The Lady in the Looking Glass

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF VIRGINIA WOOLF

Born into a well-off family in South Kensington, London, Virginia Woolf was home-schooled with a focus on classics and Victorian literature. She then studied history and classics at King's College in London, where she was influenced by the women's rights movement, and she began writing for publication in 1904. In 1912, she married writer and political theorist Leonard Woolf, with whom she founded Hogarth Press, where much of her work was published. Her first novel was published in 1915, and her best-known novels *Mrs Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, and *Orlando* were published between 1925 and 1928. Woolf was also an accomplished essayist, and is well-known for her 1929 essay "A Room of One's Own," which became an influential feminist text. Woolf suffered from mental health problems that included severe depression, psychotic episodes, and mania, and some have speculated that she may have had bipolar disorder. After a severe depressive episode, she died by suicide in 1941.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Woolf was highly influenced by the historical upheaval of her time. The years between World Wars I and II were Woolf's most productive literary period, during which she wrote this story and many of her most well-known works. Woolf was a pacifist and held strongly to her anti-war views for her entire life, and she explores war's moral dilemmas and fallout in other writings. Woolf was also influenced both by the women's rights movement, with which she came into contact during her studies, and intellectual circles such as the Bloomsbury Group, a loose collective of writers and artists in London known for their free-spirited lifestyle. Around the time she was writing "Lady in the Looking-Glass," Woolf also gave the lectures that would be transformed into her most famous essay, "A Room of One's Own," which called for both literal and metaphoric space for women writers to develop their work. In this story, Woolf turns her attention to material wealth and privilege, another major preoccupation for this writer born into a well-off family and living in a historical epoch marked by economic inequality.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Considered one of the great novelists of the twentieth century, Woolf was a pioneer of modernism. She was known for using stream of consciousness as a narrative device, a device found in "Lady in the Looking-Glass" and also in other modernist works like *In Search of Lost Time* by Marcel Proust and in *Ulysses* by James Joyce. Thematically, "Lady in the Looking-Glass" explores the way women are perceived in society, a preoccupation similarly explored in Woolf's essay "A Room of One's Own" and her novel *Mrs. Dalloway*, which also features the looking-glass as a crucial symbol. "Lady in the Looking-Glass" is also influenced by both Edwardian and realist literary conventions, in that it implicitly critiques both the ornate descriptions of the Edwardians and realism's reliance on concrete physical details. Finally, some critics have noted that the story's unusual approach to characterization foreshadows Woolf's later experimental novel *The Waves*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Lady in the Looking-Glass: A Reflection
- **When Written:** likely 1927 or 1928
- **Where Written:** Sussex
- **When Published:** 1929
- **Literary Period:** modernist
- **Genre:** Short story, modernist
- **Setting:** The home of Isabella Tyson
- **Climax:** The moment Isabella is seen clearly in the mirror
- **Antagonist:** The story has no clear antagonist, though it could be argued that both the looking-glass and the narrator themselves play an antagonistic role
- **Point of View:** First-person plural

EXTRA CREDIT

Unread Letters. "Lady in the Looking-Glass" was likely inspired by Woolf's visit to the painter Ethel Sands's home in Normandy. Woolf noted in her diary (September 20, 1927) that Ethel did not look at her letters, wondering what it implied and commenting, "How many little stories come into my head!"

Self-Exploration. Virginia Woolf would continue to be preoccupied by issues of wealth, social class, and material riches throughout her career. Much later, in 1936, she would publish an essay titled "Am I a Snob?" exploring the privileged circles in which she had moved and the role of social critics who also hold their own elite status.

PLOT SUMMARY

An unnamed narrator visits the home of Isabella Tyson and observes Isabella and her surroundings through the reflection in a **looking-glass**. The narrator, whose gender, age, and relationship to Isabella are unknown, spends the entirety of the story sitting in Isabella's drawing room. At the story's opening,

the house is empty, and the narrator observes Isabella's furniture and decorations, noting the finery of her possessions. The narrator then puts their attention toward the hall outside and the garden path, noting that Isabella has gone into the garden carrying a basket. Because she is no longer in view of the looking-glass, the narrator turns to imagining what Isabella may be doing in the garden and pictures her picking something "fantastic and leafy and trailing." The narrator lists the facts they believe they know about Isabella, including that she has not married, that she has traveled extensively, and that she has had many friends.

While the narrator is reflecting on Isabella's life and what she might be doing in the garden, a postman arrives and leaves a stack of **letters** on the table. The narrator imagines Isabella reading them and sighing. The narrator then pictures Isabella standing in the garden again, getting ready to snip a flower and thinking about how she should visit her friends. The narrator compares Isabella's mind to her drawing room, where many of the drawers are locked and off-limits, though this doesn't stop them from imagining Isabella feeling sad about cutting the flower.

Isabella interrupts the narrator's imaginings by appearing in the looking-glass, walking slowly back from the garden. As she comes closer and her reflection grows clearer, the narrator sees her in a new way. "Here was the woman herself," the narrator remarks, deciding that Isabella is "perfectly empty" and that she actually has no inner thoughts and no friends. Based on this new perception, the narrator concludes that Isabella's mail is not correspondence, but bills—a damning observation, given that she does not open them, suggesting she may not even have the money to pay for all her fine things. It is ultimately unclear which perception of Isabella actually reflects her reality—the reverent awe of this wealthy, highly-social woman, or the disdainful scorning of a lonely, aged, and perhaps financially ruined "spinster." The story ends just as it opened, with the narrator saying, "People should not leave looking-glasses hanging in their rooms," perhaps an indication that mirrors might not offer an accurate or useful reflection of reality after all.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Isabella Tyson – Isabella Tyson, the protagonist of "The Lady in the Looking-glass," is a mysterious older woman who lives alone in a large and richly-decorated house with a beautiful garden. Though the interior of her home is described in detail throughout the story, little is revealed about the protagonist herself. The story does state that Isabella is wealthy, has traveled extensively collecting objects for her home, and has never married. The narrator, whose relationship to Isabella is unclear, spends the story speculating about the other details of her life, primarily by extrapolating from what is visible in **the looking-glass**. At different points in the story, the glass reveals different information about Isabella: the fine furniture and décor of her home, her careful attention to the flowers in the garden, the **letters** that arrive partway through the narrative, and Isabella's appearance, which the narrator perceives as "old and angular, veined and lined." Yet despite all this information, Isabella ultimately remains a mystery; for example, it is not clear whether her fine home and expensive possessions have brought her happiness, whether she has close friends, or whether she agrees with the narrator's harsh assessment of her appearance. In this way, Isabella underscores the story's theme that perception and reality can vary widely: though the narrator and the reader can see Isabella's reflection in the looking-glass, this reflection doesn't reveal much about Isabella's inner world.

The Narrator – The narrator is never named and their gender and relationship to Isabella is unknown—in fact, it's not even completely clear that the narrator is human, since they are never visible, they never interact physically with the room, and Isabella seems not to notice them when she returns from the garden. Despite this lack of information, the entirety of the story is told through the narrator's perspective. The narrator sits in Isabella's drawing room and observes her and her home, both in **the looking-glass** and in their own imagination. Their opinion of Isabella is at times respectful and almost reverent. As the narrator looks at Isabella's furniture, for example, they imagine her traveling bravely in the "most obscure corners of the world" to collect beautiful objects for her home. At other times, however, the narrator seems disdainful of Isabella, and they eventually come to the conclusion that, despite her material wealth, she has "no thoughts" and "no friends." It is not clear what, exactly, causes these shifts in opinion, though it's possible they are related to the narrator's own feelings—awe or jealousy—about Isabella's material wealth. Whatever this inconsistency comes from, it does help underscore the theme that appearances do not necessarily tell the entire story of who a character is. Though the narrator spends the entire story observing Isabella and her home, in the end, their observations may tell readers more about the narrator than about Isabella herself.

