

Sylvia Plath

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Overview — the story in simple English

Sylvia Plath (1932–1963) was an American poet who lived in England and became one of the most famous voices of "confessional poetry" (স্বীকারোক্তিমূলক কবিতা) — poetry that speaks openly about the poet's private life and feelings. "Morning Song" is a short poem she wrote in February 1961, soon after the birth of her first child, her daughter Frieda. The poem describes the strange, mixed feelings of a new mother (নতুন মা) in the first days after her baby is born. It opens with the famous line "Love set you going like a fat gold watch" — love starts the baby's life the way a watchmaker winds a precious watch. The midwife (ধাত্রী — the nurse who helps at birth) slaps the baby's feet, and its first cry joins "the elements," the great forces of nature. But then something surprising happens: the mother does not feel instant, warm love. She feels distant (দূরবর্তী), as if the baby is a "new statue" in a cold, "drafty museum," and the parents stand around it like blank walls. In the middle of the poem she even says she is "no more your mother" than a cloud is the mother of the pool of water that reflects it — a difficult image meaning the mother feels her own self slowly fading (নিজেকে মুছে যাওয়া) as the child begins a separate life. Yet the poem does not stay cold: at night the mother listens to the baby's soft "moth-breath," and when the baby cries she stumbles from bed, "cow-heavy" with milk, to feed it — her body loves the child before her mind admits it. By the final stanza it is dawn (ভোর); the stars fade in the whitening window, and the baby tries its "handful of notes," whose clear vowels "rise like balloons." So the poem moves from shock and alienation (বিচ্ছিন্নতা) to tenderness (কোমলতা) and quiet joy. 💡 **One-line meaning: "Morning Song" honestly shows a new mother's journey from feeling strange and separate from her newborn baby to real, growing love, as the baby's cry turns into morning music.**

Quick Fact	Detail
Published	Written February 1961; opening poem of the collection <i>Ariel</i> (published 1965, after Plath's death)
Genre	Modern confessional lyric on motherhood
Setting	A home with a newborn baby — night to early morning
Narration / Form	First-person mother speaking directly to her baby ("you"); six three-line stanzas (tercets) in free verse
Famous remark	Ted Hughes, who arranged <i>Ariel</i> , placed this poem first, so the whole book opens with the word "Love"

Themes & Technique

- 1. Motherhood without sentimentality (অতিআবেগ ছাড়া মাতৃত্ব).** Most poems about babies are sweet and simple; Plath's is honest. She admits that a mother's first feeling can be confusion and distance, not automatic love. This honesty is the poem's greatest strength and the first point of any critical appreciation.
- 2. Alienation and estrangement (বিচ্ছিন্নতা).** The baby is a "new statue" in a "drafty museum," and the parents "stand round blankly as walls." The images are cold, hard and public, not warm and private — showing how strange the new arrival feels at first.
- 3. Loss of self / effacement (আত্ম-বিলুপ্তি).** In the cloud-and-mirror image, the mother says the child reflects her own "slow effacement": as the child grows into its own life, the mother feels herself fading like a cloud blown by the wind. Examiners love this stanza because it is the emotional centre of the poem.

4. **The growth of love through the body.** Love arrives through physical care, not sudden magic: listening all night to the baby's "moth-breath," rising at "one cry" to breastfeed, delighting in the dawn "notes." The body answers the child before the heart admits it — this movement from cold to warm is the poem's emotional plot.
5. **The child as an independent being (স্বাধীন সত্তা).** From the first moment, the baby's "bald cry / Took its place among the elements" — the child belongs to nature and to itself, not to the parents as property. The statue image also suggests a separate creation the parents can only stand and look at.
6. **Night giving way to morning; despair giving way to hope.** The poem moves through one night into dawn: the window "whitens and swallows its dull stars," and the baby's song rises with the light. Birth joins the natural cycle of darkness turning to day — unusual optimism in Plath's often dark poetry.
7. **The female body and female experience.** The mother is "cow-heavy and floral / In my Victorian nightgown" — a self-mocking (আত্ম-ব্যঙ্গ) yet tender picture of the nursing mother. Plath writes women's bodily experience directly, which male poets of her age rarely did; this is central to her importance in twentieth-century poetry.

