

28/5/15

2. Mirror (Sylvia Plath)

22/6/16

ABOUT THE POET

Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) who also used the pseudonym Victoria Lucas was born in Massachusetts on October 27, 1932. During her early childhood, Sylvia's father Otto suffered from a lengthy illness and died just days past Sylvia's 8th birthday.

Although brief in conventional terms, Sylvia's life was rich in experiences. She received accolades in the form of prizes, awards, and scholarships. In 1982 she received the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry for her *Collected Poems*.

Bright, intelligent and determined, Sylvia had a burning desire to write. She was a high achiever who was never able to quite reach the very high expectations she set for herself. Stricken with self-doubt and depression, Sylvia had a troubled life.

She was married to Ted Hughes who was himself a very famous poet.

"On February 11, 1963 Sylvia gave up her life."

ABOUT THE POEM

Introduction:

Giving an autobiographical account of itself, the mirror has highlighted its qualities in the poem "Mirror." Claiming that though certain images reflected in it might be painful to certain people at certain stages of their lives, it is in no way responsible for causing this pain because it reflects exactly what it sees. The whole poem is a reflection of the mirror's point of view.

Summary:

This eighteen line poem presents the mirror as a person, who reveals in a monologue who it is, what it does and how it reflects and affects the life of the people who view themselves in it.

one person speaks

effect -> noun

Person
31212
verb

Unlike the people who view themselves in it, the mirror is free from any preconceptions and prejudices. Its 'reflection' or view of others is not distorted by emotion of love or hatred, as is the case with human beings. Human beings might consider it 'cruel' as it shows them their real selves in true colours, but the mirror reflects only the truth.

Like God, the mirror is also omniscient. It sees all. It gazes constantly on the wall opposite it for so long that the wall becomes a part of its consciousness and existence. The wall is pink with traces of age and it like patches of discoloration. The mirror's view of the wall is interrupted when an old woman stands between the two. Darkness the night separates the mirror from the 'wall' for no view is possible without the light.

Next, the mirror calls itself a lake, for the lake also acts like a mirror and reflects everything in its true likeness. As the ageing woman faces the mirror, it projects her very truthfully. Her wrinkled face upsets her. Rubbing her hands anxiously, and with tears in her eyes, she stands in front of the mirror again and again. Every morning, she starts the day by having a good look at herself. Probably she searches for the youthful face which over years got merged with the mirror. Instead she catches sight of an old woman who emerges out of the pond of time like a figure which rather than looking graceful and attractive, looks terrible and ugly as she leaps out of the pond.

THEME

The poem deals with our sense of anxiety when we start showing signs of ageing. Everyone wishes to stay youthful and beautiful throughout one's life. However, this being against the law of nature, can never be possible. Hence we need to develop an inner strength to face all stages of life gracefully.

MESSAGE

The poem conveys the message that rather than living in the world...

illusions, we need to change our attitude and learn to face and accept reality without indulging in self-pity.

TITLE

The poem deals with mirror's exactness, truthfulness and human beings' relationship with it for years together. The whole poem revolves around the mirror, hence "Mirror" is an appropriate title.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem doesn't have any rhyme scheme. It has been written in free verse. However the poem does have an inner music.

ANNOTATIONS

- The poem is a monologue of the protagonist Mirror.
- **I am silver** : I am the colour of silver. Most mirrors have an electroplated layer of silver on one side to reflect light.
- **exact** : The images I show are accurate. I am free from all distortions. I show things as they are.
- **I have no preconceptions** : I do not judge others with pre-conceived ideas like the human beings judge others.
- **whatever I see I swallow immediately** : I absorb whatever I see / Image of everything is formed in me / I accept as true whatever I see / I resist to express my feelings about whatever I see.
- **just as it is** : without any change or distortion.
- **unmistaken by love or dislike** : People's view of others is affected by their love or hatred. It is difficult for people to be as truthful and objective as the mirror is.
- **I am not cruel** : Since I am exact, truthful and objective, I might occur to others as unfeeling and cruel but I am not so.
- **the eye of a little god** : Like God, the mirror sees the truth and views everything in all the corners of the world. By comparing itself to an 'eye of a god', the mirror at once becomes something mystic and

