

*Shadi G. Ameen**,
*Hene A. Kareem***,
*Shajwan N. Fatah****

MISE EN ABYME: REFLECTING HÉLÈNE CIXOUS'S “THE LAUGH OF THE MEDUSA” IN SYLVIA PLATH’S “MIRROR”

Шади Г. Амин
Хене А. Карим
Шаджван Н. Фатах

MISE EN ABYME: ОТРАЖЕНИЯ НА „СМЕХЪТ НА МЕДУЗА“ ОТ ЕЛЕН СИКСУ В „ОГЛЕДАЛО“ НА СИЛВИЯ ПЛАТ

Through a semiotic approach, this paper analyzes Sylvia Plath’s “Mirror” (1971), with a particular focus on the poem’s conceptual resonances with Hélène Cixous’s “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1975). Although the poem’s denotations may evoke images related to the speaker’s memory and appearance, on a connotative level it seems to raise theoretical issues related to women’s writing, voice, and identity. The ekphrastic scenes in Plath’s work depict mythological images, which Cixous figuratively illustrates in relation to women’s writing. In this essay, our focus will be on the semiotics of the ‘mirror’ not only as a reflection of the female persona but also by taking into account the arbitrary relations among the feminist voice, text, gaze, and the echoes of social conventions. The analysis also shows the text’s fictiveness and its relation to philosophical issues that are constructed and deconstructed through the act of reading.

Keywords: *Plath; Cixous; Medusa; mirror; semiotics*

Introduction

In literary texts, when the term “mirror” is mentioned, different interpretations are offered; in this context, our interpretation contextualizes it through semiotic and feminist approaches to the act of writing. Theorists have investigated this concept through various frameworks; for instance, Luce Irigaray’s *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1974) introduces the metaphor of the curved surface of the speculum to articulate feminine representation: unlike the flat mirror of phallogentric discourse, the speculum produces distorted and non-identical reflections that disrupt masculine modes of representation. In this sense, the disordered reflections generated by the speculum expose how women are misrepresented within masculine symbolic systems, while simultaneously opening space for alternative forms of feminine self-representation. In addition to Irigaray’s perspective, Kate Millett’s theoretical framework on this dialectical

* **Shadi G. Ameen** – Researcher at the Department of English Language, University College of Goizha, Kurdistan Region, Iraq, shady.aminabdullah@gmail.com.

** **Hene A. Kareem** – Researcher at the Department of English Language, University College of Goizha, Kurdistan Region, Iraq, heniazad@gmail.com.

*** **Shajwan N. Fatah** – Researcher at the Department of Gender Studies within the Charimo Center for Research, Training, and Consultancy, Charimo University, Chamchamal, Sulaimani, Kurdistan Region, Iraq, shajwan.nariman@chu.edu.iq; <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7806-5216>.

relation is presented in her *Sexual Politics* (1970). Millett contends that cultural and literary production within patriarchal societies frequently reinforces the subordination of women, thereby obstructing movements toward gender equality. In her analysis, she foregrounds sexuality as a fundamentally political force, arguing that an awareness of the interrelation between sexual relations and power structures is essential for challenging entrenched systems of inequality (Tanner 2023). These feminist perspectives offer a novel way of looking at women's works. The question here is: how are women generally depicted in literary texts? Critics such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar explain these issues in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979); they criticize male authors for portraying women as mad or psychologically unstable in fiction and other works. Thus, examining female figures from a neutral perspective seems both critical and complicated, given the ways they have historically been represented. In this essay, we read Plath's "Mirror" not at its denotative level but as an open text that evokes female narratives in relation to Hélène Cixous's notion of women's writing.

