

## **Notes on Morning Song by Sylvia Plath:**

### **In A Nutshell**

As a twenty-year-old student at Smith College, Sylvia Plath insisted that "Graduate school and travel abroad are not going to be stymied by any squealing, breastfed brats" (source). Far too many women, she thought, were forced to give up any thoughts of their own life and work to take care of babies and maintain homes. Plath, determined to write and travel, found it difficult to imagine a future that adhered to the traditional roles women tended to occupy in the early 20th century.

Shortly after graduating from Smith, however, Plath received a Fulbright fellowship and travelled to Cambridge, England – where she met and married fellow poet Ted Hughes. Plath soon realized that she actually wanted to have children, and began a long (and agonizing) attempt to have a baby.

"Morning Song," written shortly after the birth of Plath's first child, explores both Plath's long-seated ambivalence towards motherhood and her growing love for her child. Exploring the strangeness and unnaturalness latent in the mother/infant relationship, Plath steps outside sentimental conventions. Her baby daughter isn't a lamb or a dove or any of the other cutesy little images that tend to cluster on "It's a Girl!" announcement cards. In fact, this poem doesn't just discuss the baby's birth – it addresses her child as an intellectual equal.

Although "Morning Song" was originally published in *The Observer* in May of 1961 (shortly after the birth of Plath's first child, Frieda), it wasn't included in a book-length collection until after her death. *Ariel*, the last of Plath's poetry collections, came out in 1966.

It's all too tempting to read all of Sylvia Plath's work in light of her ongoing struggle with depression and mental illness, and "Morning Song" is no exception. Such a reading, however, tends to gloss over the complicated emotions that almost any mother could feel at the thought of being suddenly responsible for a completely helpless little human being – or her recognition of the bond growing between the two.

### **WHY SHOULD I CARE?**

Hey, relationships are complicated. Isn't that what your mother/brother/best friend told you the last time that you had problems with your boyfriend/girlfriend... or your teacher... or your dog? Chances are that pretty much every person you deal with on a regular basis has inspired feelings that aren't always happy and warm and fuzzy. Emotions, it seems, aren't black and white. In fact, they're usually all sorts of shades of grey.

It's exactly this sort of complicated emotional response that speaker is dealing with as she interacts with her baby for the first time. So why should this mixed response seem so shocking? Well, maybe that's because everybody is supposed to looooooove babies. After all, they're genetically designed to sucker-punch us into cooing and oohing and aaahing over their witty-bitty fingers and toes.

But what if you're the person who has to tote this little, crying, defenseless thing around for the next eighteen years or so? After all, for centuries women's primary "job" was to be a mother. Maybe those witty-bitty toes start to seem less charming when you realize that your job

description just went from "poet" or "public intellectual" to "changer of diapers." We're not saying that it's a demotion. It's just one heck of a change.

It's this complicated response that Plath works out in her poem – and it's one that helps us think through all the ways that we might have mixed feelings about the ways that our relationships shape our identities, as well. Even if they're not relationships with babies.

The speaker, "I," addresses a new baby, "you," throughout this poem.

The baby is born and begins screaming. The speaker reflects on how the baby looks and sounds in its first moments of life.

Soon the family watches the baby in its bed, a form of viewership that strikes the speaker as something similar to viewing a statue at an art museum.

At home, the speaker stays awake most of the night, listening to the baby breathing. Once the baby starts to cry, the speaker (who we now know is the baby's mother, judging from the fact that she's wearing a Victorian nightgown), rushes out to take care of it.

She watches as the morning starts to color the windowpanes, and then marvels at how the baby has begun to coo – a form of "singing" that the speaker likens to "vowels" flying up like "balloons."

Line 1

Love set you going like a fat gold watch.

We've heard a lot of lines about newborn babies. It seems like everyone's comparing all things lovely and wonderful and innocent to, well, children. The first lines of "Morning Song," though, have us scratching our heads.

Why? Well, for starters, how often do you hear little babies being described as "fat gold watches"? Aren't they usually compared to lambs and kittens and sunbeams and angels? We've all seen Hallmark baby cards, and there are no watches in sight on those bad boys.

