

At the Purchaser's Option

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This song was inspired by an advertisement for the sale of a slave, whose nine-month old child is also available "at the purchaser's option."

I've got a babe, but shall I keep him?
'Twill come the day when I'll be weepin'
But how can I love him any less,
This little babe upon my breast?

5 You can take my body
You can take my bones
You can take my blood
But not my soul

I've got a body dark and strong
10 I was young but not for long
You took me to bed a little girl
Left me in a woman's world

You can take my body
You can take my bones
15 You can take my blood
But not my soul

Day by day I work the line
Every minute overtime
Fingers nimble, fingers quick
20 My fingers bleed to make you rich

You can take my body
You can take my bones
You can take my blood
But not my soul

25 I've got a babe, but shall I keep him?

Questions for Discussion and Writing

1. To gain deeper insight into the song's basic meaning, apply the SOAPSTone method of poetry analysis:
 - What is the **subject** of the song?
 - What **occasion** do you think the song is intended for?
 - Who is the intended **audience** for the song?
 - What do you think the **purpose** of the song is?
 - Who is the **speaker** in the song?
 - What is the **tone** of the song (the speaker's attitude toward the subject)?

2. What message is the speaker expressing? In what sense can her soul not be taken (line 8)?
3. How does the situation described in the song reflect the advertisement that inspired it? What does the speaker mean when she asks, "Shall I keep him?" (line 1)? What emotional dilemma does her helplessness in this situation put her in, and what is her response to this dilemma?
4. In what sense was the speaker "young, but not for long" (line 10)? Discuss the meaning of the traumatic transformation described in the third stanza (lines 9-12) that was forced upon her. What possibility does this suggest about her child?
5. In what sense is "every minute overtime" (line 18)?
6. Identify and discuss the dehumanizing aspects of slavery depicted in the song. What stylistic and rhetorical strategies does the speaker use in expressing these truths?