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Adrienne Rich: A woman's perspective

Marjorie Waterman

ADRIENNE RICH: A WOMAN'S PERSPECTIVE

A Thesis

Presented to the

Department of English

and the

Faculty of the Graduate College

University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

University of Nebraska at Omaha

by

Marjorie Waterman

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THESIS ACCEPTANCE

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Thesis Committee

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CONTENTS

"We may safely assert that the knowledge that men can acquire of women, even as they have been and are, without reference to what they might be, is wretchedly imperfect and superficial and will always be so until women themselves have told all that they have to tell."

--John Stuart Mill

CHRONOLOGY

1929 — May 16, born in Baltimore, Maryland. Encouraged by her father, Dr. Arnold Rich, she wrote poetry as a child, influenced by his "very Victorian, pre-Raphaelite library."

1951 — A.B., Radcliffe College, Phi Beta Kappa. A Change of World selected by W. H. Auden for the Yale Younger Poets Award and published.

1952-53 — Guggenheim Fellowship; travel in Europe and England.

1953 — Marriage to Alfred H. Conrad, an economist who taught at Harvard. Resident in Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1953-66.

1955 — Birth of David Conrad.
Publication of The Diamond Cutters and Other Poems, which won the Ridgely Torrence Memorial Award of the Poetry Society of America.

1957 — Birth of Paul Conrad.

1959 — Birth of Jacob Conrad.

1960 — National Institute of Arts and Letters Award for poetry. Phi Beta Kappa poet at William and Mary College.

1961-62 — Guggenheim Fellowship; residence with family in the Netherlands.

1962 — Bollingen Foundation grant for the translation of Dutch poetry.

1962-63 — Amy Lowell Traveling Fellowship.

1963 — Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law published.
Bess Hoken Prize of Poetry magazine.

1965 — Phi Beta Kappa poet at Swarthmore College.

1966 — Necessities of Life published, nominated for the National Book Award.
Phi Beta Kappa poet at Harvard College.
Moved to New York City, where Alfred Conrad taught at City College. Residence there from 1966 on.

1966 (cont.)	Increasing involvement in protesting the Indo-china War.
1966-67	Lecturer at Swarthmore College.
1967-69	Adjunct Professor of Writing in the Graduate School of the Arts, Columbia University.
1967	Selected Poems published in Britain. Litt. D., Wheaton College.
1968	Eunice Tietjens Memorial Prize of Poetry magazine. Began teaching in the SEEK and Open Admissions Programs at City College of New York.
1969	Leaflets published.
1970	Death of Alfred Conrad.
1971	The Will to Change published. Shelley Memorial Award of the Poetry Society of America. Increasingly identifies herself with the woman's movement as a radical feminist.
1972-73	Fanny Hurst Visiting Professor of Creative Literature at Brandeis University.
1973	Diving into the Wreck published.
1973-74	Ingram Merrill Foundation research grant; began work on a book on the history and myths of motherhood.
1974	National Book Award for Diving into the Wreck. (Rich rejected the award as an individual, but accepted it, in a statement written with Audre Lord and Alice Walker, two other nominees, in the name of all women.) Professor of English, City College of New York.
1975	Poems: Selected and New published.[1]

[1]Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi, eds., "Chronology," Adrienne Rich's Poetry (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1975), pp. 203-204.

INTRODUCTION

"How sad it is to be a woman! Nothing on earth is held so cheap!"
-Fu Husuan

"A pair of eyes imprisoned for years inside my skull is burning its way outward, the headaches are terrible."
-Adrienne Rich
"Ghazal," 7/25/68ii

In both style and theme, Adrienne Rich presents a provocative figure in contemporary poetry. Her ability to transcend mere transcription of her own experience sets her apart from most poets writing today. Penetrating insight, the ability to draw precise analogies and a creative sense of the language take her writing beyond polemics. In the tradition of Walt Whitman, Rich regards words as parts of reality, as well as symbols for it. Consequently, her language is like life, dynamic, vigorous, combining heterogeneous elements. She is comfortable mixing classical references with contemporary. Her poetry incorporates scientific jargon, foreign phrases, and American slang. And because Rich respects words as small portions of life, she does not waste them in her work.

The universal appeal Rich achieves with her language does not preclude her from also being specifically a woman's

poet. She identifies herself with the woman's movement and the abrasive quality of some of her poetry reveals an impatience with the current position of women. It is out of this impatience that she has produced her feminist work. Rich sees the role of literature in the woman's movement as an essential one. Her own writing has been described as having a "sense of urgency [which] has been instrumental in making poetry responsive to and responsible for political and social energies of the greatest importance: new understandings of politics, of power, and of the sensibilities of women."[2] In an article she wrote for the Modern Language Association (MLA) Commission on the Status of Women in the Profession, she said, "A radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us; and how we can begin to see -- and therefore to live -- afresh."[3] Serving as an example of her own description, Rich's poetry focuses on the nature and direction of contemporary woman.

Aligning herself with today's feminists, Rich uses her

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[2]David Kalstone, "Talking with Adrienne Rich," Saturday Review (22 April 1972), p. 56.

[3]Adrienne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," College English, 34, No. 1 (October 1972), 18. Subsequent references to this article will be cited in the text as CE with the appropriate page numbers.

insights and observations to help other women. "Our struggles can have meaning only if they can help to change the lives of women whose gifts -- and whose very being -- continues to be thwarted." (CE p. 21) She contends that women must come to know themselves, "and this drive to self-knowledge is more than a search for identity: it is part of her refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society." (CE, p. 18) The self-destructive nature of "male-dominated society" is a recurrent theme in Rich's poetry. In her essay, Rich maintains that "male judgment, along with the active discouragement and thwarting of her needs by a culture controlled by males, has created problems for the woman writer: problems of contact with herself, problems of language and style, problems of energy and survival." (CE, p. 20)

The problems deriving from this culture are not limited to just women writers, but apply to women in general. It is this situation which provides the theme of many of Rich's poems. Essentially, she deals with the concept of male-dominance and its destructive effect on women in four thematic areas. Often overlapping and/or entwined, these areas are: interpersonal relationships, familial roles, the professional world, and political area. In the first of these respects women are affected as lovers; in the second as wives and mothers; in the third as artists and/or career women; in the fourth as competitors for power.

In accepting this feminist direction, Rich's poetry assumes a double nature: it renounces the artistic limits

which had been imposed on it, and it renounces the personal, social, and political restrictions which had previously confined her. Stylistically and thematically, then, her poetry represents a personal liberation, a creative achievement, and a political tool.

CHAPTER I

INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

"For love's sake, women must reject the roles that are offered to them in our society. As impotent, insecure, inferior beings, they can never love in a generous way."

