

# Mirror, Mirror: A Portrayal of Fear and Beauty in Morrison's *Sula* and Plath's "Mirror"

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*WRITER'S COMMENT: For years, I wanted nothing more than to believe I was beautiful, to feel wanted, loved, attractive in my own body. Yet in the throws of a serious eating disorder, with years of backlogged insecurity about my image, beautiful was far from my vocabulary. And the fear that grew from that experience, that consumed my every moment, my every thought, is one that still gives me chills today. There is an untold power to the words "You are beautiful," an incredibly simple statement -- nonetheless one that is far underused in society. This paper analyzed the connection between fear and beauty in society, and was an opportunity for me to look back at my own journey to become the strong, beautiful woman I am today.*

*INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: The range of subject matter considered in my English 185C, Women's Literature class, was diverse, but it was sometime difficult to read because of the form, as with Gertrude Stein's Tender Buttons, and sometime difficult to read because of the content, like Jhumpa Lahiri's short story "A Temporary Matter," about a couple coping with the loss of a pregnancy. Some of the best moments of this class came out of the students' willingness to challenge themselves to think critically about their own responses to literature that addresses some of the most pressing social issues, like gay rights and the legality of abortion. One of these moments occurred when we read a poem by Sylvia Plath called "Mirror," which personifies a woman's looking glass as a cold nemesis. Erica David shared bravely in lecture about her personal history with an eating disorder, and I encouraged her to draw on this experience when writing her final paper. The result is a bold reading of Plath's "Mirror" poem in conjunction with the themes of race and beauty depicted in Toni Morrison's novel *Sula*. This is Erica's second year as a winner of Prized Writing.*

—Sarah Lauro, Department of English

For six years I was lost. I was afraid. Afraid of the thoughts, of the looks, of the perception, afraid that I could be seen by those around me as anything but perfect. It was this fear that simmered -- and festered -- into a brutal eating disorder. Diagnosed with severe obsessive eating and a history of bulimia, I have had my fair share of issues when it comes to perceptions of beauty. For years, every mirror in my house was covered with drapes, as the reflections taunted and warped like those in a circus hall. My relationship with food was complicated, from fasting, to pills, to eating so much I would make myself sick, only to continue to eat in a desperate attempt to suppress the feelings of inadequacy which surrounded my every move. And I was afraid. I was afraid of numbers on the scale, of the reflections, of the food, but most of all . . .

I was afraid of myself.

Yet the absolute worst part of this story lies in the fact that it is not unique. No—quite the opposite—with very few exceptions, nearly every woman will experience similar internal conflicts. In a society where beauty is inextricably linked to success, power, and appreciation, the pressure to obtain that perfect image is unbelievable. While portrayals of beauty are common in popular culture and literature, I was particularly struck by both Tony Morrison's *Sula* and Sylvia Plath's "Mirror," as their integration of the fear and violence surrounding beauty underscores the heartbreaking challenges faced by so many women today.

Perceptions of beauty are employed extensively by Morrison in her novel *Sula*. In a work often acclaimed for its portrayal of friendships and gender roles, little critical discussion addresses the undertone of insecurity that runs throughout the text. The female characters wrestle constantly with concerns surrounding their skin color, sexual attractiveness, and self-image, often falling on violence as a coping mechanism.

Morrison creates direct discomfort when dealing with race and skin tone. Rather than refer to various ethnicities by their more political 'Caucasian' or 'African American' titles, she paints a vivid picture with creative utilization of color imagery. The "pale yellow woman" (Morrison 20) and "salmon-colored...conductor" (21) contrast with the "pitch-black truebloods" (52) and "Sula's mother [who] was sooty" (29). Nevertheless, most phenomenal is the description seen toward the end of the work, as Sula, the primary female character, engages in a disturbing internal monologue analyzing the skin of her lover, Ajax. She states:

If I take a chamois and rub real hard on

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the bone, right on the ledge . . . some of the black will disappear. It will flake away into the chamois and underneath there will be gold leaf . . . And if I take a nail file or even Eva's old paring knife...and scrape away the gold, it will fall away and there will be alabaster . . . Then I can take a chisel and small tap hammer and tap away at the alabaster. It will crack then like ice under the pick, and through the breaks I will see the loam . . . for it is the loam that is giving you that smell. (Morrison 130)

Not only is this a vivid transformation along a color gradient, but the exacting and analytical manner in which Sula contemplates dismantling her lover's face draws a shuddering connection to the use of violence to justify and reason with beauty. Ajax, the lover, is claimed to be a "pool haunt of sinister beauty" (Morrison 50), placing him in a position of extreme desire. Sula approaches that beauty with a tempered aggression, as she imagines "flak[ing] . . . scrap[ing] . . . [and] chisel[ing]" (130) the skin to discover its secrets to being beautiful. Nevertheless, this action would, in reality, destroy the very beauty Sula so admires.

