

# Mirrors of sylvia plath and claribel alegria

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The impact of dark poetry on the reader is made predominantly through correspondingly dark language- this is a common view on the source of such kind of poetry's effect. In this essay I wouldn't like to argue this point of view but I would like to broaden the understanding of dark poetry's linguistic and semantic tools . I'm going to use two poems sharing a common symbol- " I am Mirror" by Claribel Alegria and " Mirror" by Sylvia Plath- to prove that they appeal to the reader not so much through explicit means like the choice of words but also implicitly.

I will expose the existence of two poles in each poem and stress an essential role, which semantic oppositions like alive-dead, internal-external, body-soul, action-passivity, depth-surface, reflect- hurt, human-monster and human-mirror play. Besides, I will observe how the traditional motif of a mirror as a person's alter-ego is transformed in both poems into an effective poetic tool, which , on the one hand, forms a number of oppositions, and on the other hand, implies the idea of pain reflection as pain replication and multiplication.

First, let us consider the poem " I am Mirror" by Claribel Alegria.. The mirror is a second self of the woman, the self that was born in the course of some immense suffering. It is a double-sided mirror. Her pain is reflected in the external world, and vice versa, the world's pain is reflected in her soul. But the pain is so enormous that the mirror switches on as a protection mechanism. The mirror turns into a brilliant wall, which defends her from pain. Now she can see everything perfectly but she cannot perceive. To stress the state of hers the phrase " I don't feel it" is repeated a number of times.

Like a silver screen, she scans what is going on around very accurately and impartially, “ tanks that approach, raised bayonets, bodies that fall...children who run”. The intense external action is contrasted to the internal catalepsy). She wants to get back life because as she says “ I hurt therefore I exist”. Her ability to feel hurt is reduced to its physical aspect. That is why she pinches and pricks herself. Only through physical pain, she can bring back her ability to perceive world’s pain but only for a while. In a few moments, she turns back into the “ blank mirror that nothing penetrates”. She is again a fleshless phantom protected from the pain by a brilliant wall. What is left is just “ a vague memory of pain”. What is specific of the poem is that it does not reveal the pain itself but the pained mirrored, reflected, remembered. Pain sliding on the smooth hard surface.

Let us make these two mirrors reflect in each other by comparing the two poems. As I have already said, Alegria has a kind of wall mirror, a luminous barrier to protect her from pain. It only reflects external world but nothing can penetrate the surface. It is devoid of depth, it is flat, two-sided but not two-dimensioned. On the contrary, Plath’s mirror’s feature is to swallow immediately whatever appears in it. It has another dimension behind it. Depth, not surface is its main attribute. This depth is meant to search there and to be afraid of. It is a lake where a terrible fish lives.

This fish is the woman’s frightening future. It is someone into whom she is going to turn in the course of time. In both poems mirror is impartial, it implies “ female passivity, subjugation” (Freedman 1993). However, Plath’s mirror’s truthfulness is seen a kind of rebellion against what woman is seeking in it. In both cases, internal passivity is contrasted with external

action. In Plath's poem the concept of time is of great importance. It is another dimension but the surface and depth of the mirror. The stillness of a mirror lake is contrasted with the running river of time.

This river flowing through the woman transforms a young beautiful girl into a horrible fish. Hence, being a water creature, an old woman is claimed to belong to the river of time and eternity more than a young girl, still alien to it. Gradually, deep waters of time absorb a woman. A terrible fish is in fact a dead girl, who drowned in the lake of mirror. This is a kind of terrifying reincarnation a woman would prefer to ignore. That is why she turns to such "liars" as the moon and candles. Meanwhile, the mirror reflects her back faithfully. She cannot see her back mirrored, and that is an important idea. We cannot see our back, i. e. the opposite, dark side. What does it look like? Maybe it IS a monster fish? We are scared to death by our own monsters.

I would like to dwell on the language used in both poems and how it works toward a certain effect. What correlates with the image of a mirror in Plath's poem is the use of visual language without any occurrence of audible one. Words like 'darkness', 'pink with speckles', 'faces', 'flicker' etc. create a visual picture. The opposition between the pink wall and the darkness is crucial to the poem. Black water has been always associated with hidden, subconscious, uncontrollable forces inside a personality. Hence, I can say that Plath's mirror is not a medium between internal and external world, like Alegria's one. It seems to be located within the human soul itself.

While in Plath's poem the attention is drawn to the visual aspect, in Alegria's one the emphasis, however strange it may seem, is on the physical aspect, on tacton. Or rather it is on the ability or inability to perceive the world

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through touching it. That is why visual pictures, which take enough space of the poem, are deliberately detached and serve to stress the absence of the woman/mirror's feeling behind them. The opposition is 'reflect' vs. 'hurt'. That is why the dominating mood is the feeling of stifled pain. This context is suggested by the choice of words: prick, pinch; tortured, frightened, weeping, bleeding, stumbling, panic etc. On the other pole of the opposition are words like 'phantom', 'fleshless', 'vague'.

The poem's inner plot is a transition from being a woman looking at her reflection into the mirror itself. Let's read this passage at the beginning:

I pinch myself in the arm I don't feel frightened I look at myself in the mirror she also pricks herself I begin to get dressed stumbling from the corners shouts like lightning bolts tortured eyes scurrying rats and teeth shoot forth although I feel nothing

Here is the starting point of this transition. Frightened by her lost ability to feel, she looks at herself in the mirror and sees a woman with tortured eyes and teeth shoot forth but she feels nothing because she turned into a mirror. This mirror woman leaves home and wanders through the streets reflecting horrible pictures of war. She hurts herself physically to turn back into a living person again but another terrifying scene prevents her from doing so - and she is a fleshless phantom again.

The same transition can be observed in Sylvia Plath's poem, although it is proceeds according to a slightly different pattern. The woman is not replaced by a mirror but she is swallowed by it. Being swallowed, she acquires the attributes of the object, which swallowed her. But two mirrors go on existing

simultaneously- a still and eternal one and a moving mortal one. As I said before, it is running river reflected in a lake.

She comes and goes. 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. This passage suggests how a recurrent action of everyday life is correlated with transcendental eternity.

The two poems share the ambivalence of the symbol of mirror. Let us turn to what William Freedman writes about the concept of the poem. " In this poem, the mirror is in effect looking into itself, for the image in the mirror is woman, the object that is itself more mirror than person. A woman will see herself both in and as a mirror. To look into the glass is to look for oneself inside or as reflected on the surface of the mirror and to seek or discover oneself in the person (or non-person) of the mirror... the poem becomes a mirror not of the world, but of other mirrors and of the process of mirroring. When living mirrors gaze into mirrors, as when language stares only at itself, only mirrors and mirroring will be visible... " The speaker sees herself " in" the mirror ...in two senses: She is the fearful image in the depths beyond the glass and she is the mirror itself" ( Freedman1993).

#### Bibliography

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