



POEM ANALYSIS

“Morning Song” by Sylvia Plath

Essay by Claire Keyes

Author: Sylvia Plath

Pseudonym: Victoria Lucas

Born: October 27, 1932; Boston, Massachusetts

Died: February 11, 1963; London, England

Country: United States; United Kingdom

Culture: American; British

ABSTRACT

Sylvia Plath had recently given birth to her daughter Frieda when she wrote “Morning Song” in February, 1961. This eighteen-line lyric is structured in three-line stanzas or tercets. Although the title promises a song, the only song the reader gets is a baby’s cry. The mother love that the speaker is expected to feel is strangely absent in this poem. Instead, the mother-speaker moves from a strange alienation from this new being to a kind of instinctive awakening to the child’s presence, her connection to it, and her appreciation for its “handful of notes.”

KEYWORDS

- Child Care
- Child rearing or Parenting
- Children
- Love or Romance
- Mothers
- Parents and Children

TYPE OF POEM

Lyric; Song

APPEARS IN

Ariel by Sylvia Plath

The Collected Poems by Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes (editor)

The Wadsworth Anthology of Poetry by Jay Parini (editor)

Sylvia Plath had recently given birth to her daughter Frieda when she wrote “Morning Song” in February, 1961. This eighteen-line lyric is structured in three-line stanzas or tercets. Although the title promises a song, the only song the reader gets is a baby’s cry. Plath may be experimenting with a traditional form of love poem called an aubade in French or alba in Provençal. Both refer to a lyric about dawn or a morning serenade. In such poems, the lover, usually in bed with a beloved, laments the dawn because it signals their inevitable parting. Plath’s poem mentions love only in the first line: “Love set you going like a fat gold watch”; that is, the love of the parents gave birth to the baby. The mother love that the speaker is expected to feel is strangely absent in this poem. Instead, the mother-speaker moves from a strange alienation from this new being to a kind of instinctive awakening to the child’s presence, her connection to it, and her appreciation for its “handful of notes.”

Once the reader grasps the situation of the poem—the birth of a child—the remainder of the poem is reasonably clear. Although the emotional interest of the poem focuses on the new mother, both parents are mentioned: “Our voices echo” and “your nakedness/ Shadows our safety. We stand round.” Plath startles the reader with line 7: “I’m no more your mother.” Maternal feelings do not automatically occur. Plath is extremely honest to admit such strong feelings of alienation and separation in her poem. In the last three stanzas, the emotional estrangement of the speaker changes. She is compelled to listen to the sound of her child as it sleeps. She seems attuned to that “moth-breath”

and says, "I wake to listen." When she hears her baby cry, she gets up to feed it: "cow-heavy and floral/ In my Victorian nightgown." As she breast-feeds her child she observes the coming dawn as the light changes outside the window.

Plath closes with a reference to the sounds the child makes, probably not a cry of need since it has just been fed. The "Morning Song" of the title turns out to be the baby's "handful of notes;/ The clear vowels rise like balloons." Plath makes a definite contrast between the "dull stars" of the morning and the "clear vowels" of the baby. The speaker praises her baby and appears much less alienated than at the poem's beginning.

Plath is known for her striking images and her metaphors and similes. In this poem, there is a surreal quality about some of her imagery. In its attempts to express the workings of the subconscious, surreal art employs fantastic imagery and incongruous juxtaposition of subject matter. To compare a child to a "fat gold watch" is surreal. The child is animate while a watch is inanimate. Love is engaging while winding up a watch is a mechanical act. What the simile suggests is the great distance between the act of love and the fact of the baby. What does this baby—this thing with its own existence—have to do with the emotions that engendered it? By raising this question about what most people consider a most "natural" phenomenon—the birth of a child—Plath helps the reader see something very old (childbirth) as something quite strange, new, and unsettling. The disorienting effect of Plath's style is typical of Surrealism.

