

Mirror



SUMMARY

The poem is told from the perspective of a mirror, who starts by describing itself physically as silver-colored and precise. The mirror insists it has no predetermined notions or assumptions about anything, and instead simply takes in whatever stands in front of it right away, exactly the way it is, unclouded by any feelings. The mirror isn't mean or harsh, but simply honest. It's like a small god's eye, only with four corners. For the most part, the mirror focuses on the pink, speckled wall that stands across from it. The mirror has been staring at this wall for so long that it thinks the wall is in fact an essential part of itself. At the same time, that wall goes in and out of focus as people and darkness pass in front of it—and into the mirror's line of sight—again and again.

The mirror becomes the reflective surface of a lake over which a woman leans, looking intently into the water's depths for some hint of who she is inside. Not finding it, she directs her attention to the candle she holds or the moon—sources of light that she thinks must be lying to her by not showing her who she really is. The mirror watches the woman's back as she walks away, and reflects it accurately. The woman thanks the mirror by crying and wringing her hands in distress. The mirror knows that it matters a lot to this woman, who comes back to look into it time and again. Every day starts with the woman's face taking the place of the darkness that the mirror reflected all night. The young girl she once was will never look back at her again, having been metaphorically drowned in the mirror. Instead, as the days go by she sees only the old woman she has become approaching her like an awful fish.

own; it has no desire to make the woman feel bad about herself. It doesn't exist to flatter or insult, but only to reflect appearances truthfully.

The woman, on the other hand, experiences the mirror's objectivity as a pointed reminder of her own mortality. As time passes, she ages and becomes further removed from her youth while getting ever closer to death. The mirror is "important" to the woman, perhaps because women in particular are so often expected to conform to rigid standards of beauty and youth. Unfortunately, then, the very parts of the woman that patriarchal society deems most valuable are also the parts of her that have a time stamp; they are quickly fading.

Even more upsetting is the question of who she is when these parts of herself fade away. On the inside, the woman is the same person she's always been, yet as she gazes into her reflection each morning, she sees "an old woman / Ris[ing] toward her, day after day, like a terrible fish." This description suggests that the woman's reflection is disconcerting, as if the aging process has made her unrecognizable; her changing face feels shocking and unreal. And yet, the mirror insists that it is indeed real. This disconnect between how she feels inside and the harsh reality of the mirror highlights the horror and difficulty of confronting aging and—because aging inevitably leads to death—the idea of mortality.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-5
- Lines 14-18



THEMES



TIME, AGING, AND MORTALITY

The poem describes a woman seeing herself growing older and older in a mirror each day—or, more accurately, it describes a [personified](#) mirror looking on as the woman's youth fades. The woman clearly resents getting older and losing her beauty and youth—two important social currencies for women living in a male-dominated society, especially in Plath's day. The poem thus illustrates the anguish of aging, as the woman confronts her mortality in the mirror each morning.

The first stanza illustrates the objectivity of the mirror, which is only capable of reflecting what it sees. The mirror describes itself as "the eye of a little god." Like a god, the mirror sees things exactly as they are. The mirror has no intentions of its



APPEARANCE AND IDENTITY

While the poem is told from a [personified](#) mirror's point of view, it's really about the woman who sees herself in that mirror. This woman is preoccupied with her reflection, hoping to find in it "what she really is." Even though the mirror itself is objective—in other words, it reflects exactly what stands before it—the woman looking at her reflection still cannot see *herself* in its image. This, the poem implies, is because people are so much more than what they look like on the surface; the mirror only reflects how things appear, not what they *are*.

The mirror at first presents itself as being totally neutral when it comes to bouncing images back to its subjects. It is "silver and exact," and doesn't offer up distorted reflections that are "misted by love or dislike"—that is, reflections that are influenced by feelings. Instead, it presents clear and precise images and has "no preconceptions," meaning that it doesn't have an agenda. It's not bending its image to tell a certain story,

but simply reflects whatever stands before it.

The mirror, then, is trustworthy; one can count on it to tell the truth. The poem suggests that the mirror is “not cruel, only truthful.” This speaks to the fact that although people might not like what they see reflected in the mirror, this isn’t because the mirror is actively trying to hurt them. After all, it is only capable of reflecting what stands in front of it.

But the poem goes on to show the ways that the mirror’s objectivity is only skin-deep, reflecting just the surface of things. The poem [metaphorically](#) compares the woman looking in the mirror to a woman bending over a lake to see her own reflection. When she searches for this image, she can’t find “what she really is”—that is, she doesn’t gain a true sense of self-understanding. The fact that she isn’t just *looking* at her reflection in the lake, but “searching [its] reaches” speaks to her longing to find out something important about herself—something the poem implies cannot be found in the mirror, no matter how carefully she looks.

