

# **Mirror Mirror Study Guide**

## **Mirror Mirror by Gregory Maguire**

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# Plot Summary

Mirror Mirror by Gregory Maguire is a modern twist on a classic fairytale. Loosely translated, Bianca de Nevada means Snow White. Mirror Mirror is the story of a young girl who, through a strange twist of fate, is caught up in a web of lies, deceit and the search for immortality. In this intricate tale, however, there are eight dwarves instead of seven.

Bianca de Nevada is a young girl who lives on a rambling estate in Tuscany during the Italian High Renaissance. She is the epitome of innocence, purity and, above all, beauty.

Bianca lives a quiet, sheltered life as the daughter of successful landowner Vicente de Nevada. Vicente is a Spaniard and a single parent who settles in Italy under mysterious circumstances after his beloved wife dies in childbirth. One day, Vicente finds an old mirror at the bottom of a lake on his property.

Bianca's closest friend is Primavera Vecchia, the housekeeper and cook at Montefiore. Primavera and the local parish priest, Fra Ludovico, are entrusted with Bianca's care whenever her father leaves Montefiore on business. After a visit from Lucrezia Borgia and her handsome brother Cesare, Vicente de Nevada is forced to make a terrible choice. Cesare Borgia is a religious and very superstitious soldier who hopes to rule Italy someday. When Cesare promises to protect Bianca and Montefiore, Vicente departs for Greece.

In the meantime, the woods beyond the de Nevada estate are shifting and changing. There are dwarves in the woods. While the dwarves in the classic tale of Snow White and the Seven Dwarves are seven diminutive miners who live peacefully and inconspicuously beyond the edge of reality, the dwarves at Montefiore have more pressing concerns on their minds. Where once there were eight, the dwarves notice one day that one of their brothers has gone missing. None of them have names. Until their number goes from even to uneven, none of the dwarves are aware that they are, in fact, individuals. The dwarves find Bianca de Nevada on their threshold one day and after the natural world meets real human life, none of them will ever be the same.

Mirror Mirror blends reality and fantasy, history and fiction. The result is a mixture of fairytale and cautionary missive. Lucrezia Borgia takes the place of the evil stepmother but she is no less devious than her classic counterpart. Lucrezia and her handsome brother, Cesare, represent the evils of the real world and are fictionalized in this unusual narrative. Also of note is the manner in which the author blends Renaissance events and sensibilities into a story that enlivens the story of Snow White and her woodland companions.



# Part One: 1502

## Part One: 1502 Summary

Mirror Mirror is the story of Bianca de Nevada, a young girl living in Italy during the Renaissance. Bianca and her father Vicente live on an estate called Montefiore in the central part of the country. Everything in Bianca's life is safe and predictable and her small world revolves around Vicente and the people on the farm. Bianca's world is turned upside-down, however, when her father leaves Montefiore to undertake what seems like an impossible quest and she is left in the charge of the magnificent but deadly Lucrezia Borgia.

A short section which precedes the narrative proper is entitled "The Roofs of Montefiore." It is narrated in the first-person, but the text gives no indication as to the identity of the speaking subject. The passage is primarily descriptive and focuses on the farm at Montefiore and the surrounding countryside. It is obvious that the speaking subject feels somewhat wistful about the sprawling farm.

"The Name of the World" is the first section of the main narrative. This section is narrated by an omniscient narrator and it centers mostly on Bianca de Nevada, the story's primary protagonist. Bianca is a landowner's daughter and she lives a relatively sheltered life.

Montefiore is no castle but it is still impressive nonetheless. The house itself is quite old and disorganized. It is not in the best state of repair but perched on a hillside, it is lovely and it is the center of young Bianca's world.

Bianca's father is Don Vicente de Nevada. Don Vicente is a Spaniard living in Italy. He is blessed but not well-liked. Vicente de Nevada came to Montefiore as a single father.

Bianca and her father stand on the shore of a small lake, Lago Verde. Vicente is helping a work crew remove boulders so that the lake can be used to irrigate the farm.

Bianca and Vicente are devoted to one another and he is a kind, gentle father. After the boulder is removed from the lake and the water recedes, Vicente de Nevada finds an old mirror in the mud. Vicente has a beautiful frame carved for the odd piece and hangs it above the mantle.

In "What They Told Her, What She Saw", the reader is told that Primavera Vecchia, the de Nevada's cook and housekeeper "had once had sex with a squid" (15). Primavera is the closest thing to a mother Bianca has ever known. The old woman is extremely protective of the young Bianca, who has raven black hair and fair, pale skin (16).

While Bianca and Primavera Vecchia are in the kitchen one afternoon, they are visited by Fra Ludovico, the local priest. Ludovico lies to Bianca about having been present



when Bianca's mother died shortly after giving birth. The priest feels that lying to a child about her mother going to heaven is a harmless thing.

Vicente returns home and fires Primavera Vecchia for putting strange ideas into Bianca's head. He later relents and allows Primavera to stay.

In "Don't Leave, Don't Follow" Bianca tries to convince Vicente to allow her to accompany him on his next business trip. Don Vicente refuses, telling his daughter that Fra Ludovico and Primavera will keep Bianca safe at Montefiore.

In her father's absence, Primavera and Ludovico forbid Bianca to look at risqué graffiti drawn on one of the external walls of the house at Montefiore. Bianca is shunned by the other girls living at Montefiore because she is the landowner's daughter.

Don Vicente returns to Montefiore after being gone for a week and is greeted by Bianca. Bianca has a feeling that someone is watching them.

"A Pack of Dirty Thieves" is narrated by a dwarf. The dwarves in this narrative are not quite human and they age differently than humans. Physically, these dwarves are close to animals as they have "cloven feet" (28).

The impression is that dwarves are a lower life form. They go to church only because it makes them appear more civilized.

It is the dwarves who are watching Vicente and Bianca. They want to make Don Vicente de Nevada a proposition.

"Trouble and His Sister" is also narrated by one of the dwarves. The dwarf hides in some nearby shrubbery and watches as guests arrive at Montefiore.

A man on horseback tells Bianca to announce the visitors' arrival. The handsome stranger is the Duc de Valentinois. His sister is being carried in a litter by servants.

The Duc's sister wears a gorgeous (if irregular) ruby on one of her fingers.

Vicente de Nevada comes out of the house to greet his important guests.

"Cesare"

The handsome visitor is Cesare Borgia, a member of one of the most wealthy and infamous families in Italy. Cesare's father is Pope Alexander VI. Primavera Vecchia thinks Cesare Borgia is the handsomest man she has ever seen.

Fra Ludovico calls Borgia a sinner and he tells Primavera that the man is certainly up to no good.

"Lucrezia" centers on Cesare's sister, the great beauty Lucrezia, who also narrates.



Lucrezia Borgia does not especially care for Bianca de Nevada although she pretends to be interested in the child.

Lucrezia is haughty and arrogant. She is well aware of her family's power and elevated social position. Bianca is wary of Lucrezia Borgia. Lucrezia notices how beautiful Bianca is and wastes no time commenting on the steely blackness of Bianca's hair and the snowy fresh whiteness of Bianca's complexion.

It is said that Lucrezia slept with her father the pope.

Bianca de Nevada narrates "What I Saw Then." She remembers meeting Lucrezia Borgia the first time at Montefiore. It can be assumed that Bianca is much older when she recounts the day that Lucrezia and Cesare Borgia first arrived at the farm.

Bianca recalls how young Lucrezia was at that time and she muses that she was fully aware of Lucrezia's lack of interest in her. Bianca realizes that Lucrezia was only showing off for Vicente and Cesare.

Bianca remembers being bewitched by Lucrezia and not quite understanding the full range of Lucrezia's power.

"A Moment Ago" is narrated by one of the dwarves. The speaker recounts the important historical happenings of 1502.

At that time, Lucrezia Borgia is twenty-one years old and is married for the third time to Alfonso D'Este.

Lucrezia's father, Pope Alexander VI, has one more year to live.

Machiavelli's famous work, *The Prince*, will not be published for another ten years, but the author is researching the life and exploits of Cesare Borgia, who becomes the subject of the book.

The narrator mentions the discovery of Española by an explorer dispatched by Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain.

In 1502, Bianca de Nevada is seven years old.

"A Stroll in the Country" finds Cesare Borgia pacing about the courtyard at Montefiore, trying to talk to Vicente de Nevada about politics. Lucrezia pretends to be bored and insists that Vicente take her for a walk around the farm. Bianca accompanies them.

