# Morning Song

## SUMMARY

The speaker addresses her new baby, saying that love set the child's life in motion, making it tick like a big rich watch. She remembers how the midwife smacked the bottoms of the baby's feet, and how she heard the baby's unrestrained cry becoming one of the essential parts of the universe.

Now, the baby's family celebrates and wonders over the baby's arrival. The baby is like a new sculpture standing in an old museum. Its vulnerable nakedness casts a shadow over its parents' security. The family stands around stunned.

The speaker says that she can hardly believe she's the baby's mother now: she feels about as much like a mother as a dissolving cloud feels like the mother of a mirror that reflects it.

All night, the baby's moth-like breathing flutters around the roses in the wallpaper. The speaker wakes up to listen for the baby's breath; it sounds like a distant ocean.

The instant the baby cries, the speaker hurries out of bed, feeling heavy as a cow in her old-fashioned nightgown. The baby's mouth opens up as naturally and cleanly as a cat's mouth. Meanwhile, the window gets brighter as the dawn comes. The baby makes a few little practice sounds, vowels that float up into the air like balloons.

## THEMES

### MATERNAL AWE AND AMBIVALENCE

"Morning Song" depicts a new mother's conflicting, ambivalent emotions about motherhood. On the one hand, the speaker clearly feels some degree of shock at her new role and disconnection from her baby. On the other hand, she also shows signs of a burgeoning maternal instinct and desire to nurture her child. Motherhood, for this speaker, is a tender but surreal experience—something that opens up a new world of intimacy, yet is also intensely disorienting.

It's clear that the speaker is having some trouble adjusting to motherhood, and that she doesn't quite feel the instantaneous bond new moms stereotypically share with their infants. Though she attributes the baby's existence to "Love," there's something cold, distant, and mechanical about how she describes her new child. She compares the baby to a "fat gold watch" and a "statue," for example, as if the baby were a lifeless object rather than a person.

These comparisons also imply that the speaker is an artist or a watchmaker (note that this latter occupation, in particular, is a common metaphor for God). In both cases, these creators exist independently of their creations. These metaphors thus suggest that even as the speaker finds her baby precious—a golden work of art—she feels essentially *separate* from the child.

In fact, the speaker seems to feel disbelief at being a mother at all. She goes so far as to say that she's not really the baby's mother any more than a "cloud" is—a metaphor that evokes how surreal it feels for her to take on her new identity of "mother." Adding to this sense of disorientation and disconnect, the adults "stand round blankly as walls," as though looking at a museum exhibit. They are awe-struck and shell-shocked at this new life so quickly taking "its place among the elements." The speaker again emphasizes the tension between the baby's *independence* from and total *dependence* on her—the way the child so seamlessly establishes a presence in the speaker's world, yet also seems delicate and fragile, like a museum piece.

Yet despite the speaker's apparent difficulty in adjusting to motherhood, she is also clearly devoted to her child. She describes listening all night to her child's breathing, which she compares to that of a moth. She recognizes her baby's vulnerability and responds the second she hears the child "cry," jumping out of bed "cow-heavy" (i.e., swollen with milk). The baby's "mouth opens," ready for nourishment; despite the disconnect the speaker earlier describes, it's clear that the speaker and the baby are literally, physically in sync.

The speaker goes on to describe sitting with the baby until morning. As the stars fade, the baby makes incoherent sounds, which the speaker likens to balloons rising: a hopeful image that suggests the speaker's growing tenderness toward her child. Though they're no more than babbled "vowels," the baby's attempts to communicate are "clear" to the speaker—suggesting that mother and child are learning to speak a shared new language. Overall, then, the poem portrays an experience of new motherhood that is disorienting, awe-inspiring, and powerfully intimate all at once.

**Where this theme appears in the poem:**

- Lines 1-18

## LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

### LINES 1-3

*Love set you ...*
*... among the elements.*

The poem begins with the speaker addressing her new baby. Using a simile, she says that "Love set [her baby] going like a fat

gold watch." In other words, the speaker compares her new child to a valuable object.

On the one hand, this suggests that the speaker finds the baby exquisite. On the other hand, it hints at an underlying sense of disconnection: she sees the child as a perfectly made object, something to be admired, but isn't quite connecting to the baby emotionally, despite the "Love" that brought the baby into being. (Here, "Love" implies both the parents' emotional bond and the sex through which they conceived the baby.) She may also feel the weight of responsibility in caring for something so valuable. The juxtaposition, or contrast, between "Love" and a mechanical "watch" reveals the speaker's ambivalence toward her child and her own new role as a mother.