Although the woman searches the “reaches” of the lake-like mirror, the fact remains that all she can see is a surface-level reflection of herself. This implies that, though the woman wants to discover something deeper about herself, appearances can only reveal so much. The mirror might present a seemingly objective representation of how the speaker looks (even reflecting her image “faithfully” when she turns her back), but it will never be able to reveal the *whole* truth about who she is as a person. There is, after all, much more to people than what meets the eye.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-5
- Lines 10-11
- Lines 12-14



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

*I am silver ...
... love or dislike.*

The poem’s speaker is a [personified](#) mirror. This becomes clear in the first line, when the speaker says, “I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions.” This description immediately lets readers know that the speaker is a literal mirror while also establishing the *voice* of this mirror, which is direct and straightforward.

This straightforward tone makes sense, as the mirror goes on to say that it “swallow[s] immediately” whatever stands in front of it, consuming it “just as it is.” In other words, the mirror isn’t *capable* of embellishment or misdirection—to exaggerate or

conceal certain details would go against its very nature. This is because the mirror has no feelings of its own. It is able to provide an “exact” reflection that is untainted by “love or dislike.” Unlike a person, the mirror doesn’t project feelings onto what it sees. It has no purpose other than to show what is there.

These lines are quite [sibilant](#). Note, for example, the /s/ sounds in the words “silver,” “preconceptions,” “see,” “swallow,” “just,” “unmistaken,” and “dislike.” The sibilance in this section creates a subtle hissing sound that is pleasing and musical. Although the mirror’s overall tone is blunt and straightforward, then, its language sounds poetic and smooth.

LINES 4-5

*I am not ...
... little god, four-cornered.*

The mirror goes on to say that it isn’t “cruel, only truthful.” Once again, the mirror isn’t *capable* of cruelty—any feelings a person has standing in front of a mirror belong to that person, not the mirror. The mirror can only show things as they *are*, not as the person wishes them to be. It is therefore like the “eye of a little god,” a [metaphor](#) that suggests the mirror sees everything and cannot be fooled.

Of course, the mirror isn’t *really* all-seeing. Unlike a god, it can only see the surface of things, and only within the frame of its four corners. Beyond this narrow field of vision, the mirror has no insight or knowledge. And yet, the power of the mirror still seems somewhat divine, since it supposedly shows people the truth about themselves—though the poem will later challenge the idea that mirrors can unveil the truth about anything other than surface-level appearances.

These lines blend [assonance](#) and [consonance](#) together in ways that are subtle but still musical. For example, the consonant /r/ sound appears alongside the assonant /u/ sound in the word “cruel” and “truthful,” giving line 4 (“I am not [...] truthful”) a cohesive and poetic feel. Similarly, the assonant /o/ sound mixes with the consonant /r/ sound in the phrase “four-cornered.” This adds a slight rhythmic bump to the mirror’s language, making sure the poem’s flow remains engaging even if the mirror’s tone is still somewhat straightforward and simple.

LINES 6-9

*Most of the ...
... over and over.*

The mirror spends most of its time “meditat[ing] on the opposite wall.” The word “meditate” implies stillness, introspection, and tranquility. This makes sense, considering that the mirror can only look at whatever lies within its field of vision. The idea of the mirror “meditat[ing]” also underscores the fact that it is calm and unemotional—it simply stares ahead and unfeelingly reflects what it sees.

The mirror goes on in lines 7 and 8 ("It is pink [...] it flickers") to describe its surroundings. Using visual [imagery](#), it notes that the wall across the room is "pink" and "speckle[d]." This is the only information in the poem about the mirror's surrounding environment, but it's not quite enough to indicate what kind of room the poem takes place in. The wall is pink "with speckles," perhaps suggesting that it's covered in some kind of decorative wallpaper. Some readers might take this as a hint that the room is a nursery, a young girl's bedroom, or a women's bathroom, but the limited information about the *rest* of the room makes it all but impossible to come to any concrete conclusions.

This lack of information is a byproduct of the mirror's limited perspective. The mirror itself can only see whatever has been placed directly in front of it, meaning that even *it* might not know where, exactly, it is. Instead of trying to figure out where it has been placed, though, the mirror "meditate[s]" on the details of the wall, concentrating on it so intensely and for so long that it begins to feel like the wall is like "a part of [its] heart." In other words, the mirror can't tell the difference between itself and what it reflects. It has no essential self, only its function—whatever it sees is what it becomes.

But, the mirror goes on to say, the wall "flickers" as "faces and darkness" come between it and the mirror again and again. This means that the mirror is separated from its own heart (the wall) every time someone stands between them or, alternatively, every time darkness falls. This imagery of the "flicker[ing]" wall draws attention to the passing of time: day after day, things come between the mirror and the wall. The use of [diacope](#) in the phrase "**over and over**" points to the fact that this is a seemingly never-ending cycle, one that reminds readers of the monotony of the mirror's life. It also reminds readers of the passage of time—an idea that will become especially important in the second stanza.