Don Vicente does not care for Lucrezia Borgia. Similarly, Lucrezia does not especially like Don Vicente or Bianca.

Lucrezia feigns interest in Montefiore and the beautiful surrounding countryside. She asks Don Vicente to offer support and encouragement to her brother, Cesare, and Don Vicente agrees.



Cesare Borgia is a well-known soldier who hopes to someday rule all of Italy.

In "Under the Twists of Thornbank" a dwarf talks about watching Lucrezia, Vicente and Bianca as they walk about the farm.

The dwarf is more interested in a creature that Lucrezia claims was pulled out of the Tiber River than their conversation about the political intrigues of France, Spain and Portugal.

The dwarf continues to follow Lucrezia and Don Vicente and he sees what happens when Lucrezia Borgia looks into the mirror the first time.

The dwarf considers Lucrezia Borgia when she first looks into the mirror. He notices that someone looking into the mirror would not be likely to see who or what may be in the background.

Lucrezia Borgia narrates "What Lies in the Mirror."

Lucrezia gazes into the mirror and asks it what it sees: a corrupted sinner or a "saint in the making" (53).

When Don Vicente asks the mirror who is the fairest of them all, he refers to the two Lucrezias—she whose reflection shows in the mirror and the reflection itself.

Lucrezia admits that she is trying to seduce Don Vicente de Nevada.

The omniscient narrator returns in "Prince Dschem's Secret."

Cesare tells Vicente that Prince Dschem, the youngest son of Turkish king Mahomet II, claims to be in possession of a branch from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil that once grew in the Garden of Eden.

According to Cesare, the branch bore fruit in the form of three perfect apples which, once eaten, could make a person immortal.

Cesare wants Don Vicente to find the branch. If Vicente refuses, Cesare will conscript Vicente into the army, leaving Montefiore (and Bianca) completely unprotected.

The apples are in a monastery near Thessaly in Greece, being guarded by a community of cloistered monks.

Cesare promises Vicente de Nevada money, horses and translators for his journey.

Vicente has no choice but to go to Greece and retrieve the branch from the Greek monks.

Lucrezia promises to look in on Bianca from time to time and says that she will take the child under her wing.



A dwarf hides in the room and watches as Lucrezia leaves Vicente de Nevada alone, on his knees.

In "The Three Eyes of God" Fra Ludovico prepares to say mass for Cesare Borgia. Ludovico resents the Duc de Valentinois and all people of stature.

Bianca pleads with Vicente not to leave her and the mass is upset after Cesare demands that the child be removed from the chapel.

Cesare Borgia leaves Montefiore without thanks or good-byes.

Vicente de Nevada exacts a promise from Lucrezia Borgia to protect his lands and Bianca.

Lucrezia shows Vicente and Bianca three silver leaves believed to be from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

Vicente de Nevada leaves Montefiore on his quest. Bianca follows her father as far as the bridge but no further.

"The Vision in San Francisco"

Vicente thinks about the journey that lies ahead. He is not a religious man in the least and he remains concerned and saddened at the thought that Bianca is now alone at Montefiore.

Vicente thinks about Cesare Borgia and his ruthless family. Vicente then considers what would happen to him and to Bianca if Vicente were to attempt to somehow betray or disobey the Borgias.

Vicente stops in the city of Arezzo for rest and supplies. After spending the night camped outside the city walls, Vicente goes to the church of San Francisco.

In the church, Vicente meets a stonemason who is repairing the floor. He devises a plan whereby he can both satisfy his obligation to Cesare Borgia and save Bianca.

After Vicente de Nevada leaves the church of San Francisco, the stonemason sees a dwarf looking at the breathtaking frescoes painted on the walls.

## **Part One: 1502 Analysis**

The opening sections of the narrative introduce the main protagonists to the reader. Bianca de Nevada is seven years old when the narrative begins. Bianca's relationship with her father Vicente is established as one of mutual unconditional love and protectiveness on both of their parts.





"The Name of the World" grounds the fantasy narrative in actual historical events. This serves to give the novel some legitimacy. At the same time, however, the tone of the novel is very much in keeping with the fairy tale genre.

Montefiore, the farm on which Bianca and Vicente de Nevada live, figures prominently in the narrative. Montefiore is more than Bianca's childhood home, it is the site of magic and mystery. While the house and farm are havens of safety and familiarity for those who live there, the woods beyond the simple wooden footbridge represent those things beyond human understanding.

Primavera Vecchia is introduced in the section entitled "What They Told Her, What She Saw". It is not known how Primavera comes to be employed by the de Nevadas. It can only be assumed that she, like the others on the estate, belongs more to the land itself than to the household inhabiting the estate. Primavera is Bianca's caretaker as well as the family cook.

Fra Ludovico is also introduced in this early portion of the novel. The tenuous relationship between Fra Ludovico and Primavera Vecchia is also revealed. In addition, it is well established in this section that Primavera Vecchia truly loves the young Bianca de Nevada.

"A Pack of Dirty Thieves" is the first section of the novel to be narrated by one of the characters in the novel. This shift from third to first person is somewhat off-putting, as it works against the generic conventions of classic fairy-tales. However, first-person narration also adds dimension to the novel in that it gives insights into the character's mind that might escape the notice of an omniscient narrator. This section reveals the dwarves to be other-than-human. The dwarves are, in fact, piles of minerals. It is also worth noting that the dwarves view themselves as a collective, so to speak, rather than distinct individuals.

Cesare Borgia and his sister Lucrezia are both introduced in the section entitled "Trouble and His Sister". Cesare and Lucrezia stand in direct opposition to Vicente and Bianca de Nevada. The Borgias and the de Nevadas also represent the age-old struggle between Good and Evil. Also, the introduction of Cesare and Lucrezia Borgia sets in motion the first important narrative plot point. Vicente's decision to leave Montefiore and Bianca in order to find the sacred branch proves to be pivotal.

The remaining sections in Part One: 1502 alternate between first and third-person narrations.

Lucrezia Borgia's obsession with the magic mirror stands in direct contrast with Vicente's quest to find the branch from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.



## Part Two: 1506

### Part Two: 1506 Summary

"Bianca Awake"

Fra Ludovico thinks about how things at Montefiore have changed for the worse without Vicente de Nevada.

After Lucrezia Borgia fires Vicente de Nevada's overseer, Fra Ludovico takes to playing the fool whenever Lucrezia visits Montefiore. Ludovico figures that by acting befuddled and confused, he will avoid getting into trouble with the powerful Borgia family.

Bianca decides to run away from Montefiore, even though she promised Don Vicente that she would wait for him to return.

Time and again, Bianca's attempts to leave her home come to nothing as she remains unable to cross the small footbridge leading away from Montefiore.

Lucrezia visits Montefiore and tries to fire Primavera Vecchia but Primavera refuses to leave, saying that she has nowhere else to go. Lucrezia resigns herself to Primavera's remaining at Montefiore.

Lucrezia has a conversation with Bianca during which she reads Bianca a letter from her father, Don Vicente.

Unbeknownst to his enemies, Cesare Borgia is hiding at Montefiore.

The Borgias are losing ground in Italy after the death of Pope Alexander VI.

In his letter, Don Vicente tells Bianca that his family and her mother's family (the Castedas and the Navarres) will come to her defense if she should ever find herself in danger.

Vicente also writes that upon her maturity, Bianca will inherit a substantial of money.

When Lucrezia presses Bianca for information concerning the letter, Bianca is unable to shed any light on the situation.

In "Shades of Rock" Vicente de Nevada remembers his wife, the lovely Maria Ines.

Vicente is being held prisoner in a Greek monastery. He remembers meeting two brothers, fishermen, who gave him passage to Greece.

One day after catching a sufficient number of fish, the brothers discovered that they were unable to turn the boat around. They surmised that Vicente de Nevada had brought them bad luck and threw Vicente into the sea.



After swimming ashore, Vicente began anew his quest to find the sacred apples from the Tree of Knowledge.

Vicente finally came to the monastery that Cesare Borgia told him housed the apples and he gained access to the monastery by disguising himself as one of the monks.

Just as he was about to gain entrance to the monastery treasury, he was captured and thrown into a cell.

Vicente de Nevada has no idea how long he has been in prison. He does not remember that he has a daughter named Bianca.

In "Mirror mirror" Cesare and Lucrezia Borgia try once again to extract information from Bianca de Nevada. When Lucrezia leaves the room to attend to the gooseboy (who has been cornered in the pig trough by a flock of geese), Bianca asks Cesare about Vicente and the quest.

