

Comparative Analysis: Once Upon a Time vs Mirror

Matthew Williams • English Literature • May 11, 2026

Introduction

Gabriel Okara's *Once Upon a Time* and Sylvia Plath's *Mirror* both explore the painful gap between appearance and inner truth. Okara presents a speaker who has learned to perform false social roles and longs to recover his earlier sincerity. Plath presents a woman who depends on reflection but fears the truth of aging that the mirror reveals. Both poems examine identity, self-recognition, and emotional discomfort, but Okara focuses on social performance, while Plath focuses on physical aging and self-image.

Central shared theme: appearance versus reality, especially how self-image becomes painful when the outward face or reflection exposes a damaged inner identity.

Appearance and reality

Both poems expose the unreliability of outward appearance.

In *Once Upon a Time*, the speaker criticizes smiles that show only "teeth" rather than genuine feeling. Social behavior has become performance, full of polite gestures that hide self-interest. The speaker's outward face no longer reflects his inner self.

In *Mirror*, the mirror insists that it reflects "just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike." Unlike Okara's society, the mirror does not perform or flatter. It reveals reality without sympathy. This makes truth painful because the woman wants a gentler image than the one the mirror gives.

The mirror and self-recognition

Both poems use reflection to confront identity.

Okara's speaker looks at himself and sees only his "teeth," suggesting that his own face has become part of the false social world he condemns. The mirror becomes a site of self-disgust. He recognizes that the performance he criticizes is now inside him.

Plath's mirror is the speaker of the poem, and it becomes a symbol of pitiless truth. The woman searches the mirror and the lake for "what she really is," but what rises toward her is an "old woman." Reflection forces her to face the self she fears becoming.

Loss and longing

Both poems are shaped by loss.

In *Once Upon a Time*, the speaker mourns the loss of sincerity and innocence. The repeated contrast between "once upon a time" and the present suggests that human connection has been corrupted over time. His desire to "unlearn" false behavior shows a longing to return to emotional honesty.

In *Mirror*, the woman mourns the loss of youth. Her tears and "agitation of hands" show distress at the truth of aging. Unlike Okara's speaker, she does not ask to return to childhood innocence, but her repeated visits to the mirror reveal a desire to find a self she can accept.

Tone and emotional effect

Both poems are unsettling, but their tones differ.

Okara's tone is regretful, critical, and pleading. The speaker addresses his son because the child represents the sincerity he has lost. The poem's emotional center is the hope that authenticity can still be recovered.

Plath's tone is colder and more disturbing. The mirror speaks in a flat, matter-of-fact voice, which makes the woman's pain feel even sharper. There is no comfort in the poem because truth arrives without tenderness.

The role of the child

The poems differ sharply in their use of youth.

In *Once Upon a Time*, the child is a moral model. The speaker asks his son to teach him how to laugh and smile sincerely again. Childhood represents honesty and emotional freedom.

In *Mirror*, youth is not present as a child but as something lost. The woman searches for the younger self that has disappeared. Youth becomes an absence, and aging becomes an unavoidable truth. This contrast makes Okara's poem more hopeful than Plath's.

Conclusion

Both *Once Upon a Time* and *Mirror* explore identity through the conflict between outward appearance and inner truth. Okara shows a speaker damaged by social performance who longs to recover sincerity. Plath shows a woman wounded by truthful reflection and the reality of aging. Both poems suggest that self-recognition can be painful, but Okara leaves room for learning and recovery, while Plath presents truth as inescapable and emotionally harsh.

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