Classroom techniques (poetic technique):

- **Free verse** in six regular **tercets** (three-line stanzas): no rhyme scheme, but a controlled, balanced shape.
- Startling **similes** and **metaphors**: "like a fat gold watch," "new statue," "moth-breath," "clear vowels rise like balloons."
- **Apostrophe / direct address**: the whole poem speaks to the baby as "you."
- **Sound imagery**: cry, echo, breath, "handful of notes," vowels — the poem itself becomes a "song."
- **Juxtaposition (contrast)** of cold images (statue, museum, walls, mirror) with warm ones (roses, balloons, feeding).
- **Enjambment** (a sentence running past the line-end, even across stanzas), e.g. the cloud-mirror sentence — it makes the thought flow like breath.
- **Confessional mode**: private experience turned into disciplined art, as in Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton.
- The title echoes the **aubade** (traditional dawn-song), which Plath rewrites for a mother and child.

Key Quotations — memorize

- "Love set you going like a fat gold watch." — the mother, opening line: love winds up the child's life like a precious watch.
- "The midwife slapped your footsoles, and your bald cry / Took its place among the elements." — stanza 1: the baby's first cry joins the forces of nature.
- "New statue. / In a drafty museum, your nakedness / Shadows our safety." — stanza 2: the cold, distant first response to the fragile newborn.
- "We stand round blankly as walls." — stanza 2: the parents feel empty and passive before the child.
- "I'm no more your mother / Than the cloud that distils a mirror to reflect its own slow / Effacement at the wind's hand." — stanza 3: the poem's most famous and most difficult image; the mother feels herself fading as the child becomes separate.
- "All night your moth-breath / Flickers among the flat pink roses." — stanza 4: tender night-time listening; the turn towards warmth.
- "One cry, and I stumble from bed, cow-heavy and floral / In my Victorian nightgown." — stanzas 4–5: the mother's instinctive, bodily response, told with gentle self-mockery.
- "The window square / Whitens and swallows its dull stars." — stanza 6: dawn arrives; night gives way to morning.
- "And now you try / Your handful of notes; / The clear vowels rise like balloons." — final lines: the cry becomes song; joy and acceptance.

Critics' Views (safe to cite)

Critic	View	Use for
M. L. Rosenthal	Coined the term "confessional poetry" for the school of Robert Lowell; Plath is regularly placed within this confessional mode of intensely personal verse	Introducing Plath's personal manner; poetic technique essays
A. Alvarez	Championed Plath's late poems and wrote about her in <i>The Savage God</i> ; described her final work as a poetry of extreme, risk-taking honesty	Critical appreciation; the daring honesty of her imagery
Ted Hughes	As editor of <i>Ariel</i> , placed "Morning Song" first so the book opens with the word "Love"; he stressed the careful artistic design behind her seemingly personal poems	Showing the poem is crafted art, not a raw diary; its place in <i>Ariel</i>
Robert Lowell	In his foreword to <i>Ariel</i> , praised the fearless intensity of Plath's late voice	Essays on Plath's power and technique
Judith Kroll	In <i>Chapters in a Mythology</i> , argued Plath's poems form a unified mythic system, not mere autobiography	Answering "is Plath only confessional?"; deeper reading of her imagery
Helen Vendler	Read Plath as a poet of exact, disciplined style whose effects come from precise craft as much as from raw emotion	Balancing emotion with craftsmanship in technique questions

Exam Q&A Bank

Part A — Reference to Context (5 marks)

1. "Love set you going like a fat gold watch. / The midwife slapped your footsoles, and your bald cry / Took its place among the elements." — 🔥 Very likely (opening lines of a text whose critical appreciation is v.v.i. in both years)