Cesare nearly attacks Bianca and Lucrezia returns just in time, berating her brother for trying to seduce a girl young enough to be his own daughter.

Bianca leaves the room and later hears Lucrezia ask, "Mirror, mirror on the wall, who among us is fairest of all?" (110).

"Bring Me Her Heart Carved from Her Chest"

Lucrezia Borgia remembers her childhood. Her mother, Vannozza Cattanei, was Rodrigo Borgia's mistress. When Rodrigo Borgia became Pope Alexander VI, Lucrezia and Cesare went to live with their father.

Lucrezia first marries Alfonso de Bisceglie. They have a child whom she refers to as "the Punishment" (118).

One day, Don Vicente de Nevada visits Lucrezia in Spoleto and asks her to intercede with Cesare on his behalf. Vicente asks Lucrezia to give him a small parcel of land to farm where he can raise Bianca.

Vicente never tells Lucrezia what happened to cause him to leave Spain and settle in Italy.

Lucrezia refuses Vicente's request but allows Vicente and Bianca to stay with her at her husband's castle through the winter.

One evening, Lucrezia takes the Punishment out with her, planning to throw the child off an aqueduct.

Vicente stops Lucrezia and over breakfast the next morning Lucrezia promises to help Vicente de Nevada in order to prevent Vicente from revealing what happened the night before.



Lucrezia has the owner of Montefiore killed and gives Montefiore to Vicente de Nevada.

Cesare Borgia leaves Montefiore for good.

Lucrezia tells Primavera Vecchia to summon her grandson the hunter to Montefiore.

In "Interview with an Assassin" Lucrezia Borgia arranges to have Bianca taken to the woods and killed by Primavera Vecchia's grandson Ranuccio.

Ranuccio agrees to kill Bianca and bring her heart to Lucrezia Borgia as proof that Bianca is dead. Lucrezia threatens to do away with Primavera if Ranuccio does not kill Bianca.

In "A Walk in the Woods" Bianca helps Primavera prepare supper for Lucrezia. When Primavera goes to find cooking oil, she hears a slight commotion coming from the kitchen.

When Primavera reaches the kitchen, she discovers that Bianca has disappeared.

When Ranuccio and Bianca reach the woods, it is nightfall. Ranuccio then lets Bianca go.

In "The Heart of the Woods" Ranuccio wonders what reason Lucrezia Borgia could possibly have for wanting Bianca dead.

Ranuccio remembers the day he met a unicorn in the woods next to a waterfall. The unicorn had asked Ranuccio to take its life, but Ranuccio was unable to go through with it.

Since the meeting with the unicorn, Ranuccio finds it impossible to kill without feeling intense guilt and remorse.

Ranuccio kills a deer and presents its heart to Lucrezia Borgia.

"Seven" is narrated by one of the dwarves. At one time, there are eight dwarves.

The dwarves are the ones who crafted the mirror Don Vicente de Nevada finds in Lago Verde.

The eighth dwarf goes in search of the mirror, never to return again.

The absence of the eighth dwarf puts the others in a position of awareness. Realizing that one of them is missing, they are no longer an even number. The dwarves live as a collective; formerly in pairs. They never think of themselves as individuals until one of them goes missing.

The dwarves find Bianca de Nevada on their threshold half-dead and starving.



The dwarves see themselves as belonging to the natural world. They liken themselves to stone. In fact, they are often mistaken for stone. They name themselves according to their characteristics: MuteMuteMute; Blindeye; Deaf-to-the-World; Heartless; Bitter, Gimp and Tasteless.

## Part Two: 1506 Analysis

Bianca's inability to cross the footbridge and escape from Montefiore is symbolic of her unwillingness to sacrifice the safety and comfort of her father's world for adventure and the unknown.

Lucrezia Borgia's hatred of Bianca increases after Vicente leaves for his impossible quest. Lucrezia and Bianca are both raised by their fathers. However, their individual experiences are worlds apart. Lucrezia's father is corrupt and Lucrezia and her brother Cesare follow in their father's footsteps. Conversely, Vicente de Nevada's purity of heart and loyalty to his daughter result in an entirely different life for the beautiful young girl.

In prison, Vicente de Nevada's memory of his daughter begins to fade.

Lucrezia's child, "the Punishment", is later revealed to be Michelotto, the gooseboy at Montefiore.

Lucrezia's connection to the de Nevada family is explained. When Vicente prevents her from throwing Michelotto from the aqueduct in Spoleto, Lucrezia buys Vicente's silence by installing him as the owner of Montefiore. It is not revealed in the narrative whether or not Vicente is aware that Lucrezia disposes of the previous owner of Montefiore, enabling Lucrezia to give Montefiore to Vicente.

The narrative arc reaches its highest point when Lucrezia arranges to have Ranuccio Vecchia take Bianca de Nevada into the woods and kill her. This episode closely resembles the original fairytale. Ranuccio's encounter with the unicorn establishes the character as both mystical and grounded in reality. Ranuccio is a paradoxical character because he is both a hunter and a sensitive man who is able to commune with creatures on both sides of the reality/fantasy divide. Ranuccio's refusal to kill Bianca also represents his innocence. Although he is a hunter, Ranuccio is someone who is unable to take an innocent life.

The section entitled "Seven" is one of the most telling portions of the narrative proper. The dwarves' recognition of themselves as individuals after the departure of Nextday sets the stage for Bianca's arrival at their cottage in the woods. In addition, it also lays the groundwork for the dwarves' collective transition from mineral to fully human.

The names that the dwarves choose for themselves do not reflect the whimsy of the classic tale.



## Part Three: 1512

### Part Three: 1512 Summary

In "The Dwarves" Bianca de Nevada examines the space where the dwarves live. She thinks she is dreaming until she has the urge to urinate.

Bianca looks around the space and sees what she believes to be boulders with human characteristics. All of a sudden, Bianca starts her menstrual period. She finds a pump and draws water to clean up the blood.

Bianca then begins speaking to the stone creatures, whose features become steadily more human.

The dwarves introduce themselves to Bianca and explain to her that their eighth companion had gone to Montefiore one evening to speak with her father, Vicente de Nevada.

The dwarves inform Bianca that their companion disappeared when Vicente left Montefiore. She is surprised to hear the dwarves talk about Vicente, Lucrezia and her childhood home. The dwarves then tell Bianca that they would like to get their mirror back.

In "A Hole in the World" things begin to take shape in the dwarves' space and Bianca is able to make out objects and the dwarves' faces.

It seems that whatever she needs, Bianca finds. She is unsure as to how the dwarves are able to anticipate her every need. There is food, clothing, and pots and pans.

Bianca does not know where the door is and there are no windows. She has no idea where the dwarves go when they leave.

At times, it is impossible for Bianca to distinguish one dwarf from another. The dwarves seem to be sharing physical attributes. One day the dwarf with the red beard (Heartless) will appear with another dwarf's teeth or wearing another dwarf's clothes.

Bianca's memory awakens and she thinks about Montefiore. She remembers the gooseboy, Primavera Vecchia and her dear father Vicente.

Bianca informs Heartless that she wishes to see Montefiore once more. Initially, Heartless attempts to dissuade Bianca from returning to the farm, but the girl is insistent. Heartless finally relents and agrees to take Bianca back to Montefiore.

In "A Beast in the Wall" Vicente de Nevada is still in prison at the Greek monastery in Teophilos.



As he speaks to no one in particular about his quest, Montefiore and Bianca, Vicente notices a boulder in one corner of his cell. The more Vicente talks, the more responsive the boulder becomes. Vicente notices that the boulder has a shape rather like a person. He is able to distinguish legs, arms, feet and a hump on the boulder's back.

Vicente de Nevada is talking to the eighth dwarf.

Finally Vicente tells the dwarf that he wants to go home to Italy. The dwarf bores into the monastery's rock wall and tunnels his way out. Vicente follows. Eventually, the stone dwarf and Vicente reach a beautifully decorated chapel.

There, behind glass, they see the branch from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Three ripe, perfect apples grace the branch.

The dwarf removes the glass and allows Vicente the honor of removing the branch from its place on the altar. Vicente and the eighth dwarf continue to bore through the monastery walls and make their escape under cover of darkness.

"As-iksr" is narrated by Lucrezia Borgia.

Lucrezia has a one-night stand with Theo Bombast von Hohenheim, also known as Paracelsus.

Lucrezia talks about the death of her brother Cesare. It is revealed that she and Cesare had an incestuous relationship.

By this time, Lucrezia is on her third husband.