The poem immediately makes use of consonance and assonance. In the first line alone, there is /l/, /t/, and /g/ consonance and /o/ assonance:

> Love set you going like a fat gold watch.

These repeated sounds immediately give the poem a sense of rhythm and momentum, reinforced by the three stressed syllables at the end of this first line: "fat gold watch." These stressed beats evoke the emphatic way in which the baby's birth launches the speaker into motherhood.

The speaker then describes the "midwife slapp[ing]" the baby's feet and the baby crying for the first time. She says that the baby's "bald cry / Took its place among the elements." This imagery suggests that the baby's crying immediately becomes a fundamental part of the speaker's universe; in other words, it suggests how important the baby is to her. Yet there's still a sense of disconnection and bewilderment in her description of the baby, as if it has come from somewhere other than her body.

## LINES 4-6

*Our voices echo, ...*
*... blankly as walls.*

In the second stanza, the speaker uses metaphors to express the feeling of seeing her newborn. She describes the baby as a "New statue," suggesting that people are drawn to the child's beauty and novelty. This imagery also evokes a continued sense of disconnection, as the speaker again compares her child to an object (although a very precious one).

She also likens the hospital to "a drafty museum"—which, like a hospital, might have blank walls and a sterile feel. Inside this "museum," the "nakedness," or vulnerability, of the baby casts a shadow on the adults' sense of safety. In other words, they feel overwhelmed by the enormous responsibility of looking after this tiny, fragile being. It seems as if even the slightest breeze could harm the child. Due to this overwhelmed feeling, she and the other adults "stand round blankly as walls"—a simile that suggests they are frozen in place, unable to think or act normally.

Consonance and assonance continue to add musicality and rhythm to the poem in these lines, although in this stanza, some repeated sounds have a stilted or unsettling effect. For example, the hard, nasal consonants in "stand round" lend a kind of stiffness that is evocative of statues and walls. The long /oo/ and /ee/ assonance at the ends of words ("New statue"; "drafty," "safety," "blankly") is reminiscent of the "voices echo[ing]." In fact, "New statue" is a full internal rhyme—a very audible kind of "echo." The imagery of echoing voices, reinforced by the sound of the verse, conveys a kind of loneliness in spite of all the commotion.

## LINES 7-9

*I'm no more ...*
*... the wind's hand.*

In the third stanza, the speaker addresses her newborn with an odd detachment. Note how the line break after "mother" isolates the first part of the sentence, so that the reader gets the emotional impact of the speaker saying "I'm no more your mother" before continuing on to lines 8-9:

> I'm no more your mother
> Than the cloud [...]

The implication in line 7 seems to be that the speaker feels as if she is no *longer* the child's mother now that she has given birth—as if by pushing the baby out of her body she has separated from the child *emotionally* as well as physically.

This enjambment across lines 7-8 also propels the reader into a complex metaphor. The speaker compares herself to a cloud and her child to a mirror that reflects that cloud being wiped away by a personified wind (i.e., the wind is described as having "hand[s]"). Perhaps this image is meant to evoke a passing cloud "mirror[ed]" in a body of water—such as a puddle of its own "distill[ed]" rain. (If so, this would suggest the cloud has created its own small mirror image, as a parent creates a child.) Regardless, the speaker means that she feels her identity is being "effaced"—erased, made insignificant—by the child, or at least by the experience of becoming a mother.

"Effacement" is a loaded word here, as it can also refer to the thinning of the mother's cervix during labor. In other words, the birth of the baby and the erasure of the speaker's former identity go hand in hand.

The jumble of consonance and assonance in this stanza echoes the sense of bafflement expressed by the metaphor. Take all the /m/, /n/, and /r/ sounds in "I'm no more your mother" or the long /o/, /f/, /n/, and /d/ sounds in "mirror to reflect its own slow / Effacement at the wind's hand." This mixing of sounds helps evoke the whirlwind of emotions within the speaker, whose baby has caused a major shift in how she sees herself. At the same time, alliteration and consonance in "mother" and

"mirror" emphasize the speaker's connection to the child—who is, in a sense, a tiny mirror of herself.

## LINES 10-12

*All night your ...*
*... in my ear.*

By the fourth stanza, it is night and the speaker is in bed, listening to her baby breathe. She compares her baby's breathing to a moth's, suggesting its delicacy and vulnerability. The baby's breath "Flickers," a word that again brings to mind fragility, as if this new life were a flame that could go out with the slightest breeze.

