

"All I Can See Is Woman, Woman and Womb¹":

Sylvia Plath's "Morning Song"

Through the Eyes of Feminist Criticism

Sylvia Plath's poem "Morning Song" takes an unsentimental and perhaps subversive look at the process of childbirth and new motherhood. The woman in the poem, the persona, does not take any credit for the birth of her child. She is an "envelope" and a passive vessel, rather than an active participant in the process (Irigaray, "The Politics of Difference" 119-120). Plath's poem conveys events in harsh, and sometimes hateful images, but reading the poem in terms of feminist criticism, Plath's persona, ideas and imagery evolve in new directions.

Under the influence of Hélène Cixous and Elaine Showalter, it seems to me that a paper written by a woman, read, hopefully, by many women, seen through the eyes of Feminism, and dealing with a woman's poetry and the subject of women's issues, is entitled to a special preface. How can a woman not be affected by Showalter's admonition to "reinvent language" and step outside the "phallogocentric structure" ("Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness" 254) and how can such a clarion call to freedom of expression not entice woman to embrace claims that style and syntax are patriarchal dictates, and that, moreover, in some Feminist eye, the Deridian "I" is the male-read positive-pole of a binary opposition whose female-read weak and negative-pole is empty? Well, then, Jacques Derrida's phallic "I" may be a male construct, and writing may indeed have been an extension of phallic control, but by appropriating the patriarchal I, dressing it in softer curves, perhaps even using a different font, my paper might claim the empty pole as filled with an I of its own. In addition, appropriating a style not corseted by norms emanating from the corridors of male academia may allow me to remain true to myself, Cixous and her Anglo-American counterparts. This paper will, then, relate to itself in the first person deliberately. After all, "woman must write herself", says Cixous, and what is more myself than the first person? "Woman must put herself into the text" says Cixous, and again, my reaction to this is that I can do no more than establish a discourse with my reader on the level where there is no doubt that I am my own opinion (Cixous 875).

My paper encompasses "woman watching woman watching woman watching woman" (Tenenholtz 26): a dizzy notion bordering on *mise-en-abyme*. The mirrored images of mothers and daughters embedded in Sylvia Plath's poem "Morning Song" (Ariel 1), also convey an endless chain of observing, being observed and playing a role. Pamela J. Annas writes that Sylvia Plath was a poet of transition between post-war American conservatism and Feminism. During this time of retreat into traditional values, women especially were experiencing "a time of *kinder* and *kuche* if not *kirche*"³ so that those women who "expected to have a career", were also expected to be successful wives and mothers (Annas 11).

"Morning Song" looks at womanhood and motherhood both as a construct of the male world and as the experience of a new mother. The poem expresses the "tension and stresses of the success ethic and the role expectation conflict faced by any woman" who is creative and determined to be both—as in Plath's case—poet and mother (Annas 11). However, from the line, "love set you going like a fat gold watch" ("Morning Song" l. 1), it seems that Plath does not really believe her persona can do this. Her baby, ticking like a gold watch, suggests that the child is to be her retirement present. She is being sent home with a gold watch, thanking her for her service, but retiring her to rock a carriage and look after a child rather than remain part of the creative world of poetry. The ticking-baby is perceived as a threat to its mother whose days as a member of the big world, so to speak, are numbered. Once the baby goes off, the persona will have to transform herself, and although she says that "love" made her pregnant, this is ironic. Love, in the poem, is more a situation of entrapment. Love is hardly a case of soft, gentle and/or passionate communion between a man and a woman, but rather a mechanical act, and one demeaned by the notion of being wound up. The physical excitement is on the surface, but the feelings do not penetrate. What does penetrate—the semen—is seen as a threat. The persona senses the fetus as a foreign body inside her—a bomb—the beginning of the end. How unlike Cixous' images of a woman flowing with words and milk are Plath's opening lines (Cixous 881). Annas, in her analysis of the Ariel poems, also takes the dark view and discusses them in terms of the alienation and the sense of entrapment which are "inside" the personae and according to Annas, inside Plath by inference (Annas 53).