Lucrezia's son Rodrigo dies at the age of thirteen.

With her father, brother, and son now dead, Lucrezia suddenly feels very alone. She becomes bored with her life.

Lucrezia takes comfort in spending time at Montefiore. One day, she hears a great uproar coming from the courtyard.

Vicente de Nevada returns to Montefiore, leaving Lucrezia Borgia feeling simultaneously shocked and delighted.

Lucrezia notices the creature accompanying Vicente de Nevada and thinks it resembles a headless dog.

In "Vicente" Don Vicente asks about Bianca but Lucrezia refuses to discuss it until the two of them are alone.

Fra Ludovico tells Vicente that Bianca is dead. Primavera is no longer able to speak.

Don Vicente tells Lucrezia Borgia that he has found the branch from the Tree of Knowledge and that he wishes to present it to Cesare in person.



Lucrezia skirts the issue but finally informs Vicente that Cesare was murdered.

Lucrezia thinks Don Vicente is lying about the sacred branch. He then presents Lucrezia with the branch which brings la Borgia to her knees.

She tells Vicente that Bianca left Montefiore because she was a willful and rebellious child, which Vicente finds nearly impossible to believe. Lucrezia removes one of the sacred apples from the branch and offers the dwarf a slice.

The dwarf takes the apple and eats it with great relish. After another slice of the apple, the stone dwarf disappears into the wall of the fireplace.

Vicente, grief-stricken, leaves the room after Lucrezia turns to gaze at herself in the mirror.

Lucrezia Borgia narrates "Mirror Mirror."

Lucrezia admits to feeling jealous that Cesare paid more attention to Bianca de Nevada than to her.

She looks into the mirror and sees herself as a woman who is aging quickly. Lucrezia worries that the passing years have etched lines into her face that others cannot see. Lucrezia is vain and becomes insecure that she is no longer desirable.

Lucrezia looks into the mirror and asks, "Who is the fairest of all?" Suddenly, the mirror fogs over and Lucrezia is shown an image of Bianca de Nevada, who has grown into a very strikingly attractive young woman.

In "The Return of the Prodigal" Bianca stares into a circle of mist in front of the dwarves' door and sees a beautiful woman sitting on the floor of a familiar room.

It takes Bianca some moments to put a name with the young woman in the mist. Then she remembers the name of Lucrezia Borgia and recognizes the room as the salon at Montefiore.

Bianca is somewhat embarrassed to be looking in on la Borgia without the other woman's knowledge.

When Bianca looks away, the circle of mist disappears. Having seen the apple in Lucrezia's hand, Bianca grows hungry.

Bianca watches as the dwarves try to peel carrots and decides to prepare a meal for all of them.

Bianca prepares a soup and serves the dwarves. The more they eat, the more human the dwarves all become until Bianca realizes that she is able to tell them apart.





With each mouthful of the delicious soup, the dwarves become livelier and more animated.

All of a sudden, another dwarf materializes from the earth under the table. The seven others do not recognize him as one of their own.

The eighth dwarf is upset that his brothers have forgotten who he is. His name is Nextday and he, too, becomes more human in form as he chastises the group for forgetting him. Eventually, Nextday prompts the other dwarves to go back to work.

Bianca de Nevada notices that there is a door where before there was none and follows the dwarves out into the woods.

In "Beware Beware" Nextday discusses the mirror at Montefiore with the other dwarves.

Bianca asks Nextday to explain what he is talking about. Nextday tells Bianca that the dwarves are really just piles of minerals.

The story goes that the dwarves stole the secret of glass making from the Venetians and then crafted a mirror that would show the dwarves what human beings were like in order for the dwarves to humanize themselves, making it easier to coexist with humans.

Nextday goes on to say that the mirror functions much like an eye. It allows the dwarves to see into a room and reflect back to them whatever appears in the mirror. He also tells Bianca that the mirror is harmful to humans.

Bianca offers to return the mirror to the dwarves upon her arrival at Montefiore. Nextday cautions Bianca that Lucrezia Borgia may try to have Bianca killed a second time.

The dwarves then ask Bianca to stay with them in the woods so that they can ensure her safety.

After Nextday and the others leave the woods, Bianca turns her attention to their small home.

Before Bianca's eyes, the dwarves' home becomes a quiet, charming cottage in the woods with walls and a chimney.

In "A Figure in the Clearing" Bianca escapes from the woods and on the way back to Montefiore, she meets the gooseboy.

The gooseboy does not remember Bianca, but she remembers him well. The gooseboy's name is Michelotto.

Bianca helps Michelotto look for a lost goose. Not being used to being out in the world, Bianca is surprised at how unfriendly the terrain seems. She wears no shoes and her tunic has become quite ragged.



Michelotto tries to talk Bianca into returning to Montefiore with him. Bianca asks Michelotto who is at the farm and he tells her that Lucrezia Borgia is there. Bianca becomes apprehensive although she is unsure of the source of her trepidation.

Bianca runs back to the cottage in the woods. Upon her arrival, she notices that something has changed.

Bianca peers through a window and sees a strange stone tree with a serpent wrapped around the base. On one of the branches, there is a large apple. The snake's head is turned toward Bianca.

In "Interviews" Vicente de Nevada quizzes Fra Ludovico about Bianca's disappearance. Vicente blames Fra Ludovico for allowing Bianca to run away from Montefiore. The priest accepts no responsibility for Bianca's vanishing, saying that he could not possibly have controlled la Borgia.

Fra Ludovico then suggests that Vicente speak with Primavera Vecchia.

Primavera, who is quite elderly by this time, has lost her powers of speech. Since Primavera is illiterate, she has no way of communicating with others.

On his way back to the house, Don Vicente asks Michelotto the gooseboy if he has seen Bianca. Just as Michelotto is about to answer, Lucrezia calls the boy into the house to brush her hair. Vicente enters the kitchen at Montefiour and sits with PrimaveraVecchia as the old woman sifts lentils.

In "An Ivory Comb, My Dear" it is revealed that Michelotto the gooseboy is actually Lucrezia Borgia's son by her brother Cesare. Michelotto is also, therefore, Lucrezia's nephew.

While Michelotto combs her long blond hair, Lucrezia asks the gooseboy about Bianca de Nevada. Michelotto tells Lucrezia that Bianca lives in a cottage in the woods.

Lucrezia disguises herself as a dirty, bedraggled monk and takes Michelotto in search of Bianca.

Michelotto does not remember the exact location of the cottage where Bianca lives, so he uses one of his geese to guide them there.

When Lucrezia and Michelotto finally reach the cottage of Bianca and the seven (or eight) dwarves, Lucrezia sends the boy and his goose back to Montefiore. Lucrezia knocks on the cottage window and pretends to be a poor monk begging for a meal.

Bianca gives Lucrezia a meal and Lucrezia offers Bianca a lovely ivory comb as a token of gratitude. The tines of the comb are poison and when Lucrezia jabs the comb into Bianca's scalp, the young girl passes out.

Lucrezia leaves Bianca for dead and returns to Montefiore.



In "She Wakes Once More" the dwarves return to the cottage and find Bianca unconscious on the floor. They manage to revive her and then chastise her for getting into trouble.

The dwarves want to be more human but find that they rely on Bianca's perception of them as small men in order to stay human.

Bianca urges the dwarves to return to Montefiore and steal the mirror back from Lucrezia Borgia. When the dwarves tell Bianca that it is not yet safe for her to return to Montefiore, Bianca inadvertently insults her hosts. Bianca apologizes and the dwarves decide to journey as far as the footbridge the next day.

In "A Bodice, My Darling," Lucrezia Borgia consults the mirror once again and learns that Bianca de Nevada is still alive.

Since Cesare's death, Lucrezia has become more vindictive and poisonous in her temperament.

Lucrezia decides to revisit the cottage in the woods for a second attempt on Bianca's life.

For a second time, Lucrezia Borgia disguises herself and approaches the dwarves' cottage. She sees the dwarves leaving and remembers the dwarves who once entertained her in the court at Ferrara.

After the dwarves have gone, Lucrezia enters the cottage and frightens Bianca. Unable to find anything with which to stab Bianca, Lucrezia contents herself with tying Bianca's apron strings to a post in the middle of the room. Hearing footsteps, la Borgia flees the cottage.

"Two Bites from the Apple" finds Lucrezia obsessed with killing Bianca. Lucrezia is also having difficulty staying away from the magic mirror. In the mirror, Lucrezia sees the dwarves reviving Bianca a second time.