- divine - something godly, something above the ordinary and the worldly.
- **four-cornered** : I have four corners. (The frame in which the mirror is set has four corners). Four corners can also mean all the four directions, and therefore, the whole of the world. Like God, the mirror sees everything from all the four angles.
 - **meditate on the opposite wall** : to meditate here means that mirror constantly looks at the wall opposite it. All the time seeing its reflection on its surface, the wall has become an integral part of its existence.
 - **It is pink, with speckles** : The pink wall with discoloured spots.
 - **I have looked at it so long** : I have been gazing at the wall for years.
 - **a part of my heart** : it has become an integral part of my being, my consciousness, my existence.
 - **it flickers** : the wall flickers *i.e.* its view shakes and dims with changes in the shades of light.
 - **faces and darkness separate us** : People's faces and the darkness interrupt the mirror's view of the wall when they stand between the mirror and the wall.
 - **now I am a lake** : A lake also acts like a mirror because the surface of water reflects images just like the mirror.
 - **A woman bends over me** : A woman looks at herself closely in the mirror.
 - **searching my reaches** : explores the depth of time / goes down memory lane / looks at her old wrinkled face which is her reality now and regrets the loss of her youth / she is reminded of the times she used to admire her beauty in the mirror.
 - **what she really is** : Looking at herself, the woman wonders : "Is this me? No, it cannot be. I'm not so wrinkled. If this is me really, then who was that beautiful woman I used to view in the mirror earlier?"

• **those liars, the candles or the moon** : 'candles' and the 'moon' are liars as one cannot see one's true image in dim light and all the wrinkles and blemishes get hidden. They allow the woman to live in illusion about her youth and beauty.

• **I see her back** : When the woman turns her face away from the mirror, the mirror can see her back.

• **reflect it faithfully** : The mirror's reflection of the woman continues to be true, real, objective and dispassionate, even as she has turned her back on it. The mirror does not flatter or please the woman by presenting before her an image of hers she would love to see.

• **she rewards of hands** : The woman views her old wrinkled self in the mirror and weeps and rubs and twists her hands anxiously over the loss of her youth and beauty.

• **I am important to her** : I have been the woman's close companion for so many years. She cannot do without me.

• **she comes and goes** : She comes to me, views herself in me, feels upset and agitated and goes away only to come back again.

• **each morning darkness** : The first thing the woman does in the morning is view herself in the mirror.

• **In me young girl** : The woman has been viewing herself in the mirror ever since she was a young girl. That youth and beauty seems to have dissolved in me.

• **an old woman/Rises toward her** : Every morning, the woman comes to the mirror hoping to see her youthful self but gets to see only her old wrinkled face.

• **a terrible fish** : an ugly looking creature. The woman feels she has become very ugly – terribly ugly. The loss of her youth and beauty makes her behave like a fish out of water. She seems to be horrid with no grace or elegance, as she leaps out of the pond of time.

SHORT ANSWER QUESTIONS

(to be answered in about 40 words each)

Q1. In what way is the mirror 'exact'?

The mirror reflects whatever it sees in all its exactness. It does not hide, tone down, twist or distort what it sees as the human beings do nor does it enhance the beauty of any reflection. It projects the truth in its entirety.

Q2. What does the poet mean by the expression, "I have no preconceptions"?

The poet means that the mirror is absolutely unbiased. It reflects exactly what it sees without adding or subtracting. The mirror does not have any preconceived notions about things. It neither has any likes nor dislikes. Hence, its reflection is totally dependable.

Q3. How does the mirror 'swallow'? What is the poetic device used here? (Textual)

Reflecting what is present in front of it, the mirror does not reproduce anything that appeared before it in past. Hence, using personification the poet has beautifully used the expression 'swallow' to convey this idea. Like living human beings the inanimate mirror is shown to consume and draw in what it is fed.

Q4. What is the significance of the expression 'unmisted' in the first stanza of the poem? Why has the mirror been described as being 'unmisted'?

