

Narcissism and Cultural Liberation

A Textual and Cultural Analysis of Carol Shields’ “Mirrors”

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Abstract

This paper will analyze Carol Shields’ short story “Mirrors” in the collection *Dressing Up for the Carnival*. The paper will explore how the absence of mirrors in the story creates a break in narcissism, which liberates the characters from cultural impositions. This will be done using Jonathan Culler’s “Narrative” to analyze the parts of the plot where mirrors appear, or where the couple mirrors each other. The analysis will utilize the psychoanalytical and cultural underpinnings of Freud, Lacan, Lunbeck, Friedman, and Adorno and Horkheimer. Through the breaks in narcissism, the characters are liberated from the cultural impositions of vanity, fashion, marriage, and beauty, among others. Finally, the aspects of narcissism inherent in the setting and internal dialogue of the characters will be examined.

Key words: Shields, mirrors, identity, culture, narcissism, uncanny, Narcissus

1. Introduction: Carol Shields and “Mirrors”

Carol Shields’ short story “Mirrors” is about a couple’s marriage to each other over a thirty-five-year time span, and their decision not to have any mirrors in their summer house (450). This deliberate act of mirrorlessness and the season of nonreflectiveness is justified by an innate need of appearance: “The need to observe ourselves is sewn into us, everyone knows this, but he and his wife have turned their backs on this need...” (Shields 450). As noted by Dvorak, “[Shields’] writing, rooted in everydayness, is profoundly metaphorical” (Dvorak 3). Thus, the story delves into the

ideas of self-identity in the absence of the mirrors but in the presence of another person, and the experience of the couple ultimately seeing themselves in each other (Kruk 122).

Carol Shields was a Canadian author who studied at the University of Ottawa and wrote a plethora of literary works throughout her lifetime (Staines, ed. 2-3). The story “Mirrors” can be found in Shields’ publication entitled *Dressing Up for the Carnival*, which includes a collection of short stories concerning the ideas of gender, identity, and the carnival (Kruk 121). Shields is famous for her “interest in materiality, particularly the everyday, the small scale and a carefully realized world of the family, the married couple, the close friends. But the everyday is often defamiliarised” (Eagleton, Mary 70). Throughout her writing and short stories, especially within *Dressing Up for the Carnival*, Shields incorporates both modernism and postmodernism to manipulate the characters and their daily lives, as well as the various themes within her stories:

At the core of Shields's writing, then, is a paradigm characteristic of modernism suggesting a supra-reality beyond the senses, deeply concerned with figuration and representation, or the order of the world. But this vertical mode is enmeshed with a horizontal one characteristic of postmodernism: it is concerned not with re/presentation, but with the *presentation* of a world through the "*parallel realities*" of fiction (Dvorak 2).

In the story “Mirrors”, as can be inferred from the title, mirrors are defamiliarised and their tropes of reflection and identity are inverted. Similarly, the characters in the story are relatable for a wide audience—an old married couple with a summer house at the lake and grown, married children. Using the summer house as the backdrop of the story, and

mirrors as the focal point, Shields creates a short story closely linked to modernism, as are the themes within the story.

“Mirrors”, as analyzed using Jonathan Culler’s chapter “Narrative” in *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*, uses third person omniscient narration with an alternating focalization between the two main characters, a husband and wife. The story focuses on their life at their summer house, from their early marriage to their life with grown children (Shields 459). The textual analysis of this story will be emphasized through a cultural analysis of identity and narcissism. My approach to the story, in line with cultural studies, seeks to shed light on “the problematical character of identity and to the multiple ways in which identities are formed, experienced, and transmitted” (Culler 45). In the story, this formation, experience, and transmission are experienced through the absence of mirrors in the summer house. The focus of “Mirrors” in this paper will include a textual and cultural analysis discussing the connections between identity and culture, specifically narcissism as is noted below.