It appears to Lucrezia that Bianca has become more beautiful after the harrowing episode. Lucrezia, in a fit of rage, decides to poison Bianca using an apple from the branch of the Tree of Knowledge which Don Vicente brought back from Greece.

Lucrezia also notes that the dwarves appear more and more human.

The dwarves devise a plan to steal back their mirror from la Borgia.

Lucrezia coats one half of the sacred apple with a deadly concoction and makes a plan to return to the cottage a third time.

As she passes through the house dressed in her finest gown and pearls, Fra Ludovico, Primavera Vecchia and Don Vicente can all tell that Lucrezia is up to no good. Lucrezia and Michelotto walk into the woods and eventually arrive at the dwarves' cottage.



Lucrezia offers Michelotto bread and cheese, which he eats quickly. Moments later, Michelotto falls into a deep sleep. Lucrezia poisoned the bread and cheese just enough to render Michelotto unconscious.

Lucrezia then knocks on the door of the cottage. Bianca refuses to answer until Lucrezia tells Bianca that something has happened to Michelotto.

Bianca gives Lucrezia water for Michelotto and Lucrezia tells her that Vicente has returned to Montefiore looking for Bianca.

Bianca is wary of Lucrezia, knowing that Lucrezia and Cesare were responsible for Vicente's departure from Montefiore.

Lucrezia takes a bite of the apple and offers Bianca a bite.

Bianca is fully aware that the Borgias are known for resorting to the use of poison to eliminate their enemies but she bites into the luscious fruit anyway.

Bianca is overtaken by the poison and quickly falls to the floor.

In "The Oval Window," Fra Ludovico and Primavera work in the fields while Vicente de Nevada searches Lago Verde for Bianca's corpse.

Meanwhile, the dwarves make their way to Montefiore and, unnoticed, manage to retrieve their mirror.

When they arrive back at the cottage, the dwarves are so preoccupied with deciding where to hang the mirror that it takes them quite some time to notice Bianca lying in the middle of the floor.

Believing that she is dead, the dwarves construct Bianca's coffin and affix the glass from the mirror to the lid of the coffin in order to be able to witness Bianca's physical decomposition and their own transition into full humanness.

Lucrezia Borgia narrates "Reflections." After poisoning Bianca and making her way back into the woods, Lucrezia notices that the dwarves' cottage has disappeared.

Lucrezia and Michelotto return to the house at Montefiore.

When they reach the salon, Lucrezia plans to seduce Michelotto in order to take his mind off of Bianca and the episode at the cottage.

In "Vigil," Vicente de Nevada wanders the hillsides around Montefiore for long periods of time, searching for his daughter Bianca.

At the top of a mountain in Umbria, Vicente comes across a coffin made entirely of glass.



The corpse inside reminds him of Bianca, but Vicente cannot be certain that it is she who rests inside.

Vicente becomes aware that seven small men and a dog come periodically to look at the coffin.

## Part Three: 1512 Analysis

Bianca's arrival at the dwarves' dwelling in the woods signals her departure from childhood innocence. Bianca's visual appraisal of the dwarves and the space in which they live attests to the dwarves' condition as less than fully human. However, the more conscious attention the young girl pays to her hosts and her surroundings, the more the scene comes to resemble real life. Also, the arrival of Bianca's menstrual cycle further reinforces her coming into maturity.

Bianca learns that the dwarves have been aware of her for quite a long while. This fact symbolizes the way in which the world of the covert, the unseen, often informs what is thought of as the real world.

Also, "The Dwarves" reveals that the small mineral men living in the woods are, in fact, the ones who created the magic mirror.

Just as Vicente remembers Maria de Ines while he is imprisoned in the Greek monastery, his daughter Bianca thinks back on her life at Montefiore. The episode in which Heartless agrees to take Bianca de Nevada back to Montefiore foreshadows her father's escape from Agion Oros with the help of another dwarf.

When the narrative once again returns to the remembrances of Lucrezia Borgia, the reader learns more of the sordid details of Lucrezia's life. Unlike Bianca de Nevada, Lucrezia Borgia is established as a woman who manipulates and abuses the men around her in order to meet her selfish desires for ever-increasing power and social prestige.

When Don Vicente returns to Montefiore at last, Lucrezia Borgia's world is thrown into a tailspin. It is de Nevada's homecoming and the vision of Bianca, alive, in the mist of the mirror that prompt Lucrezia to increase her efforts to destroy Bianca once and for all. Bianca's inner goodness is magnified by her guilt at watching Lucrezia Borgia in the mist without Lucrezia's knowledge.

The meal Bianca prepares for the dwarves brings the dwarves even closer to being fully human. Their request that Bianca remain with them in the woodland cottage proves that the dwarves are able to form deep emotional attachments.

Bianca's vision of the serpent wound around a tree trunk foreshadows Lucrezia Borgia's three attempts to kill Bianca.



When Lucrezia Borgia's third attempt on Bianca's life proves to be successful, the narrative arc turns downward. At this point, Lucrezia Borgia seems to be the winner of the conflict between Good and Evil. Vicente de Nevada finally enters into a cooperative relationship with the dwarves.



## Part Four: 1519

### Part Four: 1519 Summary

In "Thais," Lucrezia Borgia decides that she needs to possess the third apple from The Tree of Knowledge and she travels to Venice to retrieve it from the palace of the Doge.

Lucrezia gives birth to a son named Alessandro who is born with an extremely large head. She gives birth to another child fathered by her lover Francisco Gonzaga. Gonzaga subsequently dies of the "French pox" (260).

Lucrezia is obsessed with the apple as she believes the apple holds the secret to immortality.

In "Fire and Ivy," The dwarves, having become fully human, once again visit where Bianca de Nevada lies in her coffin of glass.

The dwarves trim the ivy which has overgrown the coffin and marvel at how long it has been since Don Vicente has visited Bianca.

Michelotto, Lucrezia Borgia's gooseboy son, sees the ivy burning and makes his way to the coffin.

The dwarves grant Michelotto permission to open Bianca's glass coffin and he does so.

When Michelotto recognizes Bianca, he asks the dwarves if he may kiss Bianca—a voice coming from behind Michelotto forbids him to kiss the girl.

Ranuccio Vecchia then appears.

Ranuccio is the woodsman who, on Lucrezia Borgia's command, took Bianca de Nevada into the woods. Ranuccio was to have killed Bianca and cut out her heart as proof of her death. Ranuccio left Montefiore soon after releasing Bianca in the woods.

Before leaving, however, Ranuccio revealed the truth to his grandmother Primavera. It is revealed that Primavera lost the power of speech because of her propensity for gossip.

Ranuccio Vecchia's guilt led him to a monastery at Cirocena where he studied with the monks and prayed for absolution. When the abbot of the monastery was satisfied that Ranuccio's penance was complete, Ranuccio was allowed to leave the monastery.

Ranuccio kisses Bianca de Nevada.

In "The Heart of the Matter," Lucrezia Borgia floats on the canals of Venice in a gondola.



Lucrezia is finally on her way to the palace of the Doge to retrieve the third apple from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

Lucrezia is amazed that Venice seems to be empty. Although she finds this fact unsettling, she is nonetheless overjoyed at the prospect of supreme knowledge and immortality.

When the gondola heads for open water, Lucrezia becomes ill at ease and instructs the gondolier to turn back toward the city.

Lucrezia discovers, however, that the gondolier is actually the buck whose heart Ranuccio Vecchia cut out instead of Bianca's.

"Montefiore" is narrated by Bianca de Nevada.

Bianca and Ranuccio return to Montefiore. Oddly, Bianca's childhood seems both familiar and unfamiliar to Bianca.

Upon her return to Montefiore, Bianca sees that everyone has been waiting for her. She notices Fra Ludovico, Primavera Vecchia and her adoring father, Vicente de Nevada.

## Part Four: 1519 Analysis

The final section of the narrative brings resolution to the novel's loose ends.

Without her father and brother, Lucrezia Borgia realizes that she is alone in the world. In the absence of male figures to determine her fate, Lucrezia's greed and hatred drive her to undertake a quest similar to Vicente de Nevada's search for the branch from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Unlike Don Vicente, however, Lucrezia's motives for wanting to possess the branch have nothing whatsoever to do with higher principles. Lucrezia is rabid for power, total knowledge and immortality. Lucrezia's motives are grounded in her fleshly desire for control of everything and everyone around her. The section "Thais" serves to further reveal Lucrezia as a woman who is unconcerned with established codes of decency or morality.