If the persona in "Morning Song" feels threatened by the infant before it is born, the birth itself deepens her sense of alienation and marginalization. The woman seems virtually absent. One moment she is pregnant and the next a midwife is hitting the baby, "the midwife slapped your footsoles, and your bald cry/ took its place among the elements" (ll. 2-3). The baby's arrival, then, is associated with profound negative

changes for its mother. Now that she has acceded to motherhood as part of the social norm for woman, she has given up control over her body. She seems to see no other choices but to play out her role as wife and mother. No wonder, says Joanne S. Frye, that women cannot "perceive femaleness and autonomy." It is the woman's "self" which finds legitimization only "in relationship with marriage and/or motherhood." To Frye it is obvious that such a perception must result in the "demise of self" (Frye 3).

Plath's new mother feels this. She sees herself as suddenly a thing that is hardly there at all. Even the midwife ignores her and the retirement image of the gold watch (1) underscores the persona's erasure. She is being pushed aside. Her "sending off present" into a different world, far from the realm of productivity and vitality, is a gold watch in the form of a baby. This bleak perception of motherhood makes one think about the persona's readiness to be a mother on the one hand, and her sense of loss on the other. Before pregnancy and motherhood the persona may have felt almost genderless, defined by her cerebral contribution, mental agility and character rather than her sex. Once she gives birth, she becomes a woman "inscribed in the symbolic order, a woman bound by her corporeality" (Kirby 237). This is true, for Plath makes fun of the persona's body swollen with milk, stumbling out of bed to nurse her squalling infant—"I stumble from bed, cow-heavy and floral/ in my Victorian nightgown" (ll. 13-14). Frye says that no matter what else a woman has to offer, she is eventually "defined through [her] sexuality and its attendant roles—wife, mother, sex partner" (Frye 168).

Betty Friedan's protest against the notion of woman knowing "fulfillment only at the moment of giving birth to a child" is born out here (Friedan 55). Plath's persona appears in shock. She watches the baby being slapped and hears its "bald cry", but there is no sense of accomplishment. The husband is odiously absent. Moreover, the midwife, another woman, is acting as the emissary of a patriarchal world, drugging the mother so that she may forget the pain of childbirth, and thus be willing to repeat it .

In **The Bell Jar**, Esther Greenwood is appalled at what Buddy tells her about childbirth: the woman is numb as a result of drugs and thus "cut off from her own labor." The ritual of birth is paradoxically controlled by men (Plath 53). Mary Ellman elaborates by writing that women are kept out of sight like "mummies" while doctors come out of the delivery room "upright, calm, flecked with blood" to let the family know that a child has been born (Ellman 79). Indeed, Plath's persona has no recol-

lection of the birth and there is no transition from pregnancy to delivery just as there was no transition from love to pregnancy. The baby has been born, and the old persona is no more. She has exploded, as it were. In place of the woman of the market place, the career, the office, there is now only a mother-- a caregiver.

Raman Selden defines feminism as having an attitude toward society as a "conflict model". He explains that feminism perceives women as in the position of a social class, exploited by patriarchy at economic, political, and ideological levels (Selden 136). Keeping this in mind we see that Plath takes an image from the market place like that of the gold watch and turns it into a weapon against the conventions of motherhood. Plath's persona will not pretend to be happy in her new role, nor will she cooperate with the patriarchal hierarchy in perpetuating the myth of motherhood if this is not what she feels.

Selden and Barbara Brothers seem to agree on a definition of womanhood as a separate social class. For Brothers, this includes the idea of language, something Cixous and Luce Irigaray also discuss. Brothers writes that "women, married or unmarried" have been confined not only within men's rooms, but even more restrictively within "man's prison house of language." Therefore, women must "reinterpret what is natural" if they are to "escape from the powerful clutches of the patriarchy" (Brothers 196). Plath's apostrophe to her infant searches for this "natural" language and she makes an honest attempt to communicate her feelings to her infant. The semiotics of poetry, the unspoken, as well as the infant's marginal sounds and fragments, are very much part of the feminine realm.