'Mist' blocks the view making the visibility poor. Hence unmisted means giving a clear and a distinct image. Being unbiased and having no preconceptions the mirror is unmisted, that is, it is 'clear', 'objective' and 'dispassionate' in reflecting what it sees.

Q5. What disturbs the mirror's contemplation of the opposite wall? (Textual)

Appearance of some individual between the mirror and the wall disturbs its contemplation during the day time. During the night when darkness swallows everything, the mirror is unable to catch sight of the wall, hence its meditation gets disturbed.

Q6. **What stands between the mirror and the opposite wall time and again? How does the mirror feel about this interruption?**

Time and again people come between the mirror and the opposite wall, thus blocking its view. Then again the absence of light also interrupts its meditation. The mirror accepts this repeated interference with a sense of resignation.

Q7. **The mirror calls itself by another name. What is it? Why do you think this comparison has been made? Or**

Why does the mirror appear to be a lake in the second stanza? What aspect of the mirror do you think is being referred to here?

(Textual)

The mirror aptly compares itself to a lake. Both the objects have the quality of reflecting the image of what appears before them. Both do it truthfully without any prejudice. Just as whatever falls on the surface of the lake is drowned in it, the mirror also swallows whatever falls on its surface.

Q8. **What poetic device has been used when the mirror calls itself a lake? What is the woman searching for in the depths of the lake?**

(Textual)

The poet has made use of a metaphor. Rather than comparing the mirror to a lake, the mirror has been called a lake. The woman is gauging the damage done by the passage of time and is searching for her lost youth and beauty in this lake.

Q9. **Why have the candles and the moon been called 'liars'?**

The candles and the moon have been called liars as their dim light hides the blemishes and wrinkles on one's face. As they

mislead one into believing that they are still youthful and beautiful, the poet feels they conceal the truth and give people a false sense of satisfaction.

Q10. Why does the woman turn to the moon and the candles in spite of the fact that they are liars?

(HOT)

Knowing fully well that moon and candles would not reflect her with all truthfulness, the woman turns to them to get (though false) a mental satisfaction that age is not catching up with her and she is still comely and youthful.

Q11. Who turns her back on the mirror and why?

The woman who has lost her youth turns her back on the mirror as she cannot bear to look at her ugly wrinkled face for long. She turns away from the mirror that reflects reality and she does not dare face the stark reality.

Q12. Why does the woman start crying? What does her weeping reveal about her character?

(Textual)

The woman once young, has started losing her youth and beauty. Not ready to accept the change, she is very upset and she starts weeping. It reveals her to be a woman of weak and vain character whose life becomes miserable because she cannot reconcile to the signs of ageing.

Q13. How is the mirror important to the woman?

The woman has 'seen' herself in the mirror from her girlhood days to her old age. The mirror has always recorded and reflected all the changes in her. It is her companion and confidant. It shows her true self to her. Thus the mirror is very important to her.

Q14. Why does the woman often come to the mirror? Why does she go away immediately?

The woman is used to looking at herself in the mirror. She has

been fond of admiring her youth and beauty as reflected by the mirror. But now having aged she does not like her wrinkled and lack-lustre face. She regrets the loss of her youth and withdraws as soon as she sees her ugliness in the mirror.

Q15. Are 'the young girl' and 'the old woman' the same person or different persons? Give reason for your answer.

Yes, the two of them are the same person. Looking at herself in the mirror, the old woman travels down memory lane right upto her youthful days. Unable to accept her ageing, she searches for it in the depths of the mirror.

Q16. Why do you think the poet refers to as the fish in the last line? Why has it been described as being 'terrible'?

Or

What do you think the 'terrible fish' in the last line symbolizes?

What is the poetic device used here? (Textual)

The phrase 'terrible fish' describes the hog like and wrinkled face of the old woman. The loss of her youth and beauty makes her behave like a terrible fish trapped in the pond of time. As it leaps out of the lake, it looks horrid as all the charm, grace and beauty of her youth has faded away.

Q17. What does the poet mean by, 'she has drowned a young girl'?