In terms of the language in this section, there is a prominent [internal rhyme](#) in lines 6 and 7 ("Most of [...] so long") between "pink" and "think." This lends a satisfying, song-like quality to the moment, making the mirror's language sound pleasingly melodic. The same effect occurs in line 8 ("I think [...] it flickers"), in which another internal rhyme appears between "part" and "heart." These rhymes add a sense of richness to the poem that draws readers from one line to the next.

LINES 10-11

*Now I am ...
... she really is.*

The poem's second stanza begins with a [metaphor](#) in which the mirror presents itself as a lake. More importantly, a woman "bends over" this lake-like mirror and gazes into its "reaches" to see "what she really is." On the one hand, the woman simply stares at a reflection of herself, just the same as if the mirror were hanging on a wall in her house. On the other hand, the metaphor of the mirror as a lake suggests an alluring sense of

depth and mystery.

As the woman peers into the lake, she seems to wonder what lies *beyond* her own image. The words "searching" and "reaches" highlight this idea, especially since the [consonant](#) /ch/ sound emphasizes the words, calling attention to the fact that the woman is desperately looking for something in the furthest depths of the lake. Except, the lake isn't actually a lake at all—it's a mirror, meaning that it doesn't *have* any depth. Instead, it will only show the woman a simple, surface-level reflection of her own face.

This image of a woman looking at her reflection in the lake is most likely an [allusion](#) to the Greek myth of Narcissus, a hunter who caught sight of himself in a pool of water and became obsessed with his own image. In some versions of the myth, he was so distraught that he couldn't have himself as a lover that he drowned himself; in others, he simply withered away. Either way, this myth reveals the dangers of fixating on one's own appearance, a trap the woman gazing into the lake-like mirror seems to have fallen into.

LINES 12-14

*Then she turns ...
... agitation of hands.*

The woman staring at her reflection in the mirror doesn't stay there forever. Instead, she turns away, feeling frustrated and unsatisfied by what she has seen. Unlike [Narcissus](#), she doesn't fall in love with her own reflection, nor does she drown herself or wither away in longing.

Rather, she turns to the "candles or the moon," which the mirror says are "liars." The mirror is critical of candles and the moon because both things are incapable of telling the woman anything about herself. Instead of giving her a reflection of herself, they simply give off soft light—light that will do very little to actually illuminate the woman's search for her true self. The mirror, on the other hand, "faithfully" reproduces the woman's image in an apparent attempt to provide insight into who she is. It even displays her reflection when her back is turned and she's not looking.

Despite the mirror's supposed loyalty to the woman, though, its faithful reproduction of her image does nothing but upset her. She cries and fretfully moves her hands, clearly flustered and unhappy with the way she looks. This illustrates the pressure society places on women to look beautiful and young. Because it's impossible to remain youthfully attractive forever, the mirror can't comfort the woman, since it is nothing but a constant reminder of the fact that she is aging and, in doing so, losing social currency in a male-dominated society.

LINES 15-16

*I am important ...
... replaces the darkness.*

Even though it's clear at this point that the woman has a fraught relationship with the mirror, the [personified](#) mirror proudly claims that it is "important" to the woman. This statement might seem like it contradicts the suggestion in line 14 ("She rewards [...] of hands") that the woman breaks into tears after looking at her reflection, but the fact remains that she continues to return to the mirror. "She comes and goes," the mirror says, noting that her face appears in its reflective glass every morning.

This habitual return to the mirror indicates a certain obsession on the woman's behalf. This brings to mind the earlier [allusion](#) to Narcissus—now, though, it has become clear that the woman isn't drawn to the mirror because she's in love with herself, but because she's hoping to find something in her own reflection that will make her feel better about aging and, in doing so, inching closer to death. And yet, her lack of self-satisfaction doesn't change the fact that she's fixated on her own reflection, which ultimately does nothing but reproduce her image. Despite her desire to discover something deeper about herself in the mirror, all the mirror does is provide her with a surface-level depiction of her physical appearance.

The mirror uses [sibilance](#) in line 16: "Each morning it is her face that replaces the darkness." This sibilant /s/ sound has a hushed quality that perhaps evokes the woman's early-morning routine, creating a gentle swishing effect that matches the image of the woman tip-toeing out of bed and making her way to the mirror. The [assonant](#) long /a/ sound in "face" and "replaces" adds extra musicality to this moment, giving the mirror's language a satisfying, affectionate tone that hints at its close relationship with the woman—a relationship that is also tense (at least for the woman).

LINES 17-18

*In me she ...
... a terrible fish.*

The poem concludes with the mirror saying that the woman has "drowned a young girl" in it and that now "an old woman / Rises toward her" from the depths of the mirror itself. The [metaphor](#) of drowning recalls the mirror's earlier assertion that it "swallow[s]" everything it sees. The mirror has thus consumed the woman's youth, since the woman seems to have spent so much time looking at it and trying to use her reflection to assess her worth. While she's been so hung up on her appearance, it seems, her youth has completely slipped away.