When Michelotto visits the dwarves on the hillside where Bianca de Nevada rests in her glass coffin, Michelotto becomes part of the family of Montefiore. Michelotto's curiosity about Bianca attests to the character's attachment to her. His recognition of Bianca as a dear friend indicate that Michelotto is more present than anyone gives him credit for. However, the fact that Michelotto wishes to kiss Bianca while she rests in her coffin is an indication that he is equally a Borgia.

Ranuccio Vecchia's appearance on the hillside brings his portion of the narrative full circle. Ranuccio's willingness to do penance for his imagined crime of abandoning Bianca in the woods is a testament to his innocence. Furthermore, it becomes obvious that Ranuccio is the logical choice to revive Bianca de Nevada with a kiss. Had Michelotto been allowed to kiss Bianca, she would still be resting in the coffin in a state





of suspended animation. The point is that innocence like Bianca's would only respond to a similar innocence. Whereas it can be said the Michelotto is an innocent of sorts, he is still a member of the Borgias and therefore still on the side of Evil. Ranuccio, however, possesses the same innocence of heart as Bianca. The kiss that Ranuccio bestows on the young woman is not necessarily a romantic kiss. Rather, it is the joining of kindred spirits and Ranuccio's strength of character and purity of purpose is what finally brings Bianca out of her suspended state.

The section entitled "The Heart of the Matter" is without a doubt the most unusual section of the narrative. It is unclear whether or not Lucrezia's gondola voyage through the canals of Venice is a dream. The fact that the gondolier is actually the buck whose heart was removed instead of Bianca's symbolizes the natural world exacting its revenge on Lucrezia Borgia. After all, it is because of Lucrezia's hatred for Bianca that an innocent animal has to die. The gondola heads for open water, and Lucrezia is taken out to sea. Approaching open water, Lucrezia departs for a period of uncertainty in her own life. She is drifting alone. Her father, Pope Alexander VI, and her brother Cesare are no longer able to protect Lucrezia, which leaves the aging beauty to her own devices. It is obvious that Lucrezia has lost touch with reality. The decision to embark on an impossible quest of her own places her squarely in the same category as Cesare. However, whereas Cesare's desire to possess the sacred branch was firmly rooted in his religion and ambition, Lucrezia's motives for wanting the branch for her own is indicative of her megalomania.

"Montefiore" constitutes a happy ending. However, unlike the tale upon which it is based, *Mirror Mirror* offers no easy answers. It is true that Bianca de Nevada returns to her familiar home and those who love her, but her arrival at the sprawling farm does not resolve the character's confusion. Ranuccio accompanies Bianca but the nature of their relationship is left unspecified. It is clear, though, that Ranuccio now feels responsible for Bianca's protection and that Bianca's response is to stay close to the kind woodsman.

Interestingly enough, the final passage does not mention Vicente, Fra Ludovico, or Primavera Vecchia by name. This may symbolize Bianca's uncertainty about re-entering a life she left so long ago. Having been "dead" for so long and growing into a young woman makes it necessary for Bianca to reacquaint herself with the land and those who populate Montefiore.



# Characters

## Bianca de Nevada

Bianca de Nevada is the main protagonist of *Mirror Mirror*. Bianca lives with her father Vicente in a large farmhouse on the estate of Montefiore. When the novel begins, Bianca is seven years old. When she finally arrives at Montefiore at the close of the novel, Bianca is a young woman of nineteen.

Bianca's mother, Maria Ines de Casteda y Navarre, dies while giving birth to Bianca.

At Montefiore, Bianca lives a sheltered, comfortable life as the landowner's daughter. She has no playmates her own age. As a result of Bianca's status as Vicente's child, the other girls on the farm shun her and refuse to interact with her. Thus, Bianca is also lonely sometimes. Bianca is very close to her father, Vicente, and the two of them share a special bond of love and esteem.

Bianca is a beautiful child. Like the character Snow White, Bianca de Nevada has hair the color of onyx and skin as pale and fine as newly-fallen snow. Bianca is unaware of her beauty, however, and this adds to her appeal as a protagonist. Bianca's beauty is disadvantageous, though, as evidenced by Lucrezia Borgia's jealousy and hatred of the girl.

Unlike Snow White, however, Bianca does not necessarily develop a close emotional relationship with the dwarves, although the dwarves do come to develop a fondness for their mysterious charge.

Loosely translated from the Spanish, Bianca de Nevada means Snow White.

## Vicente de Nevada

Vicente de Nevada is a Spaniard who settles in Italy with his motherless daughter. The circumstances of Vicente's life before coming to Montefiore are unknown.

Once married to the beautiful Maria Ines de Casteda y Navarre, Don Vicente becomes the owner of Montefiore through a strange twist of fate. After he sees Lucrezia Borgia trying to throw her infant son from an aqueduct, Lucrezia installs de Nevada at the Tuscan estate.

Vicente de Nevada's age is unknown. He is a simple, practical landowner and a man of integrity and honor. Vicente is not interested in politics or the intrigues of Italy's leading families and his loyalty extends only to his daughter Bianca and those in his employ. Vicente is not a religious man and he relies solely on reason and pragmatism in his dealings with others. Vicente is not especially well-liked but he is fair and honest.



What distinguishes Vicente de Nevada from others of his social class is his humility and his unconditional love for his only child. Vicente is extremely protective of Bianca. The reason for this is not mentioned in the narrative, but it is fair to assume that since Bianca is all that is left of his beloved wife, Vicente does his best to keep his daughter from harm or discomfort.

## Lucrezia Borgia

Lucrezia Borgia is a historical figure who is fictionalized in the narrative. Lucrezia is the daughter of Rodrigo Borgia (Pope Alexander VI) and the courtesan Vannozza Cattanei. Lucrezia has a brother, Cesare, with whom she engages in an incestuous relationship that produces her son Michelotto (the gooseboy).

Historically and in the narrative, Lucrezia is famous for two things: her beauty and her ruthlessness. Lucrezia is well-known for using poison as a way to eradicate those who dare to oppose her. Lucrezia causes a scandal in Italian society by using lemon juice to lighten her hair. In the novel, la Borgia is portrayed as a vain and haughty blond; cruelly selfish and vindictive. Lucrezia's hatred of Bianca de Nevada is born out of a feeling of inferiority. Bianca de Nevada possesses an innocence that Lucrezia Borgia does not have, and Lucrezia decides to make Bianca de Nevada pay with her life.

During the course of the narrative, Lucrezia is married three times and gives birth to four sons: Rodrigo, who dies at the age of thirteen; Michelotto, the simple-minded gooseboy at Montefiore; Alessandro, whose head is said to be inordinately large, and Francisco, whose father is Francisco Gonzaga. It is also mentioned that Lucrezia endures eleven pregnancies by the time she is thirty-nine years old.

It is clear that Lucrezia Borgia has no conscience. Rather than attempting to repent or right her past wrongs, however, Lucrezia schemes to travel to the palace of the Doge in Venice in order to secure the final apple from the branch of the Tree of Knowledge. At one time in her life, Lucrezia prided herself on her reputation as both lovely and lethal to her enemies. After losing her father and brother, however, Lucrezia realizes that she is alone in the world and sees possessing the secret to immortality as her only option for redemption.

## Cesare Borgia, Duc de Valentinois

The Duc de Valentinois, Cesare Borgia, is the brother of the hardhearted Lucrezia. Cesare is the son of Vannozza Cattanei and Rodrigo Borgia who becomes Pope Alexander VI. As a result of an incestuous relationship with his sister Lucrezia, Cesare is the father and the uncle of Michelotto, the gooseboy. Cesare is known for his brutal good looks and his unparalleled prowess in battle.

Cesare is also known for his intimate affairs with both men and women and his voracious appetites. Cesare, like his sister, has a volatile temperament and an uncompromising nature. Unlike Lucrezia, though, Cesare is extremely superstitious and



religious. This seems somewhat incongruous given Cesare's thirst for blood and power. Cesare has dreams of ruling all of Italy one day. However, before his dreams of supreme power come to fruition, Cesare becomes ill with a disease said to have killed his father. It can only be assumed that the Borgia dies of a venereal disease.

Cesare's desire to possess the branch from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil stems partially from his religious fervor. He sincerely believes that if he were to possess the branch, his fate as the ruler of Italy and all of its domains would be sealed. Cesare is not as interested in immortality as he is in unlimited power and the complete control of a great empire.