-Germaine Greer
The Female Eunuch

"... sexuality is a powerful metaphor and actuality."

-Ellen Frankfort
Vaginal Politics

As presented through Adrienne Rich's poetry, the male psychology works to thwart women at even the most fundamental social level, the relationship between two people. In this area, the male need for and tradition of dominance can force women into submissive roles. Another destructive element in the male stereotype is its tendency toward non-communication. Finally, men often use their sexuality as a manipulative device. In these three ways, Rich concludes poetically, the dominance of men can serve to destroy women.

Often, when an encounter grows into a romantic relationship, the identities of the two persons involved are lost in

the roles they play. The characteristic position many women assume in such a relationship is one of deference to the male desires. As early as A Change of World, written during her college years, Rich sensed that women are often the victims in a romance. In "An Unsaid Word," she examines the traditional female attitude toward her lover:

> She who has power to call her man
> From that estranged intensity
> Where his mind forages alone,
> Yet keeps her peace and leaves him free,
> And when his thoughts to her return
> Stands where he left her, still his own,
> Knows this the hardest thing to learn.[4]
> [1951]

This poem, in effect, is a tribute to the woman who is able to accept a man's neglect without question, and remain loyal to him. The last line suggests that this may become a burden, but she must "learn" to bear it if she wants to keep the man. The structured compactness and rhythm of the poem create a poetic distance. Consequently, this poem works like an impersonal observation about a fact of life. To the degree that she has objectified the poem, Rich meets W. H. Auden's

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[4] Adrienne Rich, "An Unsaid Word," A Change of World (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1951), p. 51. Subsequent references to this volume will be cited in the text as C with the appropriate page numbers. Additional volumes by Rich, which will also be identified in the text, include: The Diamond Cutters (New York: Harper and Brothers, Publishers, 1955) (DC); Diving into the Wreck (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1972) (D); Leaflets (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1969) (L); Necessities of Life (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1966) (N); Poems: Selected and New: 1950-1974 (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1975) (PS); Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1967) (S); The Will to Change (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1971) (W). Date each entry was written will follow the quoted passage in parenthesis. If that information is unavailable publication date will be used, enclosed in brackets.

criteria for a good, young poet. In the foreword to A Change of World, Auden wrote, "in a young poet, the most promising sign is craftmanship for it is evidence of a capacity for detachment from the self and its emotions without which no art is possible."[5]

As a developing poet, Rich met Auden's standards. She adopted formalism and concentrated on technique. As she grew artistically and personally, though, she abandoned this detachment and began to speak more directly. Of this change Rich said:

> I think I would attribute a lot of ... [it] to the fact of growing older, undergoing certain kinds of experiences, realizing that formal metrics were not going to suffice me in dealing with these experiences, realizing that experience itself is much more fragmentary, much more sort of battering, much ruder than these structures would allow, and it had to find its own form.[6]

In this first volume Rich used formalism as a method and a shield. Looking back on that collection, she said, "I had always thought of my first book as well-tooled poems but poems in which the unconscious things never got to the surface."[7]

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[5]W. H. Auden, "Foreword," A Change of World (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1951), p. 10.

[6]J. Paul Hunter, ed., "[an excerpt] from Talking with Adrienne Rich," Poetry (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1973), p. 507.

[7]Hunter, p. 507.

Except for a momentary cynicism in "The Kursaal at Interloken" in which she wrote, "Reality would call us less than friends/And therefore more adept at making love " (C, p. 25) [1951], Rich maintained this attitude in many of her early poems.

In a later poem, "Living in Sin," Rich looks again at a male-female relationship and this time her poem works like a naturalistic painting to show the mundane realities beneath the romance. The woman, although she is in love, becomes increasingly aware throughout the poem, that she is the one who must keep love's house clean:

> She had thought the studio would keep itself;
> No dust upon the furniture of love.
> Half heresy, to wish the taps less vocal
> The panes relieved of grime. A plate of pears,
> A piano with a Persian shawl, a cat
> Stalking the picturesque amusing mouse
> Had been her vision when he pleaded "Come."
> Not that at five each separate stair would writhe
> Under the milkman's tramp; that morning light
> So coldly would delineate the scraps
> Of last night's cheese and blank sepulchral bottles;
> That on the kitchen shelf among the saucers
> A pair of beetle-eyes would fix her own --
> Envoy from some black village in the mouldings...
> Meanwhile her night's companion, with a yawn
> Sounded a dozen notes upon the keyboard,
> Declared it out of tune, inspected whistling
> A twelve hour's beard, went out for cigarettes;
> While she, contending with a woman's demons,
> Pulled back the sheets and made the bed and found
> A fallen towel to dust the table-top,
> And wondered how it was a man could wake
> From night to day and take the day for granted.
> By evening she was back in love again,
> Though not so wholly but throughout the night
> She woke sometimes to feel the daylight coming
> Like a relentless milkman up the stairs.
>
> (DC, pp. 60-61)
> [1955]

Here Rich expresses the attitude that women are treated unfairly in a love relationship. Speaking objectively about the woman here enables her to function on a purely poetic level and not become involved personally in the woman's problem. In other words, the persona's dilemma does not necessarily appear to be Rich's. Cleaning house in this poem could represent maintaining the relationship. The tone of the poem seems to be resignation, achieved by the manner in which the woman doggedly goes about her tasks. When the persona awakens to the reality of her situation, she feels guilty for wishing it were not so: "Half heresy, to wish the taps less vocal/ The panes relieved of grime ." It is as if she should accept her situation and be content with it. The nature of this relationship, even if it is an apparently romantic one, is bleak when viewed from the woman's perspective. She sees "scraps," "blank sepulchral bottles," "beetle-eyes" and has to contend "with a woman's demons" while all the man has to deal with are "a twelve-hour's beard," "cigarettes" and an "out of tune" piano which he quickly forgets.

Rich uses this mundane situation to convey the destructive nature of man by showing what his attitude is doing to the woman's affection for him. After laboring all day at chores she does alone, she wonders how man can "take the day for granted." True, she is "back in love again" by evening, but not as completely as she had been. Her ideal love has

vanished in the hard reality that daylight brings. And just as the stairs "writhe/Under the milkman's tramp," so must she suffer with the realization that regardless of and perhaps even because of love, each of her days means work. Her daylight is as "relentless" as the milkman. Rich's treatment here is not anger, but the cold imagery she uses returns the reader to the title of the poem. Line four employs a pun to draw a connection between the romantic wish and the domestic reality shown here. Just as the persona wishes "The panes relieved of grime " so might she want her own pain soothed by the relationship. Unfortunately, she has been disillusioned, if not deliberately misled by tradition and her own dreams. Consequently, the sin in the title suggests not the sexual aspect, as one might think, but what the woman has done to herself to perpetuate the relationship.