Sure, our speaker talks about how love gets that watch up and running, and love is a pretty common topic when it comes to babies, but there's something just a little strange in this description. For one thing, whose "love" is being described here? Is it the speaker's? Someone else's? Frankly, we just don't know. And that ambiguity makes it seem like the speaker is distancing herself from the newborn. She's sure not gushing or oohing and aaahing. In fact, her language is pretty prosaic.

If we take into account the fact that the speaker is actually addressing herself to the baby, the fact that "love" remains unaccounted-for becomes even more troublesome. After all, she's not just describing some baby getting its start in the world. She's talking to you – the baby is the audience of this poem. Which makes tracing down the source of this love just a teeny bit more urgent, don't you think?

Those of you who dabble in philosophy have probably figured out that Plath seems to be drawing the Deist concept of God down into her personal sphere with this line. See, the idea of God as a watchmaker is actually a pretty popular concept. Here's how it works: God is a guy

who creates an incredibly intricate, self-sustaining mechanism – the world. Once it's done, so is he: he steps back to admire the little thing ticking away time all on its own. He never steps in to fix it.

Metaphorically turning her baby into a "fat gold watch" allows our speaker to feel the same sort of thrill at creation that the watchmaker God must have done. After all, babies are incredibly intricate mechanisms – just like watches. Or worlds. Being able to claim responsibility for making one must feel pretty cool.

Look a little closer, though, and the analogy gets a little bit worrisome. After all, in the creator-as-watchmaker scenario, God wipes his hands of his new creation. Once it's up and running, he's out. A baby, however, tends to need care and attention. All the time. Which might be a teeny bit problematic if, as this analogy could suggest, its parents decided to let it exist on its own.

That's just the dark side of this first line, though. Maybe our speaker could simply be marveling at the incredible way that a creature who for nine months was entirely dependent on its mother, now seems to move and breathe all on its own.

And hey, gold watches – especially the fat ones – are pretty prized possessions. So maybe our speaker's not so detached from the lil' babe, after all.

Lines 2-3

The midwife slapped your footsoles, and your bald cry  
Took its place among the elements.

This is it. This is the moment that most babies have been waiting... well, nine months for. It's the moment that at least one out of three romantic comedies just has to include. It's that time when a new baby takes a deep breath and squalls for the first time.

Our speaker's stark language gets even more direct here. You can almost imagine a kid's conversation with its mother going a lot like this:

Kid: Mommy, what happened when I was born?

Mom: Well, the midwife slapped your footsoles.

Kid: And then what?

Mom: And then you cried. A lot.

It's the last line of this little passage that demonstrates Plath's dexterity with language. See, she doesn't seem to be saying much. But then again, in the space of two little lines, she morphs "you" (that's the baby, remember?) from a mechanized, watch-like being into an elemental force.

As she describes it, there's nothing as natural as a baby's cry. It's stripped-down, lonely, "bald" – the first time a baby cries, it does so just because it's out in the world for the first time.

More importantly, describing the baby's cry as a part of the elements make it seem like this particular baby is an integral part of the world. Its cry is as important to the world as earth, air, wind or... well, you get the picture. This baby is Big Stuff.

Line 4

Our voices echo, magnifying your arrival. New statue.

Ever been in a hospital corridor? Man, those walls sure know how to project sound. If you yell, you can hear the echoes of your voice for a really, really long time. We're not recommending that you try this, of course. We're just saying – those acoustics are sick. Maybe it's something to do with all that concrete and linoleum.

We're guessing that Plath is comparing the echoing of the hospital to that of another stone-and-concrete building that she knows well: the museum. And just like in the museum, there's an object in this hospital that grabs everybody's attention.

Here, of course, that object is a baby. In lots of ways, though, newborn babies are sort of like statues. They're usually pretty pale. And they don't move a whole lot – especially when they're sleeping (which is about 16-20 hours per day). And we're guessing that, if hospitals would just let them, whole hoards of people would crowd around the nursery with cameras, sort of like a museum tour group.

Remember that saying "Art imitates life"? Or maybe it was "life imitates art." Either way, our speaker seems to suggest that there's not that much difference between standing around and gazing adoringly at a statue and standing around waiting for a baby to wake up.