Here the poet means that right from her youthful days the woman used to view herself in the mirror but now that young face is nowhere to be seen. Thus, the young girl has merged in the mirror as she is a thing of past. The mirror cannot reflect that image again, hence she is referred to as 'drowned'.

Q18. How is the mirror different from most of the people who view themselves in it? Or

How does the mirror typically differ from most human beings?

Unlike the people who view themselves in it, the mirror is free

from any preconceptions and prejudices. Its 'reflection' or view of others is not tinted or misted by emotion of love or hatred. It is the case with human beings. Unmoved by anybody's tears, worries, anxieties and expectations it reflects exactly what it sees.

Q19. Why is the woman who views herself in the mirror agitated, and has tears in her eyes?

The woman is fond of viewing her beauty in the mirror and admiring it. However, time and ageing have robbed her beauty and wrinkled her face. Unwilling and unable to accept reality, she weeps out of agitation.

Q20. How is the mirror like a god and a lake?

The mirror is like a god with its all-seeing eyes - it sees everything in an unbiased and fair manner just as God does. It is like a lake because both the lake and the mirror reflect images of things around them.

Q21. What different qualities of the mirror have been brought out by the poet?

The mirror is truthful, exact, unbiased and unprejudiced. Having four corners, it reflects all that it captures with its all-seeing eyes from various angles. Its images are realistic, dependable and not tainted by its likes and dislikes. However, it cannot reproduce the past.

Q22. How does the mirror spend its time?

Or

How does the mirror usually pass its time?

(Textual)

Even when not actively at work, the mirror is busy reflecting the wall opposite it. This reflection is interrupted only when someone stands between it and the wall or when darkness blocks all visibility. When someone stands in front of it, it reflects the image dutifully.

23. What is meant by the agitation of hands? What causes the agitation of the woman's hands?

'Agitation of hands' means rubbing and twisting of the hands in a state of helplessness and anxiety. The reflection of the woman's disappearing youth, fading beauty and the wrinkled face cause this agitation of hands.

24. It is not the mirror but the woman herself who is responsible for the pain that she experiences. Comment. (HOTS)

It is not the mirror but the woman herself who is responsible for the pain that she is experiencing. The mirror is reflecting her image faithfully. It is she herself who unable to accept her ageing gracefully, indulges in self-pity bringing about suffering upon herself.

25. How does the narrator convey the fact that the woman looking at her reflection in the lake is deeply distressed? (Textual)

The poet brings out the agitation of the woman's mind through her body language. Her repeated review of herself in the mirror and the wringing of her hands reflect the troubled state of her mind.

LONG ANSWER QUESTIONS (BASED ON VALUES)

(to be answered in about 100 - 150 words each)

26. What is personification? Quote some examples of personification from the poem "Mirror". (Textual)

Personification is the practice of attributing human qualities, a character or personality to inanimate or abstract things or non-human creatures such that they appear to be living human beings. Here are a few examples of personification in the poem. First of all the mirror addresses itself as a person. The line "I am

not cruel, only truthful" proves the truth of this statement. Then again the mirror calls itself a god: "The eye of a ... little god." The poet also personifies "candles" and the "moon" by calling them liars. Thus the poet has made ample use of the poetic device of personification.

Q2. What opinion do you form of the mirror in Sylvia Plath's poem of the same name? *Or*

The mirror symbolizes some time tested values of truth, reality, fair judgement and objectivity. Do you agree? Discuss with focus on:

- Mirror's perspective of people and situations
- Old woman's views of the mirror

Sylvia Plath presents Mirror as a symbol of truth, reality, fairness and objectivity. Unlike human beings, it is free from any preconceptions and prejudices. It says it is 'silver and exact'. Its 'reflection' or view of others is not tinted by emotions of love or hatred. It believes in being exact. It gives a truthful image of the creatures looking into it. Omniscient like God, it views everything in an unbiased and fair manner. It reflects everything dispassionately. It is considered 'cruel' by most viewers as the old woman. She finds cruelty in the truthful projection of her true state in the mirror and turns to moon and candles that reveal only half of the truth. However, the mirror is indispensable for those who are young and beautiful for it helps them dote over their beauty and youth and makes them 'see' their true selves. The mirror appears to be advising its users to rid themselves of illusions and accept reality bravely whether it reflects the beauty or the ugliness, for in both the cases it is projecting the reality without adding or subtracting anything.