2. Theoretical Approach and Objective

The history of the mirror in myth and culture relates to identity and individualism. The invention of mirrors led to “new conceptions of individuality...” in society, culture, and literature (Rahimi 455). The mirror is a reminder of the reflection of the self; it allows people to discover who they are and to find boundaries in their life — it creates a sense of self (Elkisch 242). This sense of self in the reflection of the mirror is related to the idea of narcissism. Róheim examines the significance of the mirror across different cultures, and notes that the “superstitions and taboos betray man’s unconscious awareness

of the insidious dangers of a narcissistic fixation and an attempt at protection against it” (Elkisch 239). A person is unaware of the narcissistic nature of their reflection in the mirror. Therefore, the mirror has created a new idea in society and culture of the individual self which has ultimately led to cultural narcissism: “The ‘narcissistic requirement’ to maintain one’s positive self-feeling ‘plays a part in everything,’... and shaped individuals as powerfully as did the better recognized drives of sexuality and aggression” (Lunbeck 28). Narcissism is dangerously inherent in society as it allows people to maintain a positive self-image and understand their own identity. The mirror in itself is a type of cultural object, and the absence of mirrors in Carol Shields’ story indicates a “resistance to the commodifying and objectifying social gaze” (Kruk 122). I contend that, the characters in the story are resisting cultural narcissism through eliminating mirrors from their summer house. Therefore, in Carol Shields’ short story “Mirrors”, the absence of mirrors creates a break in narcissism, which liberates the characters from cultural impositions. The story’s form, its rhetorical composition, reflects the sense of liberation through the erasure of identity markers and character’s actions in the absence of mirrors.

This break in narcissism that will be argued in this paper positions “Mirrors” as an anti-Narcissus myth. According to Mark Carthwright: “Narcissus is a figure from Greek mythology who was so impossibly handsome that he fell [*sic*] in love with his own image reflected in a pool of water.” In “Mirrors”, the characters deliberately eliminate mirrors from their summer house, leaving no chance at seeing their reflection and falling into narcissism. Ventura explains that “Mirrors” is in fact an anti-Narcissus myth as it replaces self-love with secular marriage: “Shields’s treatment of the motif in the mirror

is ambiguous: she explicitly includes a reference to the myth of Narcissus in the narrative, yet a number of major divergences in the development of the plot invite us to reconsider the story and contemplate it as a possible anti-Narcissus myth” (Ventura 206). Furthermore, Shields includes a reference to the Narcissus myth within the story through the contemplation of looking *into* a mirror, and how the first mirrors were water, which started with Narcissus (Shields 457). Yet at the same time, “Shields’s treatment of the motif in the mirror is ambiguous: she explicitly includes a reference to the myth of Narcissus in the narrative, yet a number of major divergences in the development of the plot invite us to reconsider the story and contemplate it as a possible anti-Narcissus myth” (Ventura 206). Therefore, textual elements signal a divergence from the Narcissus themes of self-love and self-absorption.

Finally, the story “Mirrors” will be examined through a psychoanalytical approach as well as a cultural approach. First, the story will be analyzed using Freud’s idea of narcissism. This state is “one characterized by a lack of inner experience, or, more correctly, of the kind of experience that defines the self as an autonomous being” (Friedman 171). In essence, narcissism is selfishness, self-centeredness, and an excessive interest in oneself or one’s appearance (Oxford Dictionary of English). Second, several examples from the story will be analyzed using Freud’s *The Uncanny*, or “that which is familiar, of the self and known to the self, yet supposed to remain hidden from the self, but has become apparent, has become visible to the self” (Rahimi 459). Essentially, it is the idea of seeing the familiar in something unfamiliar, which can create fear in an individual (Ferré 43). Third, “Mirrors” will be examined using Lacan’s aptly-named mirror stage. The mirror stage is the first development of an ego or an integrated self-

image (Eagleton 143). The function of the mirror stage is to establish a relationship between the organism and its reality (443). It is essentially a step in the process of forming the ego and one's identity. Therefore, the psychoanalytic analysis of "Mirrors" will include narcissism, the uncanny, and the mirror stage.