All the while, Sula's violent streak is pushed to an extreme far earlier in the text. When she and her close friend, Nel, are confronted by "four white boys in their early teens . . . [that] harass[ed] black schoolchildren" (Morrison 53), Sula pulls out a pairing knife and "slash[es] off only the tip of her finger" (54). This brutal self-mutilation highlights Sula's sense of desperation, yet more importantly, points to the repetitive theme of violent behavior utilized as an escape from the traumas of beauty. The encounter with the boys hints at motivations of a sexual nature, as the boys "exchanged looks and dropped all pretense of innocence," contemplating the thought that "maybe they could get an arm around one of their waists, or tear . . ." (Morrison 54). The girl's beauty serves as a risk, a dangerous attractant for trouble, such as the Irish boys. This beauty presents such great danger that Sula is forced to cause extensive personal injury to drive away the risk. Yet the concept runs deeper than that. By cutting off her finger, Sula is deforming herself, damaging that very beauty which creates the danger. In a later reflection on the incident, Nel states, "Whatever those hunkies did, it wouldn't have been as bad as what she did to herself. But Sula was so scared she had mutilated herself,

to protect herself” (Morrison 101). Again, Morrison pinpoints the necessity of destroying beauty to obtain safety, just as so many women in society abuse their own bodies in fear of their fear creating a threat, or for a fear of not being beautiful enough.

Women are placed in a very complicated social dynamic, as they are conditioned to pursue beauty, yet are also threatened by it. In her book *“Look At My Ugly Face!”* author Sara Halprin discusses this challenging situation, stating, “both beauty and ugliness are problematic for us. We are endangered, raised on pedestals, and trivialized for being beautiful; on the other hand we are insulted, ignored, shunned for being ugly” (Halprin 7). She expands on this comment, stating that “one of the great paradoxes of patriarchal culture is that beauty, praised and valued as it is... is often dangerous to the woman thought to possess it” (Halprin 97-98). This danger can lead to uncomfortable situations, as extreme beauty can lead to women being “constantly placed in physical danger, danger of rape, of assault, of abuse, of battery, and of insult as well as injury” (Halprin 116). Further, when a woman “realizes that her beauty makes her attractive to men in ways that are uncomfortable, even frightening to her” (Halprin 116), she can be forced into a vulnerable psychological corner, which often leads to unstable behavior. Societal pressures instigate a double standard, requiring women to strive for the same beauty that threatens them.

This sense of internal conflict is substantial, a battle of identity and confidence that is often emotional and wearing. Catherine Valentine addresses this in her article, “Female Bodily Perfection and the Divided Self,” underscoring that “idealized images of female bodily perfection and messages of perfectibility exercise control over women’s lives by constructing a self that is distorted and divided against itself, self-policing and self-destructive” (Valentine 113). This is furthered by the description of a woman’s moral center as “the imperative for female bodily control,” that “a woman’s outer body is interpreted as a mirror of her ‘deep self’” (Valentine 114). This logic indicates that a woman is explicitly controlled by her own perception of image and beauty, that the surface defines the soul.

Indeed, this link between fear and beauty is traced through Morrison’s work by following her extensive use of fire. Several of her characters are described as beautiful or desirable, yet later many of these individuals are burned to death. This is first seen in the interaction between Sula’s grandmother, Eva, and Eva’s son, Plum. Similar to many

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women in the family, Eva is described as a woman with “a regular flock of gentleman callers” who “wanted to see her lovely calf . . . and watch the focusing that sometimes swept down out of the distances in her eyes” (Morrison 41). Her son, Plum, is a military man (invoking a societal standard of fitness and desirability), who returns from war with “a sweet, sweet smile” (Morrison 45), a description further enhancing his handsome image. Following his return, interactions with Eva become complex, as passages describe a mix of maternal and childlike imagery, “balled-up candy wrappers and empty pop bottles” (Morrison 46), with more explicitly sexual images of Plum “reach[ing] up and dripp[ing] water into her bosom” (47) and “crawlin’ up the stairs . . . opening the door soft . . . [and] creepin’ to the bed trying to spread my [Eva’s] legs” (71). Eva is clearly uncomfortable with this interaction, as it seems to shatter her previous power over men. Her beauty has turned against her, attracting the attentions of a man, her son, with whom sexual interactions would be both taboo and emotionally catastrophic. So, similar to Sula’s response to the advances of the Irish boys, Eva propels herself to an incredibly violent reaction, dousing Plum in kerosene and burning him in his sleep. Once again, beauty has created a monster, an extraordinary fear driving women to horrific behaviors.