Q3. We need to adopt the mirror's outlook on life. Comment. (HOTS)

Or

What important lesson does the Mirror teach us?

Most of us live in illusions and try to escape reality. We are given to lies and falsehood. We accept reality only if it is palatable. Otherwise we tend to turn to those objects that give us fallacious but favourable reports. What is most surprising is that we don't mind deceiving ourselves and hiding from the truth. Our views are also affected by preconceptions and prejudices which mostly emerge from our feelings of likes and dislikes, love and hatred and previous experiences. Most of us get upset as a result of our prejudiced ideas and negative thinking and cause pain to ourselves. We need to see things as they are in the light of reality and truth as they are projected and reflected by time and age. If we adopt truthful, dispassionate, objective and realistic outlook of the mirror in our life, we will not feel like a 'terrible fish' just as the woman in the poem does, and would accept realities of life gracefully.

Q4. Read the following extract from the poem "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 an agitation of hands.
I am important to her."

On the basis of your understanding of the above extract, analyze the following:

- whether the woman here is a unique individual or a representative of a universal phenomenon
- the reasons why the mirror is important to her
- the lessons one can learn from her experience

The woman in the poem stands for a universal phenomenon and symbolizes any person who with the passage of time starts showing signs of ageing. Not being able to reconcile to the reality and the ravages of time, she feels upset about her fading beauty and her wrinkles becoming prominent day by day. Like Shelley's 'Ozymandias', who wanted eternal power and immortality, she wishes to enjoy eternal beauty and youth.

The Mirror is important for her as it helps her view herself and gauge her beauty. Unfortunately, her age and decay is showing on her face and she cannot bear to see it. Her attempts to search for youthful appearance result in disappointment for her. The change brought about by time upsets her and makes her cry. This is indeed not her predicament alone, but of the whole mankind. It is not easy for people to accept that they will age and lose the vigour, vitality and beauty of youth gradually. The mirror teaches us to face realities of life as they come and not live in the make-belief world of illusions.

Q5. Why do you think the mirror's view of life is difficult to accept?

Or

(HOTS)

The mirror brings out every man's struggle to break the shackles of vanity and self-obsession and accept the truth with dignity.

Elaborate.

Most people view themselves in the mirror to see how young and beautiful they look. This satisfies their vanity and makes them obsessed with their own selves. It makes them love and admire themselves. But, harsh as it may seem, the mirror shows them the reality - how age and time rob them of their youth and beauty. Since most people are afraid of ageing, graying and dying, they find the mirror's reflection of their life difficult to accept because it is ruthlessly true and real. Not willing to accept the harsh reality, they prefer to live in illusions. They prefer to view

themselves under deceptive half-truths of candles and moonlight. However, unmoved by their tears, worries, expectations and anxieties, the mirror continues to reveal their true images faithfully. In a way the mirror conveys to us the message to be ready for and to accept the inevitable changes brought about by time gracefully.

Q6. How does the mirror reflect things? Find evidence from the poem "Mirror" to show that it actually focuses on the values of being truthful, faithful and unbiased.

The mirror is exact and true in reflecting whatever it sees. It does not distort reality but adopts a dispassionate and objective view of things. If it sees beauty, it reflects beauty; if it sees age and wrinkles it shows them as they are instead of hiding them. Earlier, whenever the woman viewed herself in the mirror, it showed her beauty and now that she is old, it faithfully reflects her old and wrinkled face, which is true self now. It does not pamper or flatter her by creating an illusion of beauty and youth. When she turns her back on it, it reflects the back faithfully. Unmoved by the woman's tears and agitation, the mirror continues to be dispassionately realistic in its 'outlook'. It neither subtracts anything to appease people nor adds anything to flatter them.

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