## **Primavera Vecchia**

Primavera Vecchia is the cook and housekeeper at Montefiore. She has a grandson named Ranuccio who is a hunter. Primavera is an older woman who cares for Bianca de Nevada and she is utterly devoted to the young girl. It is said that Primavera Vecchia once had a sexual liaison with a squid. Eventually, Primavera loses her powers of speech as a result of her penchant for gossip. Primavera is also illiterate and once she becomes unable to speak, she has no way of communicating with those around her. Primavera has a tense relationship with the local priest, Fra Ludovico. In Italian, Primavera Vecchia means "old spring."

## **Fra Ludovico**

Fra Ludovico is the priest of Montefiore. Ludovico has no illusions about his role in the community. Ludovico is fairly easygoing and not given to dogmatism or bombast where religion is concerned. He enjoys a rather simple life as the parish priest. One indication of Ludovico's ability to see past his pastoral duties is his lie to Bianca that her mother is in heaven. Ludovico sees nothing wrong in telling the young girl that he was present at the time of her mother's death. His compassion for Bianca is evident. It is also evident that Fra Ludovico is a shrewd man. His decision to play the fool with Lucrezia Borgia after the departure of Vicente de Nevada proves that Fra Ludovico has a keen sense of self-preservation.

## **Michelotto, the gooseboy**

Michelotto is the gooseboy at Montefiore. It is his responsibility to care for the geese on the large farm. Michelotto is somewhat slow mentally but he has a sweet disposition. Michelotto is the son of Lucrezia and Cesare Borgia and, as such, Michelotto's parents are also his aunt and uncle. It is difficult to determine from the narrative whether or not Michelotto is actually aware of his parentage, but he does not seem to mind it when Lucrezia refers to him as her son. Michelotto is the child Lucrezia Borgia refers to as "the Punishment" (218). It was Michelotto who Lucrezia wanted to throw from the aqueduct at Spoleto.



## Ranuccio Vecchia

Ranuccio Vecchia is the grandson of Primavera Vecchia, the housekeeper at Montefiore. Ranuccio is a hunter by trade, although after an encounter with a unicorn, Ranuccio cannot hunt without experiencing shame and self-reproach. After Ranuccio releases Bianca de Nevada in the woods outside Montefiore, he disappears and does penance at a monastery. Ranuccio apologizes to Bianca by kissing her after she is believed to have died. It is Ranuccio's kiss that revives Bianca and it is he who accompanies Bianca to Montefiore at the end of the narrative.

## The Eight Dwarves

The eight dwarves in the narrative are first introduced to the reader as a kind of collective. That is to say, before the eighth dwarf disappears, they think of themselves as a singular group and not as individuals. Before Nextday leaves for Montefiore, the dwarves operate in pairs, according to their number. Without Nextday, the collective becomes aware of itself as separate entities. Unlike the seven dwarves in the classic fairytale, the dwarves living in the woods beyond Montefiore are actually made of minerals. Once Bianca de Nevada comes to live with them, the dwarves take on more human characteristics until they become human themselves. It is the exposure to human emotions—love, fear, jealousy, and grief—that enables them to finally change.

## The Mirror

The Mirror is a character in the story just as much as the dwarves or the human beings featured in this narrative. The Mirror does not speak or interact with any of the characters, but its influence over the characters is unmistakable. When Lucrezia Borgia first gazes into the mirror, she is looking at herself as an object. However, when she poses a question to the mirror, the mirror cannot help but to answer her honestly. The mirror has the capacity to "speak" without words and to reveal more than Lucrezia and the others expect.



# Objects/Places

## Constantinople

Constantinople is a city located in Turkey. Its modern-day name is Istanbul.

## Babylon

Babylon is an ancient city/state located in what is now Iraq. Babylon is situated just south of Baghdad.

## Adriatic Sea

The Adriatic Sea is a body of water that is part of the Mediterranean Sea.

## Crete

Crete is the largest of the islands comprising the country of Greece.

## Aragon

Aragon is a city located in northeastern Spain.

## Saint Peter's Basilica

Saint Peter's Basilica is a church located in Vatican City, Italy. Saint Peter was one of the original twelve apostles, early followers of Jesus.

## Rome

Rome is the capital city of Italy.

## Tyrrhenian Sea

The Tyrrhenian Sea is located off the western coast of Italy.

## Ferro Battuto

Ferro battuto refers to a type of ornamental ironwork.



## **Ravenna**

Ravenna is an Italian city located in the Emilia-Romana region of Italy.

## **Bologna**

Bologna is a city in northern Italy. It is located in the northern Italian province of Emilia-Romana.

## **Arezzo**

Arezzo is a city located in the Tuscany region in central Italy.

## **Corinth**

Corinth is a city located in Greece.

## **Agion Oros**

Agion Oros is another name for Holy Mountain. It is located in Greece.

## **Venice**

Venice is a city located in northern Italy in the Veneto region. Venice is built on a series of interconnecting canals. Venice is also famous for its glass-making.



# Themes

## Innocence

There are multiple instances of innocence presented in the narrative. Bianca de Nevada is most decidedly innocent because of her sheltered upbringing at Montefiore. Bianca has limited social skills and a lack of exposure to the workings of the real world leaves her vulnerable on all sides. One episode which bears out this assertion is when Bianca attempts to befriend two young peasant girls. The girls shun Bianca because of her station in life. They are uncomfortable with the idea of interacting with someone outside their social class. Bianca is unaware of the basis for the girls' rejection because she has no experience with such feelings. Being so well-protected by Don Vicente thus proves to be a disadvantage. From her birth, Bianca de Nevada is surrounded by people who love and care for her. Thus, she is without the necessary defenses to counteract the cruelty with which she comes in contact.

Lucrezia Borgia's hatred of Bianca is not limited to feelings of jealousy over Bianca's beauty. Bianca is as pure as the driven snow and this fact is what upsets Lucrezia Borgia the most. Unlike the object of her ire, Lucrezia relies on guile and deception to get what she wants out of life. When she encounters Bianca, Lucrezia senses the young girl's purity of heart as something she herself lacks.

Similarly, Ranuccio Vecchia is also a character whose innocence comes into play. After his encounter with a unicorn, Ranuccio is unable to hunt and kill animals without experiencing remorse. Knowing that the unicorn wanted to die is too much for Ranuccio to bear. By the time Lucrezia Borgia summons Ranuccio and instructs him to kill Bianca, it is well established that Ranuccio is no murderer. As a matter of fact, Lucrezia's request that Ranuccio remove Bianca's heart as proof of the girl's death throws the character into a tailspin. Ranuccio feels guilty for leaving Bianca alone in the forest when he is, in fact, responsible for saving her life. Ranuccio's kiss awakens Bianca because he is an innocent like her.

## Power

It goes without saying that Lucrezia Borgia and her handsome brother Cesare are obsessed with power. Their family is one of the most dominant clans in all of Italy and it stands to reason that brother and sister are accustomed to wielding great influence.

Whereas Cesare Borgia's lust for power is principally limited to the political realm, the desire for power is perverted in the case of his sister Lucrezia. Lucrezia Borgia seeks to control everything and everyone around her. Since she is a woman, there is little chance that Lucrezia will rule a country or command an army without the support and backing of a man. Lucrezia's ability to entice and bewitch men leaves her suitors incapable of resisting her charms. Therefore, Lucrezia Borgia's quest for power is manifested in her





multiple marriages. Each time she marries, Lucrezia succeeds in advancing her own cause, both socially and financially.

When she meets Bianca de Nevada, however, Lucrezia knows she has met her match. Although Bianca has no political or social power, it is her beauty and wholesomeness which Lucrezia seeks to annihilate. Lucrezia cannot stand the thought of there being a woman more beautiful than herself. Bianca de Nevada poses no actual threat, but Lucrezia's lust for supremacy gets the better of her and she demands that Bianca be put to death.

Finally, Lucrezia Borgia's own quest to acquire the third apple from the branch from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil proves that her thirst for power over death is simply one more facet of the character's lust for complete domination of her environment.

## Family

While it may not be obvious that family is a main theme at work in the narrative, there is evidence to suggest its prominence. There are three distinct families represented in the novel. The first and most important portrayal of family is that of Vicente de Nevada and his daughter Bianca. Although there are only two of them, Vicente and his daughter have the strongest emotional bond. It is also no secret that Vicente loved his deceased wife Maria Ines a great deal. As a single parent, however, Vicente is solely responsible for his daughter's well-being and security. At one point, he risks his dignity to request that Lucrezia Borgia grant him a parcel of land in Italy to call his own. In this instance, it is clear that Vicente de Nevada is willing to humble himself before the evil Borgias in order to fulfill his obligations as a father. Since Lucrezia initially denies his request, it is a stroke of good fortune that Vicente sees Lucrezia on the bridge at Spoleto just before she tosses Michelotto into the water. Bianca is Vicente's entire world and even though he makes the supreme sacrifice when he sets out to find the sacred branch, Bianca's safety is always uppermost in his mind.

