

MIND OVER MATTER

Mirror Mirror - [jeanette winterson](#) -Feb 23, 2025

It is easy to look in the mirror. It's not easy to see ourselves.



Social media has decreed that life happens on the surface. Your appearance, your outward show, your visually edited life, your 2D exchanges. Holding an iPhone up to the Mona Lisa is not seeing. Being satisfied, or not, with how we look, is not seeing. Seeing ourselves can happen without ever looking in the mirror. Without any surface reflection. It can't happen without self-reflection.

When we are born, we see ourselves in the eyes of our mother. As adults, we hope to see ourselves in the eyes of a lover. To be recognised. The harm done to young people by social media, happens through the creation of a false self, a distorted self, a self the person doesn't recognise - even if they desire to be this false self. Unable to be yourself, to see yourself, damages our mental health. To be who you are is not possible unless you can see who you are - not in the hostile eyes of strangers, or according to the empty goals of fame, but through the eyes of people you trust, flawed, like you, doing their best, like you. The people you trust don't have to be known to you - they can be writers, artists, thinkers, and such people don't have to be alive. Through the work of others we come to trust, we can see ourselves.

That cliché about art holding up a mirror to nature? (Sorry Hamlet). Yes, art shows us ourselves and our world, but those handmade mirrors have some magic in them. They are not plain glass. And even the plainest glass is showing you an image reversed. Art will show us, alright, but it's not a faithful reproduction. When a play, or a book, whatever, gives an insight, it's exactly that... INSIGHT not OUTSIGHT. You understand a sliver of your self that suddenly affects the whole - the outside you, yes, but via the inside you. That's the way it works - a mirror reflects the outside. Art reflects the inside.

And we need it more than ever.

We are surrounded by shiny surfaces. Going deep means going private. not a private jet or a personal guru; going inside the self all by yourself. And you can't monetise that, though Lord knows, the wellness industry does its best. For all the retreats, and the workshops, and the Self-Help, we are left with ourselves, eventually. Teachers are helpful, a community keeps us strong. Friends hold us when would fall. I believe in those things. But there is always the confrontation with YOU that only you can do. It's painful and it's hard. The surface seems a long way off. Everyone has gone. For extroverts, that is especially difficult. For introverts, the journey back is more of a problem.

Looking in a mirror, without fixing our hair or make-up, or removing breakfast, can be a strange kind of soul-searching. What do you see? What do you really see? Get over the criticisms, stop fretting about your nose. What do you see? Kind eyes? Frightened eyes? A face that moves to smile? Are you tired? And when you have done your surface-seeing, then you can go deeper. Look through the surface. Now what?

Remember Snow White, and the Wicked Queen who had to be the Fairest of them All, and when she wasn't anymore, she had to plot to murder.

Remember the vampire has no reflection.

Remember Alice going through the Looking Glass to another world.

There are haunted mirrors and magic mirrors and mirrors like the water where Narcissus fell in love with his own reflection - and afterwards, could never love anyone else.

Mirror-healing involves repeating truths, or mantras, or affirmations, to yourself while watching your expression. You will see if you believe what you are saying. You will see how deep - or not - it goes.



When I had a breakdown, the only way I could silence the angry and destructive voices in my head, was to stand in front of the mirror and recite a poem. The strong voice of the poem drowned out the crazy voices. I could see my eyes settle. I could see my face relax. This was much better than having a drink. I am not the sort of person who finds it easy to ask for help - this is not a virtue, btw - but it's me. I DO know how to ask art for help. And I get help. Try the mirror-poem yourself. You can read it from a book too, but make sure you look up as you read, and make sure you know the poem well enough to let it do its work - if you are still fumbling for the sense of it, it won't be effective.

I don't believe that humans manage well without self-reflection. The first casualty of success and power is self-reflection. You think you are a King or a God. No-one tells you otherwise. You look in the mirror and you see what you want to see. That is not reality.

In some ways, trying to grow, trying to be better, trying to understand, trying to find some wisdom, is bonkers. We all die - the wise and the stupid. The mean and the kind. Those of us who believe in this personal project, not available to the META algorithm, not interested in Likes and Ticks, not rewarded by numbers, have no proof that this is a better way to live. Even something as simple as reading a book on a train is now such a minority pursuit that it's probably just you. Why not let the curated content on the phone take over? It's addictive. It's easy. It's not all bad.

Wanting more than the simplicity of Social Mirrordom can be isolating and lonely. Choose your friends well. People who share your values. Ask the living for help. And when you read, when you go to look at pictures, or listen to music, or to the theatre, don't be afraid to ask the dead for help too. Those creative people no longer have a reflection of their own, but their work continues to be a mirror for anyone who wants to look deeper.

Art is never a waste of time.