Notice how short the lines are here? There's no room for elaborate rhymes or fancy turns of phrase. Even metaphors (baby = statue) get played out in stripped-down language. It's like our speaker is just jotting down her impressions as they bubble up to the surface. Or maybe she's just in shock at the arrival of Baby – and her language hasn't had a chance to catch up with her yet.

Lines 5-6

In a drafty museum, your nakedness  
shadows our safety. We stand round blankly as walls.

Ah, see? We told you that the hospital was like a museum. (Okay, we were cheating a little bit. We read ahead.)

Notice how the speaker imagines the baby casting a shadow over the bodies of its admirers? It almost seems like the baby is elevated above the speaker (metaphorically, of course). At any rate, it's high enough to cast a shadow entirely over the group of admirers. That's a pretty typical stance for things that are supposed to be worshipped – like the cross at the front of a church, or a nation's flag, which is supposed to fly high up in the sky.

For an adoring crowd, though, these folks aren't exactly celebrating. No cheering or hugs or hoorays. Certainly no parades. In fact, these people seem shell-shocked. They're blank as "walls" – inanimate, unexpressive and, quite frankly, just a wee bit boring.

There's something really cold and inhospitable about this particular setting, as well. "Drafty," "naked," and "blank" stares? We don't know about you, but that's not our idea of a good time. In fact, it sounds downright unpleasant. So... how does our speaker feel about having a baby? Well, that's not for us to say. But chances are she's not absolutely 100% thrilled.

Lines 7-9

I'm no more your mother  
Than the cloud that distills a mirror to reflect its own slow  
Effacement at the wind's hand.

We've noticed a peculiar pattern in this poem. Want to guess what it is? Okay, here are a few clues:

Stanza 1: baby = watch

Stanza 2: baby's cry = the elements

Stanza 3: baby = statue

Stanza 4: mother = cloud

Give up? OK, here's the scoop: our poet seems to alternate between man-made inanimate objects and natural ones. It's almost like she can't decide whether this baby is part of the natural world or something less than human. More importantly, the man-made objects can be traced to specific makers. Watches are made by specific watchmakers. Statues are made by specific sculptors. The clouds, though? No way any one person can claim credit for those.

Funnily enough, asserting that this baby is alive and animate is, paradoxically, a way for our speaker to distance herself from the responsibility of creating (and perhaps caring for) the new baby. We've got two completely conflicting readings of this. Hey, no one ever said that Plath poems were easy. Here goes:

Asserting that the baby is part of the natural world allows the speaker to see the baby as something miraculous. There's way more to this child than even the speaker herself could produce. The baby is now part of life itself – which is pretty awesome.

Asserting that the baby is part of the natural world allows the speaker to detach herself from the infant. After all, one person can't be responsible for the elements, right? Where does our speaker finally come down? Well, read on to find out.

Lines 10-11

All night your moth-breath  
Flickers among the flat pink roses. [...]

Hold on to your seats, We're about to throw a super-fancy poetry term at you. Notice how the description of the baby's breath is visual? You don't really hear moth wings flutter, do you? You see them. Especially when they're described as flickering over the sorts of "flat" roses that you might find, say, on wallpaper. If you're a fan of floral wallpaper, that is.

But wait...our speaker's describing a baby breathing in another room. Unless she's got super powers, there's no way that she's seeing the breathing. What's going on here?

We're so glad that you asked. The spiffy technical term to describe what's going on here is synesthesia. Synesthesia is sort of a fancy way to describe mixed-up sense impressions, like hearing a puppy's eyes speak or seeing the sound that breath makes. Use it well, friends. Pointing out synesthesia is a sure-fire way to score huge points with English teachers everywhere. Huge.

Lines 11-12

[...] I wake to listen:  
A far sea moves in my ear.

Once again, baby sounds mimic the natural world. This time the baby's breath is a "far sea" – which is sort of soothing, isn't it? That's why they sell all sorts of white noise CD's with exactly those sorts of noises on them.

Notice how the line break here makes us hover with the speaker in a brief moment of suspense? Here's what we mean: sometime in elementary school, your teacher probably taught you that colons mean that you should pause in the middle of a sentence. They're a sign that something else is about to happen – just not yet. Unlike periods, colons indicate ongoing action. When our speaker tells us that she's listening, and then she pauses, Plath forces us to listen with her, waiting for the sounds of the "far sea" to sound in the next line. The poem's form mimics the speaker's waiting.