By the time Rich wrote "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law" in the late 1950's, she was no longer relying on formal structure as she had done earlier. Now she was primarily concerned with writing about "experiencing herself as a woman." (CE, p. 24) "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law" is a ten section panorama of womanhood; and, although it is admittedly gimmicky (CE, p. 24) and uses much allusion, it represents a breakthrough in female self-expression. The two sections of the poem which deal with a romantic relationship treat it in a negative way. One describes a woman shaving her legs, presumably in preparation for a date:

> Dulce ridens, dulce loquens,
> she shaves her legs until they gleam
> like petrified mammoth tusk.
>
> (S, p. 22)
> (1958-1960)

The imagery of "petrified mammoth tusk" works here to suggest lifelessness and emptiness. This feeling of emptiness is also supported by the use of Latin, a dead language, which lends a ritualistic atmosphere to the poem and suggests that the entire process of preparation was done without conscious planning. The use of the "mammoth tusk" image also accomplishes the comparison of the woman with something of extreme value, particularly as an ornament or possession. Laughing, she prepares herself to be possessed and seems to see no significance for herself except in that role.

The image of woman as property is continued in the sixth section. Here, Rich writes that a woman is "Pinned down/by love." (S, p. 23) The implication is not only that women are hopelessly trapped by a love relationship, but that their value in such a situation comes primarily from their being a man's property, to be displayed. Use of the word "pinned" is an obvious sexual reference, the results of which appear to emphasize female victimization in this poem.

The sexual relationship between a man and a woman often assumes more significance than mere physical union. In "The Demon Lover" Rich writes in sexual terms about a creative process and ties the two areas together. She attempted to write this poem "out of experiencing, as a woman and as a

poet, the compelling and even erotic quality of a man's mind."[8] The process of a woman abandoning herself to become part of the man is treated within this poem. Rich explains this procedure in terms of a seduction:

> You see a man doing extremely well something that you too are doing, and instead of there being envy or jealousy, there's almost a desire to turn into that person, to let the language take you over, feeling almost seduced by it, and refusing to be seduced.[9]

Rich establishes a tone of weariness at the onset of the poem with the first two words, "Fatigue, regrets." (L, p. 19) (1966) She has stylized her verse so that the poem's structure works with the initial words to turn the poem into one, long irritated sigh. Ten regular stanzas of eleven lines each, short lines, short sentences, short words contribute to a feeling of being thwarted. The continual starting and stopping leaves the reader exhausted and frustrated, not unlike the figures in the poem. The poem repeatedly speaks of stopping, of dead ends, of isolation. In the first stanza, "The lights/ go out," "Snow blindness/settles over the suburb," "your heart utters its great beats/of solitude." (L, p. 19) (1966) The third stanza continues this sensation of entrapment and isolation by mentioning the New York City blackout:

> Something piercing and marred.
> Take note. Look back. When quick

---

[8]Kalstone, p. 57.

[9]Kalstone, p. 57.

> the whole northeast went black
> and prisoners howled and children
> ran through the night with candles,
> who stood off motionless
> side by side while the moon swam up
> over the drowned houses?
> Who neither touched nor spoke?
> whose nape, whose finger-ends
> nervously lied the hours away?
>
> (L, p. 19)
> (1966)

The sense of aloneness caused by the blackout is paralleled by the separation between two people who fight any drawing together, "Who neither touched nor spoke " and "nervously lied the hours away."

Uncertainty characterizes this poem as the woman searches for her place and struggles against the man's pull, "Is she/ your daughter or your muse," (L, p. 19). But the emphasis is on the fact that the woman is drawn to the man. Wanting to stay separate from him, she realizes that she probably does not have the strength to resist. Even so, she anticipates losing this struggle; and her consolation appears to be that she will not abandon herself to the seduction but hold back, so that it becomes more of a rape than a love-making:

> If I give in it won't
> be like the girl the bull rode,
> all Rubens flesh and happy means.
> But to be wrestled like a boy
> with tongue, hips, knees, nerves, brain..
> with language?
>
> (L, p. 20)
> (1966)

The man in this poem is unaware of what he represents to the woman. "He doesn't know." (L, p. 20) He is concerned with the physical aspects of the encounter:

He's watching
breasts under a striped blouse,
his bull's head down.
(L, p. 20)
(1966)

Throughout the first seven stanzas of the poem, the woman successfully resisted the man's pull, unwilling to sacrifice her identity just to have what he had. The time has passed when the two might have worked cooperatively together ("There might have been a wedding/that never was "). (L, p. 21) At the time Rich wrote this poem, she was facing some difficult decisions in her personal life. Her attempts to reconcile her life as a woman and her life as a poet are reflected in this poem. Her reference to language in stanza nine indicates her attitude toward the significance of words and communication. It also involved her, as a poet, in this poem: "We are our words," "Only where there is language is there world." (L, p. 21) The tone of the poem is regret that man did not have to be so distant, so potentially destructive ("This is a seasick way") (L, p. 22) yet for the present, the woman in the poem will accept man's terms, if only to fight him: "I want your secrets-I will have them out." And so, "Seasick, I drop into the sea." (L, p. 22)

Translating this struggle into sexual terms accomplishes two things. It allows Rich to demonstrate how man sees woman as a physical creature; it captures the nature of dominance and submission and its effect on men and women in areas outside of a romantic relationship.

Rich suggests that men have established artificial walls to exclude women. These walls protect men from having to reveal genuine feelings and they also help to maintain men's position of superiority in this society. In "Leaflets" Rich examines the divisive nature of men's inability or unwillingness to articulate their real feelings. This poem begins with dark, cold images: "black glass," "frozen/lesions," "endless night," "Coal Sack," "black veins of ice." These create a sense of foreboding and introduce the next stanza which names the problem: "this/division" (L, p. 52) (Winter-Spring 1968). The separation between men and women appears to result from man's need for protection, because in seeking it isolation results. Rich would have people forget about being vulnerable so that they might come together:

> life without caution
> the only worth living
> love for a man
> love for a woman
> love for the facts
> protectorless
>
> that self-defense be not
> the arm's first motion.
>
> (L, p. 52)
> (Winter-Spring 1968)

Just as Rich asks for a less formal, more open albeit more vulnerable attitude between men and women, she is beginning to shape her poetry by the same premise. The honesty she encourages in personal relationships is beginning to define her poetry, making it more informal, direct, and self revealing.