3. Literary Form and Cultural Liberation

Alex Ramon discusses the themes inherent throughout Shields' stories and writing. He suggests that the stories in *Dressing Up for the Carnival*, "...are most closely connected by the *loss* of "ordinary items," by the trope of absence, and by an *exploration* of the strategies devised by protagonists to bear the lacks and deficiencies which characterize their lives" (Ramon 151). In "Mirrors", the mirrors as ordinary items are absent by the choice of the characters, who find ways of living without mirrors at the summer house. Furthermore, "[Shields'] work frequently explores the challenge of human endurance and the necessity of finding daily consolation" (Ramon 151). The characters find consolation in the absence of mirrors because the mirrors liberate the couple from cultural impositions. This elimination of mirrors is reflected in the plot through the absence of identity markers. According to Kruk, the characters are "...nameless protagonists whose insight...extends to the implied author or narratee..." (131). The reader never finds out the names of the characters, and their thoughts and actions are all dictated through an omniscient narrator, an implied author. There is no place marker, other than the fact that the cottage is on "Big Circle Lake" (Shields 451). Furthermore, there are no dates involved in the plot; the reader has to infer from the setting and cultural references in the story as to the time period in which the story takes place. At the summer house, these identity markers are lost along with the mirrors, a

symbol of reflection, culture, and identity: “Mirrors have apparently been eradicated from the narrated space: they seem to exist only in the act of narration through the reference to their elimination” (Ventura 206). Therefore, the couple is now outside the impositions placed on them by culture, and they can reflect on themselves through the reflection of the other person rather than a mirror. Considering that there is a loss of identity markers, and allowance for reflection outside the parameters of culture, the couple experiences a rupture of narcissism inherent in the cultural presence of mirrors.

4. Textual Analysis

The first example in the story regarding the absence of mirrors is when the wife discusses the pocket mirror. Told by the omniscient narrator and focalized through the wife, she remembers how new purses used to come with a small, crude mirror wrapped in tissue: “they were... like compasses; you could look into them and take your bearings. Locate yourself in the world” (Shields 457). This example is connected with gender and identity. The mirror allows women to locate themselves in society and in culture—to find themselves: “But this location is superficial, because you can only see your social position by your outward appearance; your soul is concealed” (Girod 4). Mirrors conceal the real “self” by a focus on outward appearances and defining the “self” according to that appearance; the wife specifies that only women are concerned with mirrors, which is connected to vanity. According to Lunbeck, narcissism is “closely intertwined with a critique of American consumerism” and “characteriz[ed] the unseemly self-regard of American women...by...advertisers appealing to their vanity” (14-15). Therefore, vanity is a cultural construction aimed at the female population. Vanity is a characteristic of narcissism and connects back to the story of Narcissus where he cannot stop staring at his

reflection in the pool (Cartwright, Mark). At the summer house in the absence of mirrors, the wife is liberated from the culture of vanity and narcissism because she has no mirror, and this eliminates her narcissism regarding her appearance, specifically with the example of the swimsuit, which I examine next.

The second example in the story is when the wife discusses how she walks around the house in her swimsuit without the concern that she will have to see her reflection in a mirror (Shields 453). This story is once again focalized through the wife. The mirror is synonymous with the cultural idea of fashion and gender. Fashion allows people to express their identity; however, there is societal pressure to be skinny and perfect. Lunbeck discusses in her chapter “The Culture of Narcissism” how “the ‘psychic feeling of self’ could encompass not only the body but also clothing and other like property, all of which could enhance one’s ego-feeling and contribute to the narcissistic pleasure of an enlarged self-compass.” (Lunbeck 30). The absence of mirrors liberates the wife from the cultural imposition of fashion and property, allowing her to identify with her feelings of liberation rather than the narcissistic pleasure created by society. At the same time, Kruk states that there is a “complicity in social construction, beyond the ‘surface’ removal of these reflective tools” (132). There is an absence of mirrors in the cottage, however the ideas of the cultural impositions remain around the pressure to be skinny and perfect, namely when the wife sees the thin waitresses in the restaurant, as will be explained below (Shields 456). At the same time, the cultural ideals of beauty and perfection need not concern the wife at the cottage as there are no mirrors with which to view her imperfect body, narcissistic fission when the wife finally feels comfortable in her own skin.

