

The Magic Mirror

I started watching all the *Lost In Space* episodes in order, beginning with the original pilot. I was thinking, Well, these aren't that bad, and a couple were pretty good. Then came "My Friend, Mr. Nobody," and I was wowed. The first "Penny episode." First, I was just hugely impressed by the acting from this young kid, then the story itself grabbed me, and I started really looking at how good a lot of the visuals were. Well, in black & white you can do lots of good gritty contrast stuff (see the 2 galleries I have dedicated to this episode.) This was the ep that sold me on *Lost In Space* all over again.

Then finally came along "The Magic Mirror," and I was just blown away by everything about it. It was like getting religion. It was like a ten-kiloton blast of awesome. It was like -- nothing I could have imagined, even though I vaguely remembered seeing it from the first time around.

As with the better episodes, it is redolent of familiar literary themes. Although falling through a magical mirror into another world ("It's not really a world...It's a dimension.") tips the hat to Alice, once inside, it is not Wonderland, but Neverland.

On a purely artistic point, note the blurred focus at the edges of this mirror dimension, throughout all its sequences, emphasizing its dreamlike unreality.

A brief summary: possible spoiler alert! But if you haven't seen this episode yet, shame on you! Go watch it first, then come back.

The nameless boy (brilliantly played by Michael J. Pollard) is trapped in the mirror dimension, where he never grows old, or even grows up. Lonesome, he has lured Penny in, much as Peter Pan seduced Wendy away from home. Just as Neverland had Hook and the Crocodile as an ever present threat, so does this dimension have its monsters. Finally, Dr. Smith (who has also stumbled in) accidentally frees himself by shooting at his reflection in the water. Penny begs the boy to follow her out, to live with her family, who will love him. But just as Peter Pan lost his shadow, this boy has lost his reflection. He remains trapped in his magical prison, to Penny's despair.

[As noted above, this is one of the episodes I remember seeing as a boy, although all I specifically recalled was that getting out had something to do with your reflection, Penny desperately trying to get him to follow her out, and his wistful, "I don't have any reflection." I want to make that clear just because I don't anyone to think I'm over-dramatizing my own reaction to the ending this day.]

As the episode concludes, Penny is fussing over her hair in front of the mirror, thinking about getting older and perhaps putting away childish things. Finally she leaves, her cabin empty, with the camera slowly panning over to the mirror. We know the boy liked to look at her through the mirror, so we are already figuring he's been there just now, unseen by her. As the camera slid in, I was thinking, "OK OK we get, he's there, we know it, now DON'T RUIN THIS by beating it to death and going for reverse point of view or something to leave us staring out the mirror with him, WE GET IT!"

Far more plaintively, as the camera pans by the mirror, we hear the jingling of the boy's little silver bell.... Well, I was watching this at work on my little media player, and honest to God I thought I was going to have to get up and out of the room before I embarrassed myself.

On the surface, this is the touching tale of a child ready to start growing up. Beyond that though, what I found so gripping, almost frightening, was the dark, barely disguised sexual metaphor pervasive through the episode; it is truly Penny's coming-of-age tale. All right, I admit I'm no psychologist. I don't even play one on television. I'm skeptical of so-called "Freudian analysis" of every little detail; even Freud said, "Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar." I would be glad for commentators to prove me wrong on any of my assertions here.



The discovery of the mirror established, the story begins with Judy teasing Penny before it, chiding her for her tomboyishness; Penny retorts that she's going to cut her hair short like a boy's. Judy unthinkingly tosses off a flippant, "Go ahead, be ugly!" Immediately regretful, she pulls Penny back in front of the mirror, and tells her, "You could be so beautiful...look, you *are* so beautiful." Possibly already upset from earlier witnessing Judy & Don's flirting, and even more so now, Penny rages that "Maybe I like the way I am! Maybe I'll stay this way forever!" The "Peter Pan" motif established, Penny storms off. Eventually she follows Debbie the Bloop through the looking glass.

The boy explains the wonders of the mirror dimension in the language of Neverland, though: never growing up, having fun, playing all the time or just doing what you want. Most importantly, there is "...none of that goop between people." "Like between Judy and Don." Penny acknowledges.

He also explains the origin of all the artifacts in this place; it is a veritable museum of antiquities. "When anything that gets lost or that anyone doesn't want any more, it always ends up in here." Is he insinuating, or does Penny make that connection: that *she* has become one of the unwanted?

He is surrounded with broken clocks -obviously emblematic of halted time- and explains that his cat used to bring them back. He doesn't have the cat any more: "I used to have this cat, and she used to go out and bring all kinds of things back. And then this one time she met this tomcat on the other side - I haven't seen her since." There is certainly innuendo in that, the promiscuity of cats being legendary, and the stuff of endless sexual referents in folk and pop culture: a man out looking for a date is "Tomcatting," a woman of careless habits is an "Alley Cat." Observe how he looks at Penny during this. He isn't just telling a sad story about losing a pet, he is blatantly making a connection there with Penny: he does not want her to grow up and desert him for some tomcat, either...with all that that implies.



Our first introduction to the monsters is jarring both visually and by the dialog. We see a fairly shapeless, furry mass writhing through one of the artifacts, what looks like a massive pair of toothy jaws. Described as an "awful globby thing", it writhes within a gaping, toothy, maw. The symbolism of frightened sexuality seems fairly obvious: teeth and all. Later, the other creature wanders freely: "When all the bells go off, that means that it might be that hairy thing that lives down below." This is the other creature, with a

single eye on a stalk: yes, a one-eyed hairy monster – that lives “down below.” Seems to me we're getting pretty blatant. Interestingly, when the boy goes off to hunt the monster, he shuts Penny inside a (broken) grandfather clock; once again the idea of hiding within time as protection against growing up and having to face the beast?

