Adrienne Rich brings us into the heart of relationships in her poetry. Her poetry charts the sweet beginnings, the bitter ends, the lasting scars and the life after a relationship ends. This is particularly true in ‘Living in Sin’, ‘Trying to Talk with a Man’, ‘From a Survivor’ and ‘Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers.’

In ‘Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers’ Rich’s feminism is obvious. Writing in the 1950’s she viewed marriage as an oppressive institution that stifled Aunt Jennifer’s creativity. Rich uses a powerful contrast between the confident, free tigers and the meek and terrified Aunt Jennifer. The verb ‘prance’ shows the tigers’ confidence ‘They do not fear the men beneath the tree.’ The institution of marriage on the other hand has psychologically damaged Aunt Jennifer. The alliteration of ‘fingers fluttering’ brings to mind a fragile bird that has lost control over her own thoughts and destiny. She finds life ‘hard’, she was drained of her energy in a destructive relationship. The adjective ‘massive’ highlights a marriage that loomed large and barred all progress. It was an oppressive ‘weight.’ Her husband is never named but he is an ominous presence who has imprisoned Aunt Jennifer with a wedding band. The end-rhyme of ‘band’ and ‘hand’ links the two like handcuffs. Her marriage weighs ‘heavily’ on her and stifles her creativity. Uncle is the master and he has subjected Aunt Jennifer to terrible ‘ordeals’. It was a marriage to be endured and it has left scars on the old woman. She has been branded or ‘ringed’ and is ‘terrified.’ Rich leaves us in no question as to the destructive nature of this relationship that has robbed the artistic world of a ‘bright topaz.’

‘Living in Sin’ is another poem that deals with a problematic relationship. It tracks the gradual disintegration of a relationship. It started as a fairy-tale, a couple flaunting the social conventions of the time and living together without being married. They live in a ‘studio’ a word with far more romantic connotations than a simple flat. The girl’s naiveté is evident; she believed their love would never lose its gleam ‘no dust upon the furniture of love.’ She turns a blind eye to the ‘grime’ because she believed their love was pure. The unusual adjectives ‘picturesque amusing’ of a mouse highlights how the girl sees the world through love’s rose tinted glasses. A change occurs with the cold morning light; she’s beginning to see things as they really are. The use of the adjective ‘sepulchral’ suggests the relationship is doomed to die. The use of the dash highlights disgust dawning and lingering ‘a pair of beetle-eyes would fix her own-‘ The man, never named, is already bored ‘with a yawn.’ The out of tune piano is a metaphor for a love that is falling apart. The woman falls back into societal conventions and can no longer stand the dirt that surrounds her. The coffee pot that boiled over is a metaphor for suppressed anger bubbling to the surface. The evening returns to bathe their relationship in a romantic hue but all is not right. The simile comparing her realisation of the relationship’s end to the milkman tramping up the stairs tells us the woman can no longer ignore the pounding reality.

In ‘Trying to Talk with a Man’, we encounter another relationship in turmoil and about to explode. Rich uses a metaphor that compares a relationship in turmoil to ‘testing bombs.’ The opening line stands alone and that adds to the power of the metaphor. Adjectives such as ‘deformed’ and condemned’ do not bode well for the relationship. What had started as ‘the language of love-letters’ has deteriorated into ‘silence.’ Their relationship is a ‘desert,’ all goodness has dried up and nothing grows anymore. They are ‘surrounded by silence… that came with us and is familiar’; they have nothing to share anymore except awkward emptiness. Rich allows us to see how lonely a place a dying relationship is ‘Out here I feel more helpless with you than without you.’ They are no longer there for each other. Love can bring hurt to your life ‘lacerations’ that cut deep and a ‘thirst’ for something more. The metaphor ‘Your eyes… reflect lights that spell out: EXIT’ is extremely visual and effective. There is panic and an urge to end this relationship.

‘From a Survivor’ tells us the story of life after a relationship has ended. It is an emotionally charged title. The term ‘survivor’ is often used to describe Jews who survived the Nazi concentration camps. In this poem, Rich uses the word to describe her feelings twenty years after the end of her marriage. The marriage ‘was the ordinary pact’ of ‘those days’, romance wasn’t a high priority, it was almost like a business transaction. The failure of their marriage is unfortunately not uncommon. It is shared by ‘the failures of the race.’ Rich’s presentation of the line ‘Like everybody else, we thought of ourselves as special’ adds poignancy to the poem. As in ‘Living in Sin’ Rich has faced reality and realises her husband did not have the body of a god. He no longer had any emotional power over her, Rich, unlike Aunt Jennifer, escaped. Her new life is filled with positives ‘a succession of brief, amazing movements each one making possible the next.’ Her use of run on lines shows the energy she possesses once she left the draining relationship. The implication is that marriage is a draining institution, one that is better left.

The picture Rich paints of relationships may not be very positive, she is a poet who tells it like it is and doesn’t hold back on her feelings. Her honesty challenged me into taking off the rose tinted glasses and see the real reality. While not always brimming with happiness, there is a life affirming quality to Rich’s poetry where life is filled with ‘amazing moments’ even if they don’t always last.