The third scene is once again seen through the wife, but told through the omniscient narrator. The wife sees her reflection in a mirror in a restaurant and does not recognize herself—she is a stranger to herself: “A moment ago she had felt a pinprick of envy for the lithe careless bodies of the young waitresses. Now she was confronted by this stranger” (Shields 456). The wife was feeling envious of the thin waitresses, as the wife has always struggled with her weight (Shields 456). However, at the moment when the wife sees her reflection she does not recognize herself, but instead needs to identify with someone else in order to locate herself in the world. Kruk explains that the restaurant scene is a moment of potential narcissism when the wife is stressing the other within the self (134). She is looking inward in a self-centered way, creating an interest in herself through the other. Furthermore, this is an example of Freud’s “The Uncanny” when the wife sees something unfamiliar within something familiar, herself: “The psychoanalyst writes that ‘the uncanny’ is that class of terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar” (Martín 43). The image reflected in the restaurant mirror shocks the wife who sees a stranger in own reflection, this creates a double through the conflict of the self and the other: the recognition of self and the appearance in the mirror of the stranger, the other. Ernst Jentsch describes the experience of the uncanny as “the thing is or at least seems to be foreign to him” (8). In this case, the wife’s own identity is foreign to her, in the season of non-reflectiveness, her identity had been set aside (Ventura 210). Therefore, the restaurant scene brings back the narcissism inherent in the cultural reflection of the other, reinforcing the idea that the absence of mirrors in fact challenges narcissism through a liberation from cultural impositions of beauty.

The fourth example occurs when the husband cheats on his wife and feels shameful. The lack of mirrors in the summer houses causes the husband's shame to reflect back on himself (Shields 458). From this moment until the end of the story he no longer identifies himself in his wife, he has to look for identity within himself. The absence of mirrors creates a loss of seemingly concrete identity markers for the husband, therefore the truth is not graspable to him: "But since... [man's mirrored image] was unreal, namely, not made of stuff he could lay his hand on, he obviously felt he was faced with his soul (Elkisch 240). With the absence of mirrors and the loss of identity markers in his reflection, the husband has to look inward to understand the cultural imposition placed on him by unfaithfulness in marriage. Along with the feelings of disorientation, the husband has betrayed his wife twice, once with the affair, and once with another woman who was so dependent on mirrors and her appearance: "She was more beautiful too, though with a kind of beauty that had to be checked and affirmed continually" (Shields 457). Ventura notes that "the extramarital affair is a double betrayal, since, for one thing, the husband is not true to his wife and for another he also forswears the vow of mirrorlessness by accepting his mistress's dependency on mirrors" (213). The husband needs to find something to mirror because he has "an imminent threat of loss of self" in his marriage with the betrayal of both his wife and mirrorlessness, which is inherent in the occurrence of mirroring (Elkisch 242). The husband longs to put his head down on the pine table in the kitchen, which is a metaphorical substitute for Narcissus' mirror, where the betrayal of the affair has changed the surface of the table so that he cannot see his reflection: "The husband seems to long for a restoration of his self-image on the smooth mirror of the pine table. His mirror substitute is made of wood, and the

simplicity of wood echoes the simplicity of glass” (Ventura 213). Since there are no mirrors at the summer house and the pine table does not have a reflective surface, the husband has to find something else to mirror, and in this case, it is himself. Therefore, the absence of mirrors and reflection as an identity marker forces the husband to break out of the selfishness of being unfaithful in his marriage.