The poem was composed in October 1961 and later published in *Crossing the Water* (1971), one of the two posthumous collections that Ted Hughes assembled from her remaining manuscripts (Conway 2010: 39). Scholars have read this poem through different lenses; for instance, Wagner-Martin (2003) argues that Plath employs the mirror to illustrate the tension between domestic stability and inner disturbance. Although the mirror offers absolute accuracy, it also prevents the woman from reconciling her youthful self-image with the reality of aging. According to Wagner-Martin, the verse reflects the poet's personal struggles in the early 1960s, especially the pressure of marriage and motherhood, and her desire to preserve an authentic internal identity beneath the surface (120 – 122). Feminist scholars expand this discussion: Freedman (1993) claims that Plath challenges what he calls the "male text as mirror," which forces women into passive reflection of male desire and judgment (152 – 169). Besides Freedman, Ghasemi (2007) views the mirror as a place where the woman must resist the oppressive male gaze to reclaim artistic autonomy (58). Similar to these critics, Sharma (2009) interprets the "terrible fish" as a symbol of female rebirth and resistance, showing how Plath rejects traditional roles imposed on women (23 – 26). Annas (1988) connects this to the poet's larger theme of female victimization, in which women struggle under social systems that limit their agency (12 – 15). In addition to such interpretations, other critics offer biographical layers; for example, Alexander (1991) claims that Plath feared losing her youth and power, linking the mirror's honesty to the poet's psychological distress over aging (45 – 47). Conway (2010) reads the poem through fairy-tale doubling, showing how the woman becomes both subject and object of her own gaze, reflecting inherited maternal tension (42 – 44). Like these scholars, Bassnett (2004) argues that the poet transforms personal trauma into poetic mythmaking, using symbols such as the 'triple Goddess' to explain a fractured female identity (58 – 60). Psychoanalytic critics, on the other hand, deepen the psychological dimension: Schwartz (2011) focuses on the connection between Plath and the mirror as she confronts alien versions of herself, describing the speaker as a bright surface that hides a darker double beneath (70 – 72). Adhikari (2024) sheds light on the mirror as a gaze that produces depersonalization, in which beauty becomes a threat to psychological stability (65 – 78). The poem is also read in terms of stylistics; for instance, Zhong (2022) thinks that phonological, graphological, and lexical structures demonstrate how linguistic deflection and irregularity reinforce themes of time and truth (163 – 167). Rahma et al. (2025) explain how personification shifts the mirror from a passive object to an active narrator that contributes to meaning (50 – 59). Ekmekçioğlu (2008), on the other hand, argues that the mirror moves from object to philosophical metaphor, revealing multiple identities within the self (92 – 102). Sharma (2009) relates this to cycles of disintegration and renewal, while Adhikari (2024) shows how metaphors like "swallow" signify violent appropriation rather than neutral reflection (66 – 70). Dahami (2021) states that the mirror acts as a reflective manuscript of 1960s women's poetry, emphasizing shifting interpretations of truth (18 – 22).

The narrative in Plath's text thus seems problematic, as critics generally read it from personal and psychological perspectives; it appears that the verse is read, to some extent, denotatively. However, as a literary text, the poem opens possibilities for its readers to analyze it and explore different concepts. Therefore, in this paper, we attempt to add layers of signification to the poem through a semiotic reading and by connecting the female voice in the poem to Hélène Cixous's notion of women's writing.



Representations of feminist voices in “The Laugh of the Medusa”

Written in 1975, Hélène Cixous’s “The Laugh of the Medusa” is deeply shaped by poststructuralist thought, particularly the influence of Jacques Derrida. Derrida’s well-known assertion that “there is no outside the text” underscores the idea that the formation of new meanings of the self, and new modes of relating to oneself and the world, depends upon language and writing. From this perspective, writing becomes the condition through which transformation is possible, functioning as a site for subversive thinking and as an initial force in the reconfiguration of social and cultural structures (Amanda 2022). In her essay, Cixous argues that women have historically been dissuaded from writing, and when they did produce literary work, it was frequently marginalized or dismissed as meaningless. She calls on women to “write women,” that is, to create female figures authored from women’s own perspectives rather than through male authors’ frameworks. According to Cixous, women must resist and dismantle the alienating representations imposed on them by men—representations that have long discouraged women’s creative expression and eroded their sense of value. Moreover, even when women succeeded in writing, they often internalized male viewpoints, resulting in a predominantly phallogocentric tradition within Western literature (Mustafa 2018). Cixous maintains that dominant literary traditions have historically marginalized women’s voices, thereby restricting their capacity for self-representation. She stresses the importance of women narrating their own experiences as a means of resisting social and cultural limitations. By foregrounding the relationship between corporeality and writing, Cixous unsettles entrenched binary oppositions and proposes an integrated conception of female identity that unites intellect and embodiment. While the essay has been both praised and criticized for its radical position, it has undeniably prompted a reorientation of literary expression and the recovery of women’s narratives. “The Laugh of the Medusa” thus continues to occupy a central place in feminist literary criticism, advocating a transformative reimagining of how women’s experiences are voiced and interpreted in literature. Cixous further deconstructs Freudian and Lacanian theories through her appropriation of Medusa’s head. In Greek mythology, Medusa was cursed by the goddess Minerva and transformed into a monstrous figure with serpentine hair and a gaze capable of turning onlookers to stone. She was ultimately killed by the hero Perseus, who severed her head. Cixous rereads this myth of Medusa’s destruction as emblematic of patriarchal efforts to silence women, suppress their voices, and rupture women’s modes of expression. Moreover, the figure of Medusa is closely tied to modern psychoanalytic discourse, particularly Freud’s interpretation of Medusa’s head as a symbol that evokes male anxiety over castration (Kaiser 2017: 3 – 5). When read semiotically, Plath’s “Mirror” reveals the complexities of women’s writing, theoretically illustrating Cixous’s notion of the female voice and women’s representations within historical narratives.