The speaker's attention to her baby's breath also suggests that something is shifting between them; she isn't thinking of the baby as an object but rather as a living creature, in contrast with the "flat pink roses" of the room's wallpaper.

Listening for the baby, the speaker describes a "far sea" in her ear. This could be the sound of the *literal* ocean in the distance, or it could be a *metaphor* for the rise and fall of the baby's breathing, which she perhaps finds as soothing as the rhythm of the sea.

The juxtaposition, or contrast, between the fragility implied by "moth-breath" and the power of the ocean, also hints at the speaker's continued ambivalence:

- On the one hand, the "sea" seems to suggest a powerful bond between the speaker and her child, a great depth of feeling that she associates with the baby's breathing.
- On the other hand, she perceives that sea as "far" away, as if she's still maintaining some emotional distance and can't feel the full magnitude of her maternal love just yet.

By association, the moth and sea imagery also evoke the moon, since moths are nocturnal and orient themselves by moonlight, and the tides are swayed by the moon. Perhaps this suggests that the speaker is starting to feel drawn to—emotionally swayed by—her child.

## LINES 13-15

*One cry, and ...*
*... The window square*

In the second to last stanza, the speaker responds to her child's "cry" by "stumbl[ing] from bed." This detail suggests that whatever doubts the speaker is feeling, the child's attempt to communicate overrides them and prompts her to act.

She describes herself as "cow-heavy," a phrase referencing the fact that her breasts are swollen with milk. This image reflects the natural, animal bond between mother and child. Despite her ambivalence about her new identity, her body is rising to the challenge with a natural impulse to feed and protect. When it comes to connecting to her baby, it may be that her body knows what to do before her mind.

Her "cow-heavy" feeling and flower-print "Victorian nightgown"—suggestive of something frilly and unflattering—are also comic details. The speaker still feels awkward, but the humor relaxes the tone slightly from the earlier, eerier stanzas.

The thick, back-of-the-throat consonance in this stanza ("cry," "cow-heavy," "clean," "cat's," "square") evokes both the baby's crying and the instinct to mollify that crying by feeding it (as the /k/ sound also evokes the sensation of swallowing). The speaker compares the child's mouth to that of a cat's. Over the course of the poem, she has gone from comparing her baby to a watch, a statue, and a mirror (i.e., inanimate objects) to a moth and now to a cuddly pet. The trajectory seems to point towards a strengthening bond. The stanza ends with the image of "The window square," but for the first time, enjambment propels the reader across the stanza break, building momentum as the poem nears its conclusion.

## LINES 16-18

*Whitens and swallows ...*
*... rise like balloons.*

The imagery of the "whiten[ing]" window in the final stanza indicates that night is giving way to morning. The personified window "swallows" the night stars just as the baby swallows the speaker's milk, as though the speaker has brought in the morning by nursing her child. Again the speaker is linked with nature (daybreak) as her maternal instincts emerge. The /w/ consonance ("window," "square," "whitens," "swallows," "now") adds an emphatic rhythm that perhaps evokes the baby's suckling and swallowing.

Then the baby attempts to communicate. The speaker compares this attempt to music: "you try / Your handful of notes." That the child (perhaps like its poet mother) is capable of making something—even if that something is just a few "vowels" that remind the speaker of music—seems to secure the growing bond between them. This baby isn't a perfectly made object to be displayed in a museum but a living, breathing, creating, curious human.

The closing simile—"The clear vowels rise like balloons"—is hopeful and cheerful, suggesting that the speaker's "long night of the soul" is over. Morning has arrived, and with it, a sense of relief. Balloons connote lightness, color, and celebration, suggesting that, whatever else she's feeling, the speaker is experiencing joyful tenderness toward her child.

# POETIC DEVICES

## IMAGERY

The poem is filled with clear, vivid imagery. Much of this

imagery is visual: the speaker compares her new baby to various inanimate objects, such as a "fat gold watch" in the first line, a "New statue" in line 4, and a "mirror" in line 8. These images suggest the speaker's sense of detachment from the baby: she sees the baby as her beautiful creation, but not yet as a real person she can connect with emotionally.

She also describes herself in ways that highlight her sense of shock and uncertainty. In line 6, for example, she says that the adults in her hospital room "stand round blankly as walls." This image evokes a kind of helplessness, though it's not her own "blank[ness]" but the baby's "nakedness" that unsettles her. In other words, she's overwhelmed by the baby's complete vulnerability.

There is also a lot of auditory imagery in this poem:

- The baby enters the world with a "slap" from the midwife, prompting its "bald cry."
- The "echo[ing]" voices of the speaker and other adults add drama to the baby's arrival.
- The speaker "wake[s] to listen" for the baby's "moth-breath," which she then likens to a "far sea," suggesting a soothing rhythm.