Future generations of women in Eva Peace’s family are similarly plagued by both beauty and fire. Morrison states that “those Peace women loved all men” (41), and that Eva’s daughter, Hannah, “simply refused to live without the attention of a man” (42). Hannah is portrayed as the ultimate picture of beauty and desire, as “her flirting was sweet, low and guileless”; with minimal materialistic items she could “make men aware of her behind, her slim ankles . . . and the incredible length of neck” (Morrison 42). Her position as a sexual icon in the community is enhanced further by the descriptions of men who “tipped [their] hat down a little over [their] eyes, hoisted [their] trousers and thought about the hollow place at the base of her neck,” admiring “how her thighs looked when she bent to put it [coal scuttle] down” (Morrison 43). Morrison has laid out a stunning, outgoing, confident woman, a picture of the beauty and grace desired by society, yet once again this beauty cannot last.

Midway through the text, Hannah is seen gathering and washing mason jars, and bending over a yard fire, when suddenly the “flames from the yard fire were licking the blue cotton dress,” and when water is thrown to douse the fire, it instead “also made steam, which seared to

sealing all that was left of the beautiful Hannah Peace” (Morrison 76). This woman, once the pinnacle of sexual attraction, now lay reduced to “a mask of agony so intense that for years the people who gathered ‘round would shake their heads” (Morrison 76). She was so disfigured by the fire that “the coffin had to be kept closed at the funeral and the women who washed the body and dressed it for death wept for her burned hair and wrinkled breasts as though they themselves had been her lovers” (Morrison 77). Hannah suffered immensely, as the beauty that once defined her was cruelly stripped away by the fire.

This trend of destruction continues to follow the Peace family to the next generation, as Hannah’s daughter, Sula, our lead female, is similarly robbed of her beauty by her death. Even at a young age, Sula is described “walking through this valley of eyes . . . heated by the embarrassment of appraising stares,” as men “in their lust . . . moved their lips as though to stir up the taste of young sweat on tight skin” (Morrison 50). Sula follows her family tradition in both beauty and promiscuous behavior, as there is an “easy way [in which] she lay with men” (Morrison 122), and her betrayal of her close friend Nel by sleeping with her husband paints the image of “a pariah” (122), a sexually powerful beauty with few boundaries. Yet she begins to be stripped of this power, as Morrison employs fire imagery to drive Sula to her death. Sula’s final moments begin with a dream, where she sees The Clabber Girl Baking Powder Lady “disintegrated into white dust” (Morrison 148), and as Sula rushes to pick up all of the dust, “it cover[s] her, fill[s] her eyes, her nose, her throat, and she [wakes] overwhelmed with the smell of smoke” (148). Beckoning back to the moment when Sula watched her mother burn to death, the dream integrates a deep-rooted fear with the realization that Sula was much the same woman as her mother, and may come to a similar end. Both were beautiful, powerful, sexually free women, yet both were constantly threatened by their beauty, forced to live and die in fear of losing that power. As the scene continues, Sula feels a pain, “then a kind of burning,” coupled with imagery of “wires,” “explosions,” and “oil” that propagates the visual connection to fire. As she begins to fade, she contemplates how “she was reluctant to move her face . . . [for] if she turned her head, she would not be able to see the boarded-up window Eva jumped out of” when Hannah caught on fire (Morrison 148). Sula seems suspended in this cycle of fire, pain, and beauty, with death serving as her only escape from the torture that is her physical appearance.

The turn to violence and self-mutilation seen in *Sula* is paralleled by the traumatic self-destruction real-world women experience associated with real-world eating disorders. Where the women of the Peace family fought the threats to their beauty by chopping off fingers and starting fires, women of the eating disorder crisis fight with food in attempts to control their lives. Debra Gimlim, who argues for the consideration of anorexia as a societal issue, addresses beauty and self-destruction in her article "Anorexic as Overconformist." She describes how "every woman must negotiate the contradictory ideals that are culturally available to her in an attempt to meet the unattainable feminine role" (Gimlim 108). She emphasizes the extreme standards patriarchal society has placed on ideal female appearance. Moreover, Gimlim defines the overconformist as the woman "who strives to be as thin as possible; yet in doing so, the anorexic loses control . . . and becomes grossly emaciated" (109). Similarly, Susie Orbach, author of *Hunger Strike: The Anorectic's Struggle as a Metaphor for Our Age*, states that the disease is driven by the need for the woman to "get control over her body, then perhaps she can similarly control her emotional neediness," and that "she experiences her emotional life as an attack on herself, and she attempts to control it so that she will not be devoured by her emotions" (xii). By generating a rigid controlling structure, the woman can feel a sense of protection from her emotions. Just as the Peace family hid behind violence to ward off threats to their beauty, the women suffering from eating disorders utilize extreme control and self-mutilation to separate from the vulnerability of emotion and an inability to meet societal beauty standards.

