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The Illusion of Identity: A Psychoanalytic Study of Self in Virginia Woolf's "*The Lady in the Looking-Glass*"

Ragaa Hamed Ahmed Omer

Department of Foreign Languages, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Al Baha University, Al Baha, KSA
Email: romer@bu.edu.sa

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Abstract

Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), a pioneering English author and central figure in modernism, transformed the modern novel by shifting its focus from external realities to the complexities of human consciousness. Woolf aimed to articulate inner experience and memory, conceptualizing character as a continuous stream of impressions and emotions. While she did not formulate a unified theory of identity, her works consistently challenge the notion that identity is fixed, stable, or entirely knowable. This paper contends that in Virginia Woolf's "*The Lady in the Looking-Glass: A Reflection*", identity is unstable and constructed through perception, absence, and unconscious processes. Drawing on the psychoanalytic frameworks of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, the analysis demonstrates that Woolf presents selfhood as fractured rather than unified. Freudian theory elucidates the narrator's psychological projections and the distinct operations of repression and the uncanny within the text. Lacan's mirror stage clarifies how self-image forms through images and misrecognition rather than an authentic inner essence. The mirror functions not only as a direct illustration of developmental theory or a vessel of absolute truth, but as a psychological and symbolic device reflecting illusion rather than reality. Ultimately, this research concludes that Isabella Tyson's "emptiness" is not an objective fact but a narrative construct shaped by external observation and unconscious dynamics. This study contributes to contemporary criticism by integrating psychoanalytic theories with literary analysis, offering a focused examination of Woolf's significance in debates concerning identity, consciousness, and the fragmented self.

Keywords

Virginia Woolf, Identity, Illusion, Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan

1. Introduction

Modernism, which emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, fundamentally questioned traditional conceptions of identity. Rather than viewing identity as stable, cohesive, and socially determined, modernist thought emphasized fragmentation, subjectivity, and individual experience. Influenced by scientific developments, particularly the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, modernist writers frequently argued that identity is an illusion, lacking permanence or complete knowability. They depicted identity as something individuals partially construct, perform, imagine, or misinterpret. This intellectual shift underpins the study of identity in modernist fiction, including Virginia Woolf's work, which interrogates objective reality by emphasizing subjective perception and identity's instability.

Woolf's fiction exemplifies modernist conceptions of identity. In her 1929 story, "*The Lady in the Looking-Glass: A Reflection*", Woolf presents Isabella Tyson as a cryptic figure deliberately withholding direct characterization. Isabella, the wealthy protagonist, resides in a large, elegantly furnished house with a meticulously maintained garden, travels extensively, and collects unusual objects. Despite an active social life and numerous friendships, her private life remains inaccessible. The narrator observes: "Isabella did not wish to be known—but she should no longer escape. It was absurd, it was monstrous" (Woolf, 1989: p. 217). As a result, the narrator constructs Isabella's character through external observation rather than direct insight. The narrator's ambiguous perspective intensifies the mystery by interpreting her through her possessions and speculating about her experiences. This portrayal underscores the elusiveness of identity, aligning with modernism's emphasis on perception.

Thus, Woolf's narrative illustrates the modernist concept that the relationship between appearance and reality fundamentally shapes identity. From a psychoanalytic perspective, Isabella's identity can be interpreted as sustained by illusion, as her character is mediated by perception rather than direct access. Freud's theory of the unconscious posits that much human behavior derives from desires and conflicts inaccessible to conscious awareness. Accordingly, Isabella's composed ego may conceal repression, anxiety, or psychological tensions. This interpretation anticipates Lacan's account of misrecognition in the Mirror Stage, wherein identity forms through a false identification with a unified self-image. This misrecognition generates an illusion of wholeness and elucidates Isabella Tyson's unstable selfhood. Collectively, these psychoanalytic theories support Woolf's portrayal of Isabella Tyson and reinforce the narrative's central concern with unstable identity.

The mirror functions as a central symbol, representing perception and imagination while generating illusions about identity within the story. Woolf maintains that identity is fluid, shaped by subjective viewpoints rather than objective truths. This theme emphasizes the division between inner and outer worlds. The narrator observes: "There was a perpetual sighing and ceasing sound, the voice of the tran-

sient and the perishing, it seemed, coming and going like human breath, while in the looking-glass things had ceased to breathe and lay still in the trance of immortality" (Woolf, 1989: p. 216). This division illustrates the disconnection between internal experience and external perception, highlighting that identity remains fragmented throughout the narrative.

