

Adrienne Rich

Biography :

- Born in Baltimore, Maryland in 1929.
- Father encouraged her literary talents from an early age.
- Earned a diploma from Radcliffe College at Harvard.
- In 1951 her first collection of poetry, *A Change of World*, was chosen by W.H. Auden for a prestigious award.
- In 1953 she married Alfred Haskell Conrad and settled in Cambridge, Massachusetts.
- Later moved to New York.
- Conrad died by suicide in 1979 amid their marital separation.
- Embraced her sexual orientation as a lesbian. She entered into a partnership with Michelle Cliff that would last until the end of her life.
- Poetry and writing became overly feminist and political in tone.
- Died in 2012 at the age of 82

Themes:

- Power and powerlessness
- Inequality
- Relationships
- Communication

Style:

- Personal and confessional
- Use of metaphors and symbolism
- Use of contrast
- Vibrant, vivid imagery
- Early poetry is more rigid, formal and structured
- Later poetry is reflective of Rich's sense of liberty. It is more informal and her use of language becomes more conversational.

Poems:

‘Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers’

‘The Uncle Speaks in the Drawing Room’

‘Living in Sin’

‘Power’

‘Trying to Talk with a Man’

Adrienne Rich is widely considered the most seminal (influential) feminist poet. Her work reflects themes which Rich felt strongly about and thus gave a voice to: inequality, oppression and human communication and relationships. These themes are most evident in the poems ‘Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers’, ‘Living in Sin’, ‘The Uncle Speaks in the Drawing Room’, ‘Power’, and ‘Trying to Talk with a Man’. As Rich evolved as a poet, so too did her style. Her earlier poetry is rigidly structured to reflect Rich’s struggle with conforming to societal expectations. Her later poetry is more free-flowing and less structured, as Rich finally found her poetic voice. Throughout all her poetry, however, Rich made extensive use of metaphors to convey her themes more thoroughly.

‘Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers’

Rich wrote the poem ‘Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers’ when she was a young student. The subject of the poem is the titular Aunt Jennifer, who is weaving a tapestry containing ‘bright topaz’ tigers. The tigers are her creation, and they are described as fearless and powerful as they ‘pace in sleek chivalric certainty.’ The tigers are the epitome of courage and confidence. The second stanza stands in stark contrast to the first, as we are given an insight into Aunt Jennifer herself. While the language used to describe the tigers is confident and powerful (‘prance’, ‘pace’), the language used to describe Aunt Jennifer is delicate and self-conscious. Aunt Jennifer’s fingers are described as ‘fluttering’ as she finds it hard to pull the ivory needle. She is weighed down by the ‘massive weight of Uncle’s wedding band’. The wedding ring can be seen as a metaphor for the oppression Aunt Jennifer feels in her marriage.

This is further explored in the final stanza, where Aunt Jennifer's hands are referred to as 'terrified'. The wedding ring's presence is once more expressed as an oppressive force, as she will wear it even when she is dead. The struggles in her marriage are best expressed by the phrase 'ordeals she was mastered by.' It is not clear exactly what these ordeals were, but it is evident that the relationship between Aunt Jennifer and her husband was characterised by fear and inequality. Although Aunt Jennifer will inevitably die, the tigers that she created will 'go on prancing, proud and unafraid.' Thus, Aunt Jennifer has some level of victory in the poem; while she might be fragile and indeed, mortal, her creation is not. Her tigers represent everything Aunt Jennifer cannot be in a patriarchal society: strong, confident and independent.

Style Features	
Imagery	The tigers are presented as vibrant and energetic. The wedding band is a physical representation of oppression.
Contrast	There is a stark contrast between the delicate and fearful Aunt Jennifer and the powerful tigers she creates.
Symbolism and metaphor	The tigers serve as a metaphor for Aunt Jennifer's desire for freedom and power, and her unspoken voice. Her wedding band serves as a metaphor for oppression and patriarchal domination. The artwork she creates symbolises her creativity and need for expression.
Structure	The structured form (three quatrains with a regular AABB rhyme scheme) represents the strict rigidity of Aunt Jennifer's life.
Alliteration	The tigers 'pace in sleek chivalric certainty'. The alliterative sound created here reinforces the tigers confidence and power. In contrast, Aunt Jennifer's 'finger fluttering through her wool' conveys an image of a delicate, nervous woman.

‘Living in Sin’