MINOR CHARACTERS

A Postman – The postman delivers **letters** to Isabella. His reflection in the **looking-glass** is, at first, so warped that he seems almost inhuman.

Johnson's Widow – Johnson's widow is a potential friend of Isabella's. The narrator imagines Isabella thinking of sending her flowers.

The Hippesleys – The Hippesleys are a family that the narrator

imagines Isabella might visit in their new house.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

PERCEPTION VS. REALITY

In "The Lady in the Looking-glass: A Reflection," Virginia Woolf describes an unnamed narrator viewing the home of a woman named Isabella Tyson, either through a **looking-glass** that hangs in the hall or through imagined scenes. The looking-glass reflects Isabella's belongings and the home's general ambiance, allowing the narrator to speculate about Isabella's inner life. The looking-glass, however, is flawed and distorted, and the narrator's own characterizations of Isabella seem rooted more in imagination than fact. Besides, the narrator admits that nobody really knows anything about Isabella, and Isabella herself seems uninterested in truly being known. In the end, neither the looking-glass nor the narrator (which are the only two "reflections" of Isabella that readers get) seem to have access to Isabella's reality at all. This suggests that appearances alone do nothing to reveal the truth about a person's inner life.

Throughout the story, the narrator draws conclusions about who Isabella is based mostly on the reflection of her home in the looking-glass. For example, the looking-glass reflects a cabinet with many drawers, and the narrator states that these drawers "almost certainly" contain **letters** from the exciting friends Isabella has made throughout her rich and varied life, evidence of the "passion and experience" that characterize Isabella. Furthermore, from the "exquisite" belongings she has curated throughout her home (such as pots and rugs), the narrator extrapolates that Isabella must be happy, as these objects point to many different "avenues of pleasure" available to her.

However, Woolf shows that both the looking-glass and the narrator reflect Isabella unreliably, offering a skewed and limited view of her. Woolf often emphasizes that the looking-glass reflects only part of Isabella's life; the rest exists beyond the mirror's rim, which cuts off most of Isabella's house and yard. Furthermore, the looking-glass distorts even simple, everyday things. When the mailman comes, for example, his body appears in the looking-glass as a "large, black form" that "blot[s] out everything." The letters he leaves on the table initially look like "marble tablets." That the looking-glass makes these ordinary things—including a human being—look unrecognizable casts doubt on its ability to reveal anything true about Isabella.

The narrator's view of Isabella is also skewed, as this unnamed person imagines Isabella based on the (distorted) images in the looking-glass. The narrator is determined to "prize her open" with their imagination and proceeds to extrapolate from small (and sometimes completely imaginary) details to invent scenes from Isabella's life. In one example, the narrator imagines Isabella cutting a branch in the garden and invents Isabella's resulting thoughts about mortality and how life has been good to her. Yet all of this—even the branch cutting—is entirely imagined. In another scene, just seeing Isabella's correspondence arrive on the table leads the narrator to imagine how Isabella might read these letters from friends "one by one" and "with a profound sigh of comprehension." In neither of these moments is Isabella herself even visible. Once she appears in the glass, however, the narrator's perception changes. As Isabella stands by the table with the letters, the looking-glass "pour[s] over her a light" that the narrator believes "leave[s] only the truth" about Isabella. This moment reverses the narrator's previous speculation about Isabella's rich inner life and happiness: seeming "naked" in the glass's light, Isabella appears "perfectly empty." The narrator then claims that Isabella has neither thoughts nor friends, and that the letters on the table are only bills.

Despite this sudden shift, the story leaves unclear whether the narrator's new perception of Isabella is actually her reality, or whether it is just another illusion rooted in imagination and the distortions of the looking-glass. The moment in which the narrator has this apparent revelation could also be simply a trick of the light: it's the looking-glass itself that douses Isabella in "a light that seem[s] to fix her," or reveal Isabella as she actually is. That the looking-glass (already shown to be distorted and unreliable) is the source of this light, and that Woolf uses the word "seems," cast doubt on whether what the narrator sees is really the truth or just a different illusion. Furthermore, the narrator's revelation may—like their previous characterizations of Isabella—be rooted in imagination. No matter how clear the light, the narrator cannot know by merely observing Isabella that she has "no thoughts" or "no friends." Finally, the narrator seems to extrapolate that the envelopes contain only bills from the sole fact that Isabella does not immediately open them. Yet there are many possible reasons why Isabella might not open the envelopes right away, making the conclusion that they are bills seem flimsy.

Earlier in the story, the narrator states outright that "Isabella did not wish to be known." The narrator's quest to understand her, then, seems doomed on several fronts: the narrator observes Isabella through a looking-glass that is prone to distorting the world, the narrator's imaginative characterizations of Isabella are contradictory and based mostly on unreliable images from the looking-glass, and Isabella herself seems quite private and unwilling to reveal herself. In

this way, the final image of Isabella as sad and friendless seems to be less a revelation than another illusion that is unrelated to Isabella's true inner life. All this helps to demonstrate the difference between perception and reality: even though the reader can see Isabella's reflection in the looking-glass, this reflection doesn't necessarily tell anything about the reality of who she is.

APPEARANCES AND MATERIALISM

In "The Lady in the Looking-glass: A Reflection," Woolf questions a literary convention of the Edwardian Era in which authors would describe a character by describing, at length, the physical objects they owned. In the process of questioning this convention, she also explores whether having beautiful things can actually make a person happy, and, more generally, the nature of the connection between a person's material possessions and their inner emotional state. Though the narrator observes that Isabella Tyson is surrounded by beautiful objects, these objects don't actually tell the narrator or the reader very much about Isabella. Thus, in telling this story, Woolf challenges both the Edwardian method of describing a character's possessions to tell readers who they are and the idea that physical riches necessarily lead to a rich inner life, suggesting instead that they might actually lead to emptiness and jealousy.

In Edwardian-era literature, writers commonly provided lengthy descriptions of a character's possessions, which were thought to offer insight into who that character truly was. Woolf implicitly challenges this idea by extensively describing Isabella's home and belongings and then showing how these superficial things cannot actually reveal who Isabella is. In her essay "Modern Fiction," Woolf had previously explored the theory that, while detailed descriptions may provide "an air of probability," describing specific physical details like the buttons on a piece of clothing does not necessarily bring a story to life. In the essay, she questions whether stories that are so focused on objects and physical details are really life-like, arguing instead that a person's inner world and the way they experience life is much more complex and nebulous than a simple list of possessions might suggest. In this story, Woolf takes a similar jab at the Edwardian obsession with physical details, this time employing a bit of humorous personification. Throughout the story, she describes the objects in Isabella's house as borderline human, having "passions and rages and envies and sorrows [...] like a human being," and saying the air moves through the open windows "like human breath." She claims these objects know Isabella in a way the people in her life cannot, but the claim is clearly satirical, drawing attention to the fact that things like chairs and rugs cannot actually "know" someone at all. In this way, Woolf expands on the idea from her essay, demonstrating the absurdity of thinking that a chair or a particular style of shoe can actually tell readers something about a character. She further highlights this absurdity by having the narrator admit that, despite the fact that so many of Isabella's possessions are visible, it's difficult to know much about her. Therefore, rather than shedding light on Isabella's inner world, the extensive descriptions of her possessions in this story seem to be mostly a distraction.