2. Literature Review

Virginia Woolf consistently favors the inner life over external appearance. In her essay "Modern Fiction," Woolf asserts that "life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semitransparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end" (Woolf, 2003: p. 154). This perspective explains why, in her fiction, reality is situated within the flow of consciousness rather than in observable actions. In "*The Lady in the Looking-Glass: A Reflection*", this emphasis is apparent in Isabella Tyson's composed exterior, which may conceal an ambiguous, unmapped inner identity.

Scholars frequently argue that "*The Lady in the Looking-Glass: A Reflection*" constitutes one of Woolf's most concentrated explorations of identity. The narrative questions the reliability of external appearances by stressing the disparity between Isabella Tyson's social persona and the psychological ambiguity revealed at the story's conclusion. Rather than uncovering a definitive inner self, the narrator encounters uncertainty, strengthening the argument that identity is constructed through perception and imagination.

Howard (2007) offers a highly influential analysis, arguing that Virginia Woolf rejects the Victorian notion of a unified, stable personality. Instead, Woolf portrays the self as fragmented, unstable, and continually formed by relationships and perception. Howard shows that Woolf questions the possibility of fully knowing another person, consequently supporting the view that identity is inherently unstable and relational.

Zeb & Khan (2020) study offers a psychoanalytic interpretation of the text. Drawing on Lacan's theory of the Mirror Stage, Zeb argues that Isabella's identity emerges through the relationship between the Ideal Ego and the Ego Ideal. The analysis shows that Isabella's public image is a symbolic performance formed by others' gaze, consequently supporting the argument that identity is socially constructed.

Feminist critics interpret the story as a critique of how society constructs women's identities. Isabella represents the ideal Edwardian heroine: graceful, silent, and proper. Her perceived emptiness symbolizes the cultural suppression of women's inner lives. Marcus (1987) argues that Woolf exposes patriarchal epistemologies that reduce women to surfaces, domestic spaces, objects, and appearances, rather than accepting their interiority. From this perspective, Isabella's silence and distance allow the narrator to project cultural ideals of feminine wholeness onto her. Although Isabella appears independent and sophisticated, her life is ultimately depicted as empty according to conventional social standards. This

interpretation spotlights the tension between social image and perceived selfhood.

From a philosophical perspective, scholars such as Goldman (2006) associate the narrative methods in this short story with epistemological skepticism. Within this system, language functions as a structuring and creative force rather than a transparent medium for revelation. This perspective clarifies the narrator's inability to access Isabella's true self, exemplifying modernist concerns about the constraints of language and knowledge.

Additionally, the narrative can be interpreted as an autobiographical reflection of Woolf's psychological state. Through Isabella, Woolf examines themes of selfhood, loneliness, femininity, and the ambiguity of human identity. This interpretation extends the discussion of identity into a more personal dimension, preserving a focus on the processes by which identity is imagined and interpreted.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, the text depicts identity as a shifting void. The story framework incorporates Freudian and Lacanian theories, positioning the mirror as a central symbol and theoretical locus. Freud (1955) asserts that the mirror reveals the unconscious, threatening the ego and generating the uncanny. The familiar self becomes strangely distant, in accordance with Freud's concept of unheimlich, in which the known is rendered unfamiliar. The uncanny is characterized by strangeness, mystery, and disturbance. The mirror's indifference strips Isabella's environment of comforting distortions. Freud's theory of the unconscious is fundamental to this analysis of illusory identity: the unconscious shapes identity through repressed memories, hidden desires, and fears. In the narrative, Isabella's identity is never directly accessed; her true self is consistently inferred and remains concealed. This supports the argument that visible identity is inherently incomplete.

Lacan's Mirror Stage further clarifies identity formation in the story. Isabella's reflection illustrates the Lacanian imaginary: an image of composure that conceals a fragmented self. When the mirror reveals a stark reflection, Isabella appears as an old, angular figure, stripped of projected fantasies. This collapse confronts both viewer and reader with Lacan's concept of the Real. Marcus (1987) argues that in Woolf's writing, conventional patriarchal identity is exposed as a void or illusion. Rather than interpreting this void negatively, Woolf presents it as a space of liberation. By dissolving the rigid, socially conditioned self, her characters achieve an expanded consciousness that corresponds to the wider rhythm of the universe. The narrator's shock at Isabella's emptiness and stillness corresponds with Marcus's (1987) description of "Woolf's aesthetic annihilation... identity is Void" (p. 45). Woolf's aesthetic annihilation refers to her modernist strategy of dissolving the traditional, unified self.