Finally, in the last stanza, the baby attempts its "handful of notes," as if it's a kind of untrained singer. The speaker also says that the baby's wordless "vowels rise like balloons." Notice that this simile connects the auditory and visual—as if the baby is a kind of poet, turning sound into image! Perhaps this attempt at communication is what finally bridges the distance between mother and child. In any case, the cheerful comparisons to song and balloons imply that the speaker is now responding more warmly to her baby.

**Where Imagery appears in the poem:**

- Line 1
- Lines 2-3
- Lines 4-6
- Lines 8-9
- Lines 10-12
- Lines 13-18

## SIMILE

The poem kicks off with a simile:

> Love set you going like a fat gold watch.

While this watch is a precious one (it's "gold"), there is a disconnect between this description of the baby as an object and the assertion that "Love" is what brought it into being. Whereas love is intimate and human, a watch is mechanical. The simile thus hints at the speaker's initial emotional distance from the baby.

Watches are also associated with time, perhaps suggesting that life is like a watch that time will eventually wind down—and that having a baby has changed the speaker's relationship to time's passage.

Next, the speaker says that she and the other adults "stand round blankly as walls." The comparison evokes the kind of emotional flatness that accompanies shock. Then, in the second to last stanza, the speaker says that the baby's "mouth opens clean as a cat's." By comparing the baby to a cat (a cute animal/pet) rather than an inanimate object, the speaker suggests that they're a little closer to seeing the baby as a living, lovable being. Like a cat, the baby can't just come out and say what it's feeling, but it *can* communicate.

The last line of the poem is also a simile:

> The clear vowels rise like balloons.

This suggests that the baby's attempts to communicate are lifting the speaker's spirits. The image of rising balloons expresses lightheartedness, optimism, and relief, in contrast with the speaker's earlier statement that she is "no more [the baby's] mother" than a cloud. Her feelings about her new role as a mother are probably still complicated, but it's clear that she's beginning to develop a bond with her child.

**Where Simile appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "Love set you going like a fat gold watch."
- **Line 6:** "We stand round blankly as walls."
- **Line 15:** "Your mouth opens clean as a cat's."
- **Line 18:** "The clear vowels rise like balloons."

## METAPHOR

Along with imagery and similes, the poem uses metaphors to convey the speaker's feelings about her newborn child.

In the second stanza, for example, the speaker calls the baby a "New statue. / In a drafty museum." This metaphor suggests that, to the speaker, the baby is a work of art, something she spent nine months creating and now marvels at. Like a work of art in a museum, the baby is precious and must be protected. Then again, works of art are also inanimate, like the "gold watch" in line 1, so the metaphor might also suggest a degree of emotional detachment.

The third stanza consists of a fairly complex metaphor:

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

The speaker is comparing herself to a cloud and her baby to a mirror. (Or, possibly, to the mirrored surface of water that the

cloud has "distill[ed]" and rained down.) Like a mirror, the baby reflects (takes after) the mother. But the speaker suggests that all the baby/mirror will see, as time goes on, is its mother vanishing like a cloud on a windy day. Evidently, the speaker feels that she's losing her identity—perhaps because she's in the process of forging a new one.

In lines 10-12, the speaker describes the baby's "moth-breath / Flicker[ing] among the flat pink roses" in the nursery. She also compares the baby's breath to a "far sea." In other words, it's a reminder that the baby's life is as delicate as a moth's ("flickers" suggests the flapping of moth wings, and also a flame that could be snuffed at any moment); yet it's also powerfully soothing, suggesting a deep bond between baby and mother.

**Where Metaphor appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 4-6:** "Our voices echo, magnifying your arrival. New statue. / In a drafty museum, your nakedness / Shadows our safety. We stand round blankly as walls."
- **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."
- **Lines 10-12:** "All night your moth-breath / Flickers among the flat pink roses. I wake to listen: / A far sea moves in my ear."

## CONSONANCE

The poem is filled with consonance, which adds musicality and muscularity to the verse. In the first stanza, for instance, liquid /l/ consonance competes with sharp /t/ consonance, mimicking the tension between love and detachment:

> Love set you going like a fat gold watch.
> The midwife slapped your footsoles, and your bald cry
> Took its place among the elements.

In the second stanza, nasal /n/ consonance and hard /d/ consonance, as in the slightly stiff phrase "stand round," help convey the adults' stiffness and awkwardness in the baby's presence. A combination of consonance and assonance creates a slant rhyme between "drafty" and "safety," suggesting a relationship between the infant's "naked" vulnerability and the speaker's own sense of being exposed to "the elements."