If I take Irigaray at her word, Plath's persona experiences the process of birth as a harsh intrusion into her most private realm--namely her body (Irigaray 102). And what of Irigaray's other notion, that the woman is rewarded as it were with a child, and that in giving up her own desire to its needs she can "give free reign" to her need for touching with the child? Irigaray says that "maternity supplants the deficiencies of repressed female sexuality" (Irigaray 102), yet Plath's persona does not feel immediately maternal. Unlike Irigaray's notion of maternity as an escape from sexuality into motherhood, the baby in "Morning Song" is associated with drastic, negative changes for the mother. The homophones of morning/mourning hint that this persona feels mourning and loss and Luce Irigaray and her notion of motherhood and birth as joyous events are deconstructed. Pregnancy and birth in "Morning Song" are described as sterile processes, and the oxymoron of sterility and childbirth emerges from the harsh light of the delivery room. The woman has lost her body and has

become a mere "envelope" (Irigaray 124).

In the center of the poem, Plath disclaims her hold on her baby, and for the first time addresses her child to tell her who she-- the persona--really is, "I am no more your mother/ than the cloud that distils a mirror" (ll. 7-8). Till this moment the binary oppositions had dealt with them/us or baby/society, or perhaps parents/infant. Now the persona defines herself and the role she may play in her daughter's life. She does not do so in terms of what society expects from her, and this is where a sense of vertigo comes into play. Plath conjures up the endless chain of women-having-child-dren-being mothers, "...the cloud that distils a mirror to reflect its own slow/ effacement at the wind's hand" (ll. 8-9). The baby is obviously a girl. Plath's persona erases herself as she hands over the role of child to her infant (Gagnon 179). Mothers, says the persona, do not exist. They are an accident of nature, and are there only incidentally. Biologically one has a mother, but emotionally and even possessively, the persona does not want to make such a claim on her baby. Does this denial free either the persona or the child, and does this statement of abdication change the tone for the rest of the poem?

Language, writes Annas, is a process of "naming ... to limit our perception and to provide stability of perception, so that we can act" (Annas 63). Plath's persona does not name her child. This is the first step in setting the infant and the mother free. Moreover, although the persona was "blankly" standing around, empty and almost catatonic, she now moves into a mode of communication. She does not take pride in being a mother at all, and she says so loud and clear--"I am no more your mother/ than the cloud that distils a mirror to reflect its own slow/ effacement at the wind's hand" (ll. 7-9). The analogy between the new mother and the cloud is extremely painful. What mother negates her own role to this point? The notion that the persona does not take responsibility for her baby's existence is strengthened by this comparison to a random physical event--the movement of clouds. Babies are the result of sex. Clouds are part of the distillation process. However, there is a further notion of mirror-imaging here. The persona looks at the inanimate cloud as it is reflected in the mirror, and she senses a kinship. In other words, the cloud, in passing by the mirror, is leaving something behind due to random physical events, but it has no love for this supposed offspring (ll. 7-9). When mother and child are compared to this process, there can be no feeling. In the mirror, Plath's persona can watch herself aging, while she leaves behind a mirror-image of herself: the baby, a female child. Perhaps this is what frightens the persona so intensely. She has already found out that in the male world women may have limited choices and she has discovered that

motherhood and children are choices imposed by this world. Now she faces the mirror image of herself. The child's nakedness reflects her own, and the comparison is prophetic. The new mother foresees a repetition of a process she does not believe in, and she does not know how to create a world for this child which will be different. This mirror-image is the pivot on which the poem turns. Motherhood is a never-ending chain without readiness, maturity and acceptance. It is a chain of rejection as described by Plath. The persona's anger is clear. She directs it at the patriarchal system which cuts short her own individuation. But there is anger at the child too. The baby has moved the process forward. The cloud looking in the mirror is being effaced by the wind, and the mother, once a child herself, is being replaced by the baby. This is the inexorable process (ll. 7-9).