To blame the masculine character entirely for the psychological separation between persons would be unfair. However,

there are certain values associated with masculinity which isolate individuals to the degree that they promote emotional defensiveness. These would include associating physical strength with masculinity, as well as equating lack of emotion with strength of character. Because no one really lacks emotion, unless they are psychopathic, men must hide what emotion they do feel. This contributes to dishonesty and misunderstanding. Rich expresses her desire for emotional integrity in "Leaflets" when she writes, "Tell me what you are going through-" (L, p. 54).

In one of her ghazals,[10] Rich examines a situation in which men substitute sexual closeness for real communication:

> Killing is different now: no fingers round the throat.
> No one feels the wetness of the blood on his hands.
>
> When we fuck, there too are we remoter
> than the fucking bodies of lovers used to be?
>
> How many men have touched me with their eyes
> more hotly than they later touched me with their lips.
>
> (L, p. 69)
> (July 24, 1968)

The reality and the meaning seem to be gone from the life pictured in this ghazal. The killing mentioned in the first line is not a physical thing. "No one feels the wetness of the blood on his hands." It is rather a spiritual shutting off, a sort of shared dying for which no one individual feels responsible. The isolation and dying which pervade this life

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[10]The form of the ghazal developed as a result of Rich's having read the poetry of the Urdu poet Mirza Ghalib, 1797-1869. Adrienne Rich. Leaflets (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1969), p. 59.

have also affected sex. The question "there two are we remoter/than the fucking bodies of lovers used to be?" seems to be a statement that this affliction is the disease of our age and of our society. In this kind of life, the promises have more meaning than the reality: "men have touched me with their eyes/more hotly than with their lips."

The idea that an entire generation is to blame for this barrenness is found in "Pieces":

> Plugged-in to her body
> he came the whole way
> but it makes no difference
>
> If not this then what
> would fuse a connection
>
> (All that burning intelligence about love
> what can it matter
>
> Falling in love on words
> and ending in silence
> with its double-meanings
>
> Always falling and ending
> because this world gives no room
> to be what we dreamt of being
>
> Are we, as he said
> of the generation that forgets
> the lightning-flash, the air-raid
>
> and each other
>
> (W, p. 34)
> (1969)

The pessimism in this poem derives from the thought that emptiness as a characteristic of our age has even affected love and sexual relationships. In an effort to remain invulnerable from one another, men have sacrificed closeness. Love requires a personal commitment and perhaps the most

intense type of sharing, not just talk. Too often, the talk is an effort to fill in all the emptiness behind it. The poem's last four lines indict an entire generation of men and women for their non-caring. It is possible that this attitude is a result of our cultural values. In a society suffering from overcrowding and mechanization, human relationships become difficult, but all the more essential, to maintain. Although Rich never directly blames men for this condition, by implication they are guilty because ours is a patriarchal society and men have basically directed the course of our cultural development.

If Rich avoided blaming man for the condition of the world and its people in her earlier volumes of poetry, she certainly does not in Diving into the Wreck. Published in 1973, that collection contains several angry feminist accusations that man and his world have not only been destructive to woman, but threaten the entire human race. Men's use of sex and the promise of love is one of the things Rich attacks. As a younger poet she allowed that many men use sex to hide or substitute emotional potency, now she says in "Translations" that men also use sex to manipulate women:

> You show me the poems of some woman
> my age, or younger
> translated from your language
>
> Certain words occur: enemy, oven, sorrow
> enough to let me know
> she's a woman of my time
>
> obsessed
>
> with Love, our subject:

we've trained it like ivy to our walls
baked it like bread in our ovens
worn it like lead on our ankles
watched it through binoculars as if
it were a helicopter
bringing food to our famine
or the satellite
of a hostile power

.

I begin to see that woman
doing things: stirring rice
ironing a skirt
typing a manuscript till dawn

trying to make a call
from a phonebooth

The phone rings unanswered
in a man's bedroom
she hears him telling someone else
Never mind. She'll get tired.
hears him telling her story to her sister
who becomes her enemy
and will in her own time
light her own way to sorrow

ignorant of the fact this way of grief
is shared, unnecessary
and political.

(D, pp. 40-41)
(1972)

Having nearly abandoned the structure of her earlier poems, Rich could almost have written "Translations" as prose. Sparse in imagery and figurative language, lacking in the poetic devices of rhythm and rhyme, the work holds together as a poem because the form allows a compactness and focus which prose does not. The lines are brief and unembellished to underline the honesty of the statement she is making. There is no persona in this poem as Rich is speaking as and for herself. The anger she feels is controlled and not forced upon us, but her opinion is strong. Men have used "love" as

their most brutal and effective weapon in the domination of women by promising fulfillment which they don't provide. Also, it pits women against one another, so when they should be sharing and helping one another, they become enemies. Rich shows how demeaning a situation like this can be for a woman. The description of the unanswered phone call captures the destructive nature of men in this situation. The only stanza in the poem which uses figurative language to any extent is the fourth one. Therein, Rich compares love with other types of domestic items, "ivy," "bread." And while women expect love to "bring food to our famine," it is, in fact, "worn like lead on our ankles." It oppresses and controls women through playing games with their needs. And so it becomes, Rich says, a deliberate male con where women both provide the game and pay the price to play.

Man's use of sex disguised as love to harm woman is expressed in Section IV of "Meditations for a Savage Child." In it, she examines how unwanted pregnancies often force women to kill children. As a child, she was warned of the threat men could be in this way:

> I keep thinking of the flights we used to take..
> till they warned us to stay away from there
>
> Later they pointed out
> the venetian blinds
> of the abortionist's house
> we shivered
>
> Men can do things to you
> was all they said.
>
> (D, p. 60)
> [1973]

With the line, "Men can do things to you" Rich implies that men have not only the power, but the right and the potential for harm. Whether Rich is blaming men for unwanted pregnancy as a method of controlling and/or hurting women is not clear here. What is obvious, though, is that children are taught to believe that men have the power and the right to hurt women sexually, and this lesson remains through adulthood to become fear and/or submission in women and dominance in men.

The most barbaric crime man can commit against woman sexually is rape. Forcing her to accept him manifests dominance in its most neurotic form. No longer is sex a pretense, a substitute, a defense or even a manipulation. Here, sex becomes a desperate expression of a sick male ego. Only through power and violence can a man assume a superior position. Although rape seldom threatens existing interpersonal relationships or shatters love dreams, it can become a threat to future relationships in that it can cause sex to become the ultimate terror for a woman. Also, the aftereffects of a rape often generate as much humiliation as the rape itself. It is Rich's contention in "Rape" that through such a crime a woman is twice violated, physically by her assailant and psychologically by the men who interrogate her in the name of law. The latter violation becomes the real focus of her poem:

There is a cop who is both prowler and father
he comes from your block, grew up with your brothers,
had certain ideals.
You hardly know him in his boots and silver badge,
on horseback, one hand touching his gun.