It can also be said that Primavera Vecchia and Fra Ludovico are members of the de Nevada family by virtue of their respective roles at Montefiore. Primavera is a substitute grandmother for Bianca and Fra Ludovico is charged with instilling spiritual values in the girl as she grows older. Ludovico is not entirely successful in this area, however, as he chooses to protect himself rather than Bianca after Vicente leaves for Greece. Nonetheless, Fra Ludovico's genuine feeling for Bianca is never called into question.

Lucrezia Borgia, Cesare and Michelotto represent a different type of family altogether. Whereas Vicente and Bianca enjoy a particular closeness and love which extends beyond the grave, the Borgias display an altogether atypical familial experience. It is revealed in the narrative that the Borgias are not above engaging in incest. Lucrezia is believed to have slept with both her father Pope Alexander VI and her brother Cesare. The latter fathers a child by Lucrezia. More startling, perhaps, is the idea that Lucrezia would entertain the thought of infanticide. What differentiates the de Nevadas and the



Borgias is a lack of sanctity in the latter. That is to say, familial affiliations are not as important to Lucrezia and Cesare as they are to Vicente and Bianca. To the Borgias, there is nothing immoral about exploiting a family member in order to obtain what one wants.



# Style

## Point of View

The majority of *Mirror Mirror* is told from the point of view of an omniscient narrator, which is common in fairytales. There are several parts of the novel which are narrated by characters within the story. The novel's opening and closing sections, "The Roofs of Montefiore" and "Montefiore" are both narrated by Bianca de Nevada, the main protagonist. In addition, Bianca narrates the section entitled "What I Saw Then."

"A Moment Ago" (pp. 43 - 44), "Under the Twists of Thornbank" (pp. 51 - 52), and "Seven" (pp. 139 - 143) are all narrated in the first person by one of the dwarves. Similarly, Lucrezia Borgia narrates several sections of the novel as well, including "What Lies in the Mirror" (pp. 53 - 54), "Al-iksr" (pp. 171 - 176), and "Mirror Mirror" (pp. 187 - 191).

The first person narrations of Bianca de Nevada, Lucrezia Borgia and one of the dwarves function to update the fairytale form and give *Mirror Mirror* a decidedly more modern feel. Whereas classic fairy stories are all usually the recollection of one specific individual, having multiple narrators adds texture to the story and gives the reader an opportunity to see the story from the inside out. By having the characters narrate portions of the story, the novel takes on greater dimension and texture.

## Setting

The majority of the novel takes place in sixteenth-century Italy during the period known as the High Renaissance. Montefiore, Bianca de Nevada's childhood home, is located in central Italy between the regions of Umbria and Tuscany. (Emilia) Romagna is another Italian region mentioned in the narrative.

Vicente de Nevada is imprisoned in a monastery located in Greece, specifically on the peninsula of Agion Oros.

Lucrezia Borgia's home is in the city of Ferrara and the character also spends some time in Rome, Italy's capital city. Toward the close of the narrative, Lucrezia Borgia travels through Venice on the city's Grand Canal in her effort to retrieve the third sacred apple.

Other locations outside Italy mentioned in the narrative include Turkey, Spain, France, Africa, Persia (modern-day Iran), Lebanon and Byzantium. Also, the cities of Lisboa (Lisbon, Portugal) and Castile, Spain are also referenced. The use of such a variety of geographic locations in the novel attests to the wide reach of the Italians and other European powers of the time period. Europe (Spain, Italy, France and England) ruled the known world and there was no end to their influence.



## Language and Meaning

The novel is written in English. *Mirror Mirror* takes place in Italy, during the Renaissance, and Italian words are interspersed throughout the narrative. This is an interesting choice, as the author could have translated the Italian words into English. However, using Italian words gives the narrative an air of authenticity while solidly grounding this new take on an old story in the category of modern literature. Also, the choice to include Italian words rather than their English counterparts serves to give the narrative itself greater legitimacy.

Examples of Italian words included in the text are the words "contadini" (farm workers, peasants); "nonna" (grandmother); "condottieri" (soldiers, leaders) and "salone" (sitting room).

The language found in the narrative proper is at once sophisticated and fluid. The fairytale genre lends itself well to rather lofty speech. In addition, the use of more sophisticated language in *Mirror Mirror* reinforces the fantastic nature of the very familiar tale of Snow White and the Seven Dwarves. It is the language which prevents *Mirror Mirror* from being seen as just another twist on a well-worn children's story. Finally, the language used in *Mirror Mirror* firmly establishes the novel as adult literature rather than children's literature.

## Structure

The novel is comprised of a total of 276 pages, spanning a total of seventeen years in the life of Bianca de Nevada, the novel's primary protagonist. The narrative proper is divided into four main sections: 1502, 1506, 1512 and 1519.

Within each main chronological section, there are shorter, titled sections. These brief sections vary in length from one or two pages to approximately sixteen pages. In addition, short prose pieces interspersed throughout the main narrative are intended to give insights into the characters' minds and emotions. Each prose piece is written like a riddle, never revealing the name of the character who speaks. Additionally, these prose pieces all begin with the words "I am."

The first and last sections of the novel are narrated by Bianca de Nevada. Since Bianca opens and closes the narrative, so to speak, the narrative itself is "bookended" in such a way as to fashion the narrative as a circle. This bookending technique lends itself well to the fairytale form as neat endings are part of the genre. Regardless of whether or not a fairytale has a stereotypical happy ending, the story itself usually comes to a close without loose ends.



## Quotes

"The eye is always caught by light, but shadows have more to say" (p. 2).

"Before catechisms can instill a proper humility, small children know the truth that their own existence has caused the world to bloom into being" (p. 7).

"Once a mother started being dead, and was planted in the ground, what was to say she didn't emerge, eventually, as a broad bean?" (p. 17).

"[Cesare Borgia] was a young brute, one of those handsome men who knock mountains to one side in order to clear the view" (p. 33).

"What keeps a river in its banks but the spirits of the drowned, the titans and Nereids, whose time has passed, and who in shame and righteous humility cover themselves in their watery blanket?" (p. 51).

"Faith is a floor. If you don't work at making it for yourself, you have nothing to walk on" (p. 75).

"It took a highly cultured woman to manage to marry more advantageously each time her husband, through murder or carelessness or the decisions of the courts, happened to be disposed of" (p. 83).

"I am a gooseboy or am I a goose—The margin that separates us is loose" (p. 104).

"Bianca felt a wealth of fondness toward [Primavera Vecchia], who seemed to have been present at the birth of the universe and grown old long before the first drops of the Flood burst from God's vengeful clouds" (p. 159).

"How long had Cesare been dead?—three years, four, and her father only a year or more than that? Since then [Lucrezia] had turned into a monster" (p. 232).

"While a question is formulating—'Who is the fairest of all,' say, or 'How many crow's feet can I pretend not to have today? Or 'Is this the face of a murderer?'—the mirror always knows the answer before the question is asked" (p. 247).

"I should like not to turn my back on my life, but I would be grateful for an escape from the tyranny of family" (p. 172).

"Any murder, even suicide—especially suicide, perhaps—is an attempt to stop the future from happening" (p. 221).



## Topics for Discussion

What is the relationship between Michelotto the gooseboy and Lucrezia Borgia?

Re-read the section entitled "The Heart of the Matter" on pp. 271-276. Discuss the significance of Lucrezia Borgia's experience in the gondola.

What causes Primavera Vecchia to lose the power of speech?

What is the name of the eighth dwarf?

Explain the process by which the dwarves choose names for themselves. Use textual examples to guide your discussion.

What prompts Vicente de Nevada to undertake the quest to find the branch from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil?

Who is the speaking subject of the short prose piece on p. 137? Who are the "brothers" to whom the speaker refers?

Bianca de Nevada narrates both the opening and closing sections of the narrative. Explain how this "bookending" technique impacts the narrative as a whole.

Review Gregory Maguire's comments on pp. 277-278. In what way does the author of the novel take literary license with historical figures?

What happens when Ranuccio Vecchia takes Bianca de Nevada back to her childhood home?

What is the nature of the relationship between Cesare Borgia and his sister Lucrezia?

How does the dwarves' mirror end up in Lago Verde?