These are the opening lines of "Morning Song" by Sylvia Plath, the first poem of her famous collection *Ariel*. The mother-speaker addresses her newborn baby and recalls the moment of birth. In the first line, love is the force that "set going" the child's life, just as a watchmaker winds a valuable gold watch. The simile is surprising: the baby is precious like gold and its heartbeat ticks like a watch, but a watch is also a machine — so warmth is mixed with a strange mechanical coldness from the very start. Then the midwife slaps the baby's feet to make it breathe, and its first "bald" (plain, naked) cry joins "the elements" — the basic forces of nature. The lines are significant because they announce the poem's central idea: from its first breath the child is a separate being belonging to nature, and the mother watches with wonder mixed with distance, a distance the rest of the poem will slowly turn into love.

2. "I'm no more your mother / Than the cloud that distils a mirror to reflect its own slow / Effacement at the wind's hand." — 🔥 Very likely (the poem's most-discussed stanza)

These lines occur in the third stanza of Sylvia Plath's "Morning Song," after the cold images of the "new statue" and the parents standing "blankly as walls." Here the speaker makes her most startling statement: she denies that she is truly the baby's "mother." She compares herself to a cloud that distils (slowly forms) rain; the rain makes a pool, and the pool becomes a mirror reflecting the cloud — but what the cloud sees in that mirror is its own "slow effacement," its own disappearing as the wind blows it away. In the same way, the child is made from the mother, yet as the child grows the mother watches her own self slowly fade. The lines are significant because they express, with rare honesty, the new mother's fear of losing her identity, and they mark the emotional low point of the poem before tenderness returns in the night-feeding stanzas. They are also a perfect example of Plath's difficult, compressed imagery.

Part B — Short Notes (5 marks)

1. Short note: The title "Morning Song" — ★ Likely (title-significance notes are a standard Part B pattern in these papers)

The title "Morning Song" carries at least three meanings, and each opens up the poem. First, literally, the "song" is the baby's cry at dawn: in the last stanza the window "whitens and swallows its dull stars," and the child tries its "handful of notes," whose "clear vowels rise like balloons." The baby's morning cry has become music. Second, "morning" means beginning — the morning of the child's life, and also the beginning of the mother's new identity. The poem itself moves from the darkness of doubt and alienation to the light of morning acceptance, so the title names the poem's whole emotional journey. Third, the title recalls the old poetic tradition of the dawn-song (the *aubade*); Plath quietly rewrites that tradition, replacing the lover's dawn parting with a mother's dawn meeting with her child. The title is therefore tender and hopeful: whatever coldness the mother felt at first, the poem ends in song, light and love. Fittingly, it stands first in *Ariel*, opening the whole collection with the word "Love."

2. Short note: The mother's mixed feelings in "Morning Song" — ★ Likely (feeds directly into the v.v.i. appreciation and Plath essays)

"Morning Song" is admired because it tells the truth about new motherhood instead of painting a sweet picture. The mother's feelings move in a clear curve. At first there is wonder mixed with shock: the baby arrives like a "fat gold watch," and its cry joins "the elements." Then comes distance and alienation: the child is a "new statue" in a "drafty museum," and the parents "stand round blankly as walls" — images of coldness, hardness and emptiness. The low point is the cloud-mirror stanza, where the mother says she is "no more your mother" than a cloud is mother to the pool that reflects its fading. But the second half of the poem turns warm. The mother listens all night to the baby's "moth-breath"; at "one cry" she stumbles from bed, "cow-heavy and floral," to feed the child; and at dawn she delights in its first "notes." The mixture of fear, estrangement (বিচ্ছিন্নতা), duty, tenderness and finally joy makes the poem psychologically real — and this honesty is exactly what makes Plath a great modern poet.

