

Mirror

Matthew Williams • English Literature • March 18, 2026

Mirror

I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions.

Analysis: The mirror begins with blunt self-definition, presenting itself as objective and impartial. "Silver and exact" establishes precision, while "no preconceptions" suggests complete freedom from bias or emotion.

Whatever I see I swallow immediately

Analysis: The metaphor "swallow immediately" suggests total absorption without distortion or delay. The mirror presents itself as something that takes in reality exactly as it is.

Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike.

Analysis: The mirror claims emotional neutrality. It rejects human bias, insisting that affection or hatred does not alter what it reflects.

I am not cruel, only truthful,

Analysis: This line separates honesty from malice. The mirror defends itself, suggesting that painful truth may feel cruel, but that pain comes from reality itself, not from the mirror.

The eye of a little god, four-cornered.

Analysis: The metaphor "The eye of a little god" gives the mirror divine authority, but the word "little" is quietly important: this god is limited. It can only see what stands directly in front of it; it cannot see behind the woman, cannot read her mind, cannot know her history. It is powerful but partial. "Four-cornered" emphasises its flat, bounded nature as a god trapped in a rectangle.

Most of the time I meditate on the opposite wall.

Analysis: The personification "meditate" gives the mirror a contemplative quality, making its routine seem thoughtful and self-aware.

It is pink, with speckles. I have looked at it so long

I think it is part of my heart. But it flickers.

Analysis: The metaphor "part of my heart" suggests attachment formed through repetition and familiarity. However, "it flickers" reminds us that this stability is constantly interrupted.

Faces and darkness separate us over and over.

Analysis: The line suggests the passage of time through cycles of day, night, and human presence. Repetition is built into the mirror's existence, reinforcing monotony and routine.

Now I am a lake. A woman bends over me,

Analysis: The metaphor "I am a lake" expands the mirror into something deeper and more symbolic. A lake suggests depth, memory, and emotional searching rather than simple surface reflection.

Searching my reaches for what she really is.

Analysis: The woman is not merely checking appearance. She is searching for identity, truth, and perhaps reassurance, showing how deeply self-image is tied to reflection.

Then she turns to those liars, the candles or the moon.

Analysis: The metaphor "those liars" refers to softer, more flattering light sources. Unlike the mirror, they distort reality and offer comfortable illusion. The candle offers warm, flickering light; the moon is softer still. The choice of the moon is pointed: "luna" is the Latin root of "lunatic," so turning to the moon is also a kind of madness, a preference for delusion over truth.

I see her back, and reflect it faithfully.

Analysis: The word "faithfully" reinforces the mirror's role as an unbiased witness. It cannot soften or comfort; it only returns what is present.

She rewards me with tears and an agitation of hands.

Analysis: There is irony in "rewards me with tears", since truth is met not with gratitude but distress. Her emotional reaction shows the pain of confronting aging and loss.

I am important to her. She comes and goes.

Analysis: The mirror recognizes its significance in the woman's life. It has become part of her daily ritual and self-understanding.

Each morning it is her face that replaces the darkness.

Analysis: This emphasizes repetition and inevitability. The daily return to the mirror suggests obsession, dependence, and the passage of time.

In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman

Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish.

Analysis: The metaphor "drowned a young girl" suggests the disappearance of youth over time: the young woman the woman once was has been submerged and replaced. The simile "like a terrible fish" presents old age as something grotesque rising from the depths, making aging feel monstrous and unavoidable. The image also carries two allusions: to the myth of Narcissus, the hunter who fell so in love with his own reflection in a pool that he could not leave it, and who eventually died there; and to Jonah, who was swallowed by a "terrible fish" when trying to escape his destiny. The woman, like Jonah, cannot escape what awaits her. Like Narcissus, she is trapped by her own reflection.

About the poem

Author: Sylvia Plath (1932–1963)

Context: Plath was an American poet writing in the mid-20th century, known for her confessional style and unflinching exploration of identity, femininity, and psychological tension. She died at 30.

Form: The poem consists of two equal-length stanzas, a structural choice that is itself a mirror. The second stanza reflects the first, just as the lake in stanza two reflects the mirror in stanza

one. The **free verse** form reinforces the mirror's claimed objectivity: no rhyme, no imposed pattern, just plain, unfiltered truth.

Core idea: The poem explores the painful relationship between truth and self-image, showing how aging forces the woman to confront a version of herself she does not want to accept.

- **Main themes**

- Identity and self-perception
- Aging and loss of youth
- Appearance vs reality
- Time and inevitability
- Female anxiety and self-image
- Truth versus illusion
- **Mood:** Pensive and unsettling, with increasing sadness and emotional tension
- **Tone:** Matter-of-fact, coldly truthful, and quietly disturbing

- **Remember**

- The mirror is both a literal object and a voice of harsh truth
- **"Eye of a little god":** the god is limited, it can only see what stands in front of it. Power without omniscience
- **The moon** is called a liar partly because "luna" is the root of "lunatic"; turning to the moon is a kind of madness
- **Two allusions** in the final image: Narcissus (trapped by his own reflection until he died) and Jonah (swallowed by a terrible fish when fleeing destiny)
- **Form** mirrors content: two equal stanzas = two mirror halves; **free verse** = the objectivity the mirror claims
- "Now I am a lake" deepens the poem from surface reflection to psychological searching
- The young girl is not literally dead; youth has been lost over time, drowned in the mirror
- "Like a terrible fish" is the key ending image. Aging rises as something feared and unavoidable