



Seeing Things Within and Beyond the Mirror: An Analysis of Virginia Woolf's "The Lady in The Looking Glass: A Reflection"

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Abstract

Virginia Woolf a highly appreciated writer both for her literary-critical insight and innovative writing techniques explores the role and character of women in society to reveal the truth and reality of their nature. Woolf in her works surfaces forth the inner discomfort of apparently integrated and a whole individual. In "The Lady in The Looking Glass: A Reflection" (1929), Woolf employs the stream of consciousness technique to communicate the thoughts of a narrator who ponders an image of Isabella Tyson to unveil the nature of truth and reality of her person by opening the intricate layers of her appearance. This paper explores the concept of the split self with reference to the character of Isabella to see the impact of the other on/in the construction of self. Lacan's concept of mirror stage is used as a theoretical framework to see how Isabella's character is put in the external symbolic order and is alienated from its own history to examine how the self can be conceptualized and effected by the interplay of various forces and the inside form in and through other. This study demonstrates that Isabella's self-image is the distorted product of the ideal ego and ego ideal and is made and changed by acting towards others to make them believe what they see in her as true of her.

Keywords: Lacan, Mirror, Ego Ideal, Ideal Ego, Identity, Self, Other

Introduction

"For there is never anywhere to go but in."

The early decades of the twentieth century are marked by a "wave of experimentalism in British short fiction" and have observed significant changes in the conception of art and literature.



(Benzel and Hoberman, 2004). The short story provided a proper medium of a narrative experiment for Henry James, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf to reflect on the change in nature of the artist and the art. Woolf's important contribution in this regard is her stream of consciousness technique, to excavate something more profound below the surface of appearances. Critics have often interpreted Woolf's short fiction in the context of her essays (Baldwin, Head 2004.) But Susan Dick (2003) in her introduction to Woolf's collected shorter fiction records the line of separation between Woolf's fiction and her essays in a very reasonable way, and states that stories such as *Three Pictures* and *Memoirs of Novelist* cross the margins between sketch, story, and essay.

Woolf in *The Art of Biography* considers the role of creative imagination and believes that it is the creative imagination that ultimately separates art proper from biography (Woolf, 1967). Her presentation of the problem of the imagination is often read in terms of the irresolvable tension between binary opposites in the current criticism of *Woolf's Imagination in Short Fiction* (D'hoker, 2008). In this regard her short story "The Lady in the Looking Glass" is significant that explores the role of a woman in social context with the help of the creative power of imagination which is a significant concept in Woolf's aesthetics and is a more truthful and crucial factor in the representation of life itself (Woolf, 1966). Joanne Trautman Banks (2004) explores Woolf short fiction in terms of binary opposites such as "life and art, the self and the not-self, subjectivity, and objectivity, appearance and reality, and vision and fact" (17) and Julia Briggs (2004) in her critical discussion of "The Lady in the Looking Glass", notices a chain of binary opposites of imagination and reality, life and art; words and pictures; room and garden; light and shadow; inside and outside; change and stillness" (175). While the tension between the two opposite poles is not easy to resolve, we will nevertheless try in this paper to pin down Woolf's position with regard to her power of creative imagination in the light of the concepts of self and other in somewhat more precise way. How does the binaries of the self or the other Woolf privilege in her story? What does Woolf's story reveal about the real and the imagined image of the main character? What does the story tell us about the societal or personal restrictions imposed on a woman to keep balance between the role and responsibility assigned? And what is the wielded psychological dimension of the sympathetic imagination of Woolf in the portrayal of the main character? These are some of the questions which are considered in this paper.



Theoretical Framework

To Virginia's short story, ideas by Lacanian mirror concept which shows the double or different side of the object offers a useful theoretical framework for analysis to pin down the tension between the self and the other to reveal about the limits and the power of the Other in forming or deforming self. For Lacan looking shapes identity and looking means looking at. Lacan stresses that mirror image gives the infant a chance to see and perceive itself as a unity by enabling him to anticipate a state of subjective completion thus image guides human development as infant identifies with a body image and respects this image as its own.