You hardly know him but you have to get to know him:
he has access to machinery that could kill you.
He and his stallion clop like warlords among the trash,
his ideals stand in the air, a frozen cloud
from between his unsmiling lips.

And so, when the time comes, you have to turn to him,
the maniac's sperm still greasing your thighs,
your mind whirling like crazy. You have to confess
to him, you are guilty of the crime
of having been forced.

And you see his blue eyes, the blue eyes of all the fami
whom you used to know, grow narrow and glisten,
his hand types out the details
and he wants them all
but the hysteria in your voice pleases him best.

You hardly know him but now he thinks he knows you:
he has taken down your worst moment
on a machine and filed it in a file.
He knows, or thinks he knows, how much you imagined;
he knows, or thinks he knows, what you secretly wanted.

He has access to machinery that could get you put away;
and if, in the sickening light of the precinct,
and if, in the sickening light of the precinct,
your details sound like a portrait of your confessor
will you swallow, will you deny them, will you lie your
way home?

(D, p. 45)
(1972)

Ten times in this poem Rich uses the word "know." In so doing, she accomplishes several things. First, she emphasizes by contrast how ignorant and insensitive the policeman is. Also, she could be representing the sexual aspect of the poem by referring to "know" in the Biblical sense of carnal knowledge. Repetition often contributes to the feeling of panic and in this case could reinforce the victim's reaction.

It is interesting that the word "know" is present in all but the third and last stanzas. These are the two stanzas which deal with her two violations.

Rich's syntax and diction in this poem create its strength. The first stanza, which introduces the policeman, is full of male imagery: "prowler," "father," "brothers," "boots," "badge," "gun." The second stanza draws an image of his power: "access to machinery that could kill you," "stallion," "like warlords," "unsmiling lips." The force of his personality nearly overshadows the actual rape in the poem. When the victim finally has to turn to him, it is as the "guilty" one. As she relates the details of her rape, his "blue eyes grow narrow and glisten" and he is pleased by the "hysteria in your voice," as it reinforces his position of power and authority. Rich has carefully arranged his description and that of the rapist, so that by the poem's end, the two become indistinguishable as her "details sound like a portrait of her confessor."

Controlled by the structure of the poem, Rich is not screaming here, but her voice is definitely raised. She is exposing her own attitudes about the crime of rape and its implications, and she is doing it in such a way as to elicit an emotional response. In effect, Rich is blaming the male character for this crime. It is the traditional masculine value system that has changed a neighbor and friend into a "prowler" merely by a change of clothing. Assuming the

role of policeman involves becoming a male symbol and displaying traits of dominance, strength, and power. Consequently, when a woman is forced to turn from one man to another in such a situation, it is difficult to determine which is the larger threat. Is it the man who forces himself to be accepted by a woman? Or is it the man who makes her feel guilty for "having been forced"? The implication in Rich's poem is that the police officer becomes the more active threat. He poses behind a veil of safety and then allows himself to assume an artificial superiority by exploiting the woman's vulnerability: "the hysteria in your voice pleases him best." Rich uses this exaggerated example of male-female relationships to level a potent indictment against the destructive nature of man and his society.

Culminating in the poem about rape, Rich uses her poetry to reveal how the male psychology can serve to destroy personal relationships principally in three ways: through outright dominance, through non-communication and isolation, and through use of sex as a manipulative device.

CHAPTER II

FAMILIAL ROLES

"...to be a female human being trying to fulfill traditional female functions in a traditional way is in direct conflict with the subversive function of the imagination."

-Adrienne Rich
"When We Dead Awaken:
Writing as Re-Vision"

"The modern individual family is founded on the open or concealed slavery of the wife...Within the family he is the bourgeois and his wife represents the proletariat."

-Friedrich Engels
The Origin of the Family

Marriage commonly represents the fusion of a personal relationship with a domestic role. Within the marriage structure, a man's expectations of his wife often serve to frustrate her creative impulse and contribute to feelings of resentment and guilt. As wives, most women find their time consumed by domestic chores: cleaning, caring for children, cooking, shopping, washing. As they realize that much of their energy is being spent on repetitive and boring tasks, many women find it necessary to confront their dissatisfaction. Frequently they fail to identify the reason for their unhappiness, not daring to question the traditional role of

housewife and mother. Rich feels there is a real problem with women being unaware of the source of their frustration and pain:

> 'If I'm in pain, it's because of Love. Not because I'm failing to realize my being, or failing to become the person I was intended to be, no-it's got to be love.' That's a misdefinition by women themselves of what their pain was about.[11]

The resentment many women suffer because of their lives often is not cause enough for examination or change. Frequently, women feel guilty for not being satisfied with a role which they had been taught meant happiness and contentment.

After Rich had been married, delivered three children, and published two volumes of poetry, she felt unfulfilled and forced herself to discover the reasons for it:

> I seemed to be losing touch with whoever I had been...I was writing very little, partly from fatigue, that female fatigue of suppressed anger and the loss of contact with her own being; partly from the discontinuity of female life with its attention to small chores, errands, work that others constantly undo, small children's constant needs.
>
> (CE, p. 23)

She realized that her writing was in direct conflict with her domestic responsibilities:

> For writing is renaming. Now to be maternally with children all day in the old way, to be with a man in the old way of marriage, requires a holding-back, a putting-aside of that imaginative activity, and seems to demand instead a kind of conservatism.
>
> (CE, p. 23)

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[11] Kalstone, p. 57.

Even before Rich consciously identified the nature of this problem, she was aware that traditional marriages in most cases did not allow the woman creative growth. In a poem she wrote as a college student, "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers," Rich examines the marital suppression of one woman. At the time she wrote this poem, Rich was not secure enough to speak directly as herself. Consequently she uses the character, Aunt Jennifer. "In those years formalism was part of the strategy -- like asbestos gloves, it allowed me to handle material I couldn't pick up barehanded." (CE, p. 22)

> Aunt Jennifer's tigers prance across a screen,
> Bright topaz denizens of a world of green.
> They do not fear the men beneath the tree;
> They pace in sleek chivalric certainty.
>
> Aunt Jennifer's fingers fluttering through her wool
> Find even the ivory needle hard to pull.
> The massive weight of Uncle's wedding band
> Sits heavily upon Aunt Jennifer's hand.
>
> When Aunt is dead, her terrified hands will lie
> Still ringed with ordeals she was mastered by.
> The tigers in the panel that she made
> Will go on prancing, proud and unafraid.
>
> (C, p. 19)
> [1951]

The formal structure of this poem, which Rich credits to protection, works well to parallel Aunt Jennifer's rigidity and contributes to the total effect. Just as the poem is carefully controlled, so is Aunt.