Plath juxtaposes biological and aesthetic creation. In her view, one comes at the expense of the other. In Annas' words, giving birth stands in the way of "rebirth of the self" (Annas 93). Annas refers to Plath's dilemma as a "tension between stasis and movement, isolation and engagement, and the preoccupations with a resolution of these tensions through rebirth" (Annas 97). At this point the persona feels both orphaned and barren, yet paradoxically, now that she has disengaged herself from the role cast upon her by cultural dictates, she is free to experience motherhood in a novel way.

Throughout the poem, Plath's persona remains in a process of change. She may be effaced by the wind, or looking in the mirror see emptiness, but she may also transcend the images of a reductive mother and look inward. In spite of the persona's perceived humiliations of pregnancy and birth, she may still find a way of living inside herself and inside the world. She may forge a new sense of wholeness. It seems that such a transformation takes place on a symbolic level between the first and final stanzas of the poem. From being a statue by day, the woman comes alive at night. Like a sleeping Gargoyle, mythically awakened, it is the call of her infant daughter that transforms her, "All night your moth-breath/ flickers among the flat pink roses. I wake to listen" (ll. 10-11). She is silent by day, awkward and cynical but alive at night, and by morning she has become nurturing, "One cry and I stumble from bed" (l. 13).

Although Annas does not specifically relate to "Morning Song", she does speak of the *Ariel* poetry in terms of movement from symbolic death to rebirth of the persona, even if this rebirth can come only after an essential part of the self has faded away (Annas 98). "Morning Song", while far from a poem of rejoicing, does show

how eventually communication between mother and child does take place.

I get the strong feeling that as long as the persona feels she is being observed, she is either cynical or angry, but when she is alone with her little girl, she can allow herself to feel. Annas lists the poem among those dealing with "pregnancy and maternity and which focus on the self's reaction to the fact of childbirth rather than on the relationship between mother and child", but I disagree. In the fourth stanza the persona is lying awake, silently, listening for the infant. Her baby's breathing moves her. She admits this although the emotions are distant and motivated more by obligation than love. She is moved by the child's "moth breath" and feels "a far sea mov[ing] in [her] ear" (ll. 10-12). The image is amniotic and extremely feminine, and the silent mother shows a concern beyond her willingness to provide food and shelter. The baby is so fragile, "your breath flickers..." (l. 11), she tells her daughter. The child is ethereal, moth-like, and the persona is moved by her child's eloquent helplessness. "One cry" and the woman is up to feed the baby. I could imagine her husband turning over and looking at his wife's awkward sleep-laden movements, for again the persona is self-deprecating, "...I stumble from bed, cow-heavy and floral/ in my Victorian night gown" (ll. 13-14). The allusions to her swollen body create a caricature of a woman's body. Gone is the sexy nightdress, replaced by a floral, flowing, long and awkward night gown, which is designed for breastfeeding, but not for love. She is trapped inside it, and trips over it. However, the next moment she is outside her husband's aura and in the baby's orbit, and her language changes. The light changes. The sounds change. Communion can take place here. The metaphors emphasize this change in mood, "Your mouth opens clean as a cat's. The window square/whitens and swallows its dull stars" (ll. 15-16).

The baby was an inanimate object, a gold watch, and later she was denoted by the metonymy of her footsoles, the lowest part of the body and thus only barely human. Later, when she first comes home, she is a statue. Like her mother, she comes alive at night. The child breathes at night—she is a moth. She also cries. Her mouth is clean. And while it is true that these images are closely connected to the animal world, there is a progression from moth to feline. Comparing her child to a cat may indicate that the persona hopes her daughter may have some of the cat's characteristics. A cat is independent and does not grow loyal to any master. A cat is far from being a man's best friend and considering that the words female and feline are near homophones, we may assume that the persona wishes her daughter to be true to herself rather than to a master.