The fifth example happens at the end of the story when the narrator speaks through the husband’s vision when the husband and wife look at each other in the bedroom. The husband does not recognize his wife as they glance at each other: “...The two of them at this moment had become each other, at home behind the screen of each other’s face. It was several seconds before he was able to look away” (Shields 460). This is an instance of a loss of individual identity; the story has lost all sense of identity markers, as do the husband and wife when they are reflected in each other. Kruk further explains this loss of identity markers in the story: “Where the publicly projected self was once *other*, the private other is now *self*, located within the concentric circles of marriage bed, summer house, Big Circle Lake” (135). The summer house represents a break in narcissism in relation to the cultural impositions of relating oneself to the other, and the husband and wife look towards each other to search for identity, finding a reflection in each other. The reflection in the other creates a lack of orientation in reality from waking from sleep as well as in identity, creating a feeling of uncanny (Jentsch 8). Rahimi describes this phenomenon well: “it is that which is familiar, of the self and known to the self, yet supposed to remain hidden from the self, but has become apparent, has become visible to the self” (459). The husband and wife are mirroring each other, seeing each other as themselves, before which the husband does not recognize his wife. This sense of

uncanny can also be described using Lacan's mirror stage. Eagleton writes that the reflected image "is at once somehow part of ourselves – we *identify* with it – and yet not ourselves, something alien" (143). The husband and wife lose their sense of self when they look at each other and see something alien in the other person. According to Lacan, "the function of the mirror stage is to establish a relationship between the organism and its reality" (443). The husband and wife are attempting to find reality in the other, as they are losing their sense of identity markers: "They have learned to accommodate the otherness of the same and the sameness of the other, while mirroring each other in the pupils of their eyes" (Ventura 217). This loss of identity signals a split with the narcissism inherent in cultural impositions of the self and other.

The sixth example that signals a break from the narcissism of the couple is focalized through the husband when he talks about their self-care routines at the summer house. In the absence of mirrors, the couple have to shave and do their hair and make-up without mirrors. At the cottage, the husband is no longer meticulous about shaving: "Just try it. Shut your eyes and you'll see you can manage a decent shave without the slightest difficulty. Maybe not a perfect shave, but good enough for out at the lake" (Shields 452). Also, the wife makes do without mirrors, in the same way that her husband does: "She does her hair in the morning...by feel, brushing it out, patting it into shape.... As for lipstick, she makes do with a quick crayoning back and forth across her mouth..." (Shields 453). Without mirrors, they have lost concern for their appearance, shaving or doing their makeup "haphazardly", not needing their hair or makeup to be perfect. This lack of concern for their appearance with the lack of mirrors signals a break in narcissism. Lunbeck notes that narcissism "at its simplest is a freighted synonym for

self-love or self-absorption” (13). The couple are no longer self-absorbed with their appearance, the mirrorless cottage creates a relaxed environment for them. This break in narcissism liberates the couple from the cultural implication of beauty and narcissism as “an indulgent, sensuous, and feminized consumption” (Lunbeck 15). The lack of mirrors at the cottage forces the couple away from the cultural implications of beauty and perfection.

The seventh example takes place when the husband describes the first time they met. The two individuals remind themselves of each other: “‘You remind me of someone,’ she said the first time they met. He knew she meant that he reminded her of herself. Some twinned current flowed between them” (Shields 459). The wife finds something familiar to her, yet unfamiliar at the same time, she has found someone with which to identify: “We have only to understand the mirror stage as an *identification*, in the full sense that analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image...” (Lacan 442). The wife sees her image reflected in her husband and identifies with it. According to Eagleton, during Lacan’s mirror stage, “the child ‘misrecognizes’ itself in [the mirror], finds in the image a pleasing unity which it does not actually experience in its own body” (143). The wife sees herself in her husband, however she does not understand this recognition. This mirroring of each other abolishes narcissism through individuation: “From a Freudian perspective, the narcissistic state is one characterized by a lack of inner experience...the kind of experience that defines the self as an autonomous being” (Friedman 171). There is an internalization of narcissistic mirrors to produce an autonomous self, the formation of an identity capable of self-realization (Friedman 172). Although the wife recognizes