Plath emphasizes the child's strangeness—its thingness—by referring to its cry as "bald." Her choice of adjective is odd. The baby's head may be "bald," but by describing its cry this way, Plath seems to emphasize the nonhuman quality of this new being/thing that does not take its place among other humans but "among the elements." Stanza 2 reinforces the nonhuman quality of the baby as perceived by its parents. The child is a "new statue." The parents are pictured as gazing at it "in a drafty museum." In other words, they cannot help staring at the child, but they feel vulnerable and inadequate: "We stand round blankly as walls." With the child as a statue and the parents as walls, not much

communication occurs. Plath's surreal images underline the parents' feelings of alienation and strangeness in this new (to them) situation.

Stanza 3 contains not only the most striking line ("I'm no more your mother") but also the most puzzling image: "Than the cloud that distills a mirror to reflect its own slow/ Effacement at the wind's hand." First, clouds do not distill mirrors. The shadow cast by a cloud reflects it; when the wind moves the cloud along, both cloud and shadow disperse. The bond this mother feels to her baby is just as insubstantial and fleeting. Plath's image is convoluted and perhaps deliberately inexact. She suggests the tenuous relationship between mother and child, cloud and mirror. It is as if the birth of the child were external to the mother rather than part of her. Fortunately, the speaker discovers she is wrong. Maternal instincts arise in her.

She is attentive to the breathing sounds her child makes. The imagery animates those sounds: They are like "moth-breath," suggesting how quiet and subtle they are. It is as if she can see the moth as it "flickers among the flat pink roses," suggesting the patterns on wallpaper or fabric. Otherwise, the roses would not be "flat." The contrast signifies the aliveness and motion of the moth-breath versus the less vibrant roses. The new mother, listening to her child's breath-in-sleep, uses the image "A far sea moves in my ear" as if she were holding a shell to her ear and capturing the sounds of the ocean. The child's delicate moth-breath suggests something more ponderous—new life and new possibilities.

The child's mouth is "clean as a cat's," with the emphasis on "clean": This new being is untarnished. Plath uses this word again in "Nick and the Candlestick" to describe her son: "The blood blooms clean/ In you, ruby." It is a word of praise. No longer a statue, the child's presence takes on more spirited animation through the animal imagery. The speaker's lack of feeling for her child gradually transforms into appreciation and wonder, particularly at its sounds—not a "bald cry" any longer but something shaped, "a handful of notes." The child enters the human world when the speaker perceives its attempts at language: "The clear vowels rise like balloons." The poem closes on this image of ascension, a typical Plath strategy. "Morning

Song" records how the speaker's perception of her baby changes; her intimacy with her child grants her the vision of its animated being.

The dominant theme in "Morning Song" is alienation and the process by which it is overcome. A woman's poem, it deals with maternal instinct and its awakening. Plath avoids sentimentality in taking up a subject—becoming a mother—that is too often treated in a superficial way. A woman—certainly an ambitious poet such as Plath—does not come to motherhood merely by giving birth. New behavior is learned. The being of the mother is as new as the being of the child. Readers can appreciate Plath's honesty in dealing with her subject. It also takes a certain amount of courage to admit to a colossal lack: "I'm no more your mother/ Than the cloud." The alienation in the poem is overcome by such acute delineation of the feelings. Instinct has a role to play as well: The speaker finds herself listening to the child's sounds. This is not self-willed or under her control. She follows her instinct: "One cry, and I stumble from bed." In the end, she is rewarded. Alienation is overcome in her connection to her baby. Her own child serenades her with a "morning song" and a bond is formed through language, the quintessential human act.

The third tercet, with its convoluted imagery, introduces a secondary theme: the speaker's awareness of her child as potentially marking her insignificance, her erasure as a poet: "I'm no more your mother/ Than the cloud that distills a mirror to reflect its own slow/ Effacement at the wind's hand." Can a woman be both mother and famous poet? Plath, writing in 1961, had few predecessors who managed to achieve both. In engaging this theme, she is dealing with one of the major issues that faced women poets in the twentieth century. If mothering absorbed her attention, would she still be the poet-artist she longed to be? This superb poem answers her implied question. Further, the joyous ending proclaims the arrival of both a new singer on the scene and a mother proud of her child's vocal bravura.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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