Part C — Essays (15 marks)

🔥 **"Write the critical appreciation of the poem The Morning Songs." (appears in BOTH the 2019 and 2020 lists; marked v.v.i. by the compiler)**

Sylvia Plath's "Morning Song," written in February 1961 after the birth of her daughter, stands first in her celebrated collection *Ariel* (1965). It is a short lyric of six three-line stanzas in which a new mother speaks directly to her newborn baby. The greatness of the poem lies in its honesty: it refuses the usual sweetness of baby-poems and instead traces, through a chain of brilliant images, a mother's real journey from estrangement to love — and it does so with a craftsmanship that proves Plath is a careful artist, not merely a diarist.

The poem opens with one of the most famous first lines in modern poetry: "Love set you going like a fat gold watch." The line is tender — love is the origin of the child, and the child is precious like gold — yet also strange, because a watch is a machine, wound up by someone else and ticking away time. From the very first line, warmth and coldness are mixed. The birth itself is described with plain physical truth: "The midwife slapped your footsoles, and your bald cry / Took its place among the elements." The baby's first cry is not sentimental music; it is a natural fact, joining wind and weather. Already the child is a separate being in the universe.

The second movement of the poem is coldness and distance. The baby is a "new statue. / In a drafty museum," and the parents "stand round blankly as walls." These images deserve close attention. A statue is beautiful but hard and lifeless; a museum is public, cold and draughty, not a warm home; walls are blank, passive things. Plath is confessing that the expected flood of motherly love did not come at once. The third stanza deepens this into the poem's most difficult image: "I'm no more your mother / Than the cloud that distils a mirror to reflect its own slow / Effacement at the wind's hand." The cloud produces the rain-pool, as the mother produced the child; but the pool-mirror only shows the cloud disappearing in the wind. The mother fears that in creating a new life she is erasing her own self.

Yet the poem does not end in coldness — and this turn is what makes it a true "morning" song. In the fourth stanza the mother lies awake listening: "All night your moth-breath / Flickers among the flat pink roses." The delicate image of the baby's breath as a soft moth shows love arriving through attention and care. Then the body answers before the mind: "One cry, and I stumble from bed, cow-heavy and floral / In my Victorian nightgown." The self-mocking picture of the heavy, milky mother is humorous and deeply tender at once. Finally dawn comes: "The window square / Whitens and swallows its dull stars," and the baby tries "a handful of notes; / The clear vowels rise like balloons." The cry that began "bald" among the elements has become song, colour and celebration.

Technically, the poem is a model of controlled free verse: six regular tercets, no rhyme, but exact rhythm, bold enjambment and flawless imagery. Plath belongs to what M. L. Rosenthal named the confessional school, yet Ted Hughes, who edited *Ariel*, insisted on the artistic design behind her personal poems — he placed this poem first so that the collection opens with the word "Love." A. Alvarez likewise praised the fearless, risk-taking honesty of her late work. "Morning Song" proves both judgements: it is intensely personal, yet perfectly shaped.

In conclusion, "Morning Song" is a small masterpiece of twentieth-century poetry. It transforms a private, ordinary event — a baby's first days — into a universal study of love, identity and new beginnings. Its movement from the cold museum to the rising balloons of dawn shows that true motherly love is not automatic but grows; and its images stay in the memory long after the poem ends.

"Comment on the male-female relationship in Sylvia Plath's poetry." (2020 list; marked v.v.i. by the compiler)

Sylvia Plath is one of the most powerful female voices of twentieth-century poetry, and the relationship between men and women — husband and wife, father and daughter, woman and the male-ordered world — runs through her work as a central concern. Although our set text, "Morning Song," is about a mother and baby rather than a romantic couple, it still reveals a great deal about how Plath presents female experience in relation to the male world. The thesis of this essay is that Plath writes the male-female relationship from the woman's side with unprecedented honesty: she shows the woman's body, her labour, her fear of losing her identity, and her quiet strength, against a background in which men appear distant, official or oppressive.