The possessions themselves may be a distraction, too—as the story suggests, these external riches do not necessarily lead to inner riches like happiness and peace for Isabella, and they may even bring her unhappiness. The descriptions of Isabella's house and belongings are sumptuous and elegant, but the narrator's final description of her gives the rest of her life a bleaker cast. Rather than leading a rich and friend-filled life, the narrator suggests that perhaps Isabella "care[s] for nobody" and is "perfectly empty." This suggests that, in the end, Isabella may have filled her home with beautiful objects only to fill a void in herself, using material possessions as a distraction from her loneliness and unhappiness. The narrator's assertion that the **letters** are actually all unopened bills makes this even more tragic by implying that Isabella may not be able to pay for these nice things. If this is true, not only do these objects not bring Isabella happiness, but they also lead to her financial ruin. This further highlights the potential gulf between the happiness that possessions might seem to indicate and the possible darker truth of Isabella's inner state.

Yet it is ultimately unclear whether Isabella is actually happy or unhappy, despite what the narrator seems to decide. Even so, what is clear is that the narrator takes pleasure in seeing their initial image of Isabella crumble. This mean-spiritedness seems to suggest an additional drawback of materialism: jealousy that can morph into cruelty. When the narrator sees, in the **looking-glass**, what they imagine to be Isabella's terrible "truth," they call it an "enthralling spectacle," and they seem to enjoy watching their perfect image of Isabella fall apart. The narrator's description of Isabella's final reflection in the looking-glass is unsparing to the point of cruelty: she is "old and angular, veined and lined," with a "wrinkled neck," "no friends" and "no thoughts." This harsh description feels almost vindictive, further supporting the idea that the narrator may be taking pleasure in Isabella's pain. Because of this cruel attitude, when the narrator says that Isabella seems to stand "naked in that pitiless light," it may actually be the narrator's judgement that is pitiless, rather than the literal light itself. It's possible, then, that this final description of Isabella says more about the narrator and their jealousy than it does about Isabella herself. In this way, the narrator's initial admiration of Isabella's material wealth may have evolved into jealousy throughout the story's course, making them eager to seize upon any evidence—even thin or completely imaginary evidence—that this wealth has not made her happy.

Thus, regardless of whether the narrator's verdict on Isabella's inner life is accurate, the story does demonstrate how

materialism reflects an inner emptiness: either Isabella filling an emotional void with meaningless things, or the narrator dwelling on their jealousy of Isabella because of a dissatisfaction with their own life. What's more, by showing how the narrator's fixation on Isabella's material objects tells readers nothing about who this woman really is, Woolf makes an effective case that—contrary to Edwardian literary conventions—appearances do not provide a reliable source of information about literary characters.

IMAGINATION VS. REALISM

In this story, the narrator observes Isabella Tyson through her reflection in the **looking-glass**. Notably, looking-glasses are a common symbol for realist fiction, which seeks to accurately reflect the world back to its readers so they can see their own reality more clearly. In addition to seeing Isabella through the looking glass, the narrator spends a significant portion of the story using imagination to try to reveal Isabella's inner life. By telling the story entirely through imagination and a mirror's reflection, Woolf comments on imagination and realism as methods of accessing truth, suggesting that while both methods are inherently limited, imagination has the potential to create beauty in ways that realism can't.

Throughout the story, Woolf explicitly questions how useful the imagination can be as a tool for discerning hidden reality. When Isabella can no longer be seen in the looking-glass's reflection, the narrator begins to imagine what she might be doing out in the garden—perhaps picking flowers and cutting overgrown branches. The imagined scenes feature just as much detail as the scenes in the looking-glass, with descriptions of the flowers Isabella might pick—"light and fantastic and leafy and trailing"—as well as how she feels about cutting a branch: "filled with tenderness and regret." These imagined scenes include rich language and impressive imagery, and Woolf tells them in lush, ornate sentences such as, "Avenues of pleasure radiated this way and that from where she stood with her scissors raised to cut the trembling branches while the lacy clouds veiled her face." By crafting these imagined scenes to be some of the most aesthetically pleasing in the story, Woolf makes a case for imagination as a tool for heightening a story's beauty.

Yet despite the fact that they are aesthetically pleasing, these imaginative leaps are not necessarily related to the truth of who Isabella is. In other words, imagination is clearly creating beauty in the story, but it's not necessarily giving access to truth. In one example, the imagined scene of Isabella picking flowers and snipping branches is full of references to her relationships and inner life. She thinks about sending "flowers to Johnson's widow," and cutting a branch makes her sad "because it had once lived, and life was dear to her." Yet all these possible glimpses of Isabella's ideas and thoughts are undermined by the final paragraph, in which the narrator decides that Isabella actually has "no friends" and "no thoughts" of her own. Though the story never confirms whether the narrator's final assertion is true, it is clear—due to the fact that the narrator does not ultimately trust their own imagination—that readers also cannot trust imagination as a source of accurate information about Isabella. And the fact that the narrator's imaginative efforts do not lead to a new understanding of Isabella is further underscored by the way the story ends with the same words it starts with: "People should not leave looking-glasses hanging in their rooms." These words give the story a circular feeling, showing how, despite the narrator's beautiful flights of fancy, nothing has changed; no real insight into Isabella has been gained.

Along with imagination, the looking-glass is the other potential source of truth in the story, one that could be thought to provide more accurate information, given how it directly reflects the world. Yet the looking-glass, too, is flawed—and Woolf uses these flaws as a way to implicitly critique realist literature. Though the story is told partially through the reflection in a looking-glass, it also consistently casts doubt on the authenticity of what that looking-glass shows. Woolf spends a lot of time describing how the looking-glass distorts things, making them "irrational and entirely out of focus" or slicing them off at odd angles with its "gilt rim." With these descriptions, Woolf indirectly questions the idea that a looking-glass—or, by extension, a story—is capable of reflecting reality without altering that reality in the process. By using a looking-glass to ask this implicit question, Woolf also questions whether realist literature is capable of reflecting the world back to its readers clearly and without bias. In this story, skewed and imperfect reflections show how even a device as simple, commonplace, and seemingly trustworthy as a mirror may distort the truth. In this way, Woolf challenges realist literature's fundamental assumption, positing that if even a looking-glass distorts reality, then a fictional story certainly can't claim to reflect reality as it is.