Mirror-stage states the development of the Ego in terms of the alluded feeling of a unified image taken by the subject in the outer world as something ideal, as an Ideal Ego and blinds him to everything that does not fit the image. The understanding of one's own identity develops in perceiving one as identical to oneself and arises the claim of the drive "thou art that" (Lacan, 1949/2006a, p.80). The imaginary misrecognition activates the ego in a fictional direction before its social determination. This *méconnaissance* (Lacan, 1949) or misrecognition is compounded when the baby contrasts what it sees with the actual body in taking the subject position of the image and looking back on its actual self. This reflects itself as inferior and imperfect, thus cementing the trauma of imperfection and self-loathing, by exaggerating the difference a subject develops the desire to become the unattainable ideal. Boundary formation of identity creates a sense of loss by separating the image as distinct other and develops an ultimate desire to regain the connected wholeness. Lacan describes the process of mirroring as the beginning of one's experience of identity which is actually set at the level of desire. The logic behind the development of one's own identity or mirror image is not that it is the sole solution to inner chaos but it is a means to cherish the other's peculiar desire as humans construct their identity through identification with the desire of the other. The "Other" can be social order, society, or can be embodied in concrete persons. The individual identity is the relational construction, changing constantly as the other is not stable. (Bertens 2008). As a result, he experiences stress, being divided between and through the conflicting desires of the other. Lacan terms this process as alienation. He claims that the process of identification is symbolically mediated creation of the self-image. It is the process of adoption of ego to perfect self-image by turning it into ideal ego as



subject earns from the discourse of the other or the outer world. Ego assessing potential gains and losses of satisfaction in light of possible effects of various courses of action feels both loved and satisfactory in relation to the other. Lacan (1976/1998) says that subject desire becomes the desire of the other which brings organization into a relationship and through identification with ego-ideal he seeks to maximize satisfaction and correspondingly minimize pain/dissatisfaction. Basing on Lacan assumption that the self is the experience of alienation and is composed of and based on the offer and expectations of the other, in this paper I analyze the influence of forces within and without on the subjective experiences of one as ‘oneself’ in “The Lady in the Looking Glass”.

Results and Discussion

Central to Woolf’s writings is the looking glass motif which functions variously to reflect the self or alternative selves to envision the tension between the individual’s private self and public personae. The gaze and looking glass is a frequent topic in feminist literature; it has been related to power, identity, sexuality, and gender construction. Freud considers the erotic aspect of gazing of the spectator and Foucault relates power and powerlessness with observing and being observed in western culture.

In her fiction, Woolf, by pushing the boundaries of realistic fiction, explores the disintegration between the image and self to show the other within a subject. In “The Lady in the Looking Glass”, mirror and women are linked and the narrator's voyage through looking glass takes the reader to the inner desert of Isabella’s self. Woolf uses specular language and imagery in the story; she involves gaze to indicate the thoughts of the narrator by describing how her mistress and her belongings tell the story of her lost reflection. The beginning of the narrative of the split self occurs when the narrator sees the reflection of her mistress in the mirror providing her with the ideal completeness; the looking glass here signifies Isabella's self as a visual object but quickly it shatters its completeness being misread as a unified object. As mirror image makes the person able to see different notions of self so Woolf uses a looking glass in her work as a metaphor for the lady, to examine her reflection in a looking glass to see her divided self or one figure with many levels of character. She uses the stream-of-consciousness technique to understand the lady by the imaginative musing of the narrator guessing about the life of Isabella Tyson. We see Isabella through the change in thoughts of the narrator and follow her mind as it wanders to and fro. We



in this manner see how real thoughts occur and get a profound understanding of Isabella that is not likely to get under conventional narrative styles.

Sitting in the drawing-room of a house, an unnamed narrator describes the exterior scenes of the house that can be seen reflected in a mirror in the hall. Lady's very appearance invites the narrator to imagine the inner life of her. Though her speculations are at first fairly self-effacingly presented by providing detail about the interior and exterior of the house they rapidly give way to daring declarations about the characters' inner and outer realities, her secrets.

The looking-glass is, here, held up to capture the interior states of Isabelle Tyson of what no one knows even the narrator doesn't know. The image reflected in a glass is two dimensional and flat; when looking at an object, one can only see the mirror image of its surface but cannot see what's within the object; in the same way, the reflection of the lady does not reflect the true depth of hers. The mirror creates a sense of order and stability to the objects of the room and the world it reflects but a person's character cannot be captured in one still image rather the role of the other demands to change and to be in constant motion.