First, Plath gives the woman's experience a voice that poetry had rarely allowed. In "Morning Song" the entire drama of birth and nursing is seen through the mother's eyes and felt through the mother's body: "One cry, and I stumble from bed, cow-heavy and floral / In my Victorian nightgown." No male poet of the tradition wrote the nursing mother's midnight reality with such physical truth. The word "Victorian" is quietly critical: the mother sees herself trapped inside an old-fashioned, decorative image of womanhood even while she performs the most basic human labour. This is exactly the confessional honesty that A. Alvarez praised in Plath's late poetry — an art that takes real risks with private truth.

Second, where the couple appears together in the poem, their togetherness is strangely cold. "Your nakedness / Shadows our safety. We stand round blankly as walls," the mother says of herself and, implicitly, the father. The "we" is not a warm partnership but two blank walls in a "drafty museum." Shared parenthood does not comfort the mother; her deepest crisis — "I'm no more your mother / Than the cloud that distils a mirror to reflect its own slow / Effacement at the wind's hand" — is faced completely alone. It is the woman, not the man, who fears effacement, because in the family structure of Plath's time it was the woman whose self was absorbed by the roles of wife and mother. The poem quietly dramatizes this unequal division: the woman's body and identity pay the price of new life.

Third, this pattern matches the larger picture of Plath's poetry in *Ariel* as a whole. Her poems repeatedly stage a struggle between a female speaker and dominating male figures — most famously the dead father remembered as a huge, oppressive presence, with the husband as his shadow, in "Daddy," where the speaker must symbolically break the male idol in order to be free. Critics have long read this conflict as the centre of her work: M. L. Rosenthal placed her in the confessional school precisely because she turned such private family conflict into public art, while Judith Kroll argued that these male figures belong to a coherent personal mythology of female suffering and rebirth rather than simple autobiography. Against the male figures who control or judge, Plath sets the female powers of creation — and "Morning Song," which opens *Ariel* with the word "Love," shows that life-giving side of her imagination.

Fourth, for balance, we must note that Plath's women are not only victims. In "Morning Song" the mother moves from alienation to strength: she watches, feeds, endures the night, and greets the dawn when the baby's "clear vowels rise like balloons." The final image belongs to mother and child — a female line of song and new life. The relationship that finally matters in the poem is not the cold "we" of the parents but the growing bond between the mother and her baby.

In conclusion, the male-female relationship in Plath's poetry is a relationship of tension: male figures are distant, official or oppressive, while the female speaker fights to keep her selfhood and finally asserts it through her own voice. "Morning Song" shows the gentler face of this struggle — a woman alone with the labour and love of motherhood — and proves that Plath turned women's hidden experience into some of the most honest and enduring poetry of the twentieth century.

⚡ One-Page Revision Sheet

Item	Content
Story in 3 lines	A new mother speaks to her newborn baby. At first she feels cold and distant — the baby is a "new statue," and she fears losing her own self. Through night feeding and the baby's dawn cries, distance turns into love: the cry becomes a "morning song."
2 must-quotes	"Love set you going like a fat gold watch." — "I'm no more your mother / Than the cloud that distils a mirror to reflect its own slow / Effacement at the wind's hand."
2 backup quotes	"One cry, and I stumble from bed, cow-heavy and floral / In my Victorian nightgown." — "The clear vowels rise like balloons."
2 critics	M. L. Rosenthal (named the confessional school) — A. Alvarez (praised the fearless honesty of Plath's late work)
Technique words	free verse, tercets, simile, metaphor, imagery, apostrophe, juxtaposition, enjambment, confessional mode, aubade
Top 3 likely essays	🔥 Critical appreciation of "Morning Song" (both years, v.v.i.) — 🔥 Male-female relationship in Plath's poetry (2020, v.v.i.) — ★ Poetic technique of Sylvia Plath (2020)

Exam timing tip: in the 4-hour paper give a 15-mark essay about 45 minutes — 5 to plan, 35 to write (intro + 4-5 body paragraphs + conclusion, with 2 quotations and 1 critic), and 5 to check the spelling of your quotations.