The description Rich uses elicits sympathy for Aunt. The opening stanza is filled with references to the tigers, "bright," "do not fear," "sleek." By contrast Aunt seems to be a pathetically weak and drab character. Aunt's suffering stems

from her role as wife, a convention which is based on male dominance and consequently female oppression. "The massive weight of Uncle's wedding band" makes it difficult for her to pull the ivory needles. She obviously had to fight for even this token creative outlet. In the third stanza Aunt is projected as dead, but still "ringed with ordeals she was mastered by." Choice of the word "lie" to describe Aunt's hands establishes an insight into the persona's attitudes about her condition. "Lie/Still" of course could refer to her being dead and motionless. Or the words could refer to the fact that Aunt never really loved the man she married, that her submission derived from fear ("terrified hands"), not affection. So wearing his wedding band after death continues the charade -- she is still lying.

In two Frostlike narrative poems, Rich looks further at marital dissatisfactions. "Autumn Equinox" examines a woman whose marriage is so predictable that she is suffocating from boredom. The narrator is unhappy with her life at the same time she is guilty for these feelings. She has tried to deny them to the point where the only time they surface is when she is asleep:

> Night and I wept aloud; half in my sleep,
> Half feeling Lyman's wonder as he leaned
> Above to shake me. 'Are you ill, unhappy?
> Tell me what I can do.'
>
> 'I'm sick, I guess --
> I thought life was different than it is.'
>
> 'Tell me what's wrong. Why can't you ever say?
> I'm here, you know.'

> Half shamed, I turned to see
> The lines of grievous love upon his face,
> The love that gropes and cannot understand.
> 'I must be crazy, Lyman -- or a dream
> Has made me babble things I never thought.
> Go back to sleep -- I won't be so again.'
>
> (DC, p. 67)
> [1955]

The woman in this poem is not a total person; in the section quoted, the word "half" appears three times to emphasize that fact. Her married life is a disappointment to her, "'I thought life was different than it is.'" But she is "shamed" that she is not satisfied so she denies it and betrays herself. Rich captures the sense of deception with the husband's name, Lyman, and its obvious pun. Later in the poem, the narrator asks if the things a man and a woman exchange when they marry balance each other in value. The implication is that they do not. What can equal the loss of creative expression and identity?

> Young lovers talk of giving all the heart
> Into each others' trust: their rhetoric
> Won't stand for analyzing, I'm aware,
> But have they thought of this: that each must know
> Beyond a doubt what's given, what received?
>
> (DC, pp. 67-68)
> [1955]

Another poem in the same style, "The Perennial Answer" (DC, pp. 73-81) [1955] also deals with a woman who is discontent with marriage, but for a different reason. This woman is married to a brute and is afraid to leave. Because her marriage is not fulfilling to her, she looks outside of marriage for satisfaction by encouraging an affair with another man. Her release comes finally only when her husband dies,

and she knows it, "but at last I was alone/In an existence of my own." (DC, p. 79) and "My debt is paid." (DC, p. 81) Neither of these two women had the opportunity to realize their full potential as human beings, one because of limits imposed upon her by her husband's dull life and the other because of fear.

Traditionally, marriage has meant different things to men and women in terms of the changes it necessitates. Usually men continue their careers after marriage. For a woman, however, if marriage does not altogether end a career, it adds a new dimension: taking care of a husband and possibly children. Today more and more women are finding careers outside of the home to be beneficial financially as well as psychologically. A few decades ago, this was not the case. The years after World War II saw America valuing the home and domestic tranquility as it had not done since the turn of the century. Men returning from the war sought the security of a home; women, happy to have men back in their lives, cooperated by becoming wives and mothers. Later, when they discovered being a housewife was not really enough to satisfy them, they became angry, frustrated and often neurotic women. In "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law," Rich looks at some examples of this syndrome. Part one of the poem shows what life has become for one middle-aged woman whose mere survival seems to depend upon fantasy:

> Your mind now, mouldering like wedding-cake,
> heavy with useless experience, rich
> with suspicion, rumor, fantasy,
> crumbling to pieces under the knife-edge
> of mere fact. In the prime of your life.
>
> (S, p. 21)
> (1958-1960)

The bitter tone of this poem is accomplished by Rich's use of irony. Describing an obviously empty life as "rich" and a wasted woman as being in "the prime" of life allows Rich to create a distressing image with only a few words. This woman's prime of life is a vast reservoir of meaningless memories and vague fantasies. Her life is and has been "useless" and now the reality of her condition threatens to destroy even the unsubstantial world she has built on dreams. That marriage is responsible for her condition can only be gathered from the reference to "wedding-cake" "mouldering" now like her mind.

Section two of "Snapshots" concentrates on another woman laboring within the confinement of her marriage who subconsciously realizes her discontent but refuses to do anything about it:

> Banging the coffee-pot into the sink
> she hears the angels chiding, and looks out
> past the raked gardens to the sloppy sky.
> Only a week since they said: Have no patience.
>
> The next time it was: Be insatiable.
> Then: Save yourself; others you cannot save.
> Sometimes she's let the tapstream scald her arm
> a match burn to her thumbnail,
>
> or held her hand above the kettle's snout
> right in the wooly steam. They are probably angels,
> since nothing hurts her anymore, except
> each morning's grit blowing into her eyes.
>
> (S, p. 21)
> (1958-1960)

The woman in this poem is hearing voices which urge her to change her lifestyle, to "have no patience," to "be insatiable," to "save" herself. They promise change, but the future is unpredictable. Right now the woman is unhappy, but at least her life is structured ("raked gardens") and to that degree secure. The angels inhabit a "sloppy sky," suggesting disorder and uncertainty. Change is a frightening prospect even though these "angels" come at a time when she is nearly desperate. In order to escape her misery, she has tried to shut off her senses. To protect herself from reality she has numbed herself to the degree that "nothing hurts her anymore." She has almost accomplished the ultimate resignation by her own emotional suicide. But reality is relentless, as in "Living in Sin," and it still hurts ("each morning's grit blowing into her eyes.").