The narrator encounter with her looking glass image signifies the moment of discovery or recognition of her mistress, she looks into the mirror of the room, where the images of the garden, room, and Isabella present a different look and seems as if she has no single and actual look of her own. Woolf uses the simple act of looking into a mirror as a haunting metaphor for Isabella's divided self. The narrative begins with an account of a vacant room reflected in a mirror situated in a dressing room, with Isabella Tyson having left into the garden to gather flowers. One can see the contrast of the character through the exterior and interior of the house; exterior which reflects the part which is seen by the world, a looking glass image or a mask hiding the turbulence beneath one fixed expression, on the other hand interior reflects the deep interior of the self-hidden from the outer world perpetually adapting and changing contrast to the outer image of the house which is serene still and peaceful. The interior is a world of flux. It's depicted as a lively environment that is continuously in a state of movement from one form to another. The play of light and flash of reflections in the room is obtained as the movement of small creatures and the garden outside



as reflected in the mirror is paradoxically still. The animal images and the play of light and shade give a sense of hidden depths, of things that cannot be seen from the surface.

In the story, the external and internal images of the self are widely different and by no means corresponding to each other. The narrator hitherto feels a vital want to learn new information about her hostess and searches for a certain image of her to record her fear and fascination with the looking glass image. Lacan says that in the mirror a child sees a unified and ordered image of himself but because this image remains separate from the self and outside, it is alienating as well as pleasing. The child experiences totality just in reflection not in his body. Lacan explains more that this reflection of himself is disrupted by the symbolic world of social relations and the child gradually develops his own identity when he approximates more with the social ideal of the whole self. But on the other hand, feminist theorists argue it is difficult for a female child to make progress beyond the mirror stage as for her the world has gendered meaning where looking and being looked at may cause a difference in her image and herself.

Woolf in this story demonstrates not only how a woman identifies with her construction by society, but also to what length she will go if necessary, to manufacture her looking glass image. Isabella imagines the stable self as a source of power rather than a measure of powerlessness that's why she pictures herself rich, successful, and distinguished, dressed in her expensive and fashionable clothes in the lower garden not allowing us a glimpse into the more private aspects of her character. The narrator wants to see the contents of her secreted nadirs for "how little, after all these years, one knew about her." She begins a lyrical account of her, providing a sight of the furnishings of her life and ponders which kind of flowers will best define her, and realizes that even after knowing her for many years such judgments are pointless because they do not relate an unflinching truth about her inner real self. There are some facts, but no real knowledge of Isabella's inner being: "it was absurd, it was monstrous. If she concealed so much and knew so much one must prize her open with the first tool that came to hand" (216).

We can say that Isabella develops her social self through the gaze of other and social exposure. Her looking glass self is confined to its social milieu as it depends on the way people behave and react towards her. Crucial for Isabella's identity is the concept of others or the Other,



which links her strongly to the environment, to the social: For Lacan, we need the recognition of others to arrive at what we experience as our identity. We become subjects ourselves by the views and perspectives of others (Bertens 2008). Our ‘subjectivity’ is constructed in interaction with ‘others’ who are different from us. Mirror image is important to show “the appearances of the double, in which psychical realities, however heterogeneous, are manifested” Lacan (2000, 46). The intensity of Isabella’s inner struggle saves her for the real pleasure which was treasured by the standards of the ego ideal. The identity of Isabella is constructed in self seen totality through alienating her from her real self. The mirror is an apt metaphor: the reflection in the mirror just reflects Isabella but not truly her. The description of the mirror images, the room further emphasizes Isabella’s fragmentation. Thus the narrator sees no unifying image in the glass but only finds her further divided into the objects of room and garden. She uses mirror imagery of the reflecting objects to narrate the character's life and thoughts. The subject and abject relationship are complicated here because the real person in the mirror becomes the object of the subject. From the images of the house we learn not only the physical aspects of the house, but the impressions they leave as well as the furniture seems to have a greater understanding of Isabella. The narrator continues with the minute description of the interior of the room, furniture, and the letters that are kept secret within the drawers and cabinets of the room, seem to know more of Isabella than her.

The narrator's response to reflection suggests that she is incapable of integrating other images of her into a coherent self or identity. Her staring at images does not reveal the wholeness but decomposition, distortion, and disintegration of her mistress’s self. The Narrator's attention is then shifted from the house to its mistress, Isabella Tyson. First, she thinks about Isabella based on her behavior and appearance: "She suggested the fantastic and the tremulous convolvulus" She then reviews the facts about Isabella's life: that she is single, rich and travels extensively and furnished her house with beautiful objects from her travels as if these things embody the lady herself and could yield up valuable information about the richness of her life tell the reader everything one needs to know. The narrator then starts a rich chain of thoughts about Isabella’s innermost self, about life and death, happiness, and regret. She also fancifully compares Isabella to the fantastic, beautiful and elegant, flowers she is cutting, and she links Isabella’s thoughts to the dancing light in the drawing-room. Yet the narrator realizes at the same time that the metaphors