Semiotic Reading of “Mirror”

The poem’s title, “Mirror,” connotes several meanings related to echoing, reflecting, reproducing, and simulation. Strikingly, the term “mirror” seems to be absent from the poem; in other words, the title functions as a liminal and paratextual element that exists both outside and alongside the text. Although it precedes the narrative and remains external to it, the title is simultaneously inseparable from the work because it directs interpretation, signifies meaning, and shapes the reader’s understanding (Pillai 2025: 222).¹ Metaphorically, at this point, the title suggests the duality of a female writer whose persona is reflected in the text:

I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions.
 Whatever I see I swallow immediately.
 Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike.
 I am not cruel, only truthful,
 The eye of a little god, four-cornered.

¹ The concept of ‘paratext’ refers to the materials that surround a literary work without constituting its primary body, such as titles, prefaces, notes, appendices, and related textual features. Gerard Genette conceptualizes the paratext as a liminal zone that mediates between the text and its external context, functioning as a strategic and pragmatic site through which readers’ interpretations are guided, and the text’s reception is structured and enhanced (Genette 1997).

The introductory line of the verse presents readers with an unknown voice that lacks any origin and invites multiple interpretations (Barthes 1967: 142).² It also represents an echo, a reflection, and an arbitrary relation that appears to involve both a female figure and her reflection. The expression "I am silver and exact," shows a sense of neutrality which has "no preconceptions". On the one hand, this depicts a sense of pre-maturity; on the other hand, it suggests a philosophical reading that evokes Cixous's view of women's prematurity:

...And I, too, said nothing, showed nothing; I didn't open my mouth, I didn't repaint my half of the world. I was ashamed. I was afraid, and I swallowed my shame and my fear. (1977: 876)

The term "swallow" here seems to be problematic, as distinctions emerge in the ways its signification may be investigated. On a literal level, the expression "whatever I see I swallow immediately" may delineate the image of a "mirror"; however, metaphorically, it reveals gendered issues as one follows the thread of the analysis. Connecting to Cixous's essay, the language explores the power relation between reality and fictiveness; women may 'swallow' whatever they see (perceive). In other words, they see themselves through the perception of others; in the same way, through the act of writing, the persona mirrors the lector — (all the possible meanings that emerge in the moment of reading the verse). Women must inscribe themselves through writing: they must write about women and reclaim writing as a space from which they have been forcefully excluded, just as they have been alienated from their own bodies. This exclusion operates through the same structures of power and toward the same destructive ends. Through writing, woman re-enters the text—and, by extension, the world and history—on her own terms and through her own agency (Cixous 1976: 875). Thus, "[she is] not cruel, only truthful," in terms of Cixous, this seems to be a defense for women who should "write this as a woman, toward women" (875). The expression "[the] eye of a little god, four-cornered," evokes the act of watching (the gaze), which, from a feminist perspective, shows a sense of objectifying the woman. We are by no means compelled to surrender our lives to their economies of absence, to conceive the formation of the subject as a repeatedly mutilating drama, or to perpetually reassert the law and authority of the father (Cixous 1976: 884). Then, the narrative voice depicts the image of her reflection through the act of writing:

Most of the time I meditate on the opposite wall.
It is pink, with speckles. I have looked at it so long
I think it is part of my heart. But it flickers.
Faces and darkness separate us over and over.

The language at this point reveals an integration of time and space through the narrative voice who "[meditates] on the opposite wall". Figuratively, this moment articulates an arbitrary yet constitutive relationship between the author, the text, and the reader. The notion of the "wall" may thus be read as a fourth wall,³ described as pink and speckled. These visual markers explicitly resonate with Cixous's concept of *écriture féminine*: the speckles function as signs of the feminine sphere, while the pink color evokes a feminized space that has "been looked at for so long." Together, these elements foreground writing as a process shaped by visibility, gendered perception, and inscription: "[in] women's speech, as in their writing, that element which never stops resonating, which, once we've been permeated by it... [You don't build walls around yourself; you don't forego pleasure as "wisely" as he] ..." (881). In other words, the barrier between the author and the reader is transformed into a wall; a reflective space

² In his "The Death of the Author" (1967), Roland Barthes examines the narrative voice in Honoré de Balzac's *Sarrasine* (1830). Barthes questions the origin of the "I" through the relation between the author, the text, and the reader.