A possible interpretation of this is that the male gaze and patriarchal expectations rob women of the chance to just *exist* in their bodies. Instead of simply living in their bodies, women are encouraged by male-dominated societies to constantly scrutinize their own appearances, always trying to view themselves from someone else's perspective and, in doing so, treating themselves like objects.

The old woman "rising" out of the mirror is an illustration of

how this societal pressure to remain beautiful and young has affected the woman—she is terrorized by the mirror's visual evidence that she's losing her youthful beauty, which is unfortunately one of the few forms of social currency available to her in a misogynist, male-dominated society. With each passing day, the woman's face seems to change into something frighteningly unrecognizable.

With the approach of old age comes the approach of death, which is another reason the image of this old woman feels so frightening. The [simile](#) comparing the woman's aging face to a "terrible fish" captures her distress about getting older while hinting at the strange feeling of unfamiliarity she now has about her very own image. And yet, the woman returns time and again to the mirror, despite the fact that it only seems to terrify and upset her. This is because she's hoping to find something meaningful in the mirror—something that will make her feel better about getting older. The use of [diacope](#) highlights the repetitive nature of this habit, as the mirror notes that the woman stares at herself "day after day." Unfortunately for her, though, the mirror is "truthful" and "exact"; it will reveal the way the woman looks, but nothing deeper or more meaningful.



SYMBOLS



THE MIRROR

The mirror in the poem [symbolizes](#) a few things at once. Most broadly, it represents the unavoidable reality of aging and mortality. The mirror's repeated insistence that it has no agenda or "preconceptions" emphasizes the fact that it is objective, forcing people to face the insistent, painful truth of growing older and dying.

That the woman doesn't recognize, or doesn't *want* to recognize, her own reflection in the mirror thus represents her own inability or refusal to accept that truth—to face her own mortality. Though the woman can see herself reflected "exactly" in the mirror, it's clear that something is missing: she can't find "what she really is," no matter how long she looks or how often she returns to the mirror. Her aging appearance doesn't reflect her inner sense of self. Part of the pain of aging, the poem thus implies, is that people may feel that their bodies no longer match up with their true selves.

On a slightly different level, the mirror subtly evokes the unrealistic and unfair expectations forced upon women by a patriarchal society. In Plath's day, women were expected to appear immaculate while also somehow running a household, caring for their husbands, and serving as full-time caretakers for their children. Since the mirror allows the woman to carefully scrutinize herself, it perhaps comes to represent the pressure she feels to look a certain way.

Unfortunately, it seems this pressure has led to a kind of

obsession, as the woman returns "each morning" to pour over her own image. And yet, studying herself like this does nothing but frustrate her. The mirror thus represents the dangers of fixating on one's own image and the harmful nature of society's misogynistic expectations.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-5
- Lines 10-11
- Lines 13-18



POETIC DEVICES

PERSONIFICATION

The poem is told from the point of view of a mirror, so the whole poem is an example of [personification](#). The mirror is made to think and speak like a person, giving voice to an objective account of the woman standing before her own reflection. Through this use of personification, the poem allows the mirror to comment on the woman's discomfort with her own image. This highlights the way women in male-dominated societies often end up objectifying themselves by ruthlessly scrutinizing their own appearances.

The use of personification also draws attention to the limitations of the mirror. While the mirror is indeed "truthful," it is not the whole truth—it can only see, and reflect, whatever's *visible*. The mirror compares itself to the "eye of a little god," perhaps because of the importance the woman places on it—she returns to it day after day, almost worshiping its ability to reflect her image. Yet, unlike a god, the mirror isn't actually omniscient. In other words, all-seeing isn't the same as all-*knowing*. The mirror can reflect the woman's outer beauty or her signs of aging, but it cannot reflect or know what makes her valuable; it cannot see her thoughts, beliefs, or feelings.

By personifying the mirror, then, the poem tricks readers (at least at first) into giving an inanimate object more power and agency than it actually deserves. The fact that the mirror speaks directly to readers creates the impression that it is capable of meaningful observation. This illustrates the misplaced faith the woman places in the mirror to show her something meaningful about herself. In the end, though, it is nothing but a reflective piece of glass.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-18

CONSONANCE

The [consonance](#) in "Mirror" intensifies the language and calls attention to important words. Consider, for example, the simple

repetition of the hard /c/ sound in the first line:

I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions.

This harsh, biting sound gives the line a rhythmic effect. It also adds emphasis to the words "exact" and "preconceptions," spotlighting the idea that the mirror shows people precise images that are completely unbiased. There's also some [sibilance](#) in this line, since the /s/ sound adds a hissing effect to the words "silver," "preconceptions," and even—to a certain extent—"exact." This smooths out the line, offsetting the harshness of the /c/ sound.

Elsewhere, several different kinds of consonance layer atop one another, making the language sound especially rich and poetic. For example, consider the way the /p/, /k/, /l/, /rt/, and /s/ sounds appear in lines 7 through 9:

It is pink, with speckles. I have looked at it so long
I think it is part of my heart. But it flickers.

Faces and darkness separate us over and over.