Thus Woolf suggests that realism, like imagination, cannot ultimately provide access to truth; neither gives the narrator insight into Isabella's inner life. Furthermore, realism is limited to portraying only what can be directly reflected in the looking-glass, making it less useful than imagination, which at least offers a chance for human connection through beauty. In the end, the story makes a compelling case for imagination as a storytelling tool: though it cannot ultimately tell unambiguous truth, imagination can create beauty, while realism's superficial focus is both aesthetically bland and far too limited to provide any "real" truth at all.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE LOOKING-GLASS

The titular looking-glass that hangs in Isabella's hall represents the difficulty of discerning truth based on appearance alone. Throughout the story, the narrator views Isabella's home through the looking-glass, using the details visible in the glass (cabinets, rugs, the garden path) to imagine what Isabella and her life must be like. However, Woolf casts doubt on whether the details reflected in the glass can reveal anything true or definitive about who Isabella is. For one, the mirror always sees a limited and distorted view of the world. The narrator often describes the rim cutting off details and making parts of the house (and, for a while, Isabella herself) invisible. Furthermore, even what's visible isn't necessarily accurately reflected; when the postman comes to deposit **letters**, for instance, his reflection is initially so mangled that he's not even legible as human. Aside from the concerns about the mirror's incomplete and distorted reflection of reality, the details that the mirror does clearly reflect have ambiguous meaning. For example, the narrator sees the letters on Isabella's table and initially assumes that they're evidence of her many fascinating friends. Later on, based solely on Isabella not immediately opening the letters, the narrator decides that, actually, the letters are bills and Isabella has no friends. Of course, without seeing the contents of the letters, the narrator (and, by extension, the reader) cannot know which assumption (if either) is true. The mirror, however, can only give access to the surface details of Isabella's life—such as the envelopes that contain the letters—which remain ambiguous and misleading.

Finally, Woolf depicts the mirror itself as somewhat menacing. The story opens and closes with the advice that "people shouldn't leave looking-glasses hanging in their rooms." While at first this seems to be a warning about allowing others to see intimate details of one's life, by the end this statement is more ambiguous, since it's not clear that the mirror *does* give access to any truth about who Isabella is. Instead, the mirror seems to have distorted the image of her life in a way that Woolf describes as almost violent; it strips the life from her and her world. Near the beginning of the story, the narrator contrasts the liveliness of the drawing room with the stillness reflected in the mirror. The air flowing through the drawing room is like "breath" and the room seems to experience a range of emotions, making it almost human. By contrast, the mirror reflects a world that is "fixed," "still," and without any breath at all. The mirror, in other words, seems to kill life by making it into an image—something the mirror does to Isabella at the story's end. When she finally appears in full view of the mirror, the reflection seems to "fix" her (or to preserve her in that moment) and reveal the cruel truth of her essence: that she has no thoughts or friends. However, even as the mirror gives the appearance of showing the truth, by this point the mirror lacks credibility: its reflection has been described as limited, distorted, superficial, and deadening, so why should the reader believe this final reflection? By demonstrating the disconnect between image and reality, the mirror also makes an implicit commentary on the project of realist literature, which purports to reflect reality as-is back to its audience, promising access to truth via descriptions of people and objects. Because the mirror's reflections of Isabella and her home do not seem to reveal any inner truth about Isabella, the story ends up questioning whether this project of reflecting reality through a realist novel is even possible—thus also questioning whether realist literature is ultimately effective at leading to a true understanding of the world.

LETTERS

Isabella's letters represent the futility of truly trying to know another person. Although both observation and imagination might be able to provide some clues into another person's life, these tools cannot ultimately provide access into anyone's innermost ideas or thoughts. The letters are delivered partway through the story by the postman, and initially the narrator cannot tell what they are just by looking at them. In the **looking-glass**, they appear to be more like "marble tablets" than letters. The narrator struggles to relate them to "any human purpose," confusion that casts further doubt on the looking-glass's ability to accurately reflect reality, showing how observation does not necessarily lead to truth. Upon finally realizing the object in the reflection is a stack of letters, the narrator decides that if one could only read these letters' contents, everything about Isabella (and even life itself) would be revealed. But instead of opening the letters, the narrator simply imagines Isabella reading, picturing her taking the letters "one by one" and sighing as she pores over them "carefully word by word." Yet—showing how imagination, like observation, is a flawed tool—this imagined scene could not ultimately be further from reality: when Isabella does come inside, she does not even open the letters at all. When Isabella does not open the letters immediately, the narrator decides that this correspondence is not letters as all, but rather bills. However, there's not enough evidence for this claim to have credibility—there are many reasons that Isabella might not open an envelope, so the narrator's inference that the letters are bills is tenuous. Given the narrator's wildly different interpretations of what is inside the letters' enclosed envelopes at different points in the story, the letters represent Isabella's ultimate mysteriousness and the fact that she is unknowable, as much as the narrator tries to both observe Isabella and imagine deeper truths about her. Just as the truth about the letters' contents cannot be known, the truth about Isabella cannot be known, either. And the fact that the letters are never opened adds to this sense of mystery, supporting the idea that neither observation nor imagination can ultimately tell readers anything about who Isabella truly is.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Cambridge University Press edition of *Stories of Ourselves: Volume 1* published in 2018.

The Lady in the Looking Glass Quotes

People should not leave looking-glasses hanging in their rooms any more than they should leave open cheque books or letters confessing some hideous crime. One could not help looking, that summer afternoon, in the long glass that hung outside in the hall.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Narrator, Isabella Tyson

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 105

Explanation and Analysis

In these opening lines, the story's narrator gives a warning (that nobody should leave a looking-glass hanging in their house) and an excuse (that the narrator cannot be blamed for looking in Isabella Tyson's looking-glass because this action simply couldn't be avoided). By comparing the looking-glass to a checkbook or a criminal confession, the narrator implies that the looking-glass has the power to reveal truths that a person would otherwise try to conceal. Based on this, the narrator seems to believe that the looking-glass doesn't simply reflect the surfaces of a room, but that it actually gives access to the truths that those surfaces might otherwise conceal. This seems to be at the heart of the narrator's warning: that leaving a mirror out will allow others to glimpse secret truths. Of course, this seems at odds with the conventional understanding of a mirror's purpose, which is to simply reflect things exactly as they appear.

It's significant that, after giving this warning about the truths a looking-glass might reveal, the narrator makes an excuse for violating Isabella Tyson's privacy. After all, since the narrator believes that a looking-glass can grant access to the kinds of truths Isabella might want to conceal, it would seem that gazing into the mirror would be unkind and intrusive—but the narrator insists that looking in the mirror can't be helped. This feels both like an attempt to excuse the narrator from moral culpability for prying into Isabella's life and a way to introduce the story's focus on the human compulsion to know other people's secrets. The narrator spends the duration of the story making guesses about Isabella's inner life based on the details of her home that are reflected in the glass, which shows the narrator's insatiable need to know things about Isabella that Isabella herself seems unwilling to share. The narrator appears to be motivated simply by human curiosity (and perhaps a jealous desire to believe that Isabella's wealth hasn't made her happy), so the statement that peering into the looking-glass (or searching for a person's inner truth, symbolically speaking) cannot be helped speaks to the narrator's belief that the human urge to pry into the lives of others is unavoidable. Whether this is something Woolf believes to be true—or whether it is merely a convenient belief that helps the narrator excuse their behavior—is up to the reader to decide.

But, outside, the looking-glass reflected the hall table, the sun-flowers, the garden path so accurately and so fixedly that they seemed held there in their reality unescapably.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Narrator, Isabella Tyson

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 105

Explanation and Analysis

After describing Isabella's drawing room as almost human and physically alive, the narrator describes how Isabella's home appears in the looking-glass: lifeless and frozen. It's striking that, after a whole paragraph devoted to the drawing room's subtle and gorgeous fluctuations of atmosphere, the image reflected in the mirror seems so inert. Woolf says that the world in the mirror is reflected "so fixedly" that everything "seemed held there in their reality unescapably"—the opposite of the physical presence of the drawing room, in which everything seemed to constantly change.