In the third stanza, a jumble of /n/, /m/, /r/, /l/, and /d/ consonance—a mix of nasal, liquid, and hard consonant sounds—adds a mournful slowness and intensity to the complex metaphor of the speaker's "Effacement" (erasure). Consonance and alliteration link "mother" and "mirror"—the parent and the child that seems to reflect her image.

In the fourth stanza, continued muted /n/ and /m/ consonance combines with playful /k/ consonance ("Flickers," "pink," "wake"), /f/ alliteration ("Flickers," "flat," "far"), and a whisper of sibilance ("listen," "sea") to create a sense of tender quietness.

Back-of-the-throat /k/ sounds in the fifth stanza evoke both the cry of the infant and the sensation of swallowing as the speaker prepares to nurse her baby. Harsh /r/ and sharp /t/ sounds ("stumble," "floral," "Victorian," "nightgown," "cat's") suggest a certain stiffness or unease with tenderness, perhaps a remnant of "Victorian" times.

Finally, open /w/ sounds ("window," "square," "Whitens," "swallows") connect the end of the fifth stanza to the beginning of the sixth, where again liquid /l/ consonance and sharp /t/ consonance compete, mirroring the opening stanza. This time, though, the sharpness gives way to the softer /l/ sounds in the final line, suggesting the speaker's own softening toward her child.

**Where Consonance appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "Love," "set," "going," "like," "fat," "gold," "watch"
- **Line 2:** "midwife," "slapped," "footsoles," "bald"
- **Line 3:** "Took," "its," "place," "among," "elements"
- **Line 4:** "magnifying," "New"
- **Line 5:** "drafty," "nakedness"
- **Line 6:** "Shadows," "safety," "stand," "round"
- **Line 7:** "I'm ," "no," "more," "your," "mother"
- **Line 8:** "cloud," "distills," "mirror," "reflect," "own," "slow"
- **Line 9:** "Effacement," "wind's," "hand"
- **Line 10:** "night," "moth"
- **Line 11:** "Flickers," "among," "pink," "wake," "listen"
- **Line 12:** "sea," "moves"
- **Line 13:** "cry," "stumble," "bed," "cow," "floral"
- **Line 14:** "Victorian," "nightgown"
- **Line 15:** "clean," "cat's," "window," "square"
- **Line 16:** "Whitens," "swallows," "dull," "stars," "try"
- **Line 17:** "handful," "notes"
- **Line 18:** "clear," "vowels," "rise," "like," "balloons"

## ASSONANCE

Like consonance, assonance helps to elevate the poem's language. For example, the poem is full of long /o/ sounds, particularly in the first two stanzas ("going," "gold," "footsoles," "echo," "Shadows"). Besides adding rhythm, the /o/ sounds evoke the "echo[ing]" of voices greeting the newborn. These echoes also suggest a kind of emptiness, both emotional and physical, as the speaker adjusts to the feeling of her child living outside her rather than in her womb.

The /o/ assonance, as well as /n/, /m/, and /r/ consonance, in line 7 ("I'm no more your mother") creates a slow, mournful sound as the speaker adjusts to new motherhood and reflects on time's passage. Similarly, in line 8, /o/ assonance ("own slow") slows the pace of the verse to mimic the slowness the speaker is describing. (The enjambment after "slow" has the same

effect.)

**Where Assonance appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "going," "gold"
- **Line 2:** "footsoles"
- **Line 4:** "echo"
- **Line 6:** "Shadows"
- **Line 7:** "no," "more," "your"
- **Line 8:** "own," "slow"
- **Line 11:** "Flickers," "pink," "listen"
- **Line 13:** "floral"
- **Line 14:** "Victorian"

## ALLITERATION

Alliteration works in much the same way as consonance and assonance, adding music and rhythm to the poem. Take the first line, where the alliteration of hard /g/ sounds combines with assonance in "going" and "gold," creating a sense of force and momentum that evokes the way a new mother is thrust into her responsibilities. Soft /m/ alliteration shows up in stanzas two and three ("magnifying," "museum," "more," "mother," "mirror"), adding a quiet, wistful intensity to the speaker's observations. In stanza four, /f/ alliteration mimics the regularity of the child's breathing, while /k/ alliteration in line 15 evokes the back-of-the-throat sensation of a baby drinking its mother's breast milk.