What does happen when a woman attempts to maintain a creative life while simultaneously leading a domestic one? This situation is depicted in the fourth section of "Snapshots":

> Reading while waiting
> for the iron to heat,
> writing, My life had stood - a Loaded Gun -
> in the Amherst pantry while the jellies boil and scum,
> or, more often,
> iron-eyed and beaked and purposed as a bird,
> dusting everything on the whatnot every day of life.
> (S, p. 22)
> (1958-1960)

The intellectual pursuits named in this selection ("reading," "writing") seem to play a secondary role to the woman who is preoccupied with the domestic aspects of her life. The poem

abounds with housewife images: "waiting for the iron to heat," "pantry," "jellies," "dusting," "whatnot." The last line suggests that housekeeping has become nearly a compulsion. This idea seems supported by the description "iron-eyed." That term could be understood two ways: one referring to the iron which was heating in line two and also to a hard, cold, perhaps dead attitude. Coupled to this is a reference to her being "purposed as a bird." This image continues the suggestion of compulsion. Even though a bird may be "purposed" it is a mechanical, automatic behavior. Rich's use of Emily Dickinson's "My life had stood - a Loaded Gun -" hints at the potentially destructive nature of the situation. In addition to suggesting destruction, it also refers to untapped potential. Ironically, Dickinson originally used the passage to mean a woman was incomplete until she found love. Rich reverses the meaning, and says that finding love can often lead to incompleteness.

Aside from the thwarting effect domesticity can have on women, the emotional distance from her mate that poor communication causes can serve to threaten her well-being. "A Marriage in the Sixties" (S, p. 46) (1961) points out that marriages, even the best of them, consist of "Two strangers, thrust for life upon a rock," and if the couple is fortunate enough to "have at last the perfect hour of talk/that language aches for;" they are "still-/two minds, two messages." An example of Rich's effective use of language is found in her

selection of the word "still." At once she conveys the idea of perpetuity, and the stagnation of standing still. When Rich writes, "We're at each other's mercy too," she shows the absolute necessity for mutual support within a marriage if it is to survive.

Poor communication usually leads to some sort of confrontation. In "Novella," Rich describes the agony of marital quarrel:

> Two people in a room, speaking harshly.
> One gets up, goes out to walk.
> (That is the man.)
> The other goes into the next room
> and washes the dishes, cracking one.
> (That is the woman.)
> It gets dark outside.
> The children quarrel in the attic.
> She has no blood in her heart.
> The man comes back to a dark house.
> The only light is in the attic.
> He has forgotten his key.
> He rings at his own door
> and hears sobbing on the stairs.
> The lights go on in the house.
> The door closes behind him.
> Outside, separate as minds,
> The stars too come alight.
>
> (S, p. 57)
> (1962)

The simple directness and sparse imagery of this poem combine to capture the tone of suffering. Rich has deliberately avoided using judgment in the poem, keeping her sentences short, declarative, and nearly devoid of adjectives and adverbs (except for "harshly" in line one). Nevertheless, the poet's opinion does emerge from the details she chooses to include and thereby emphasize. The light-dark image she uses in the poem, though trite, works to parallel the people's

emotions. Also, the stars' light at the end of the poem serves to give a universality to the story. This quality comes, too, from Rich's restraint in using opinions about the characters in the poem. Consequently, they become representatives rather than individuals. It is significant to note that the woman in the poem is not the only one who has been hurt by the quarrel. The man is suffering, too. However, faced with the difficulty, the man escapes the house while the woman escapes to her chores. Perhaps this is an indication of just how strong the domestic ties are on a woman.

Lack of communication within the marriage is not its only isolating force. "Women were [also] isolated from each other by the loyalties of marriage." (CE, p. 22) The doubts and fears women have are often suffered alone because they are not shared either with their husbands or other women. In "After Twenty Years" Rich writes of two women who lived in such isolation:

> Two women sit at a table by a window. Light breaks
> unevenly on both of them.
> Their talk is a striking of sparks
> which passers-by in the street observe
> as a glitter in the glass of that window.
> Two women in the prime of life.
> Their babies are old enough to have babies.
> Loneliness has been a part of their story for twenty yea
> the dark edge of the clever tongue,
> the obscure underside of the imagination.
> It is snow and thunder in the street.
> While they speak the lightning flashes purple.
> It is strange to be so many women,
> eating and drinking at the same table,
> those who bathed their children in the same basin
> who kept their secrets from each other
> walked the floors of their lives in separate rooms
> and flow into history now as the woman of their time

> living in the prime of life
> in a city where nothing is forbidden
> and nothing permanent.
>
> (D, p. 13)
> (1971)

The two women are only now coming to life. Light imagery captures their awakening: "Light breaks," "striking of sparks," "glitter in the glass," "lightning flashes." Their tragedy is that their awakening has come at a time in their lives which should be the culmination of years of productivity ("the prime of life") and they really have nothing. They have not even had the support of one another because they "kept their secrets from each other" and suffered unnecessary loneliness because of it. The fact is that their lives and creative energy were spent raising children who no longer need them ("Their babies are old enough to have babies."). This seems to be Adrienne Rich's testimonial to any woman who would sell out her being for a lifetime supply of detergent "and flow into history now as the woman of their time." Fortunately, the tone of the poem is not entirely negative; there is a sense of promise in it. Though late, the women are finally beginning to communicate. The significance of this alone is dramatic: "snow and thunder in the street" and "the lightning flashes purple." The results of the change appear to be far-reaching. Even passers-by observe the sparks in the window. Rich seems to indicate by the end of the poem that now anything is possible as "nothing is forbidden/and nothing permanent."

Regret seems to be the thrust of Rich's marriage poetry. It does not emphasize the sentimental well-being and contentment associated with the traditional marriages. Instead her poetry speaks of emptiness, frustration, and waste which can result from the institution and which will continue to result until women begin to speak to one another and to men, as well, about the dissatisfactions they are experiencing. For the present, though, domesticity represents a thwarting to women's creative potential.

CHAPTER III

PROFESSIONAL WORLD

"I am a woman in the prime of life, with certain powers
and those powers severely limited
by authorities whose faces I rarely see."
-Adrienne Rich
"I Dream I'm the Death of Orpheus

Many women, at some time in their lives, work outside of their homes. In most cases, these women find themselves competing directly with men for a job. In a patriarchal society it is difficult for a woman to be recognized and rewarded for her abilities. A token woman may be hired, but generally the capable, thinking woman presents a continual threat to men who rely on their male birthright for a job. Consequently, many men actively discourage women from entering career fields. These men have patronized, belittled, ignored, or fought women for years. To succeed in such a world, many women have compromised their own standards, fought discrimination, and faced exclusion.