Consonant sounds like the /rt/ in "part" and "heart" are especially noticeable, tying the words together and—in doing so—underlining the idea that the mirror feels connected to the opposing wall. The /l/ sound, on the other hand, links words like "looked" and "long," highlighting the fact that the mirror can only "look" at whatever's in its field of view—since the wall is directly across the room, the mirror has had quite a lot of time to study it. Through all of this, the sibilant /s/ sound works its way through the lines, appearing in words like "faces," "darkness," "separate," and "us." This gives the section a soft, lisping quality that sounds flowing and musical.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "silver," "exact," "preconceptions"
- **Line 2:** "Whatever," "see," "swallow"
- **Line 3:** "Just," "unmistakenly," "love," "dislike"
- **Line 4:** "cruel, only truthful"
- **Line 5:** "four-cornered"
- **Line 6:** "time," "meditate," "opposite"
- **Line 7:** "pink," "speckles," "looked," "long"
- **Line 8:** "think," "part," "heart," "flickers"
- **Line 9:** "Faces," "darkness," "separate," "us"
- **Line 11:** "Searching," "reaches for," "really"
- **Line 12:** "turns," "liars," "candles," "moon"
- **Line 13:** "back," "reflect," "faithfully"
- **Line 14:** "rewards," "tears"
- **Line 16:** "face," "replaces," "darkness"
- **Line 18:** "Rises toward her," "after," "terrible"

ASSONANCE

[Assonance](#) links pairs of words throughout the poem,

emphasizing their relationship and—on a more basic level—adding musicality to the language. In line 2, for example, the /ee/ sound appears twice:

Whatever I see I swallow immediately

This gives the line a cohesive, melodic feel. It also makes the words "see" and "immediately" a bit more noticeable, subtly accentuating the idea that the mirror quickly devours whatever is in front of it. The word "preconceptions" in line 1 ("I am silver [...] preconceptions") also anticipates this /ee/ sound, highlighting the speaker's use of assonance and giving the beginning of the poem a particularly harmonious sound.

A similar effect appears in line 8, when the mirror thinks that the wall is "part of [its] heart." The /a/ sound here combines with the [consonant](#) /rt/ to create an [internal rhyme](#). This adds a certain intensity to the speaker's tone—an intensity that aligns with the mirror's feeling that the opposing wall has become part of its very own heart. This suggests that the mirror thinks whatever has been placed in front of it is actually part of its very own being. The mirror, then, has no sense of self beyond the function it performs. In the same way, the woman seems to struggle with who she is beyond her role as an object to be looked at.

In line 16, the speaker uses the long /ay/ sound, which gives the moment an almost song-like quality:

Each morning it is her face that replaces the darkness.

Combined with the [sibilant](#) /s/ sound, this assonant /a/ creates another subtle internal rhyme that is quite pleasing to the ear. Assonance thus helps the mirror's language sound satisfying and smooth.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "exact," "have," "preconceptions"
- **Line 2:** "see," "immediately"
- **Line 3:** "is," "unmisted," "dislike"
- **Line 4:** "cruel," "truthful"
- **Line 8:** "part," "heart," "it flickers"
- **Line 9:** "Faces," "separate"
- **Line 11:** "reaches," "really"
- **Line 13:** "see," "faithfully"
- **Line 16:** "face," "replaces"

DIACOPE

The use of diacope in "Mirror" adds to the poem's sense of passing time, drawing attention to the idea that the woman returns to the mirror multiple times over the course of days, months, years. There are two instances of diacope, both of

which occur at the end of a stanza, as if to imply that this repetition—this routine—carries on beyond the scope of the poem. In other words, the poem is short, but the scenarios it describes will continue to repeat themselves.

The first instance of diacope is in line 9, when the mirror says that both darkness and people looking at their reflections frequently separate the mirror from the opposing wall: "Faces and darkness separate us **over and over**." The repetition of the word "over" demonstrates the dailiness of this routine, indicating that the mirror has become very accustomed to these disturbances. The drudgery of watching the same thing occur day in and day out comes through in this moment, as the mirror's language hints at this sense of unending repetition.

In the last line of the poem, the mirror describes the way that the woman sees an older version of herself "[r]ising toward her[self] **day after day**, like a terrible fish." Again, the use of diacope allows the poem to enact the repetition it is describing. It evokes the dread the woman must feel looking into the mirror each day, the constant reminder not only that her youth is slipping away, but also that she is inching toward death.

Where Diacope appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "over and over"
- **Line 18:** "day after day"

METAPHOR

While the poem is told from the point of view of the mirror, its [metaphors](#) tell the reader something about the woman's feelings. For instance, in line 2 the mirror says, "Whatever I see I swallow immediately." The reader knows that the mirror doesn't *actually* swallow what it sees; it only reflects it. But the mirror does *appear* to swallow what it sees—that is, the mirror immediately contains and seemingly consumes whatever appears before it. This metaphor hints at the way the woman feels about the mirror; that it is consuming her, or that she is being consumed by her own reflection. She can't stop thinking about the way she appears to others.