**Where Alliteration appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "going," "gold"
- **Line 4:** "magnifying"
- **Line 5:** "museum"
- **Line 7:** "more," "mother"
- **Line 8:** "mirror"
- **Line 11:** "Flickers," "flat"
- **Line 12:** "far"
- **Line 15:** "clean," "cat's"

## ENJAMBMENT

While most of the poem's lines are end-stopped by periods or other punctuation, a handful are enjambed. Line 2, for example, is enjambed partway through the second clause of the sentence, so that the baby's first sound ("cry") upon entering the world is emphasized. The placement of the line break also stresses "Took" at the beginning of line 3, a strong verb that links the baby's agency to its ability to communicate:

> [...] and your bald cry
> Took its place among the elements.

The second line of the second stanza is also enjambed, with the naked white space after "nakedness" further emphasizing the baby's vulnerability:

> [...] your nakedness
> Shadows our safety.

This white space may even evoke the metaphorical "drafty museum" (hospital), a sterile environment where the adults stand "blankly as walls" and the baby seems vulnerable to the slightest breeze. The line break also emphasizes "Shadows" at the start of the next line. The baby is tiny, but the shadow—or sense of responsibility—its vulnerability casts on the speaker is huge.

Every stanza except for the fifth ends with a period, so the enjambment at the end of stanza 5 stands out. The image of the window square is ambiguous until the following line, which reveals the action attributed to the personified window:

> [...] The window square
> Whitens and swallows its dull stars. And now you try
> Your handful of notes;
> The clear vowels rise [...]

The momentum leading into the final stanza suggests something is shifting between the speaker and her child. The shift is made apparent by the enjambment in the following line, as the child's action ("try") is emphasized. The child is "try[ing]" to communicate something, and this helps the speaker find a way to connect. Though she might not yet understand what her baby is saying, she can at least understand the human impulse behind the effort.

**Where Enjambment appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 2-3:** "cry / Took"
- **Lines 5-6:** "nakedness / Shadows"
- **Lines 7-8:** "mother / Than"
- **Lines 8-9:** "slow / Effacement"
- **Lines 10-11:** "moth-breath / Flickers"
- **Lines 13-14:** "floral / In"
- **Lines 15-16:** "square / Whitens"
- **Lines 16-17:** "try / Your"

## JUXTAPOSITION

The poem's moments of juxtaposition help evoke the speaker's ambivalence and awe. In the first stanza, for example, "Love" is immediately contrasted with the connotations of the "fat gold watch" to which the speaker compares her baby:

- While "Love" indicates a tender emotional connection, "gold watch" suggests material value—as if the baby is a form of capital proving that the family unit is successful.
- It also hints at the speaker's sense of disconnection from her baby, as if her baby is an object to be displayed and admired rather than a tiny human

with needs.
- Finally, it points to the idea that the speaker *made* her baby (as a watchmaker makes a watch), which may help explain the dissonance she's feeling: the baby is both her and not her, created by her and unknown to her.

In the fourth stanza, the speaker compares her baby's breathing both to a moth and to a faraway ocean. The juxtaposition of a small, fragile insect whose breath is barely perceptible with the powerful crash of distant waves speaks to the very different things the new mom is feeling toward her baby:

- On the one hand, the baby is vulnerable and delicate;
- On the other hand, its effect on her is enormous. (It creates a "sea change" in her life.)

There's also a juxtaposition of the baby's "Flicker[ing]" breath with the "flat[ness]" of the "pink roses" on the wallpaper. After the earlier "watch" and "statue" comparisons, this contrast highlights the actual gap between an inanimate object and a tiny, living, breathing person.

**Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "Love set you going like a fat gold watch."
- **Lines 10-12:** "All night your moth-breath / Flickers among the flat pink roses. I wake to listen: / A far sea moves in my ear."

### PERSONIFICATION

Even as the speaker compares her baby to various non-human objects ("a fat gold watch," a "New statue," "a mirror"), she personifies things that *aren't* human. These effects contribute to the poem's portrait of motherhood as a pretty surreal experience.

For instance, in the metaphor that makes up lines 7-9, the speaker personifies both a cloud and the wind:

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

In this metaphor, the cloud (which represents the speaker) and the wind (which might represent time/change) both have agency. The cloud has the human ability to "distill" (i.e., produce something through a process of concentration or purification), and what it distills is the "mirror" (which represents the baby). This may mean that the cloud distills rain, which pools and reflects the cloud's passing. In any case, the metaphor describes one generation yielding to another. Meanwhile, the wind is described as having "hand[s]," as if it's guiding the process of time/change that causes clouds (and generations) to pass.