The contrast between the vivacity of the drawing room and the lifeless image in the looking glass is one of the story's first clues as to the distorting and even cruel effects of the mirror. While the narrator seems to imply that the mirror reflects the world as it is (everything is shown "so accurately," Woolf writes), it's impossible to take this statement at face value given the striking difference

between the physical reality of Isabella's home and the reflection of it in the mirror. Clearly, there are aspects of reality that the mirror cannot capture, and so its reflection is inherently distorted: it takes something alive and renders it lifeless, eliminating the sense that one is inhabiting a place that is full of shifting moods, whose details are alive and unfixed. This in itself is a reason to distrust the mirror's ability to tell the truth about the world. But it's possible to read into this further and see a kind of violence at work in the mirror's reflection; it's as though the mirror is killing the world it reflects by freezing it into an image. In this way, the mirror's distortion is not morally neutral, but rather frightening and malicious.

All of this is important to keep in mind as the narrator draws inferences about Isabella and her life from the mirror's reflection of herself and her belongings alone. Perhaps the truth of Isabella's life is like the physical presence of the drawing room (alive, shifting, impossible to pin down, and impossible to capture in an image). If this is the case, perhaps it is in fact the mirror's cruel tendency to make things lifeless that leads the narrator to believe, in the story's final lines, that Isabella's life is much less vibrant than it initially seemed.

> Such comparisons are worse than idle and superficial—they are cruel even, for they come like the convolvulus itself trembling between one's eyes and the truth. There must be truth; there must be a wall.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Narrator, Isabella Tyson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 106

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the narrator has been imagining what Isabella might be doing in the garden, ultimately comparing her to the convolvulus flower. Soon after deciding this, however, the narrator immediately undercuts this comparison, saying that comparing a human being to a flower is not useful or illuminating.

In this quote, the narrator goes even further, suggesting that such a comparison is not simply superficial and unrevealing, but also actively "cruel." It's not totally clear, however, what the narrator means by calling the comparison "cruel"—the quote suggests that the cruelty lies in the tendency of metaphor and comparison to obscure truth, which does not seem conventionally cruel. After all, it's not clear who might be harmed by a comparison obscuring truth (certainly not Isabella herself, who seems not to want to be known). Perhaps this is simply cruel to the narrator, whose relentless desire to know Isabella is thwarted by distracting metaphors that obscure more than they reveal.

This quote is important in part because it reveals the narrator's certainty about the existence of truth (the "wall" is the narrator's metaphor for truth, which is half-hidden behind the creeping convolvulus). In this pursuit of truth, the narrator is now beginning to question whether imaginative leaps—such at this flower comparison—can actually help reveal truth. At one level, then, this quote shows the narrator questioning the value of imagination; even though "there must" be truth, perhaps imaginative tools like metaphor cannot necessarily reveal that truth. In fact, imagination may even ultimately make truth more difficult to apprehend.

On another level, however, this quote may reveal less about imagination and more about the narrator themselves. The fact that the narrator changes their mind so many times in a short span of time casts doubt on their reliability and foreshadows the way the narrator later changes their mind about Isabella several times. Additionally, the narrator characterizes "such comparisons" as "worse than idle and superficial," implying they find idleness and superficiality to be negative qualities. However, throughout the story, the narrator is idle, at no point moving from the sofa in the sitting room, and also at various junctures the narrator demonstrates a certain inclination toward superficiality, often judging Isabella based on her appearance and material objects alone. In this way, the narrator seems to lack a basic self-awareness, potentially revealing another way in which they are not necessarily trustworthy as a source of either moral judgements or grand truths.

> And, whether it was fancy or not, they seemed to have become not merely a handful of casual letters but to be tablets graven with eternal truth—if one could read them, one would know everything there was to be known about Isabella, yes, and about life, too.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Narrator, Isabella Tyson

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 106-107

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the narrator has just watched the postman deliver a bundle of letters to Isabella's home, but since the narrator is watching in the mirror—which distorts the postman and the letters almost unrecognizably—the narrator initially believes the letters to be stone tablets. Seeing the letters as stone tablets suggests a permanence and unchangeability far beyond that of a paper letter. To a Western audience, these stone tablets may evoke the story of the Ten Commandments, in which the Abrahamic god passed on the most important rules for humanity in the form of two tablets of stone. This freighted symbolism quickly loses its potency when the narrator admits to having misinterpreted the scene, noting the objects on the table are not stone tablets, but letters, which lack both the physical and symbolic weight of stone—showing how deeply the looking-glass has distorted this simple image.

Despite knowing that the tablets are letters, the narrator continues with the comparison to stone tablets, even saying the letters seem "graven with eternal truth" and suggesting they could reveal all of Isabella's deepest secrets. It is not clear what has led the narrator to decide this—other than the metaphorical associations in their own mind, given their initial, faulty impression of the letters' reflection in the mirror. Casting accuracy aside, the narrator seems to be taken in by their own idea of the tablets. The lofty and impassioned tone of this sentence feels hopeful and even inspirational, even if it is ultimately based on faulty logic.

Since the narrator does not actually open the letters, these "eternal truths" remain hidden, as do the letters' real contents. In this way, the letters come to represent the gulf between surface details and actual inner truths: the narrator can see the envelopes, but cannot actually see what the letters themselves say, leaving this supposed truth completely inaccessible.

> If she concealed so much and knew so much one must prize her open with the first tool that came to hand—the imagination.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Narrator, Isabella Tyson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 107

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator has just finished imagining Isabella opening her letters and then putting them back into the drawer, hiding their precious truth from the viewer. The narrator is upset by Isabella's imagined reluctance to be known and considers it "monstrous" and "absurd." With this quote, the narrator decides that if Isabella will not share this information about herself—that is, will not reveal details of her life or offer up any observable facts about who she really is—then the only option is to continue to use imagination to discover more about her.

Once again, the narrator's logic seems somewhat faulty, considering that Isabella did not actually hide her letters in the drawer; this was something the narrator only imagined. The story implies that, generally, Isabella is in fact reluctant to share private details about her life, but the narrator never makes any effort to ask her about these details, either, instead jumping to the conclusion that it will be necessary to "prize her open" against her will using their imagination.

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that the narrator calls imagination a "tool" here. The only scenes in the story that the narrator doesn't "see" through the reflection in the looking-glass are the scenes the narrator "sees" in their imagination. This supports the idea that realism (represented by the looking-glass) and imagination are the two "tools" the narrator tries to use to learn more about Isabella's inner life. The story pits these two tools are against each other in an effort to see which is a more effective method for revealing the truth.

> It was her profounder state of being that one wanted to catch and turn to words, the state that is to the mind what breathing is to the body, what one calls happiness or unhappiness.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Narrator, Isabella Tyson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 107

Explanation and Analysis

Prior to this passage, in the midst of imagining Isabella in the garden, the narrator speculates that she is having

quotidian thoughts about social obligations. In this quote, the narrator rejects these imagined thoughts as being insufficiently revealing; the narrator, instead, wants access to her deeper sentiments, the feelings that are the essence of her life.

Throughout the story, the narrator vacillates between being taken in by more every-day, surface-level observations about Isabella's life—such as the decorative details of her home and garden, or observations about her many social connections—and wanting to dive deeper into Isabella's very consciousness, into her true thoughts and feelings about herself and the world. With this particular quote, the narrator focuses in on what they actually hope to discover: whether she is truly happy or unhappy.