Some critics suggest that the text presents two stages of conflict: projection and reality. Bowlby (2011) observes that Woolf's narrators construct vivid fantasies around absent figures, showing how unconscious desire shapes perception. Consequently, the narrator's insistence on interpreting Isabella as a romantic figure demonstrates a tendency to project internal fantasies onto others, a process Freud

(1955) identifies as projection: attributing internal feelings and desires to external objects. Freud argued that projection involves attributing unacceptable thoughts, motivations, desires, and feelings to others.

Broader scholarship documents extensive research in this area. Howard (2007) observes that in the story, Woolf investigates selfhood and the articulation of personal narrative. The motif of reflection recurs as a literary device, functioning both as a surface for examining the self and as a metaphor for autobiographical storytelling. Woolf's style alternates between public image and private existence, stressing the tension between them. Building on Howard's analysis, Woolf shows a pronounced interest in autobiographical writing, particularly regarding identity and self-representation. Howard further notes that Virginia Woolf (1942), in her essay "The Art of Biography", contends that biography engages the subject's inner self or selves. While Woolf recognizes biography's factual limitations, she also endorses a form capable of representing the subject's multiple aspects.

Sohier (2017), "The Strangeness of Phenomenology," foregrounds Woolf's phenomenological approach in this short story. Sohier argues that the narrative displaces traditional markers of realism and, in doing so, reaffirms them, thereby presenting a problematic portrait of a lady. He explains that phenomenology, as a discipline, seeks to clarify the world's meaning as commonly understood. This process requires suspending belief in what is ordinarily taken for granted. The so-called eidetic reduction is necessary to remove extraneous layers. Central to phenomenology is reducing or bracketing the question of existence to access the things themselves, thereby sharpening the story's inquiry into what can be. In this context, Husserl (1996) states that the structural modalities through which individuals encounter and experience everyday objects can become entirely transparent under deliberate phenomenological reduction. The narrator elaborates on this by describing the initial encounter with a long mirror hanging on the wall, showing the garden outside: "From the depths of the sofa in the dining-room one could see reflected in the Italian glass not only the marble-topped table opposite, but a stretch of the garden beyond. One could see a long grass path leading between banks of flowers until the gold rim sliced it off at an angle" (Woolf, 1989: p. 215). The uncanny quality in the expressions "slicing it off at an angle" and the gold rim cutting off the rest of the garden parallels the bracketing of an object in Husserl's concept of epoche. The most striking example of bracketing or disconnection occurs when a large black form is reflected in the mirror, causing all meaning to collapse as all views are submerged in darkness: "Suddenly the reflections were ended violently and yet without a sound. A large black form appeared in the looking-glass; it blotted out everything. The picture was entirely altered. For the moment it was unrecognizable, unreal, and entirely out of focus" (Woolf, 1989: p. 217).

Sohier (2017) observes that by placing the character in the garden, where Isabella serves as the gardener, Woolf establishes a strong correlation between the garden and the lady. At the same time, Woolf ready-makes a gesture reminiscent

of the Greek god Momus, who, in classical mythology, was associated with censure and mockery. Momus complained that man was poorly designed because he lacked a window in his breast to see his thoughts. In this system, Woolf assumes a role analogous to Momus, seeking to reveal the mystery at the center of existence and to grant readers access to the lady's private world. Ultimately, within the narrator's construct, the mirror appears as the privileged instrument of revelation.

3. Discussion and Analysis

3.1. Methodological Framework

To systematically unpack the instability and narrative construction of identity in "*The Lady in the Looking-Glass: A Reflection*," this discussion employs a localized, text-based psychoanalytic methodology. Rather than broadly generalizing Woolf's prose, the analysis is tethered to three specific textual passages selected from the authoritative Hogarth Press edition (Woolf, 1989: pp. 215-219): first, the opening description of the vacant dining room and the dynamic movement of light and shadow (p. 215); second, the mid-story sequence where the narrator speculates about Isabella's hidden mail and letters (pp. 216-217); and third, the climactic scene where Isabella walks directly into the line of sight of the looking-glass (p. 219).