In lines 15-16, the speaker describes the window as "Whiten[ing] and swallow[ing] its dull stars." This imagery perhaps indirectly suggests that the child is nursing: swallowing its mother's milk just as the personified window "swallows" stars. Yet the speaker focuses on the object, not the child—at least at first. By morning, the speaker finally seems to see her child as a person trying to communicate and bond with her, and seems to feel a growing attachment of her own.

**Where Personification appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 8-9:** "the cloud that distills a mirror to reflect its own slow / Effacement at the wind's hand."
- **Lines 15-16:** "The window square / Whitens and swallows its dull stars."

## VOCABULARY

**Set you going** (Line 1) - Here, the speaker is saying that this child's life started with love—a line that might suggest a loving night of sex, or that pure love is somehow the source of life.

**Footsoles** (Line 2) - The soles of the baby's feet.

**Midwife** (Line 2) - Someone who is trained to assist with childbirth.

**Bald** (Lines 2-3) - In this context, "bald" means unadorned, simple, or blunt.

**The elements** (Lines 2-3) - The basic materials of the universe, or sometimes the weather.

**Distills** (Lines 8-9) - To purify or to refine; to extract the essential meaning or most important aspect of something.

**Effacement** (Lines 8-9) - To make something vanish, to wear something away.

**Moth-breath** (Lines 10-11) - Here, the speaker is suggesting that the baby's breath is as soft and fluttery as a moth.

**Cow-heavy** (Line 13) - Heavy as a cow; this image suggests that the speaker's breasts are swollen with milk.

## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

The poem is made up of six tercets, or three-line stanzas. These orderly tercets contrast with the speaker's sense of being overwhelmed at new motherhood. It's almost as if she is trying to wrangle this bewildering, surreal experience into something

that makes sense to her. Almost every stanza also ends in a period, which creates a contained feeling, as if the speaker is just trying to take things one day at a time.

The small stanzas also give the poem a slow, gradual pace which mirrors the speaker's bit-by-bit acceptance of motherhood. The gradualness suggests that the speaker's bond with her baby is something that develops slowly, rather than something that happens all at once.

### METER

"Morning Song" is written in free verse, so it doesn't use a standard pattern of meter or rhyme. This organic, flexible form lets the poem change shape to mirror the speaker's feelings.

The length of line 8, for instance, drags the image out, and in doing so reflects what the line describes: a cloud, reflected in a mirror, gradually dissolving in the wind. Just a couple of lines later, when the speaker describes the baby's "moth-breath," the line is much shorter, evoking the baby's own tiny body and its light, fluttery breathing. See the contrast in lengths below:

> Than the cloud that distills a mirror to reflect its own slow
> [...]
> All night your moth-breath

This freedom to move between much longer and shorter lines allows the poem to capture the speaker's feelings about new motherhood: her tenderness, shock, and amazement all come through in the shapes of her lines.

### RHYME SCHEME

The poem doesn't use any rhyme at all, with one exception: the subtle internal rhyme between "New" and "statue" in line 4. This rhyme mimics the "echo" mentioned in the same line. It also reinforces the relationship between the baby's "new[ness]" and the speaker's perception of her baby as a perfected work of art, something not meant to be touched but only marveled at. In other words, she's struggling to see this new being as an individual *person* rather than something that she's made, a created object.

Aside from this one internal rhyme, though, the poem relies on other devices, such as consonance and assonance, for its musical effects. The lack of a rhyme scheme (and a meter) suggests that the speaker is rejecting elaborate artifice—avoiding a highly "poetic" style—as she candidly describes new motherhood.

## SPEAKER

The speaker of this poem is a new mother. Her relationship to the life-changing experience of having a baby is complex. She emphasizes that her child has entered the world because of "Love," not obligation or happenstance. Yet she struggles to connect with her baby, to see it as still being part of her now that it's separate from her body. The sudden arrival of this new generation also seems to reflect her own "Effacement": it's a reminder that she's no longer a child herself, and her life is passing.

She compares the baby to a "gold watch," a "New statue," and a "mirror"—inanimate objects that reveal her alternating sense of wonder and bewilderment. In some ways, it seems she can't yet see the baby as a real person that lives outside her. At the same time, the baby's vulnerability reshapes her life: all she can do is "stand round" and watch it, or lie awake listening for its cry. As soon as it cries, she responds, despite feeling clumsy and ridiculous ("cow-heavy and floral / In my Victorian nightgown"). Though the need to care vigilantly for a new life—at the expense of her own comfort—may feel oppressive on one level, this vigilance helps her start to feel a true maternal bond.