‘Living in Sin’ also explores a relationship between a man and woman. This relationship, however, is not as traditional, though similar problems arise in their relationship. The couple are unmarried (thus, living in sin) and live in a studio apartment. Their bohemian lifestyle is described in detail in the poem. The man is an artist and their lifestyle appears, on the surface, to reflect the freedom and easygoing nature of this kind of lifestyle. Rich describes the subjects of the man’s paintings: ‘a plate of pears, a piano with a Persian shawl’. The man appears rather bored and apathetic in the poem. He yawns while sounding ‘a dozen notes upon the keyboard’ before he ‘rubbed at his beard’ (a symbol of his masculinity) and ‘went out for cigarettes’. Due to societal expectations forced upon her, the woman cannot live such a languid (lazy) and apathetic existence. Rich notes, wryly, at the beginning of the poem, that ‘she had thought the studio would keep itself’. Although the woman knows that she is expected to almost enjoy cleaning and embrace her domestic role, she clearly resents it, which Rich likens to ‘heresy’. The studio is not presented to us in a flattering light. Words such as ‘grime’, ‘coldly’ and ‘dust’ suggest that this couple is not living in domestic bliss. The woman is clearly not adjusting to the role that is expected of her. ‘Last night’s cheese’ and ‘sepulchral bottles’ have yet to be cleaned up. In the kitchen ‘a pair of beetle-eyes’ fix the woman’s. She lets the ‘coffee-pot boil over on the stove.’ The repetitiveness of this cycle is symbolised by the milkman’s step on the stairs day after day. It is clear that the pressure to perform domestic duties is becoming a source of frustration for the woman as the poem ends with the statement that she is still in love ‘though not so wholly’ as before. Similarly to ‘Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers’, ‘Living in Sin’ describes an unequal and imbalanced relationship, where the man exercises a measure of control over the woman.

Style Features	
Imagery	The imagery ranges from romantic (the image of a plate of pears and the piano with the Persian shawl) to grimy and reflective of the reality of a mundane domestic life.

Contrast	There is a contrast between romantic expectation and harsh reality. The couple imagine a life of artistic freedom but instead, the woman is bound by domestic responsibilities and the man appears bored.
Symbolism	The 'furniture of love' symbolises the romantic life the couple had envisioned. The milkman is a symbol for the drudgery and monotony of daily routine.
Structure and Form	The poem is written in free-verse and does not contain a regular rhyme scheme. The poet also uses enjambment. This loose structure represents the couple's romantic and bohemian ideals.

'The Uncle Speaks in the Drawing Room'

'The Uncle Speaks in the Drawing Room' also describes an unequal relationship, although this time, Rich discusses the inequality that exists between social classes; most notably the upper class aristocracy and the lower classes. The speaker of the poem is 'The Uncle', an unnamed, gentrified man who is a symbol for the upper class patriarchy. Much like 'Aunt Jennifer's Tigers', this poem is rigidly structured to symbolise the rigidity of the social class structure. It is also a rather political poem, betraying Rich's thoughts on social divides. The man notes that he has seen 'a mob' standing 'sullen' outside his house which he describes in terms of its 'window, balcony and gate.' The so-called mob (notable by the fact that they are referred to as a singular group) talk in 'bitter tones' while they hold and finger stones.

Although the threat of the mob is ever-present, the man does not seem to take it very seriously. He refers to the 'follies' of the mob with a rather dismissive tone. The man's concerns seem to lie with his glassware, most notably his 'crystal vase and chandelier'. He rather arrogantly states that the mob will not throw their 'missiles'. The scene does remind the man of a past incident where his 'grandsire

stood aghast to see his antique ruby bowl shivered in a thunder-roll.’ Again, he appears singularly preoccupied with his material possessions. The incident, which happened in the distant past, hardly seems particularly noteworthy, but it has clearly been the subject of much discussion in the family. The term ‘grandsire’ is interesting also. It suggests the importance of breeding and generational wealth in the aristocracy.

The final stanza continues to discuss the importance of material wealth to the aristocracy. This is something that is generational or ‘handed down’. The aristocracy are protective and mindful of this wealth, as they ‘stand between’ it and the ‘murmurings of missile throwers.’

Style Features	
Voice	The poem is presented as a dramatic monologue. The speaker is an unnamed, gentrified man who represents the upper class. His limited and biased perspective conveys class privilege and detachment. His tone is formal, authoritative and dismissive.
Imagery	The poem contains images of wealth and opulence, such as the crystal vase, the chandelier and the ruby bowl. The storm imagery serves to reinforce the theme of social upheaval and revolt, although the event it describes is quite innocuous.
Symbolism	The ‘frailties of glass’ (the crystal vase and the chandelier) symbolise the upper class: they are expensive items but they are also fragile. The antique ruby bowl also symbolises generational wealth.
Contrast	There is a contrast between the disenchanted ‘mob’ outside holding stones and the upper class inside, concerned for their material possessions which are more delicate

	than stones.
Structure	The poem contains an ABABCC rhyme scheme and its strict structure reflects the rigid order and discipline of the upper class.

‘Power’

In ‘Power’, Rich writes about Polish scientist Marie Curie and her contribution to the scientific community. Rich is particularly focused on the impact Curie’s work had on her physical health. Initially, Rich focuses on the present day. She uses a wonderful metaphor to describe historical research: ‘a backhoe divulged out of a crumbling flank of earth one bottle amber’. She muses that the bottle might have been a ‘cure for fever or melancholy’. The inclusion of the word ‘melancholy’ is interesting; as this is an archaic term used to describe depression, often associated with women. Rich repeats the word ‘today’ to open the third stanza, informing the reader that she has been reading about Marie Curie. She muses that Curie ‘must have known she suffered from radiation sickness’. Curie is most famous for purifying the element radium, which ultimately resulted in her death from radiation poisoning. Rich notes that Curie’s body was ‘bombarded’ by radium though she ‘denied’ this. It resulted in ‘cataracts on her eyes’ and ‘cracked and suppurating’ skin. Despite all of this, Rich notes that Curie’s contribution to the scientific community and indeed to the world, as well as her knowledge and resilience in a field traditionally dominated by men, endowed her with an immortal power. In order for her to be respected and ultimately acknowledged, she had to make the ultimate sacrifice. Rich ends the poem by telling us ‘her wounds came from the same source as her power.’ While Curie suffered greatly, her choice to continue and her resilience in doing so has inspired Rich.