By defining Isabella's happiness or unhappiness as the mind's version of "what breathing is to the body," the narrator implies that this emotional state is an absolutely fundamental part of who Isabella is and something they deeply desire to understand about her. Yet it's intriguing that the thoughts the narrator imagines Isabella thinking—about flowers and friends—do not actually help this project of "catching" Isabella's profounder state or turning it "to words." Thus, though the narrator desires a deeper understanding of Isabella and tries to reveal the truth about whether this wealthy woman is happy or unhappy with herself, it seems even their own imagination cannot help them achieve this goal.

> At once the looking-glass began to pour over her a light that seemed to fix her; that seemed like some acid to bite off the unessential and superficial and to leave only the truth. It was an enthralling spectacle.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Narrator, Isabella Tyson

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 108

Explanation and Analysis

The real-life Isabella has returned from the garden, and for the first time the narrator is seeing her actual reflection in the looking-glass. This quote is the story's climax, and it marks a deep shift in the way the narrator perceives Isabella. The light fixes Isabella, as though she is trapped and caught in place. Furthermore, (in rather violent wording) the mirror "bite[s]" off the superficial "like some acid," leaving—in the narrator's perception, at least—only the truth of who Isabella is.

The narrator calls this harsh revelation an "enthralling spectacle," suggesting that they seem to enjoy what they describe as "the truth" of Isabella. In the narrator's view, this is a very bleak truth indeed, where Isabella has no redeeming external or internal qualities. The narrator describes Isabella as looking aged: "veined and lined" with a "wrinkled neck." Based on this image, the narrator imagines that Isabella actually has "no thoughts" and "no friends," and the narrator calls her "perfectly empty." It is not clear whether this final judgment of Isabella is warranted or even close to the truth—after all, the narrator does not have sufficient evidence to make these judgments and, throughout the story, the mirror has been shown as disfiguring and untrustworthy. However, the narrator seems to believe that this final image of Isabella in the looking-glass does represent her reality, and it is clear the narrator is "enthralled" by it. This rather cruel enjoyment on the part of the narrator appears to hint that, regardless of whether the story has achieved its goal of conveying some inner truth about Isabella, it has certainly achieved another goal: providing entertainment, at least for its narrator and perhaps—by proxy—its readers, too.

> People should not leave looking-glasses hanging in their rooms.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Narrator, Isabella Tyson

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 108

Explanation and Analysis

These are the final words in the story. They come at the moment when the narrator has decided—based on her reflection in the mirror—that Isabella is empty and alone. These closing words, stated as general advice, suggest that the narrator believes this sad truth about Isabella was revealed because of the harsh reflection of her life visible in the looking-glass. The narrator seems to suggest that if looking-glasses can reveal the truth about someone, perhaps it is risky to hang a mirror in one's room.

However, since it is not clear whether the narrator's final harsh judgement of Isabella is actually true, it is also unclear whether this advice is really warranted. The narrator has spent the entire story viewing Isabella or her empty home and garden through the reflection in the looking-glass, so this advice could also be interpreted as a warning to avoid giving visitors an invitation to pry into one's innermost life, in the form of a looking-glass or otherwise.

The fact that these ten words are an echo of the story's first ten words adds to the feeling that the story does not end with more insight or information than it started with. Rather than offering up supporting evidence for the epiphany the narrator seems to have had, with their sureness they have just seen the truth of who Isabella *really* is—this refrain-like ending adds to the feeling that the story has been a circular journey, ending in the same place it started. In this way, this repeated phrase, a tidbit of advice with no clear logic behind it, further "mirrors" the narrator's baseless conclusion about Isabella and enhances the feeling that the story is a series of unfounded ideas reflecting back on each other, with no real truth at its core.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE LADY IN THE LOOKING GLASS

An unnamed narrator advises that "people should not leave **looking-glasses** hanging in their rooms," comparing this to leaving an open checkbook or a letter confessing to a crime. It's a summer afternoon, and it's impossible not to see into the looking-glass in the drawing room, which reflects a table, part of the garden beyond it, and an outdoor path that the mirror's gold rim cuts off.

The narrator's opening line is a somewhat mysterious warning, telling readers not to leave mirrors hanging in their homes. The comparison between a mirror and a checkbook or criminal confession seems to imply that mirrors might grant someone access to private truths about a person's life, which is a confusing claim, since the function of a mirror is simply to reflect things exactly how they appear. In other words, if a secret is concealed, one wouldn't expect it to be revealed in a mirror—although the narrator seems to believe that this is possible, or even inevitable. By pointing out that the mirror is impossible not to look into, the narrator implies that it is not their fault that they are looking in the mirror and—by extension—prying into the private details the mirror might reveal. Despite the narrator's confidence that the mirror will reveal secrets, the end of this opening paragraph begins to cast doubt on the mirror's reliability. After all, the mirror only reflects part of this home, so it seems limited in its ability to give a full picture of what goes on here, and it actively distorts the image of the garden path by cutting it off.

The narrator, who is alone in the empty house, feels like a camouflaged naturalist who watches shy animals while remaining unseen. The room's "shy creatures," though, are "lights and shadows, curtains blowing, petals falling"—things that rarely happen "if someone is looking." The room is old and cozy, full of rugs and bookcases, and the narrator feels the room's emotions—"passions and rages" and "envies and sorrows"—ebbing and flowing as though the room were human.

This passage establishes an ambiguity about who (or what) the narrator is. While they seem to be a person who is alone in this house, they are described as "unseen" and as having access to phenomena that rarely happen with a person present. This implies that the narrator might not be a human presence—a possibility that is bolstered later on when the lady of the house comes home and seems not to notice the narrator at all, despite the way the narrator can see her plainly. Woolf never clarifies who or what the narrator is. In contrast to the inhuman qualities of the seemingly-human narrator, Woolf describes the drawing room (which is clearly inhuman) as being essentially alive, and even humanlike. The room's natural phenomena (curtains swaying, shadows moving) are described as "creatures" and the room itself has "emotions"—all of this makes the room seem more alive and physically present than the narrator itself. Overall, this story critiques an Edwardian literary convention in which an author describes a character's belongings in order to give insight into that character's personality. Similarly, in this moment, Woolf is describing inanimate belongings from which the narrator will later draw inferences about the life of their owner. By giving these objects a life of their own, however, Woolf implicitly undermines the notion that these belongings exist to reflect the truth of their owner—these objects have their own truth, it seems, and that truth itself seems constantly in flux and impossible to pin down. Therefore, it seems absurd to draw any inference at all from this room.

The way the **looking-glass** reflects the environment "so accurately and so fixedly" shows a world that is "all stillness," unlike the constantly changing room. The doors and windows are open, which creates a sound like breathing in the room—but nothing breathes in the looking-glass, where everything is in a "trance of immortality."

Here, the narrator draws a contrast between the physical presence of this home (which seems alive, and even human) and the reflection of the house in the looking-glass, which is still and lifeless. That the house seems to be physically breathing in real life, but then appears immortal and without breath in the looking-glass, implies that the looking-glass is essentially killing life by turning it into a still image. This hints that the looking-glass distorts reality merely by reflecting it, since it cannot capture the shifting atmosphere of a room or the sense of life in the house. This casts doubt on the credibility of the narrator's future attempts to use the lifeless reflection in the looking-glass as a basis for assumptions about the life of the house's owner. It also implicitly critiques realist literature, of which the looking-glass—and its supposed ability to reflect the world back accurately and without bias—is a common symbol.