## SETTING

The first half of the poem doesn't have a fixed setting. The speaker describes the baby as a "New statue / In a drafty museum," but this museum is metaphorical, suggesting the speaker's awe of her new baby: to her, this little life seems like a breathtaking work of art.

Beginning in line 10 ("All night your moth-breath"), however, the poem's setting is the speaker's home. The speaker describes listening to the baby breathing through the night, hearing its breath "Flicker[ing] among the flat pink roses" of the room's wallpaper—an image that suggests a peaceful nursery, decorated in soft colors for the new arrival. And when the speaker hears "a far sea" in her ear, it might be the literal sound of the sea in the distance or a metaphor for the comforting rise and fall of the baby's breathing.

The last stanzas of the poem are also set, not just in a specific place, but a specific time: the "Morning" of the poem's title. When the speaker gets up to care for her baby, the nursery window "Whitens and swallows its dull stars" as the dawn arrives. This slow brightening might symbolize both the "dawn" of the baby's new life and the dawn of the *speaker's* new life as a mother.

## CONTEXT

### LITERARY CONTEXT

"Morning Song" was first published in the *Observer* newspaper in 1961, and appeared later as part of Plath's posthumous collection *Ariel and Other Poems*. The impact of *Ariel*—and the popularity of Plath's only novel, *The Bell Jar*, which was published a month before her death—secured Plath's lasting

legacy as an American writer.

"Morning Song" showcases many of Plath's characteristic themes and qualities, like her vivid, energetic, image-driven language, and her penetrating and distinctly female perspective. Like "Morning Song," many later poems such as "Lady Lazarus" and "Ariel" use tercets, or three-line stanzas, and the poem's theme of motherhood and childbirth appear throughout the collection in poems like "Nick and the Candlestick" and "Child."

The poem, which can be read as autobiographical, is often seen as part of Confessionalism: a revolutionary new style of writing that emerged in the 1950s and '60s. Confessionalist poets wanted to drop the barrier between themselves and the speaker of the poem and to examine the aspects of life which a conformist post-war society deemed too indelicate to talk about. Robert Lowell's "Skunk Hour," W.D. Snodgrass's "Heart's Needle," and Anne Sexton's "The Double Image" are all good examples of Confessionalist poetry.

Inspired by these poets, Plath turned more and more to her own experiences of childhood, marriage, and motherhood in her poetry. "Morning Song," is just one of her honest, unsparing, intimate poems about the complexity and bewilderment of becoming a mother.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Sylvia Plath wrote "Morning Song" in 1961, shortly after the birth of her and Ted Hughes's first child, Frieda Hughes. Plath had a complicated relationship to motherhood (and her own relationship with her mother was far from harmonious). And all around her, she saw women giving up careers and personal freedoms to become housewives whose lives revolved entirely around their children and their homes.

After World War II, this was par for the course: while some women were privileged enough to get an education, ultimately they were expected to give up their careers and settle down to raise a family. But Plath had dreamed of being a writer from a young age. She had no intention of giving up her own ambitions just to fulfill society's expectations of her.

But when as she got older and fell in love, she found herself desiring the very things that represented a lack of freedom to her: marriage, homemaking, children. The ambivalent undertones in "Morning Song" express the conflict Plath felt about her desires for both traditional motherhood and an untraditional career.

This complexity is part of why her work resonated so strongly with second-wave feminists in the United States and Britain: women at this point in history saw their own experiences reflected in Plath's honest introspection.

# MORE RESOURCES

## EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Reading of the Poem — Listen to the poem read aloud by actress Meryl Streep. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hIbzNKFqrQc)
- A Short Biography — Learn more about Plath's life and work at the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/sylvia-plath)
- Plath's Legacy — Read a reflection on Plath's literary afterlife. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/feb/08/sylvia-plath-reflections-on-her-legacy)
- An Interview with Plath — Listen to a 1962 interview with Plath. (https://youtu.be/g2IMsVpRh5c)
- Another Take on the Poem — Read an analysis that examines "Morning Song" through the lens of Simone de Beauvoir's feminist writings on motherhood. (http://reidynotes.weebly.com/morning-song.html)

## LITCHARTS ON OTHER SYLVIA PLATH POEMS

- Ariel
- Daddy
- Fever 103°
- Lady Lazarus
- Mad Girl's Love Song
- Mirror
- Nick and the Candlestick
- Poppies in October
- The Applicant
- The Arrival of the Bee Box
- The Moon and the Yew Tree

# HOW TO CITE

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## CHICAGO MANUAL

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