By describing itself as the "eye of a little god" in line 5, the mirror implies that it is all-knowing, or at least all-seeing, but of course the reader knows that it's not; the mirror can only see what is immediately visible. The description also perhaps suggests something about the woman's attitude and the way she views the mirror. She is almost worshipful of the mirror and afraid of what she will see reflected there.

In line 10 ("Now I [...] over me") the mirror metaphorically describes itself as a lake. This suggests that, despite its simple reflective surface, it is like a deep and dark body of water—something in which a person like the woman might lose herself. To that end, the mirror says that the woman has "drowned a young girl" in it, indicating that the woman feels as if she has lost touch with the "young girl" she used to see

staring back at her in the reflective surface.

Now, the mirror says, the woman only sees an "old woman / ris[ing] toward her day after day." The fact that this vision of an elderly woman "rises" at the woman indicates that she feels affronted or overwhelmed by the image. It's almost as if the sight of her aging face feels like an attack. By metaphorically presenting itself as a lake, then, the mirror makes itself seem mysterious and even a bit ominous, thus conveying the woman's fear of aging. In the same way that the woman would fear the sight of a stranger "ris[ing]" toward her from the depths of a deep lake, she fears the image the mirror shows her of herself as she ages.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Whatever I see I swallow immediately"
- **Line 3:** "unmistaken by love or dislike"
- **Line 5:** "The eye of a little god"
- **Lines 7-8:** "I have looked at it so long / I think it is part of my heart"
- **Lines 10-11:** "Now I am a lake. A woman bends over me, / Searching my reaches for what she really is"
- **Lines 17-18:** "In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman / Rises toward her day after day"

SIMILE

There is only one [simile](#) in the poem, which appears in the last two lines ("In me she [...] a terrible fish."). The simile is part of a larger [metaphor](#) suggesting that the woman's image "rises" toward her from the lake-like mirror. As the woman watches this happen, she feels like she's looking at someone else entirely. Of course, this strange "old woman" is in fact the woman herself—a version of herself she finds horrifying. Appalled by this reflection, the woman feels as if the old woman staring back at her is like "a terrible fish."

This simile suggests that the woman feels as unfamiliar with her own reflection as she would feel with a random fish swimming toward her. Unable—or perhaps unwilling—to recognize herself, she feels as if her face is a completely different species. This, she seems to think, is not who "she really is." Her reflection is too "terrible" to be real.

The simile also recalls the beginning of the poem, when the mirror claims to "swallow immediately" whatever it sees. Leaning over the lake, the woman feels like she is going to be swallowed by her reflection. In other words, old age is going to consume her.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 17-18:** "and in me an old woman / Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish"

IMAGERY

The [imagery](#) in "Mirror" is very straightforward, but it's an important part of the poem—after all, the entire poem is about reflected images! The brief visual descriptions that appear throughout the lines therefore help establish the poem's focus on sight and physical appearance.

For example, the poem begins with a clear and vivid example of imagery, as the mirror describes itself as "silver and exact." This description of the mirror's color allows readers to envision it a bit more clearly. To add to this, the mirror says that it's "exact," suggesting that it is precise, factual, and unsparingly tied to reality. In other words, its silvery glass will display accurate representations of whatever stands before it.

In line 5 ("The eye [...] four-cornered"), the mirror describes itself as the "eye of a little god, four-cornered." This once again provides readers with visual information about the mirror, making it easier to picture it. The fact that it's "four-cornered" clarifies that it is a square or rectangular shape, not circular. The use of imagery also gives readers information about where, exactly, the mirror is located: it sits across from a pink wall "with speckles."

All of this information might seem somewhat trivial, but it helps readers create a portrait of the poem's general landscape. Given that "Mirror" is about how the woman perceives her own image in the mirror, this ordinary but detail-oriented imagery is particularly relevant, highlighting the poem's special attention to sight and appearance.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "I am silver and exact."
- **Line 5:** "The eye of a little god, four-cornered."
- **Line 7:** "It is pink, with speckles."
- **Lines 8-9:** "But it flickers. / Faces and darkness separate us over and over."
- **Line 16:** "Each morning it is her face that replaces the darkness."

ALLUSION

Lines 10 and 11 ("Now I am [...] she really is") feature a possible [allusion](#) to the [Greek myth of Narcissus](#). According to myth, Narcissus was a hunter who fell in love with every beautiful thing. He himself was very beautiful—so beautiful that he became obsessed with his own image when he caught sight of his reflection in a pool of water. Unable to look away, he wanted no lover but himself. In some versions of the myth, he withered away in this state, rejecting lovers who couldn't live up to his impossible expectations. In other versions, he killed himself, realizing he could never truly possess what he sought: his own loveliness.