Coming back to the poem's title, "Morning Song", we may ask who does the singing here. The question is answered in the final stanza: it is the child. She is not mute and inanimate. She sings. And she sings in the morning. At the break of dawn the infant tries her "handful of notes" and her "clear vowels rise like balloons" (ll. 16-18). Notwithstanding their ambivalence, the lines still state that the child has a voice. The baby sings in the morning—the persona addresses her child in the apostrophe of the final lines, and Plath writes the poem. This is another moment of vertigo and *mise-en-abyme*. Is this baby's song a promise of poetry? Is it perhaps the song of the lark who also sings at dawn and is sometimes seen as the harbinger of death? On a more subversive level the baby's morning song may even be the crowing of a rooster. This would mean that this baby girl is announcing the dawning of a new day and has usurped the rooster's—male—role. She can raise her voice, and in fact, it rises to the heavens like a sacrifice, which is being accepted.

No matter how hard I try, I cannot get beyond the ambiguity of the final lines. They are a mixture of optimism and ending. If the sounds rise in sacrifice, there may be hope for the child. If her song moves off like a balloon on the wind, she is part of the effacement of the poem. However, I am also struck by the fact that Plath gives this baby a language all of her own. There is some kind of semiotic communication here. The pre-language communication of sounds and crying and breathing softly in the dark are uniquely part of the communication between mother and child. The mother may say her baby is a statue, but this proves to be not the case. The progressive metonym from being inanimate to becoming a creature capable of a language that the persona finds beautiful, speaks for itself.

Mother and child have come together at dawn. The persona observes the child and listens to her singing, "... and now you try/ your handful of notes;/ the clear vowels rise like balloons" (ll. 16-18). In Jewish thought this moment is called *חסד* – compassion. At the moment of dawn we may ask whether it is possible to have both motherhood and poetry, "two forms of generativity to be congruent rather than contradictory" and whether they may be reciprocal and "self-confirming" (Johnson 198). We may believe for one short moment – as the persona seems to – that there is such a chance for this child.

Unfortunately, most feminist critics believe the opposite. Alicia Ostriker writes that woman must break the bond between herself and her mother and that the child too causes a rupture in the creative process. Ostriker writes that "she (the aspiring poet) can never become autonomous unless this bond is broken—and when it is, she wants

to recover it" (Ostriker 179). In most general terms this is the essence of the poem "Morning Song" because it too oscillates between the persona's need to be her own person, and her innate maternal feelings.

It is difficult to say that this is an optimistic poem, especially in view of Plath's own life. Nevertheless, I feel the poem exhibits a certain strength which comes from that deep well of womanhood and which transcends societal expectations of women. "Morning Song" does not hide the persona's despair at her new status, and nowhere does she gloss over her feelings. This is the poem's strength and its claim to ecriture feminine -- feminine writing-- for its subject matter is so wholly in the female realm that it is difficult to imagine its emotions emanating from a male pen. In Cixous' words, Plath has succeeded in liberating the "New Woman from the Old by coming to know her", and if Plath does not succeed in having her persona love herself, as Cixous demands she must, at least she has shot one of those arrows Cixous claims will give women writers strength (Cixous 878).

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Notes

1. The title of this paper is inspired by the poem "Walking with My Mother" (Tenenholtz 26).
2. considering the richness of this poem, I felt it had to be quoted in full.

Morning Song

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

Our voices echo, magnifying your arrival. New statue.
In a drafty museum, your nakedness
Shadows our safety. We stand round blankly as walls.

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

All night your moth-breath
Flickers among the flat pink roses. I wake to listen:
A far sea moves in my ear.

One cry, and I stumble from bed, cow-heavy and floral
In my Victorian nightgown.
Your mouth opens clean as a cat's. the window square

Whitens and swallows its dull stars. And now you try
Your handful of notes;
The clear vowels rise like balloons.

3. This is an old German expression denoting that the woman has no place outside the home and implies that the woman's realm is narrow and clearly defined by patriarchal dictates of childbirth, motherhood and marriage.
The words mean children, kitchen and church.