The analytical method applies Freudian concepts (specifically projection, repression, and the uncanny) and Lacanian concepts (the Imaginary and the Real of the Mirror Stage) as separate interpretive lenses. Freud's theories dissect the narrator's defensive psychological shifts and textually inferred internal anxieties. Concurrently, Lacan's framework is utilized not as a literal developmental history of Isabella as a physical child, but as an illuminating metaphor for how the mirror imagery operates within the text—demonstrating the tension between an imagined image of structural wholeness and a fragmented reality.

3.2. Narrative Projection and Freudian Cognition

The narrative opens with a detailed description of an empty room reflected in a mirror. Isabella Tyson, the mistress of the house, is absent, having gone for a walk in her garden. The narrator tries to describe her but abruptly interrupts this effort, stressing the inadequacy of those portrayals. The narrator observes: "After all these years, one knew about her; for no woman of flesh and blood of fifty-five or sixty may be really a wreath or tendril" (Woolf, 1989: p. 216). The letters stored in her cabinets and drawers are imagined as "tablets graven with eternal truth," suggesting that, if accessible, these letters would reveal everything about Isabella and, by extension, about life itself (Woolf, 1989: p. 217). By the end of the story, the narrator's realization about Isabella overturns the first image, exposing it as a subjective illusion. The narrator ultimately depicts Isabella as "old and angular, veined and lined" (Woolf, 1989: p. 219), stripped of the beauty implied by the earlier portrayal.

This section argues that Isabella Tyson's identity in the text is unstable and il-

lusory. Through a fragmented narrative structure, mirror symbolism, absence, and psychological projection, Virginia Woolf challenges the notion of a singular, unified self and reframes self-knowledge as uncertain. A central aspect of the story is Isabella Tyson's profound silence and reluctance to reveal herself directly, which maintains the instability of her identity within the narrative framework. Rather than providing access to her inner thoughts, the narrator constructs Isabella's identity through detailed descriptions of her house, furniture, letters, and garden. By interpreting these objects, the narrative suggests that external signs constitute identity, even as their meanings remain ambiguous. Woolf reinforces this uncertainty by deliberately withholding Isabella's inner thoughts.

Freud (1955) concept of projection asserts that individuals unconsciously attribute their own unacknowledged desires, anxieties, and internal fantasies onto external entities. In this reading, projection is analytically isolated as the narrator's active mechanism for filling structural gaps in knowledge. The narrator projects meaning onto Isabella, demonstrating the mind's resistance to psychological emptiness. The narrator unconsciously imposes personal desires and fantasies onto Isabella's story, imagining romance and secrets in her absence and constructing her identity from subjective needs for meaning. When the mirror ultimately displays Isabella, these fantasies dissipate, illustrating the fragility of imagined identities.

3.3. Repression, The Uncanny, and the "Empty" Self

To understand the text's psychological depth, Freud's concepts of repression and the uncanny must be distinguished from projection and linked to separate narrative movements. Repression—the unconscious keeping away of painful thoughts or impulses from awareness—is textually suggested as an interpretive possibility by Isabella's pristine, hyper-controlled domestic environment. Her composed exterior, juxtaposed against her hidden, unread letters, serves as a textbook emblem of a defense mechanism masking potential psychological tensions, anxieties, or hidden emotional conflicts. This provides a plausible interpretation for why her private life remains aggressively hidden from the social world.

The uncanny (unheimlich), by contrast, operates in a distinct narrative movement: the description of the empty room where everyday domestic items become strangely alienated. Freud (1955) defines the uncanny as that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar. This is textually anchored when the narrator observes the room through the looking-glass: "while in the looking-glass things had ceased to breathe and lay still in the trance of immortality" (Woolf, 1989: p. 216). The familiar dining room becomes strangely deadened, frozen, and unfamiliar, evoking a subtle, disturbing quality that strips the environment of human warmth. This moment illustrates how Woolf uses the mirror to create an uncanny atmosphere in which the home becomes unhomely-like (unheimlich).

Crucially, the paper must distinguish the narrator's eventual claim that "Isabella

was perfectly empty" (Woolf, 1989: p. 219) from the paper's own critical conclusion. The assertion of "perfect emptiness" is not an objective fact about Isabella Tyson's actual psychological state; rather, it is the ultimate failure of the narrator's projection. When the narrator's elaborate, romantic fantasies are punctured by the realization that the letters are merely "unpaid bills" (p. 219), the narrator swings to the opposite extreme, reducing a complex human being to a state of absolute vacuity. The story's central issue is not Isabella's literal emptiness, but the narrator's limited, projecting, and unstable perspective. The text offers clues that support this elusiveness through the symbol of the letters. The narrator speculates that these letters contain emotional conflicts, appointments, lengthy messages of intimacy and affection, and expressions of jealousy and blame (Woolf, 1989: p. 216). By leaving them unread, Woolf denies access to Isabella's inner world, reinforcing the notion that identity remains elusive and uncontained by the narrator's gaze.