The idea of narcissism comes from this myth. Narcissists are people who are overly attached to or fixated on themselves and

their own appearances. In "Mirror," this dynamic is a little different, since the woman doesn't fall in love with her own image, but actually comes to *fear* and even detest her reflection. And yet, the woman comes back to gaze at herself in the mirror "day after day," indicating that she's still obsessed with her own appearance, even if this obsession isn't fueled by self-love or self-admiration.

Perhaps part of what brings the woman to the mirror time and again is the pressure that a male-dominated society puts on women to look beautiful and young. This was even more true in the 1960s, when Plath wrote the poem. The poem is therefore a reversal of the Narcissus myth, as the woman fixates on her supposedly undesirable physical qualities instead of focusing on her own beauty. The result, though, is the same: just like Narcissus, she suffers because she spends so much time scrutinizing her reflection.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

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

ENJAMBMENT

The majority of the poem's lines are [end-stopped](#), but there are three instances of [enjambment](#). These enjambed lines offer a brief change of pace, making the poem sound less monotonous and predictable. Although the mirror's tone is somewhat flat and straightforward, these moments of enjambment ensure that the poem's overall flow isn't too stilted.

This variation between end-stopped lines and enjambment occurs early in the poem. Line 1 is end-stopped (and comprised of two short sentences), whereas line 2 is a single enjambed sentence that stretches over a line break:

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 line breaks after "immediately," but the lack of punctuation combined with the flow of the phrase itself encourages the reader to keep going without pause. The poem's quick pace here illustrates the mirror's ability to immediately reflect exactly what it sees.

Line 7 is also enjambed, since the sentence that carries over into line 8 begins halfway through the line:

It is pink, with speckles. I have looked at it so **long**
I think it is part of my heart. But it flickers.

The carrying over of this sentence seems to reflect the duration of time in which the mirror has been staring at the wall, a duration of time that has led the mirror to identify with the wall,

seeing it as part of itself. This echoes the woman's identification with her own reflection, which she has also been looking at for a long time, albeit intermittently.

Line 17, which is the longest line in the poem, is also enjambed:

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 length of this sentence seems to encapsulate the entirety of the woman's life, ranging from her youth to her old age. In this way, the poem ends with a less measured, less controlled feeling, as readers feel the woman's sense of dread about the fact that her life is speeding by all too quickly.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "immediately / Just"
- **Lines 7-8:** "long / I"
- **Lines 17-18:** "woman / Rises"



VOCABULARY

Preconceptions (Line 1) - An assumption, prejudice, or some other kind of preconceived idea.

Unmisted (Lines 2-3) - Not clouded; clear.

Meditate (Line 6) - To contemplate or focus on something with great concentration.

Speckles (Line 7) - Flecks or freckles; small blotches of color.

Agitation (Line 14) - To be "agitated" means to feel anxious, excited, and possibly even upset.



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The poem consists of two nine-line [stanzas](#). Because the first and second stanzas are of equal length, the visual effect of the poem is similar to that of a mirror reflecting an image. The first stanza focuses on the mirror's description of itself and its observations of its surroundings, while the second stanza introduces the woman who looks into the mirror each day. As the mirror stares out at the room, then, the woman stares into it. This creates a feeling of simultaneous separation and attraction that the poem's form mimics, since the stanzas are clearly split from one another but remain connected by their equal lengths and tonal similarities.

METER

"Mirror" is written in [free verse](#), meaning that there is no set meter. This lack of meter is part of what makes the poem feel

very direct, contributing to the mirror's straightforward, unadorned way of speaking. There's even a flatness to the language that makes sense for the mirror, who—after all—has no depth or dimension: it is just a reflective surface. While many of Plath's poems are characterized by intense sounds and knotted language, this effect is largely absent from this specific poem. Instead of using meter to create a dense and complex overall sound, the poem uses free verse to evoke the "exact," "truthful," and unemotional nature of the mirror.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem has no rhyme scheme, nor does it use any [end rhymes](#). This overall lack of rhyme, like the lack of meter, contributes to the feeling of directness in the poem. The mirror is matter-of-fact and embellishes nothing. It neither reveals nor conceals, but simply shows what is visible.

There are, however, a few [internal rhymes](#) throughout the poem. The words "see" and "immediately" in line 2, for example, create a [slant rhyme](#) that leads to a subtly cohesive sound: "Whatever I see I swallow **immediately**." Similarly, the /ru/ sound in "cruel" and "truthful" creates another internal slant rhyme in line 4: "I am not **cruel**, only **truthful**."

In line 8, the mirror uses a more prominent internal rhyme, saying that the wall across the room has become "**part**" of its "**heart**." This is the first full rhyme in the poem and thus calls attention to the idea that whatever appears before the mirror actually becomes *part* of the mirror. On a more basic level, though, this rhyme—along with all of the other internal rhymes—simply adds a small amount of musicality to the poem, which otherwise features a flat, matter-of-fact tone.



SETTING

"Mirror" takes place in a seemingly domestic setting. The mirror itself is in a pink room "with speckles" on the wall, suggesting that it's possibly in a bedroom or bathroom. The fact that the woman returns to it "each morning" also implies that it's in her home, since it's part of her daily routine.