Lines 13-14

One cry, and I stumble from bed, cow-heavy and floral  
In my Victorian nightgown.

We've got to admit – this isn't exactly the way that most people want to be remembered. Stumbling and cow-y? Covered head to toe in a floral Victorian nightgown? Please. We've seen pictures from the nineteenth century. It wasn't exactly a high point in the history of fashion.

It's almost like our speaker is reveling in the fact that she just isn't all that sexy right now. She sure paints a graphic enough picture of her lack of coordination. Either that, or she's just the tiniest bit unhappy about it. After all, what are cows known for? Milk-giving. And if you've ever met a newborn, you probably know that the only things babies seem to care at all about are milk and sleeping.

Imagine if you went from being a thinking, talking human being with desires and plans of your own into a milk-producing machine. How would you feel? Well, that's the role that our speaker seems to think she plays in this baby's world. Based on her description, it sounds like she hasn't drummed up a whole lot of enthusiasm for her new gig.

It's probably good to notice, though, that our speaker's been half-awake, anticipating the time when the baby will need her. And as soon as it does, our speaker is up and moving. However conflicted she may feel about the new role that she plays, she makes sure to take care of everything that the baby might need. That's not bad parenting at all.

Line 15

Your mouth opens clean as a cat's. The window square

Once again, Plath's simple, direct language creates an absolutely clear image in her readers' minds. We all know how cats yawn – slowly, silently, taking all the time in the world to open their mouths wiiiiiiiiide.

That's the image that we get of this baby. And we're betting that you saw something similar. Which means that Plath's imagery is right on the money – it can create pictures with only seven words. Not bad, eh?

Notice how Plath adds yet another metaphor to her collection of baby comparisons? It's almost as if she's circling around this strange new creature, trying to find real-world approximations of its movements and actions. She's sifting through language until she comes up with a way to best describe it... which only reminds us that babies can't describe themselves. And there's something new – exciting, different – about new life that makes this speaker eager to capture all of its various nuances.

What's up with "The window square"? You'll just have to wait until the next stanza to find out.

Line 16

Whitens and swallows its dull stars. [...]

From the previous stanza, we're left with the start of a sentence – "The window square" – but we don't know what it means until now.

This poem builds itself up as a collection of images – from watches ticking to statues standing to cats yawning. These lines follow in this trend even as they situate us in time.

Here's what we mean: have you ever gotten up early – really, really early? Early enough to see the sky brighten and all of the fading night stars disappear? Well, that's where our speaker is now – looking out the window and watching day begin. It's a new start. A new beginning. And probably a new baby's first day at home. That's big stuff, folks.

Notice how the introduction of temporality (the coming of day) situates our speaker in a concrete location. She's not thinking any more about her role as a mother or the child's place in the universe. She's just standing in her baby's room, watching the outside world slowly change.

We're not totally sure about this, but there seems to be a shift in the emotional currents of this poem, as well. All of a sudden that bright, busy world is nothing more than "dull" stars. All the action is taking place inside – where the baby is.

Lines 16-18

[...] And now you try  
Your handful of notes;  
The clear vowels rise like balloons.

Notice how we're still living in the moment? It's like the entire poem has been gearing up for two little words, "and now."

Why is that so important? Well, if this entire poem has been a "song" addressed to a baby, then this is the point where it comes full circle. See, our speaker has been "singing" (or, well, talking) to her infant. And now the infant sings back, trying out "notes" that become "vowels." A mother's

language is matched by baby language – and communication is born. We've got lots more to say about this, believe us. Check out our thoughts on the title for more.

(We have to admit, we think our speaker's just a little bit optimistic here. After all, most baby sounds that we've heard are just sounds. They're not necessarily identifiable as "vowels." But hey, poets and new moms get to have a little poetic license, don't they?)

Plath seems to date the birth of the mother-infant bond from the first moment of communication – the first time that the baby makes an attempt to express itself to its mother. Awww. That's pretty sweet, huh?

Well, we don't want to get maudlin here. Plath would probably be the first person to mock us for too much sentimentality. But dating the birth of a relationship from the start of communication is a pretty incredible act, and that's what our speaker has allowed herself to do.