³ The fourth wall refers to an imagined boundary in theatre, film, television, and other fictional forms that separates performers from their audience. Although invisible to viewers, this wall is treated as opaque by the performers, who behave as if the audience does not exist. By avoiding direct address or eye contact with spectators or the camera, performers enable the audience to observe the narrative unobtrusively, much like voyeurs. This convention supports realism and sustains the audience's suspension of disbelief, which is essential for engaging with and appreciating fictional works (Styan 2026).



in which she encounters an image that is “silver and exact”. This reflection continually escapes fixed ideological frameworks and therefore remains free of preconceptions. The speaker now shifts to her emotions: “I think it is part of my heart/ [but]it flickers,” as the language conveys a sentimental aspect integrated into the thinking process. A heart that is “palpable and red,” is not read as a symbol of the heart but as the physical organ itself, responsible for circulation and associated with emotion, passion, and feeling. Although the heart is the organ that sustains life, it on its own paradoxically suggests separation from the body and may or may not circulate blood or continue to beat (Pillai 1997: 838). In other words, there are different ways this term could be read; for instance, through an existential lens, the term “heart” may denote the core of the female persona. At a deeper level, this core seems to reveal the unspoken words of the female character; thus, she needs “the opposite wall [that is] pink with speckles” to express her thoughts. This is explained by Cixous as how every woman has experienced the anguish of rising to speak: her heart pounding, sometimes left completely without words, with footing and language giving way. Such is the boldness of the act, and the extent of the transgression, for a woman to speak—even merely to open her mouth—in public (1976: 880). These unspoken but written words now “flicker,” which semiotically signifies the meaning of “a light that is sometimes bright and sometimes weak” (CD).⁴ Therefore, it seems to evoke the concept of a mirror that is reflective “silver and exact”; from this standpoint, the “opposite wall” appears like a mirror (text) that reflects the thoughts of the woman into the female persona. However, the language shows elements that seem to block this reflection: “[faces] and darkness separate us over and over,” that is, the gazes may add layers of meaning that obscure the original meaning (Barthes 1967). These reflections are eventually transformed from the ‘mirror’ into the “lake,” which depicts mythological narratives:

Now I am a lake. A woman bends over me,
Searching my reaches for what she really is.
Then she turns to those liars, the candles or the moon.
I see her back, and reflect it faithfully.
She rewards me with tears and an agitation of hands.

Here, the speaker compares herself to “a lake” which reflects the “woman”. Once more, the arbitrary relation is depicted between the author, the poem, and its reader. At this point, we shed light on the word “lake,” which carries mythological significance associated with Narcissus and evokes classical narratives of reflection and self-recognition. The female subject sees her image through the opposite wall, which functions as a reflective and observing surface. This moment resonates with Cixous’s argument, which explains that patriarchal society has instilled an “anti-narcissism” in women, conditioning them to reject or undervalue themselves. In contrast, the act of encountering one’s own reflection, here mediated by the lake, invokes the possibility of self-recognition, affirmation, and self-love, paralleling Cixous’s vision of women writing themselves into being. Men have perpetrated the gravest injustice against women. Through insidious and violent means, they have conditioned women to despise themselves, to become their own adversaries, and to direct their considerable energy toward fulfilling male desires. In doing so, they have imposed an “anti-narcissism” on women—a form of self-love that exists only to be validated for what women supposedly lack. This has established a pervasive logic of anti-love (Cixous 1976: 878). The expressions “[searching] my reaches for what she really is,” seem to be connected to the female subject’s identity, as the speaker attempts to find and construct her ‘heart’ that figuratively shows the concept of essence:

When I write, it’s everything that we don’t know we can be that is written out of me, without exclusions, without stipulation, and everything we will be calls us to the unflagging, intoxicating, unappeasable search for love. In one another we will never be lacking. (Cixous 1976: 893)

The narrative voice then “turns to those liars, the candles or the moon,” situating the persona between two worlds: one behind the “wall” and one beyond it. From a Lacanian perspective, this duality

⁴ Cambridge Dictionary <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/flicker> Accessed 20-12-2025

reflects a constant oscillation between the conscious and the subconscious (Mahmood et al. 2025: 13).⁵ The language also evokes Cixous's notion:

[Time] and again I, too, have felt so full of luminous torrents that I could burst—burst with forms much more beautiful than those which are put up in frames and sold for a stinking fortune. (Cixous 1976: 876)