Style Features	
Allusion	The poem alludes to the contribution made by Marie Curie to the scientific field.
Imagery	Images of archaeology suggest the

	<p>discovery of buried truths.</p> <p>Medical imagery referencing Curie's 'cracked and suppurating skin' conveys the sacrifices she made to advance scientific knowledge.</p> <p>The radioactive imagery presented in the poem serves to convey her power as something both illuminating and destructive.</p>
Symbolism	<p>The amber bottle symbolises the continued search for scientific advancement as well as the struggles of women over generations.</p> <p>Curie herself symbolises the sacrifices a woman must make to advance in a male-dominated space.</p> <p>Radiation symbolises knowledge and advancement but also destruction and sacrifice.</p>
Contrast	<p>There is a contrast between the contributions made by Curie to the field of science and the toll it took on her body.</p>
Structure	<p>The poem is written in free-verse and contains a rather fragmented structure. This conveys the poem's theme of breaking boundaries. The fragmented stanzas create a sense of discovery and piecing together evidence, which is reflective of Rich's desire to unearth Curie's contributions to science.</p>

'Trying to Talk with a Man'

As Rich grew older, her poetry became no less political but more personal. As her relationship with her husband deteriorated and ultimately imploded, Rich channelled her intense feelings of frustration into her poetry. These poems are

written in blank verse and lack the rigid structure of her earlier poetry. In ‘Trying to Talk with a Man’, Rich describes a trip she took with her husband where they drove to the Nevada desert to witness a nuclear bomb test. From the outset, Rich brings together the public and private as she writes ‘out in this desert we are testing bombs’. In a literal sense, Rich is referring to the US government testing nuclear weapons, and in this sense the ‘us’ mentioned refers to American citizens. On a more personal level, Rich is referring to the marriage between her husband and herself, which is being tested and about to implode. The tension is continued throughout the first stanza, where Rich states ‘sometimes I feel an underground river forcing its way between deformed cliffs’. The river may well be a symbol of the impending release of tension between the two, as they finally begin to confront the issues they face as a married couple.

The second stanza describes a happier time for the couple. Their earlier relationship was filled with ‘LP collections...bakery windows full of dry, chocolate-filled Jewish cookies...love-letters.’ There are hints, however, that even then, all was not well between the couple. The reference to ‘suicide notes’ is telling. As well as this, Rich refers to the couple ‘pretending to be children’. It is possible that she believes that their love was always juvenile and artificial.

The next stanza returns to the present. The desert, a barren and desolate place, reflects the current state of the couple’s marriage. The couple’s journey may have been an attempt to revive their failing relationship but instead they are ‘surrounded by a silence’ that ‘came with’ the couple. It is clear that the couple cannot escape their problems. In perhaps the most poignant line of the poem, Rich admits ‘out here I feel more helpless with you than without you’. Rich also admits that her husband looks at her ‘like an emergency’. She notes that his ‘dry heat feels like power’. The tension between them has become unsustainable. The last three lines explicitly admit the fundamental truth of the poem: that the marriage is about to end. Rich states that the couple are ‘talking of the danger as if it were not ourselves/ as if it were testing anything else.’

Style Features	
Voice	The poem is written in the second person; the speaker is directing the poem to her husband. There is a sense that she is speaking, but not being

	heard.
Imagery	There is contrasting imagery in the poem to convey the duality of their relationship. The speaker shares romantic memories of ‘bakery windows’, ‘chocolate-filled Jewish cookies’ and ‘love-letters’ but this contrasts significantly with the dry, barren imagery of the desert and the nuclear testing site she describes.
Symbolism	The ‘underground river’ symbolises the underlying tension between the couple. The desert is a symbol of what their marriage has deteriorated into and how stifled their communication has become. It symbolises emotional barrenness. The nuclear weapons symbolise the imbalance of power which can exist in personal and political relationships, and the tension which can exist in relationships. It symbolises the impending implosion of their marriage.
Contrast	There is contrast created between the couple’s past and present. Where they once wrote ‘love-letters’, they now struggle to communicate effectively. The mention of ‘suicide notes’ also reminds us of the destructive potential of love.
Juxtaposition	Rich juxtaposes the personal with the political. A failing marriage is compared to (and discussed alongside) large-scale political danger.
Structure	The poem is written in free-verse, with no set rhyme scheme. The loose structure mirrors the fragmented nature of the couple’s communication. The use of enjambment conveys the speakers need to be heard- she is

	pouring her heart out. There does not appear to be any resolution.
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