



*'Adrienne Rich explores the twin themes of power and powerlessness in a variety of interesting ways.'*

*Write a response to the poetry of Adrienne Rich in the light of this statement, supporting your points with suitable reference to the poems on your course.*

The poetry of Adrienne Rich is centered on the theme of power – who is in power, and who suffers from powerlessness. Rich explores this double-sided theme in her poetry by examining the heightened power males enjoy in society, while also exploring the lack of empowerment females suffer from in this same arena, devoting her poetry to addressing this injustice and attempting to evoke change. This is achieved through many interesting approaches, some of which will be looked at here, such as powerful images, the challenging of patriarchal society, the transcending of stereotypical feminism and the politics of power. Poems in which this can be seen are AUNT JENNIFER'S TIGERS, DIVING INTO THE WRECK, LIVING IN SIN, THE UNCLE SPEAKS IN THE DRAWING ROOM, OUR WHOLE LIFE, TRYING TO TALK WITH A MAN and POWER.

Imagery is often used in poetry to reveal a poem's message, and Rich makes use of this stylistic approach in her poetry. Throughout her poetry Rich uses images which reveal various sources of power, all of which serve the purpose of showing how females experience only powerlessness, while males easily retain power.

This is achieved in DIVING INTO THE WRECK. As Rich dives into the "wreck" at the poem's beginning, she is presented in an appearance created by powerful images, checking "the edge of the knife-blade" while she puts on "the body-armor of black rubber". The reason for this is to symbolise how women cannot be powerful in their natural form in the masculine-dominated metaphorical "wreck" of a world that Rich inhabits, and hence must adopt a different guise simply to function, which Rich refers to as "the grave and awkward mask". Another example of the confining life females live is seen in LIVING IN SIN. Here Rich's husband, the "milkman" is presented as in complete, effortless control as he eases through life, which is in cruel contrast to the struggle his wife must face in everyday life, another revealer of the masculine-dominated society of Rich's time. Whereas her daily routine includes being "jeered by the minor demons" and making "the bed" and finding "a towel to dust the table-top", the milkman is juxtaposed in carefree contentment as he "with a yawn, sounded a dozen notes upon the keyboard,/ declared it out of tune, shrugged at the mirror, rubbed at his beard, went out for cigarettes". In another poem, THE UNCLE SPEAKS IN THE DRAWING ROOM, we see echoes of the milkman, with males assuming power comfortably as once more a male is depicted in a powerful position, albeit ironic as this is the uncle, who presides over "the mob". It is logical to presume that this group, who are on the verge of violence (we hear that some of them "have talked in bitter tones" and "have held and fingered stones") would hold power in this

position, however here it is the individual, the masculine who does so. The Uncle is assured and confident, and dismisses the mob, declaring that “these are follies that subside”. Indeed, in Rich’s world, when another holds power it is not even the female, but the tigers in AUNT JENNIFER’S TIGERS. The mention of “Aunt Jennifer’s tigers” is a conventional image of power, with the tiger considered one of the fiercest animals. The significance of the animals here is shown in the world they inhabit, Rich’s world – it is a difficult world, full of obstacles, seen with the challenge to females such as Aunt Jennifer, who is controlled by “Uncle”. However the tigers, with their strength and capacity, do not suffer such trials – instead we here that they “do not fear the men beneath the tree”: in an act of metaphorical defiance that females cannot engage in, they “pace in sleek chivalric certainty.”

Rich does not limit her focus on the powerlessness females experience to simple submission, such as that shown above by imagery: through the transcending of stereotypical feminism (in which the male dominates the female), Rich provides other examples of how the female is powerless in her world, through such factors as alienation, where the female is ignored, isolated and therefore cannot function, as none will embrace her need for companionship.

This is introduced in LIVING IN SIN. Here Rich laments the alienation the female feels in her relationship, caused by the uncaring male. The female thought “the studio would keep itself” but instead she has been relegated to the conventionally thought female role, that of domestic wife, to the detriment of her relationship. She must focus on “last night’s cheese and three sepulchral bottles”, with the result that when she is in love it is “not so wholly”. The poem does not so much focus on female equality as it laments female loneliness – and the husband who provides no source of happiness or joy, but rather goes “out for cigarettes”, only to return at five when “each separate stair would writhe”. Once more in AUNT JENNIFER’S TIGERS there is no companionship in a relationship, which Rich laments the lack of. With no love, joy and equality in her marriage, Aunt Jennifer cannot be the loving wife she surely desires to be. Marriage is instead an “ordeal”, where she is overseen by her master in an act of synecdoche, as her “finger” is depicted “fluttering through her wool” despite the fact that she finds “the ivory needle hard to pull.” Likewise, in TRYING TO TALK WITH A MAN, the female cannot communicate with her other, and cannot be the loving partner she wishes to be, as her relationship breaks down. Rich declares that “Coming out to this desert”, through alliteration, that she and her partner are “surrounded by silence” and that until now this silence was eradicated only because “everything we were saying until now/ was an effort to blot it out”. Poignantly, she and her partner only “talk of caring for each other/ in emergencies”, but she realises tragically that this man looks “at me like an emergency” and this is the only function she can serve to be, a truly worthless role. Indeed the use of simile, which compares two items are not alike, poignantly represents the disconnect between partners here.