Valentine exhibits this sense of fear and vulnerability through powerful journal entries from women with eating disorders that highlight the painful concepts of self-mutilation and internal conflict. One subject states, "I wanted so badly to conform to what I believed society wanted me to look like that I was willing to destroy myself" (Valentine 115), while others "felt somehow inferior" and "anxiety-ridden . . . almost out of breath" (116). Orbach also expands on this sense of discomfort, describing "fragments of emotional shrapnel [that] pierce the bulimic woman's insides," and hints at the sense of a split self and mistrust as "she [the bulimic woman] is delicately perched on a binge-vomit seesaw that could betray her" (Orbach xiv). Fear is an incredibly powerful driver of behavior. As the eating disorder gains control, the woman is trapped between the fear of not being pretty enough, skinny enough—and the

fear of losing control, when unfortunately the only sense of control to be found is regained by further manipulating and harming her own body. However, she is then thrown into a loop, where control leads to fear, which further drives the behaviors that cause control to be lost. This cycle of control must be broken to achieve any hope of overcoming the fear that dominates female thought processes.

One of the most predominant keys to control is seen in individual obsession with reflection. As a species, humans are strangely connected to seeing our own image; whether through mirrors, pictures, or video, there is an intense and growing desire in culture to capture and look upon ourselves. And it is through this obsession that our reflections, and the objects, such as mirrors, which provide us that service, are given extraordinary power and control. A mirror can be either a friend or a foe, and many women will respond with a laugh and an understanding look when questioned on her love/hate relationship with her mirror.

Yet as much as one may joke, the mirror holds incredible power and is a dominating, manipulative force controlling an incredibly intimate and vulnerable aspect of our individuality. Sylvia Plath's poem, "Mirror," points to the darker relationship between a woman and her mirror. The poem opens with a cold and distant voice, as the use of phrasing such as "silver and exact" (Ln 1) "no preconceptions" (Ln 1) and "unmistaken by love or dislike" (Ln 3), paired with the mechanically repetition of form in "I am," "I have," "I see," "I swallow," and "I meditate" to create a negative and oppressive character in the mirror. The perception of control is furthered by the line "The eye of a little god, four-cornered" (Ln 5), as Plath explicitly labels the mirror as a god, empowering the ability to control women's emotions. When the character of the woman enters in the second stanza, the interaction of fear and manipulation begins to grow. The woman is seen "searching my reaches for what the really is" (Ln 11), as she entrusts the mirror with the task of helping her find her true self. Very few individuals are trusted with knowledge of the truest part of who we are as a person; by allowing the mirror character into that space, the woman exposes a substantial vulnerability. While the mirror initially exhibits a loyal behavior, "I see her back, and reflect it faithfully" (Ln 13), and "I am important to her.../Each morning it is her face that replaces the darkness" (Ln 15-16), a sense of unrest is felt in the relationship, as the woman "rewards me with tears and an agitation of hands" (Ln 14). By tapping into women's most vulnerable emotions, her insecurities can be



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exploited to further the power and oppression of the mirror.

Throughout the poem, the image of the mirror develops from a lighter “silver” (Ln 1) to “a lake” (Ln 10), dark and mysterious, which draws on a history of ominous imagery to lay scene to the powerful actions in the last two lines. Plath depicts the woman intertwined with, and dependent on, the mirror, as “In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman / Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish” (Ln 17-18). This chilling closing captures the sense of fear and the unavoidable nature of women’s insecurities relating to physical appearance. Traditionally, this text is read in the connotation of an aging woman, as the “terrible fish” rises through the darkness, and just as a dead fish floats belly up, the “terrible fish” brings with it death and despair. Yet the poem can connect on a much deeper level to fears concerning all aspect of beauty. The dark unknown of the lake/mirror can harbor a full spectrum of concerns, from weight, to skin color, to aging, to daily appearance or comparison with peers. We are human, and all fall at some point in time into the depression of that lake, obsessing on a trait, minor or otherwise, which undercuts who we are as a person and a soul. Just as the woman in the poem “has drowned a young girl,” so too do we all turn to self-deprivation or violence to defend ourselves against the tortures of these insecurities.

The world we live in is filled with judgment. In society, we are constantly appraised, ranked, and defined by our outward appearance far before consideration is given to our truer identity. Particularly for women, this intense pressure to obtain an ideal physical appearance and prioritize beauty above all else can lead to insecurity, internal conflict, and emotional distress. We are forced to be afraid. When fear becomes too great, we often lash out in extreme and violent patterns, whether attacking those around us as Morrison described in *Sula*, or self-mutilating through eating disorder or depression. The key lies in the control and fear we allow to impact us—do we allow a mirror, an off-handed comment, a number on a scale, to control our lives? Or do we instead stand up—displacing the fear, and breaking free of the burdens to become the fuller, truer, happier versions of our true souls?

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