will not do, “for they come like the convolvulus itself trembling between one’s eyes and the truth” (215), and this is not satisfactory and she begins to wonder what might be hiding profound deep within the little drawers of Isabella's mind. The double-voiced discourse changes from outer to inner reality, from within to beyond the mirror image, and the narrator gradually realizes the point that there is a great gap between her appearance and reality. The distance between the mirror and where she stands symbolizes the gulf between her reality and appearance and finally, Isabella is revealed to be “perfectly empty” and to have “no thoughts” at all (219) when suddenly the view in the mirror changes dramatically and the postman delivers a number of letters onto the hall table. It is at this point that the narrator's speculations are interfered with by the mail delivery, an occurrence that changes the picture under contemplation and leads the narrator down a track of thought. The letters are imagined, when the mail is delivered, as “tablets graven with eternal truth; if one could read them, one would know everything there was to be known about Isabella, yes, and about life, too” (222).

The letters are seen like marble tablets establishing a new visual significance, and the narrator thinks their contents might disclose further about Isabella’s character. As in “The Lady in the Looking Glass” the narrator of Woolf’s work longs for the transcendent secret knowledge in the tablets, and even perhaps believes that that truth exists, but she is unable to access or decipher it. The narrator longed to make attempt to fully and definitively represent the reality of Tyson who possesses some treasure, she realizes that one must look for more refined tools to uncover the true person as she is considered much deeper than originally thought. As Woolf writes there, “in the chambers of the mind and heart of the woman who was, physically, touching her, were stood, like the treasures in the tombs of kings, tablets bearing sacred inscriptions, which if one could spell them out, would teach one everything, but they would never be offered openly, never made public” (50). And finally, as Isabella makes her way back to the house and finds her letters, the narrator then has a new vision of the truth about Isabella as she believes to see then the true woman. She considers what Isabella talks about and comprehends that this can't in fact encompass the whole person, as she says: "It was her profounder state of being that one wanted to catch and turn to words". And in her the narrator finds nothing. The closed drawer with hidden letters emphasizes her alienated, narcissistic relation to her veiled self. For the narrator, here, the momentary illusion



of her whole self fades and the strong independent woman becomes merely an old empty woman; the beautiful woman with a lovely house and exciting life is nothing but empty. She isn't thinking magnificent thoughts at all; she has no ideal life, no friends; and the letters are all utility bills – which Isabella doesn't even bother to open. The letters reveal the life of Isabella, as they have no more significance than mere bills, and reveals that she is “empty.”

Woolf write in the stream of consciousness technique to see clearly which seems difficult and then Isabella getting "larger and larger in the looking glass, more and more completely the person", to provide the whole picture giving a deeper understanding of her and "brings in some new element the past reflection into the true object; ‘everything dropped from her all that one had called the creeper and the convolvulus’. Here was the woman herself crushing the picture of her imagined life revealing the truth quite different. The narrator imagines Isabella's petty dinner-table conversation, her looks, and facts about her life but her spiritual side—the “profounder state of being . . . what one calls happiness or unhappiness” (223)—remains elusive. The narrator who continues to gain insight into the interior self by providing us with the material details of all the colors of the woman, ends with “old and angular,” as “perfectly empty” an image of Isabella who herself remains absent in her own sketch. By describing the garden, flowers, the light, and shadow, her reflection in the mirror, Woolf foreshadows the cleavage in herself to convey that her life was meaningless and she was slowly breathing in the death of her real self. Actually, the long-term suffocating spinster life leads her to confuse her inner and outer reality and to develop a split personality, never identifying whether there is a real self-belonging to her. She attempts throughout her life for her desirability and existence in order to survive successfully as a spinster, and opts to an extreme solution of compromising her private self for the public and in a result turns life to the desert. More than fifty years of her isolation from her real self and domestic seclusion contribute to her lack of knowledge of her real happiness and she lives a life full of painful laughter. She learns how to deal with the outer world but forgets how to deal with her inner emptiness. In this way, the narrator does succeed to explore a real person whose inner life is empty.

Conclusion

Woolf makes the narrator see the reflection, her ‘othered’ self, a distorted version of Isabella by the mirror image which throughout the story symbolically depicts a stable, unified, and



polished woman who constructs her ideal ego from the ego ideal imposed by existing social structures. The disparity between her private and public selves makes the narrator doubt her stable self. In order to retain her identity, she has to provide the spectator with socially accepted spectacle until the carefully made-up psychological structure collapse distorting the image, blurs the narrator's vision of it. The story suggests that Isabella has no identity and she herself disappears as the narrator searches for her real self in the looking glass.

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