Due to the powerlessness experienced by females in the world around her, which she records in her poetry, Rich sets about challenging this unfair sexist power/powerlessness divide. To achieve this, she challenges the traditional patriarchal society, in which the male reigns supreme, inserting various instances

and examples to illustrate that such a societal norm is neither universally revered, nor accepted.

This is seen in *DIVING INTO THE WRECK*. Having read “the book of myths”, which hold a timeless set of rituals and conventions for society to elevate males and render females as inferior, Rich dives into the wreck to attempt to challenge this. This challenge is epitomized as she reaches “the place” where she and the merman “circle silently”. Her depiction of the scene metaphorically sums up her unwillingness to be considered as less than the male. As she and the “merman in his armored body” dive into “the hold”, Rich does not conform to the common conception of the time, and rather places both on a common level through repetition, declaring “I am she: I am he”. Nor is it solely Rich in her poetry who mounts such a challenge. It can be considered that the mob, clearly angered by an issue, have congregated outside the Uncle’s house in *THE UNCLE SPEAKS IN THE DRAWING ROOM* due to the mistreatment of females, as this is a prominent theme of Rich’s work and that the Uncle considers them of little worth, or potential, dismissing their wants and desires as mere “follies”, a conception considered of females in Rich’s time.

However that there is a “mob” outside the “Drawing Room” indicates that such a conception is no longer universally accepted. Now it seems as though the uncle wishes to retain things, represented through repetition, “in the keeping of our kind – our kind” (which here can be considered to be males), due to necessity, as a challenge to his way of life, which he has grown comfortable with, is a very real possibility. Similarly, in *AUNT JENNIFER’S TIGERS*, while Aunt Jennifer is controlled by “Uncle” in the poem there is some suggestion that the dominance of the males is coming to an end. Another relationship in which males are generally considered superior is mentioned, that of hunter and beast, but with an alteration – here the tigers “do not fear the men beneath the tree” and rather “pace in sleek chivalric certainty”. The ending of the poem can be seen to be not an indication of the uncaring world who pays no notice of Aunt Jennifer’s death, but rather a heralding of what is to come – much like the tigers “go on prancing, proud and unafraid”, the females will soon follow suit, and challenge the dominance of males also. The end of male dominance is likewise predicted in *OUR WHOLE LIFE*. The poem refers to a factual event where an Algerian set himself on fire as a protest against the political events in his wartorn country. Rich uses such an event to metaphorically show not only the lengths that are needed to challenge and overcome the obstacle of male dominance (where females must adopt a new language simply to function, communicate and be accepted in the world ruled by males, “the oppressor’s language”) but also to reveal that there is a real intention to do so. The “knot of lies” currently “eating at itself to get undone” is symbolic of the female finally challenging the male, and attempting to rid herself of her current, unwanted state.

However, despite such efforts by Rich, her poetry does suggest that the society Rich seeks to change is not ready for radical overhaul. There is the poignant and tragic message that females cannot achieve true empowerment and that even when they experience some element of this, they do remain ultimately powerless.

This is seen in *POWER*, the poem which focuses on Marie Curie, who sacrificed her own power for the good of others. Rich tells us that “she must have known she

suffered from radiation sickness” but she defiantly “denied to the end/ the source of the cataracts on her eyes... till she could no longer hold a test-tube or a pencil”. As widely known, Curie’s research work radically improved cancer treatment but tragically the radiation she was working with made her terminally ill – her power came at the cost of her death. Tragically, as Rich laments, “her wounds came from the same source of her power”, the power she sacrificed for the good of the world around her. Similarly, in AUNT JENNIFER’S TIGERS, Aunt Jennifer only experiences empowerment while under the control of “Uncle”. She does possess the artistic ability to create something of worth even in the most troubling of circumstances, but she is not powerful; her tigers are, as they do “not fear the men beneath the tree” and “pace in sleek chivalric certainty”. It is suggested tragically that Aunt Jennifer only achieves some worthwhile sense of empowerment when she is “is dead”: it is alluded that she lives on, even through death, like her tigers – “prancing, proud and unafraid.” There is an even bleaker message in TRYING TO TALK WITH A MAN where the female, like Aunt Jennifer, is empowered by the male. However the he female has no freedom in the poem, and rather is at the mercy of the male, who treats her more as a subject than a partner. Indeed she only gains a minute sense of power when he rejects her from the relationship, when he can only look at her “like an emergency”, not as someone he is in love with: as she says, “your eyes are stars of a different magnitude”, eyes that “reflect lights that spell out: EXIT”, a metaphorical representation of the disconnect between one time romantic partners.

Rich’s poetry focuses on the power that males have, and that females, the powerless, should have. Her poetry is not just an exploration of this, but an attempt to evoke change concerning this pressing and unjust issue. However the conclusion is tragic, as her poetry, despite its best efforts, comes full-circle with the poignant realisation that the imbalance is so engrained in society that change is not yet possible. Her poetry, while attempting to redress the unbalance, merely confirms this social injustice: that the males are those in power, at the expense of the opposite sex.