However, it's difficult to say anything else about the poem's setting, since the mirror can only describe whatever appears in its narrow field of vision. The only concrete details about the surroundings have to do with the opposing wall, the fact that darkness falls every night, and the appearance each morning of the woman's face. Beyond this, the mirror is incapable of telling readers anything about the setting, presenting a very limited point of view that hints at the fact that mirrors can't actually reveal very much about the things they reflect.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"Mirror" was published in the 1971 posthumous collection of Sylvia Plath's poetry, *Crossing the Water* (though Plath wrote the poem in 1961, shortly before turning 29). Plath is often grouped with other poets of her time, including Anne Sexton, Robert Lowell, and John Berryman. All of these poets wrote from a place of intense personal experience, using poetry to express and explore previously taboo subjects such as mental illness and the struggles of marriage and family life. They are referred to as "[Confessional](#)" poets, a term first used by a critic responding to Lowell's collection *Life Studies*.

Life Studies had a great impact on Plath, as did Sexton's poetry. Both Lowell and Sexton tore away the masks and pretenses typically associated with lyric poetry, instead opting for immediacy, vulnerability, and directness. Where poets had previously tried to create "universal" poems that many people would find relatable, the Confessional poets dug deep into the personal and the specific. They only tried to speak for themselves. In doing so, they ended up creating poetry that is arguably even *more* relatable because it speaks to the private thoughts and insecurities that most people have from time to time.

This approach was groundbreaking in the 1960s because it shattered the illusion of decorum so insisted on by society. By rupturing these norms, Confessional poets exposed the underbelly of polite American life. The impact of Confessionalism on American poetry can't be overstated, and its reverberations can still be felt in contemporary poetry.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Plath entered adulthood in the United States during the 1950s, a period characterized by many repressive social norms and a



SPEAKER

The speaker of this poem is a literal mirror! This becomes apparent early on, since the title is "Mirror" and the speaker describes itself as "silver and exact" and having "no preconceptions." The mirror sees the world (or the little bits of the world that appear in front of it) through an unsentimental "eye." It is like a god that passes judgement on those who stand before it—not out of a desire to be mean, but out of an inability to do anything other than tell the truth.

The mirror claims to have a heart, but since its heart is partially made up of the wall it looks at every day, it's safe to say that this heart isn't like a human heart at all. The speaker doesn't feel passion, sorrow, or fear, but simply reflects whatever happens to be in front of it. And its "faithfulness" to the woman isn't a form of love or duty, but simply a byproduct of the mirror's primary purpose: to reflect everything that comes into its view. As a speaker, then, the mirror is matter-of-fact and objective, providing a straightforward account of what it sees.

return to traditional family values in the wake of World War II. From a young age, Plath bristled against expected gender roles, resenting the idea that she was expected to marry, have children, and give up her own ambitions—all expectations that were common in the late 1950s and early 1960s, when Plath wrote "Mirror."

The male-dominated, patriarchal culture during the 1950s and '60s also put an enormous amount of pressure on women to look young and beautiful. The cultural expectation was that women must maintain their physical appearances while also caring for their husbands and children. There was, then, very little room for personal ambition and independence, both of which Plath tried to retain after marrying in 1956 and having her first child in 1960.

"Mirror" captures the poet's unease regarding the stifling standards women faced in American society during this period. The woman who stares in the mirror is subject to the era's patriarchal expectations, and this is most likely why she breaks into tears each morning after looking in the mirror—seeing her own reflection reminds her that she's aging, and this goes against the unforgiving, sexist, and unrealistic standards to which society holds her.

[symbolism-of-mirrors-in-womens-literature-abb9bb5c2e7](https://www.litcharts.com/symbolism-of-mirrors-in-womens-literature-abb9bb5c2e7)

- [The Poet's Voice](#) — Check out this recording of Plath reading a selection of her earlier poems, most of which were featured in *The Colossus*, her only book published during her lifetime. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zOv9_ksYwAg&feature=emb_title)
- [Biography and Poems](#) — An overview of Sylvia Plath's life and work, along with a number of her poems to explore. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/sylvia-plath>)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER SYLVIA PLATH POEMS

- [Daddy](#)
- [Fever 103°](#)
- [Lady Lazarus](#)
- [Mad Girl's Love Song](#)
- [Nick and the Candlestick](#)
- [Poppies in October](#)
- [The Applicant](#)
- [The Arrival of the Bee Box](#)
- [The Moon and the Yew Tree](#)



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MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [A Reading of the Poem](#) — Hear the poem read aloud. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6nZht4WMoMo>)
- [An Interview with Plath](#) — An interview with the poet by Peter Orr for the BBC, in which she talks about her influences and process. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g2IMsVpRh5c>)
- [Mirrors and Women](#) — A brief essay by Neve Akridge about the significance of mirrors in women's literature (<https://medium.com/the-nerdy-virginias/the-mystical->