A half-hour before, Isabella Tyson—the owner of the house—had gone down the path to the garden. As she walked, she was reflected in the **looking-glass** until she "vanished, sliced off by the gilt rim." The narrator presumes that Isabella went to pick flowers—perhaps an "elegant" convolvulus whose colorful blossoms are often found on ugly walls. To the narrator, Isabella seems more like the "fantastic and tremulous" convolvulus than more "upright" or "starched" flowers.

The fact that part of the world is "sliced off" by the mirror's rim shows how the mirror is an imperfect reflection of reality. The mirror does not reflect reality completely, but rather shows only parts of it—an incomplete vision of the world that cannot possibly contain the entire truth. Seemingly aware of this limitation, the narrator decides to turn to another tool—imagination—to attempt to accurately reflect reality. When the narrator tries to come up with an appropriate flower to represent Isabella, the narrator chooses the convolvulus, which seems to suggest that Isabella—like the convolvulus—is a beautiful, entrancing decoration, and that the world in which she is found—like the ugly walls on which the convolvulus grows—is made less dreary by her presence. It's notable, though, that this description of Isabella is quite abstract: she's not currently visible, the narrator is merely imagining that she's picking a convolvulus (readers have no idea whether she has any real connection to this flower), and even the narrator struggles with comparing her to a flower, which suggests that the metaphor might not be all that illuminating.

This comparison, the narrator reflects, shows how little anyone knows about Isabella—after all, a "flesh and blood" woman is nothing like a flower. Such comparisons can even be cruel, as they (like the convolvulus) stand in the way of seeing the truth about Isabella. "There must be truth," the narrator muses, "there must be a wall." Despite this, even after years of knowing Isabella, nobody can say much about who she is. What is known is that Isabella is a "spinster," she is rich, and she collected the objects in her house "at great risk" to herself while traveling the world.

Here, building on the previous hints that using a flower as a metaphor for Isabella is somewhat arbitrary and imperfect, the narrator seems to suggest that imagination is also a flawed tool. After all, the narrator is pointing out that Isabella is a real person with real truth about her, which contrasts to the immaterial, speculative nature of metaphor and imagination. This moment implicitly calls attention to the fact that the reader is learning about Isabella through a written story narrated by a character who is not directly observing Isabella. By emphasizing the reader's distance from "flesh and blood" Isabella, Woolf implicitly asks readers to doubt what is being said about her. The narrator compares the truth of Isabella the wall that is partially hidden behind the flowering convolvulus. Since Isabella herself was previously compared to a convolvulus, the implication here is perhaps that Isabella's bright and beautiful exterior might be masking an uglier inner truth, or that comparing Isabella to a flower in the first place obscures the truth (metaphorically, "the wall") of who she is.

The narrator notes that the furniture in Isabella's house seems to know her better than the people in her life. The cabinets in her house have small drawers that "almost certainly" hold **letters** from her "many friends." If one opened them, the narrator imagines, one would find records of these friendships: intimacy, jealousy, and other markers of the "passion and experience" Isabella has lived. The room becomes more "shadowy and symbolic" due to the "stress" of thinking about Isabella.

The narrator's suggestion that Isabella's furniture "knows" her better than the people in her life may be facetious, given that furniture cannot actually "know" anything at all. It's possible this is a humorous dig at Edwardian literary conventions, again showing Woolf's skepticism that a list of a character's material objects can really accurately convey any core truth about them. The narrator's suggestion that the letters would reveal everything about Isabella seems more genuine, however, demonstrating the narrator's desire to dig beneath the surface of things and gain real insight into who Isabella truly is. The drawers and the envelopes represent how a thing's superficial appearance can obscure its truth; the drawers hide the envelopes, and the envelopes hide the contents of the letters, where the narrator believes the real truth can be found.

Suddenly, the narrator's musings are interrupted by a "large black form" that looms into the **looking-glass**, blocking the view of everything else. The form deposits a "packet of marble tablets" on the table and vanishes. For a moment, the image in the looking-glass is "unrecognisable and irrational," but then the narrator realizes that the tablets are a stack of **letters** brought by the postman.

Earlier in the story, the looking-glass sliced off sections of Isabella's house, which called into question the looking-glass's ability to reflect the truth of what happens in Isabella's home. Here, the mirror's credibility gets worse: not only does it reflect a limited picture of reality, but it's also a distorted one. In this moment, the mirror is unable to accurately reflect such banal things as letters, and it even distorts the postman beyond the narrator's ability to recognize him as human. Here, the mirror seems to actively and even wilfully distort reality in strange and unpredictable ways. This is surprising and disturbing, showing how perhaps realism, as represented by the mirror, is just as flawed as imagination as a tool for accessing truth. This section is powerful because it is one of the first moments in the story that so explicitly shows the looking-glass not only limiting but perhaps actively warping the truth.

The letters appear still and immortal in the **looking-glass**, and the narrator imagines that if one could read them, they would know everything about Isabella and even about life itself. The narrator imagines Isabella reading the letters and letting out "a profound sigh of comprehension" as if she, too "had seen to the bottom of everything." Then, the narrator concludes, Isabella would lock the letters in a drawer to "conceal what she did not wish to be known."

Though the narrator seems convinced that the letters will provide access to the truth, if only they can be read, the narrator has no evidence for this claim. Interestingly, rather than attempting to read the letters, the narrator instead uses their appearance in the mirror as a jumping-off point for an elaborate invented scene where Isabella both reads the letters and decides to hide them from the viewer. Aside from a view of the envelopes in the mirror, and this completely imaginary image of Isabella opening them, the narrator has no information about what is inside the envelopes. Thus this passage shows the narrator mistaking this surface detail—the visible envelope—for real information about what can be found under the envelope's surface. Perhaps the letters are correspondence, perhaps they are bills, perhaps they are something else altogether. But because the letters are never actually opened, this moment cannot tell the audience anything substantive about Isabella or the letters themselves. Instead, this moment testifies to the way the narrator mistakes surface details for inner truth, and how—even with the help of imagination—these surface details do not provide any real insight into Isabella's inner world.

This thought is a "challenge" to the narrator, who believes that, even though Isabella does "not wish to be known," she "should no longer escape." Since Isabella conceals her life and knowledge, "one must prize her open" with the "first tool that came to hand: the imagination." The narrator believes one should "fasten her down there" and refuse to accept mere polite conversation—instead, one should "put oneself in her shoes."

This is a vaguely threatening moment that hints at the fact the narrator may have sinister motives for prying into Isabella's life. It's interesting to note that this "challenge" comes not from any real-life action by Isabella, but rather, simply the narrator's imagined scene, in which Isabella hides the letter from view after reading it. Despite the fact that Isabella's reluctance to share the letter (and thus the details of her life) is completely imagined, the narrator's response to this is quite violent. The language here is aggressive, implying that Isabella might want to escape from the narrator's insistence on forcing her to reveal inner details about her life she would rather not share.

The narrator describes the elegant shoes that Isabella is wearing down in the garden. At that moment, Isabella must be pruning with the sun in her eyes, but then "at the critical moment," a cloud covers the sun, making it hard to see whether the look on Isabella's face is "mocking or tender, brilliant or dull." So the narrator muses about what Isabella might be thinking—that she needs to send flowers to a widow and visit some acquaintances at their new home, perhaps, which are the kinds of things she would say at dinner. But "one was tired of" these sorts of banalities, wanting access instead to Isabella's "profounder state of being."

