

# Mirror by sylvia plath



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Mirror Sylvia Plath is a well known poet with an equally well-earned reputation for having led a tortured inner life. Her poetry often sounds very simple on the surface but contains a wealth of material buried in the imagery and constructions of her poems. One of the common themes in her poetry is an obsession with aging, attractiveness and dying. Sylvia Plath's poem "Mirror" reflects this obsession with aging and decay, which is an attitude shared by numerous other writers including William Faulkner, as evidenced in his short story "A Rose for Emily."

On its surface, Plath's poem seems to be simply about a mirror and the woman who continues to look into it day after day. The story of the mirror is told from the perspective of the mirror itself as it stands nonjudgmental in the corner of a room and looking endlessly at the far wall, which is "pink, with speckles" (7). The mirror presents itself as nonjudgmental, but there are hints throughout the poem that it does judge those who look into it by the way in which they judge themselves. The second stanza of the poem allows the mirror to transform itself into a lake where (presumably) the same woman peeks in to search her reflection. In this stanza, time speeds up, first taking on human dimensions and then speeding into "each morning" (16) and finally counting down "day after day" (18) as the young girl becomes an old woman.

The poem seems to capture the sense of time as it is experienced in a lifetime. In childhood, time is meaningless, it stands still and goes nowhere, like the mirror placidly sitting in the room and contemplating the pink wall. "I have looked at it so long / I think it is a part of my heart" (7-8) just like the child is a child for all of its experience and often thinks it will remain so.

However, the wall, like childhood, "flickers. / Faces and darkness separate

us over and over” (8-9) as the child begins to grow into a young woman. The second stanza makes this point much clearer as the young woman continues to look into the mirror for signs of the lost child and finds instead evidence of the aging woman. “ She rewards me with tears and an agitation of hands” (13) when she looks for a fairer reflection such as what is seen by the romantic light of candles or the moon, yet she cannot deny the call of the reflection as she returns every day. Through this behavior, the mirror sees that she has “ drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman Rises toward her day after day” (17-18). The passage of time, like a terrible fish, cannot be avoided or ignored.

This progression is very much like the passage of time in William Faulkner’s short story “ A Rose for Emily.” Throughout the story, Miss Emily is characterized as an unchanging object through the use of such imagery as “ her upright torso motionless as that of an idol” (437) as she is framed in a lit window, “ We had long thought of them as a tableau; Miss Emily a slender silhouette in the background” (437) when discussing the image the town had of Emily and her father, and the occasional glimpse of her “ in one of the downstairs windows ... like the carven torso of an idol in a niche, looking or not looking at us, we could never tell which” (442). She is unchanging, like the child in Plath’s first stanza. However, she is also forced to abandon her timelessness just following her father’s death while she was courting Homer Barron. Like the woman in Plath’s poem, Miss Emily seems to be attempting to cling to a youth only remembered as “ her hair was cut short, making her look like a girl, with a vague resemblance to those angels in colored church windows — sort of tragic and serene” (438). Finally, though, Miss Emily ages and dies in a house that has also aged and lost its former grandeur like the

terrible fish of Plath's imagery.

Although her poem seems to be about a simple mirror, Sylvia Plath develops a highly complex poem about aging through her careful use of imagery and style. Both she and William Faulkner seem to characterize the idea of aging in the same way. They present childhood as a seemingly timeless period of life that only passes with the interference of others while aging seems to accelerate faster and faster with the years. Finally, one ends with the ugliness of the terrible fish, wrinkled, perhaps bloated, whitish and utterly undesirable.