

“Mirror”
(by Sylvia Plath)

[The text of this poem has already been included in Chapter One.]

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SUMMARY

In this poem, a young woman seeks affirmation of her youth, her beauty, and her very worth from a silver-framed mirror, projecting a reflection of her face, a reflection that bears the lines and creases of age. Plath explores the relationship between the woman and the detached, indifferent mirror, whose perpetual state of meditation on the opposite wall is constantly interrupted by the woman’s face. The poem is also about the woman’s daily pilgrimage to the four-cornered little god, whom she approaches in desperate hope of finding a miracle – emergence of the youthful beauty she once had, which, she feels, has somehow disappeared in the depths of the mirror.

TOPIC

Plath depicts an all-too-common, yet unrealistic attitude toward aging.

THEMES

From Plath’s poem we learn that vanity makes us seek flattering lies rather than face bitter truths. Moreover, even though aging is a natural and inevitable process, we have a tendency to run away from its reality. Still another feeling embodied in this poem comes in the form of an indirect exhortation: To be content with life, we should not base our self-worth on transient attributes, such as physical beauty and youth.

SUPPORTING DETAILS

The woman in this poem cannot accept the facts about her aging and turns from the harsh reality to the false reassurance of the wrinkle-concealing, soft glow of “those liars, the candles or the moon” (line 12). Like a devout pilgrim, she submits to the daily, hallowed ritual of appearing before the truthful mirror in the hope of having her silent prayers answered. Day after day, with desperate faith, she submits to what she perceives as the “eye of a little god” (line 5), hoping to find the lost image of her face as unblemished by time. Day after day she loses her youth and advances rapidly and miserably toward old age. This woman’s false set of values, unfortunately based on and sanctioned by societal standards, has attached too much importance to youth. As a consequence, she is reduced to desperation as her “tears and . . . agitation of hands” demonstrate (line 14).

STYLE

Sylvia Plath’s use of personification is an outstanding feature in this poem. She gives the mirror personality, consciousness, and awareness. The mirror claims to have no preconceptions; it reflects truthfully whatever it sees: “I am not cruel, only truthful” (line

4).

By making the mirror into a lake in the second stanza, Plath gives it an added dimension of depth, thus effectively making it a repository of the images of the woman's past youth. This device enhances the futility of this woman's quest. While she is busy searching for her lost youth in the depth of the mirror/lake, precious moments of her life are slipping away.

CONCLUSION

"Mirror" reminds me of a cherished poem, "Desiderata," which speaks of wisdom on the subject of aging in one line: "Take kindly the counsel of the years, gracefully surrendering the things of youth."