herself in her husband, and they experience other uncanny experiences throughout the story, the two characters demonstrate individuality through different thoughts and feelings in the story. This can be seen through a change in focalization between the two characters to describe their thoughts and feelings through a third-person omniscient narrator. This individual expression of feelings and thoughts liberate the couple from the cultural imposition of homogeneity and uniformity in cultural production: “Culture today is infecting everything with sameness.... Each branch of culture is unanimous within itself and all are unanimous together” (Adorno and Horkheimer 94). Therefore, the division between narcissism and individuality liberates the characters from homogenous culture.

5. The Presence of Mirrors and Narcissism

As much as the absence of mirrors within the story is anti-Narcissistic, and effectively liberates the couple from cultural impositions, the presence of mirrors in the natural lake and the dialogue results in narcissism. Ventura explains:

In narrated space, mirrors have been eliminated, but their presence, which is necessarily an absence, makes itself felt through the representation of the place in discourse, which consecrates the extraordinary dimension of the log cabin by the lake as subtending the possibility of the inversion of signification (212).

The inversion of the signification of the mirror begins with Big Circle Lake. There is no specific identity marker for Big Circle Lake, which reflects the elimination of mirrors. This is ironic, however, because Big Circle Lake, being a body of water, is a natural mirror; the lake is a substitute for the mirrors in the story: “...while the couple are

represented in a state of mirrorlessness, they are made to inhabit a house next to a circular watery surface, the reflection of which is deliberately suppressed from utterance” (Ventura 208). This inescapable presence of the mirror as Big Circle Lake signifies that the couple is never far away from the narcissism caused by the cultural ideals imposed on them. At the same time that Big Circle Lake breaks the deprivation of mirrors at the summer house, the reflection of the lake cannot be prevented as it is a mirror made by nature (Girod 5). Also, when the husband and wife go to wash up in the lake, there is no mention made of the reflection of themselves they may have seen in the water.

In order to argue further that the absence of mirrors creates a break in narcissism, it is necessary to consider that the presence of mirrors involves narcissism with the characters in Carol Shields’ “Mirrors”. This is explained further by Ventura’s analysis of “Mirrors”: “The annual season of non-reflectiveness allows the simultaneous presence of selflessness and self-seeking in the psychological build-up of the characters, just as it accommodated several kinds of duplicitous mirrorings in the narrated space and the space of utterance” (209). Therefore, within the story the lack of narcissism in the “narrative space” translates to inherent narcissism in the “space of utterance”. For example, in the story, the wife reflects upon the composition of the mirror, and refers to them as magical, composed of glass and silver:

She had always found it curious that mirrors, which seemed magical in their properties, in their ability to multiply images and augment light, were composed of only two primary materials: a pane of glass pressed up against a pane of silver. Wasn’t there something more required? Was this really all there was to it?

The simplicity of glass. The preciousness of silver. Only these two elements were needed from the miracle of reflection to take place. When a mirror was broken, the glass could be replaced. When a mirror grew old, it had only to be resilvered. There was no end to a mirror. It could go on and on. It could go on forever.

Perhaps her life was not as complicated as she thought. Her concerns, her nightmares, her regrets, her suspicions—perhaps everything would eventually be repaired, healed, obliterated. Probably her husband was right: she made too much of things (Shields 458-459).

In this example the wife reflects on the composition of mirrors, which sparks a reflection on her life. Essentially, when the mirrors are present (whether physically or mentally) the wife thinks about herself and opens up to narcissistic tendencies. According to Girod, the mirror stands for self-awareness and truth. When the wife thinks about the mirror, she becomes self-aware and finds the truth in her husband's evaluation of her behavior. Lacan notes that the mirror stage leads to the formation of the I (441). Therefore, when the mirror is present in the story, the characters open themselves up to self-reflection. At the same time, when the mirrors are absent in the story, they mirror each other, signaling a collapse in narcissism between the self and other.