Shortly thereafter, Dr Smith finds his way in, and she screams that “There's an awful beast running around here.” Recall Penny's revulsion at Don and Judy's carrying on. I believe her own burgeoning sexual awareness is the beast which stalks and frightens her, echoed by the boy's ambivalent relationship with the creature: as terrible as the monster is, he has something like a working relationship with it – he shoots it with the cannon, it chases him, it's fun, as dangerous as it is. When Penny tries to actually kill it, he panics. “You're not supposed to kill the hairy beast!” It's meant to be played with, not killed, but neither do you let it catch you.

Note too, that two episodes previously, at the beginning of *Ghost In Space*, we had the first cast costume change. As the episode begins, Maureen is measuring Penny for her new clothes, who worries it will be too long before they are ready for her: “I keep growing so fast it'll probably be tight in all the wrong places by the time they're ready to wear.” So Penny has already established that she is aware of her maturing figure, and self.

Dr. Smith has an interesting and tolerable role inside the mirror. I'm not going so far right now as to assert that any of this bit was intentional, just my own observation. I hope you all are familiar with the story of *The Nutcracker*. Recall the mysterious character, Uncle Drosslemeyer, who gives Clara the nutcracker which becomes her prince, and the dollhouse-castle. (Ironically, *Nutcracker* has been imagined and staged as the same type of “sexual awakening” story I'm claiming for *Magic Mirror*, but in the case of the *Nutcracker*, I don't quite buy it.) Smith is the one who finds the mirror, and because of him, Penny finds it and her way inside, a slight parallel. Some debate whether Clara's *Nutcracker* adventure is a dream or not; once Smith gets inside the mirror dimension, he is convinced that the whole thing is *his own* dream! Later, when he and Penny are safely outside, he explains to the parents, “A little girl can fall asleep and dream, can't she?” Again, I'm not alleging any intentional allusion there, just thought it was an interesting comparison.

By contrast, when Smith is convinced it is all his own dream, he pursues and embraces the hairy monster! It almost kills him before Penny rescues him by shooting at it. When he fails to drive the beast away with the cannon, he abandons the hunt. Also, Smith introduces the subject of psychology, and even states, “One must confront ones nightmares.”! I'm not asserting any deliberate meaning or symbolism to this sequence: still, the symbolism is there.



While Penny flees in terror from the one-eyed hairy monster, Smith welcomes its embrace.

Hmm.



Smith's presence in the mirror dimension, I think, is only to show Penny the way out. It is he who accidentally shoots at his reflection in a pool of water and so throws himself back outside. This takes us back to where we started here, near the end, with Penny understanding what must be done, and trying to get the boy to come back with her. At this point, though, profound significance may be read into the act of shooting at one's own reflection: the symbolism of destroying yourself, or a part of yourself. Is Penny shooting down her own childish innocence? The immature *id* which refuses to be an adult?

What does that say, then, about the boy? Does he have no reflection because there is nothing left of him except the reflection? Is there nothing left of him except childishness? Is this the real reason he can't escape? Is he condemned to an eternity of looking at the maturity and adulthood of others through the wrong side of the looking glass, or is there a possibility he can regain the "real" part of himself, and maybe, someday, pass on through? (Interestingly, Pollard played a very similar role not too long after on *Star Trek*, as the leader of a group of children who cannot grow up past puberty.)

Penny admonishes him, "You can't stay in this awful place forever," and I believe she really refers to the awful place that is adolescence, it is indeed the un-real, in-between place behind the mirrors. And, as I suggest above, the only way out is to let go of your childishness -- or destroy it outright.

Just a couple other notes, small details to look back at now, in this new light. When Penny first comes in to this dimension, she looks down into the same pool of water which she later shoots into. Instead of her reflection, all we see is the eye of the beast. Is this speaking to us already of the beast within Penny? Then, she hears the boy calling to her, "Jump." Still on the threshold of this new dimension, she must jump over the water to completely enter it. Of course, crossing a river is a common motif in history and folklore for some sort of milestone, all the way back to Caesar crossing the Rubicon – still a byword for an undo-able action, much like "Burning one's bridges behind you," or "Crossing the Jordan," as a euphemism for death. Is this Penny's irrevocable jump toward adulthood? Finally, we note that both Debby and the boy's cat have the ability to cross freely through the mirror. Is this simply a necessary plot point, or does it imply the freedom of a certain kind of innocence? Did his cat just "run off" with a tom, or did she thereby lose the ability, for some reason, to make the trip back in? I honestly don't see any way that would add up in the overall context of innocence and sexuality: I freely grant that probably nothing is implied. But it is still an interesting angle.

Finally: watch again Penny's last few moments on either side of the mirror. I believe she is already tasting Love. Her desperate urgency, not just to get herself out, but for him to follow, doesn't quite make sense otherwise. Back outside, she pleads frantically, heart-wrenchingly, to Dr. Smith to stop as he smashes the mirror. And poor Penny! She can't know the truth, and achingly accuses, "He wouldn't come! He could have, but he wouldn't." In a few minutes, she has passed through budding love, loss, betrayal, and anguish. (And may I also add, that these last couple sequences are just wonderful pieces of acting by Miss Cartwright.)

In sum: this is a brilliant, touching, heart-wrenching episode. This alone justifies all of *Lost In Space*. This episode redeems Thor on a plastic horse, killer carrots and robot parrots. Even if you disagree with the *extent* to which I assign Freudian/sexual symbolism here, I think you have to admit that this episode reaches a profundity which is unequalled in the series, and rarely achieved on television.

Why is this site specifically a tribute to Penny Robinson? I believe this episode exemplifies why Penny is the most fascinating, most complex, most real and human character in the series. And why, after 40 years, I fell in love with her all over again.