The narrator takes their own suggestion about putting oneself in Isabella's shoes literally here, describing her actual shoes in what may be a moment that satirizes realism's focus on hyper-specific descriptions of clothing and other material objects. The narrator then pivots from realism to imagination, picturing Isabella in the garden. Yet even in this imagined scene, the thoughts that the narrator imagines Isabella pondering are quite mundane: remembering minor social obligations or little errands she needs to do. The narrator quickly becomes tired of their own imaginings of what Isabella might be thinking, and signals that they will try to delve deeper. The narrator seems to be straining against their own impulses to keep things on a surface level, and it's an interesting point of tension in the story that seems to ask whether the narrator will actually be able to dive deeper and truly access Isabella's "profounder state."

The narrator believes that Isabella must be happy, given her many friends, her wealth, her extensive travels, and her exquisite belongings. As Isabella stands in the garden with the clouds masking her expression, there are many "avenues of pleasure" surrounding her.

Despite the fact that the narrator has vowed to dig deeper, the narrator continues to rely on superficial details here (including Isabella's riches and her travels) as proof of her happiness. And—in an image that further casts doubt on the narrator's ability to truly access Isabella's inner state—even in this imagined scene in the garden, clouds obscure Isabella's facial expression. The narrator cannot see whether Isabella is smiling or frowning in this made-up scene, showing how, even with imagination, Isabella's true emotional state is still obscured. Thus these clouds seem to suggest that imagination cannot provide full access to someone's inner thoughts, just as the narrator's continued focus on the surface details of Isabella's life—like the "avenues of pleasure" available to her—call into question the narrator's ability to dig beneath those details and achieve the goal of discovering Isabella's authentic truth.

However, as Isabella snips a branch in the garden, the narrator imagines a little light falling on her face, allowing for more insight into her mind. Isabella feels a "tenderness" at cutting something living, given that life itself is "dear to her." This act of cutting causes Isabella to reflect on her own mortality—both the "futility and evanescence of things" and the fact that her life has been good.

This imagined scene is one of the most beautiful in the book. Despite the fact that the narrator has just cast doubt on imagination's ability to access truth, the ornate language in this passage makes a case for imagination's aesthetic usefulness. Even if imagination is an imperfect storytelling tool that may not give the narrator full access into Isabella's inner life, in this section of the story, it at least allows the narrator to convey something beautiful: a poetic reflection on life, on mortality, and on the impermanence of things—something a literal and direct reflection in the mirror would not be able to offer on its own.

The narrator compares Isabella's mind to her room, with her thoughts moving through it like lights "pirouetting and stepping delicately" across the floor. Isabella's "whole being" is—like the room—flooded with "some profound knowledge, some unspoken regret," and—like her cabinets—Isabella is "full of locked drawers, stuffed with letters." The narrator decides that the talk of "prizing her open" is "impious and absurd," since one must use the "finest and subtlest" tools to access Isabella.

Here, the narrator seems to regret their earlier—and somewhat sinister—goal of prizing Isabella open, even against her will. This aggression disappears from the narrator's language, replaced by a respectful and almost reverent posture toward Isabella. At this point, however, the narrator has changed their mind about many things in the story multiple times and is clearly a somewhat unreliable figure when it comes to their opinions of both Isabella and their own motives. For this reason, it isn't clear whether the narrator will actually follow through on this commitment to only prizing Isabella open with the "subtlest" of tools. It's also worth noting that the narrator's shift towards a less aggressive posture does not mean that the narrator is backing down from their initial goal of gaining access to Isabella's inner truth, even if she doesn't want it to be found. So this change of heart is mostly superficial: a shift in tone, rather than in intention.

Suddenly, Isabella herself is visible in the **looking-glass**. She is returning from the garden, walking slowly and becoming gradually larger and more visible in the frame. As she comes closer, she becomes more and more "the person into whose mind one had been trying to penetrate." Since she approaches slowly, Isabella's presence doesn't disturb the "pattern" of objects in the looking-glass. Instead, the image seems to "make room for her," and the objects in her home seem to move to "receive" her.

This is a strange moment. Though theoretically the entire story is about the titular "Lady" in the looking-glass, Isabella has not actually appeared yet in the flesh. For this reason, even though Isabella enters the scene gradually, her arrival feels somewhat abrupt, showing how far the narrator's observations of Isabella's home and flights of fancy have gone from the real-life details of Isabella herself. Nevertheless, at least as the narrator sees it, this real-life Isabella also fits neatly into the image of her as reflected in the mirror; this is supported by the fact that as she approaches, Isabella doesn't disturb the "pattern" in the looking-glass reflection at all. This suggests that the narrator is moving toward trusting the image in the mirror and whatever truth it may convey, even if earlier passages have cast doubt on the mirror's ability to provide a complete and non-distorted reflection of reality.

Isabella stops in the hall and the **looking-glass** casts its light over her, a light that "seem[s] to fix her" the way an acid would strip what is "unessential and superficial," leaving "only the truth." To the narrator, this new view of Isabella is an "enthralling spectacle." Everything has "dropped from her": the "clouds, dress, basket, diamond" are gone. There is no more "convolvulus"—only the "hard wall beneath."

The narrator seems rather cruel again, leaving behind their reverent posture toward Isabella to instead enjoy the "spectacle" of seeing her truth revealed. The finer details of Isabella's life seem to disappear in the looking-glass's harsh light, and the narrator claims to be finally seeing the truth of who Isabella is (that is, the "wall" of truth previously hidden by the metaphorical convolvulus). Yet despite the narrator's seeming clarity that this vision of Isabella is the ultimate truth, the narrator has been proven time and time again to be unreliable. In this moment, the narrator has no more substantive information about Isabella than they had before; after all, it is still only Isabella's image in the glass (her superficial appearance) this is visible.

The narrator sees "the woman herself." In the "pitiless light" of the **looking-glass**, there is "nothing": Isabella has no thoughts and no friends. The **letters** from friends are actually bills, and she doesn't bother to open them as she stands there, "old and angular, veined and lined."

As the narrator sees her in this closing image, Isabella is as unattractive on the outside as she is empty on the inside. This description of her is as "pitiless" as the light reflected in the mirror, calling into question whether it is actually the looking-glass that is pitiless—or perhaps the narrator themselves, who seems unwilling to see any potential redeeming qualities in Isabella. This idea that the narrator may actually be the "pitiless" one is further supported by the fact that story leaves ambiguous whether the idea of Isabella as friendless and with "no thoughts" is accurate or not. It may not be the light reflected in the mirror that is harsh and unrelenting; rather, it may the narrator, rendered biased by their own jealousy toward Isabella. Similarly, it is also possible that the looking-glass is in fact revealing a truth about Isabella, however partial or distorted this truth may be; the story leaves room for both these interpretations.

The narrator warns again that "People should not leave **looking-glasses** hanging in their rooms."

This final sentence—which is an echo of the story's opening line—is ambiguous in meaning. Since the narrator is relaying this line after experiencing a moment of supposed clarity about Isabella, it seems that the narrator thinks it was unwise for Isabella to leave the looking-glass out, since it (supposedly) allowed the narrator to glimpse the bleak reality of her (lack of) inner life. However, the fact that this final sentence also repeats part of the story's first sentence adds to the feeling that the story has, in a way, led nowhere. Despite the narrator's assuredness that they have gained some insight into who Isabella truly is, it is actually impossible to know whether any of the narrator's claims about Isabella are true, giving the story a circular feel and leaving the narrative right back where it started: with a confusing piece of advice that leaves room for many different interpretations and symbolic possibilities.

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