A second example of the presence of narcissism in the presence of mirrors is when the husband discusses his concern with the mirrors after he reflects on his son and daughter's perception of the couple living without mirrors. The husband believes that the son and daughter describe the absence of mirrors in the summer house as an eccentric or

a stabilizing act; however, he notes: “Living without mirrors is cumbersome and inconvenient, if the truth were known, and moreover, he has developed a distaste in recent years for acts of abnegation, finding something theatrical and childish about cultivated denial, something stubbornly willful and self-cherishing” (Shields 459-460). The deliberate absence of mirrors at the summer house creates an inherent narcissism, and a denial of the problems rising from cultural and societal impositions at the same time that the absence of mirrors liberates the couple from cultural impositions. “People in the house can forget who they are or at least what they look like and problems, which a mirror could reveal, are pushed away” (Girod 5). Furthermore, the asceticism and renunciation of mirrors leads to narcissism: “The psychoanalyst’s narcissism, rooted in deprivation and unmet need.... The exemplary narcissists of the consulting room were not the hedonists of the social critics’ collective imagining but, rather, closet ascetics, glorying in their independence of everyone and everything” (Lunbeck 11). The asceticism and deprivation that the husband and wife voluntarily accept is a form of narcissism, as noted when the husband calls denial self-cherishing, recognizing the narcissism within the absence of mirrors: “...the mirror finds a presence in the text through the unconscious and contradiction and denegation (Ventura 209). At the same time that the absence of mirrors at the summer house and the reflection on this absence leads back to narcissism, the choice to eliminate mirrors in summer house is inherently non-narcissistic: “Of course, for the couple no mirror was needed to show the cottage’s real beauty. It has emotional value, which no mirror in the world could show” (Girod 5). As much as the reflection on mirrors in the story signals narcissism, and the absence of mirrors may signal narcissism as well, the summer house is non-narcissistic because it

harbours an emotional connection. Considering that the presence of mirrors results in narcissistic tendencies of the characters in the stories, the absence of mirrors and the emotional connection to the summer house, where mirrors are absent, thus effectively breaks narcissistic tendencies.

6. Conclusion

Overall, in Carol Shields short story “Mirrors”, the absence of mirrors creates a break in narcissism inherent in culture, which liberates the characters from cultural impositions, as shown through the loss of identity markers and the characters thoughts in the absence of mirrors. The excerpts from the text were analyzed using psychoanalysis, including Freud’s The Uncanny and Narcissism, Lacan’s mirror stage, as well as the cultural theories of Lunbeck, Friedman and Adorno and Horkheimer. When they relinquish narcissism, the husband and wife are liberated from cultural impositions of beauty, fashion, vanity, gender, marriage, the self and other, and uniformity.

It is interesting to note that in the story, the wife is always reflecting on the mirrors, and the husband always reflects on his wife, referring to the search for the self within the constraints of culture and society. Ventura summarizes the story well when she says:

...Shields has made us witness the lovers’ progress from the forswearing of mirrors as an emblem of vanity to the secret accommodation of mirrors as an emblem of truth, which reaches its final climax in the acknowledgement of the beloved’s pupil as the natural looking glass reflecting the divine essence of love (217).

In order to expand on this topic, further research can be conducted regarding “Mirrors” as an anti-Narcissus myth, as well as the imagery and metaphor of mirrors in the story. Furthermore, it would be useful to explore the connections between identity and mirrors in the story, and the progress the characters make throughout the story. As Shields writes in the first paragraph of “Mirrors”, the couple is ultimately reminded of “their better selves” when they spend their summers by the lake because the absence of mirrors interferes with narcissism and liberates them from the cultural impositions of everyday life.

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