims it has a heart. The woman consults it regularly, and one day the mirror delivers its "truth": that she is not the fairest of them all.

In the first edition of *Snow White*, the Queen is actually *Snow White's* jealous mother, not her stepmother. As Plath was no stranger to her German heritage, and considering the troubles she had with her mother, exemplified in her poem "Medusa", readers can draw the parallels. Plath casts herself as *Snow White* – she regularly represents herself as something "white" in her work – and assigned the role of Evil Queen to her mother.

Aurelia Plath was widowed when Sylvia was eight. She was a fairly young woman at the time, with two children to raise, so she worked jobs that were beneath her intelligence to support her family instead of being the homemaker and academic assistant she had been before the death of her husband Otto.

Aurelia's story is all about her children: scrimping and saving to ensure they went to the best schools, became the absolute best at everything they did, both of them Fulbright scholars. She put away her own literary aspirations and lived vicariously through her children's successes. The perfection of her children was the perfection of herself.

Plath buckled under this pressure. Through the fairy tale, Plath finds a means to voice her irritation by casting *Snow White* as her double. Plath suggests that she has surpassed her jealous mother, the Evil Queen; survived three death attempts, as claimed in "Lady Lazarus"; and was saved by the handsome poet, Ted Hughes.

But the symbolism is deeper than that. After all, when the seven dwarves find the young princess, they "save" her only to make her their housekeeper and cook. And what happens when the handsome prince arrives? It is her beauty that ensnares him, as she is lying stiff in a glass tomb so all could see her youth preserved. She lives happily ever after – keeping house for one man instead of seven dwarves – just as a good wife and mother was expected to do. The woman

in "Mirror" is as much Plath's mother as she is Sylvia giving voice to her dark fears that one day she will become her mother.

Tim Kendall writes in *Sylvia Plath: A Critical Study* that "despite the need to conform, Plath's writings often express loathing for the limiting role models to which they aspire, and self-loathing for their reliance on them. The resulting division between inner and outer selves, which would later become manifested in Plath's obsession with doubles, shows up early in her journals" (Kendall 51).

Maria Tatar, author of *The Annotated Brothers Grimm*, interprets "Snow White" as a polarisation of women between passive and domestic, which is reflected in Plath's poem. In "Mirror", youth is represented by the wall: "Most of the time I meditate on the opposite wall. / It is pink, with speckles" (Plath 173). Here Plath demonstrates innocence through her use of the colour pink and passive/domestic with the wall – the mirror is, after all, a stationary home furnishing. The mirror's voice continues: "I have looked at it so long / I think it is a part of my heart. But it flickers" (173). When a girl is young, she has no need to consult the mirror; she has no idea that the mirror will become so important. With the word "flickers," the reader can see time changing, like one of those stock film sequences of pages flipping off a day calendar: "Faces and darkness separate us over and over" (173).

The mirror does not tell us how the girl becomes a woman, but we see there is movement, action, and something sinister, the mirror isn't sharing. With the next line, in which the mirror describes itself as a lake, the girl is now a woman, an anxious one: "I see her back, and reflect it faithfully. / She rewards me with tears and an agitation of hands. / I am important to her. She comes and goes" (174).

It is here that the mirror sounds most smug. With these lines, the poem shifts, and the mirror becomes evil and active. But what is the mirror not showing us? And what is Plath telling us by her omission?

The mirror says "Each morning it is her face that replaces the darkness," which is to assume that the first thing a woman does each morning is to run to her mirror (174).

Mirrors hold a place in popular culture of folklore and urban legends or myths, especially for teenage girls. Girls and teenagers used to consult their mirrors in the dark to catch a glimpse of their future husbands, or – if they died before marriage – the grim reaper. Sometimes they played the game "Bloody Mary," in which they stood before a mirror in the dark at midnight and



taunted the ghost of Queen Mary about her dead infants in the hope that her spirit would help them divine their futures before quickly turning on the light. "Faces and darkness separate us over and over" – how many times could the woman in the poem have played this game, maybe even with her friends, trying to discern shadowy faces, pretending they are the future that awaits her, the happy life she might lead (173)?

Marriage and motherhood are the root of these legends, because without them a woman of Plath's generation was considered a failure. Yet marriage and motherhood are common tropes in Plath's work. So why has she skipped over them? Why has she chosen to have the mirror 'flicker' through the teenage years of her double becoming a woman?

The mirror likens itself to a god, defining itself as male, and the woman moving from childhood to adulthood represents the Maiden-Mother-Crone aspects of goddess mythology. Use of the first and third aspects indicate a death and regeneration trope of which Plath was fond and revisited often in her work – "The journey of death and rebirth frees the ego from the constraints of its domestic double" (Kendall 95). These lines are the only indications we have for the Mother aspect of the goddess, because Plath gives us Maiden in the form of the pink wall with speckles and the Crone with the "terrible fish" line ending the poem: "In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman / Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish" (174).

While the maiden becomes the crone, the crone also becomes the maiden – although in "Mirror," its speaker does not acknowledge this aspect of the cycle, it chooses to ignore the idea of rebirth, and in so doing, Plath snidely uses the mirror to comment on men: it sees only what it wants to see and ignores that which it fears or cannot understand.

Plath's work is filled with supernatural and metaphysical allusions, and "Mirror" is no exception. The line "Now I am a lake. A woman bends over me, / Searching my reaches for what she really is" describes a woman trying to divine her future – both mirrors and water are used for this purpose (174). Water in particular is a feminine element, and mirrors were long regarded to reflect the soul, hence why breaking one brings bad luck and why vampires cast no reflection. But instead of the Maiden trying to figure out who her husband might be – as Plath crafts this double she already knows the answer – now it is the Crone that stares at her "like a terrible fish" – perhaps pike that are "immense and old," as described in her husband Ted Hughes's poem "Pike," which also ends with fish rising to the surface to stare – searching for lines, wrinkles, flaws that demonstrate the effect of aging, signs of wear and use.

In *Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes*, Margaret Dickie Uroff correlates the Triple Goddess appearance in "Mirror" to Ted Hughes's poem "The Bear" in *Wodwo*. Uroff cites the "moon as bear-goddess" as described by Robert Graves, a deity that rules beginnings and endings, connecting the bear with the double. Hughes identifies the bear at the end of his poem: "He is the ferryman/ To dead land" (Hughes 41). The bear "is representative of the creator-destroyer who glues beginning to end to close the circle of creation. The surrealism of this poem passes through the animal world to some obscure activity behind it" (Uroff 185).

"Mirror" reflects the plight of women in Plath's position but also of all women who feel as though they must remain young and beautiful to be considered relevant. The mirror declares the woman in "Mirror" not a success, and I suspect he is pleased. A truly successful woman has little need of mirrors.



Works Cited

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