3.4. Lacanian Misrecognition and the Illusory Real

Lacan's Mirror Stage provides a powerful structural metaphor for identity formation in the story, but its application must be carefully qualified. Lacan's theory is fundamentally a developmental model explaining ego formation in infancy through an encounter with a specular image. Treating Woolf's physical looking-glass as a literal, direct illustration of an infant's psychological development would be a theoretical error. Instead, the theory illuminates the text by demonstrating the structural mechanics of the Imaginary order: how an adult consciousness continues to rely on external, frozen images to project an illusion of coherence over an underlying fractured selfhood.

This Lacanian framework reframes the story's climax. It is critical to reconsider any casual assertion that the mirror ultimately "reveals reality" or truth. The looking-glass does not provide unmediated access to absolute truth; rather, the reflection remains deeply mediated, distorted, and entirely dependent on the narrator's fluctuating perception. When Isabella steps into the mirror's frame and appears stripped of projected fantasies, she is described as "a woman of no importance" (Woolf, 1989: p. 219)—a phrase historically matching Oscar Wilde's social satire, here repurposed to signify a sudden reduction in narrative grandeur.

This moment represents a narrative collapse into the Lacanian Real—the raw, unyielding dimension that resists symbolization and punctures the narrator's Imaginary constructs. The narrator's shock at Isabella's sudden stillness corresponds with Marcus's (1987) description of "Woolf's aesthetic annihilation," in which a character's outer "identity is Void," provides a critical framework for understanding how the mirror functions as a destructive force rather than a passive reflection (p. 45). This refers to her modernist strategy of dissolving the traditional, unified self. The mirror does not reveal a clean "reality"; it exposes the void left by the narrator's collapsed projections, reminding the reader that the self remains partial, unstable, and subject to continuous reinterpretation.

The story framework of A Lady in the Looking Glass incorporates Freudian and Lacanian theories, positioning the mirror as a central symbol and theoretical locus. Lacan's Mirror Stage further clarifies identity formation in the story. Isabella's reflection illustrates the Lacanian imaginary: an image of composure that conceals a fragmented self. When the mirror reveals reality, Isabella appears as an old, angular figure, stripped of projected fantasies. This collapse confronts both viewer and reader with Lacan's concept of the Real. Some critics suggest that The Lady in the Looking Glass presents two stages of conflict: projection and reality. Rachel Bowlby (2011) observes that Woolf's narrators construct vivid fantasies around absent figures, showing how unconscious desire shapes perception. Consequently, the narrator's insistence on interpreting Isabella as a romantic figure demonstrates a tendency to project internal fantasies onto others, a process Freud identifies as projection: attributing internal feelings and desires to external objects. Freud argued that projection involves attributing unacceptable thoughts, motivations, desires, and feelings to others.

4. Conclusion

This study examines the construction and illusion of identity in Virginia Woolf's "*The Lady in the Looking-Glass: A Reflection*" using the specialized psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan. The text indicates that Woolf rejects the traditional conception of identity as stable, unified, and fully knowable. Rather, the narrative depicts identity as a fragile construct formed by unconscious desires, repression, memory, imagination, and the gaze of others.

The study demonstrates that Isabella's public persona is formed by appearances, reputation, and the narrator's imagination. Throughout the narrative, the narrator tries to construct a consistent image of Isabella by referencing her possessions and social status; however, these elements only create the illusion of her authentic personality. When the mirror reflects Isabella, the narrator's constructed identity collapses, indicating the disjunction between outward appearance and internal reality. Woolf thereby suggests that perceived identity is interpretive rather than absolute.

Crucially, this analysis underscores that the final judgment of Isabella's "emptiness" belongs strictly to the limited, projecting narrator rather than representing a definitive psychological fact. This research contributes to Woolf scholarship by integrating Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theories into a unified analytical system, showing how these approaches jointly deepen our understanding of Woolf's nuanced depiction of identity. In conclusion, the story demonstrates that identity is not a fixed reality to be revealed, but rather an illusion continuously generated through perception, unconscious desire, memory, and social representation.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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