Rene Magritte, the Belgian Surrealist, was born November 21, 1898 in Lessines, Belgium. The eldest of three sons, his father was a tailor and his mother a milliner. Magritte showed an early aptitude for art and began studying painting in 1910. Sadly in 1912, his mother died tragically having a profound effect on the young artist and influenced his later works of art.

In 1916, at eighteen he moved to Brussels and began to study art at the Academie Royale des Beaux Artes and in 1922 married his childhood friend, Georgette Berger. Unable to make a living as an artist, Magritte made designs for wallpapers, posters, sheet music covers and collage illustrations for furrir’’s catalogues and these were to form the basis of techniques used on his Surrealist canvases. Finally, in 1926 he signed a contract with a gallery and was able to devote all his time to his art. He produced his first Surrealist painting, The Lost Jockey, for an exhibition in 1927, unfortunately it was panned by critics. That same year Magritte moved to Paris and met Andre Breton, the founder of the Surrealist movement and became an important member of that group.

Andre Breton defined surrealism in his manifesto of 1924 as:

“psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express…verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner…the actual functioning of thought…in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern”.

This art movement was based on the exploration of dreams, imagination, fantasy and the subconscious. Surrealism is also closely connected to the ideas of Sigmund Freud, who thought that dreams or unconscious thoughts motivated human behavior. When Breton wrote his manifesto, the horrors of WWI were still very recent. In some ways, Surrealism was an answer to what many Surrealists believed caused the war, the industrial revolution driven by rational thought. Surrealism offered an outlet from “false rationality”. It celebrated mystery and idiosyncrasy.

Magritte wrote of his own work:
“My painting is visible images which conceal nothing; they evoke mystery and indeed, when one sees one of my pictures, one asks oneself this simple question, ‘what does that mean?’ It does not mean anything, because mystery means nothing either, it is unknowable”.

There began his investigation of pictorial language in a burst of activity that was to produce sixty pictures in one year, some quite large. When he returned to Brussels in 1930, he became the center of the avant-garde circle. His trademark style—precise, meticulous and impersonal technique were almost completely established. He remained there until his death in 1967.

Magritte’s works are conceived as riddles. In them he explores the mysteries lurking in the unexpected juxtaposition of everyday things, involving the viewer in a self-induced disorientation. His paintings exclude symbols and myths; everything is visible. Magritte worked from several sources, which he repeated with variations: anatomical surprises, such as the hand whose wrist is a woman’s face; the mysterious opening, where a door swings open on to an unexpected vista; metaphoric creatures, such as a stone bird flying above a rocky shoreline. He animates the inanimate, as a shoe with toes; he enlarges details, as an immense apple filling a room. He makes an association of complementary, as the leaf-bird of the mountain eagle. His titles accompany the paintings as names correspond to objects, without either illustrating or explaining them.

Magritte had discouraged analysis of his paintings in such statements as: “If one looks at a thing with the intention of trying to discover what it means, one ends up no longer seeing the thing itself, but of thinking of the question that is raised.” For Magritte, interpretation of the image was a denial of the mystery.

Many of Magritte’s paintings from his Paris days were violent and gruesome. While living in Brussels during the German occupation he renounced violence and pessimism in the face of WWII in favor of wit, hope and peace. This precipitated the end of his relationship with Breton, but did not change his dedication to his surrealist vocabulary for artistic expression.

The Return, painted in 1940, is an excellent example of Magritte’s fascination with mystery, and juxtaposition: light vs. dark, day vs. night, what is known vs. what has yet to happen. One views the painting as if looking out of a window which frames the view of a dove flying over a dark landscape in the early evening. A perfectly detailed bird’s nest and three eggs are rendered on the windowsill in the foreground. It is illuminated by a light source that comes from the space the viewer occupies. It cannot be known whether the light is natural and therefore the opposite of the nightscape outside. The dove is the focal point of the painting. While the outline of the
form suggests that the image is clearly a bird, it is also an image of a daytime sky with clouds, which stands in contrast to the darkening sky in the background. It is as if the bird has torn a hole in the night sky to illuminate the promise of tomorrow. That promise is reiterated in the bird’s nest on the window sill. The eggs themselves represent the promise of tomorrow. Today they are just eggs, but soon they will transform and become birds. These other worldly, dreamlike and unexpected images speak to the mystery of life and the universe and they challenge the viewer’s perception of reality.

Magritte continued to paint until his death in 1967. He is considered one of the most important painters in the Surrealist movement, along with Salvador Dali and Jean Miro. His work had a significant influence on Pop, Minimal and Conceptual art of the 20th century.
QUESTIONS:

Are there any symbols?

What colors does Magritte use?

How is the space used? Which is the positive space? Which is the negative?

What mood does this communicate?

Does the title tell you anything about the painting?

Does the painting look real?

How does it make you feel?

Could this painting be an answer to a riddle? Magritte’s works are conceived as riddles. In them he explores the mysteries lurking in the unexpected. (Why did the little boy throw the clock out the window? He wanted to see time fly. What dog keeps the best time? A watch dog)