In other words, the female subject's world has been mediated through artificial or imposed images (candles/moonlight) rather than being constructed from her own authentic self. At this moment, a distinctly feminist voice emerges, encouraging women to build a world that mirrors themselves, much like the reflection in Plath's mirror, described as "silver and exact". The female speaker now appears to "see [the woman's] back and reflect it faithfully". In other words, the significations of the text highlight the relationship between what lies beneath the surface of the "lake" and the reflected image above it. The ekphrastic scene captures the interaction between the two figures, one beneath and one above the lake, or more precisely, the mirror, which can be read figuratively as a blank page marked with "pink speckles". Moreover, this provokes Cixous's notion of anti-narcissism: only through the act of writing does the reflected persona confront the back of the female persona, thereby symbolizing repressed memories and thoughts (Lacan 1977). The act of writing is depicted clearly through the expression "[she] rewards [the woman] with tears and an agitation of hands," that is to say: "[to write herself], [her] body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring" (Cixous 1976: 880). The narrative voice now represents her persona who seems to move ("comes and goes") and whose "face" takes the place of the "darkness":

I am important to her. She comes and goes.

Each morning it is her face that replaces the darkness.

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

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

These expressions align with what Cixous explains: she enters and positions herself between herself, me, and you—opening a space where identity is never singular but always exceeds itself. In this space, subjectivity remains limitless and continuously in process, animated by the pleasure of becoming. She disrupts protective attachments, maternal fixations, and forms of possessive consumption; moving beyond closed, narcissistic self-relations, she inhabits an open, fluid, and transitional realm in which she willingly embraces risk (Cixous 1976: 893). The expressions "[in] me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman," appear to depict a woman at two different ages, however, figuratively and more philosophically, it seems to show the supremacy: It is time to free the New Woman from the Old by coming to understand her and to love her—not merely for survival, but for her capacity to move beyond inherited limitations without hesitation. This means advancing toward what the New Woman is becoming, anticipating her transformation, like an arrow leaving the bow in a motion that both gathers and releases vibrations harmoniously, allowing her to become more than she is now (Cixous 1976: 876). In other words, the woman is reborn through writing. She emerges from the darkness of the "liars" and from the artificial, staged illumination of "candles and mood," appearing instead with the stripped, unadorned presence of old age. This apparent paradox gives shape to the figure of the 'New Woman'—one formed not through illusion or aesthetic simulation, but through self-authored transformation and embodied awareness. The narrative voice concludes with an ironic self-comparison to a "terrible fish" that

⁵ For Lacan, the unconscious and conscious minds are deeply intertwined, along with the Imaginary and Symbolic orders, forming a structure akin to a Borromean knot. Because conscious thought cannot recognize its roots in the unconscious, it remains fundamentally unaware of itself, experiencing only *méconnaissance*, or misrecognition. The resistance conscious thought shows toward the unconscious mirrors the resistance of the signifier to fully capture the signified in language. In this system, the signifier stands in for the subject, yet the subject itself is experienced as an absence. Language, like thought, oscillates between presence and absence, as do the conscious and unconscious. This absence in consciousness—the "gaze"—generates desire: a longing for the Other that substitutes for the missing subject or object, highlighting the impossibility of fulfillment caused by the unconscious's inaccessibility (Hendrix 2015: 261 – 262).



“rises toward her day after day,” a gesture that produces a deliberate tension. Spoken in a disruptive, revelatory tone, this image breaks with conventional representations of femininity by refusing ideals of beauty, passivity, and visual pleasure, as cultural norms have perpetrated a profound injustice against women by subtly and forcefully compelling them to internalize hostility toward femininity itself. As a result, women are positioned as adversaries to their own being, channeling their considerable energies into self-negation and into fulfilling masculine demands. This process produces a form of anti-narcissism, in which women are encouraged to value themselves only through absence—loving themselves insofar as they are desired for what they are perceived to lack (Cixous 1976: 876).

Conclusion

Sylvia Plath’s “Mirror” (1971) raises philosophical issues that this paper examines. Although common readings emphasize the poem’s most denotative meanings in relation to the poet’s biography, the text also suggests deeper concepts related to women’s writing, the act of reading, and the analysis of words and their significations. Thus, in this essay, we set aside the most literal meanings and instead focus on the language’s rhetorical functions. Following a semiotic analysis, our reading demonstrates that the images in the poem can be interpreted through the theoretical tools of feminist criticism, as articulated by Hélène Cixous in “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1975). Both Plath’s poem and Cixous’s essay on women’s voice and its representations are intertwined, highlighting the problems of interpreting language through the arbitrary relationship between the female persona, the lector, and the “opposite wall”—the text.

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