The irony of this situation is that many men realize the failure of the system they have created. In examining the attitudes of contemporary male poets, representatives from Rich's own career field, she reaches into the male mind:

> 'we, the masters, have created a world
> that's impossible to live in and that
> probably may not be livable in, in a very
> literal sense. What we'd thought, what
> we'd been given to think is our privi-
> lege, our right and our sexual preroga-
> tive has led to this, to our doom.'
> I guess a lot of women - if not a lot
> of women poets - are feeling that there has
> to be some other way, that human life is
> messed-up but it doesn't have to be this
> desolate.[12]

The problems of the professional woman are examined by Rich in "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law." Here she focuses on what might become of a "thinking woman":

> A thinking woman sleeps with monsters.
> The beak that grips her, she becomes. And Nature,
> that sprung-lidded, still commodious
> steamer-trunk of *tempora* and *mores*
> gets stuffed with it all: the mildewed orange-flowers,
> the female pills, the terrible breasts
> of Boadicea beneath flat foxes' heads and orchids.
>
> Two handsome women, gripped in argument,
> each proud, acute, subtle, I hear scream
> across the cut glass and majolica
> like Furies cornered from their prey.
> The argument *ad feminam*, all the old knives
> that have rusted in my back, I drive in yours,
> *ma semblable*, *ma soeur*!
> (S, p. 22)
> (1958-1960)

This type of professional woman believes that to be equal to a man she must be the same, and so in order to compete and succeed, she assumes the masculine character. Traits of aggression, willfulness, brutality, and ultimately ruthlessness are now her traits. The implication in the first line is that the "monsters" with whom "A thinking woman sleeps" are

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[12]Hunter, pp. 508-509.

men. By "sleeping with" these "monsters" she becomes their partner. The slang expression, "sleeps with," reduces the action to a purely physical, expedient level. The woman joins the man, not because of love, but out of practical necessity. Then sex becomes a means to an end, rather than an end in itself. Consequently, she now assumes the same psychological orientation which has been the source of her oppression ("The beak that grips her, she becomes."). This woman, fully equipped to be helpful to other women ("handsome," "proud, acute, subtle,"), instead prostitutes her identity for success. In so doing, she represents a larger threat to other women, than men do ("all the old knives/that have rusted in my back, I drive in yours,/ ma semblable, ma soeur!").

In section eight of the same poem, Rich looks at what happens to the women who defer to male attitudes and deny themselves a career outside of marriage:

> 'You all die at fifteen,' said Diderot,
> and turn part legend, part convention.
> Still, eyes inaccurately dream
> behind closed windows blankening with steam.
> Deliciously, all that we might have been,
> all that we were -- fire, tears,
> wit, taste, martyred ambition -
> stirs like the memory of refused adultery
> the drained and flagging bosom of our middle years.
> (S, p. 23)
> (1958-1960)

The quote Rich uses to open this section captures the traditional attitude toward the value of women. Many men and women, too, believe that when a woman's youth and/or beauty are gone, her worth diminishes appreciably. Many

women who were raised to believe this, find that they lose the will and energy that had once come so easily. For many women, the onset of puberty is the signal for them to forget their own ambitions and to try to find a man with whom to share the remainder of their lives. At that point, they virtually abandon their own identities ("all that we were") and their potential ("all that we might have been") and begin to fulfill their traditional role. By the middle of their lives the women become robots, performing their roles ("part convention") and "inaccurately" dreaming of what they had been ("part legend"). The image Rich employs in the passage to show how the woman is trapped consists of closed windows which are "blankening with steam." The extent of her imprisonment is such that her vision is obliterated. Because steam is forming the barrier, it is reasonable to assume it is her domestic role (steamy from washing dishes, floors, clothes, children) which is responsible for her condition. This woman's fantasies, which she savors "Deliciously" are only memories of herself and what she was.

The woman who does not assume the male character, who does not settle for domesticity, who does not become a threat to her sisters, but who acts upon her talents, Rich sees in a problem area, also. It is this woman, especially, who must deal with threatened men:

> Not that it is done well, but
> that it is done at all? Yes, think
> of the odds! or shrug them off forever.
> This luxury of the precocious child,

Time's precious chronic invalid, --
would we, darlings, resign it if we could?
Our blight has been our sinecure:
mere talent was enough for us --
glitter in fragments and rough drafts.

~~Sigh~~ no more, ladies.

Time is male
and in his cups drinks to the fair.
Bemused by gallantry, we hear
our mediocrities over-praised,
indolence read as abnegation,
slattern thought styled intuition,
every lapse forgiven, our crime
only to cast too bold a shadow
or smash the mould straight off.

For that, solitary confinement,
tear gas, attrition shelling.
Few applicants for that honor.

(S, p. 24)
(1958-1960)

Rich's contempt for men and the games they have played to maintain their dominance is especially obvious in this poem. Her sarcastic tone filters through the poem, punctuated occasionally with words like "luxury," "mere talent," "bemused," "honor." This tone captures the predicament of the aggressively productive woman who refuses to allow men to control her life. It is a testimony to the schemes man has designed to keep women oppressed. The tone is emphasized by the rhythm of this passage. Appearing to be unstructured, it actually follows a voice pattern. Rich is orating here, a technique which brings her closer to the "ladies" she addresses.

The first two lines of this poem emphasize the fact that male arrogance is nothing new. They are reminiscent of a comment made by Samuel Johnson regarding women preachers.

He said, "Sir, a woman's preaching is like a dog's walking on his hinder legs. It is not done well, but you are surprised to find it done at all."[13] The male attitude developed in order to protect itself from competition or the admission that men's sense of superiority derives from tradition and not from actually being better. In order to maintain this position of power, many men deliberately try to keep women from achieving to the limit of their abilities. They may "over-praise" "mediocrities" hoping that the woman would be satisfied with herself and not try to accomplish anything further. Because women are also a product of stereotypes, they are particularly susceptible to male ploys of "gallantry." Weakness, gentility, passivity, and emotion have long been equated with femininity; and many women still respond to a man who treats them as "the weaker sex." Often a man employs such courtesies because they reinforce his belief that men are stronger and patronizing a woman keeps her content while allowing him to be stronger. When confronted with the woman who was not duped by "gallantry" but insisted on displaying her intelligence, men tended to regard her as the exception, a "precocious child" who would eventually come to her senses. And if she didn't realize it was unfeminine to be bright and accomplished and competitive, then she was viewed with distaste as "Time's precious chronic invalid." As expressed in the battle imagery of the final stanza, Rich's attitude

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[13]Hunter, p. 486.

seems to be that any woman who is willing to forget traditional and societal limits is in for a fight. She can expect loneliness and rejection ("solitary confinement"), unhappiness ("tear gas"), and outside attempts to have her repent and change ("attrition shelling").

In a poem she wrote nearly ten years after "Snapshots..." Rich again used punishment imagery to capture the nature of women's struggles in the professional/career area. "The Observer" pays tribute to a woman who is living in pursuit of her own interests. The existence of this woman apparently represents a contrast to Rich's life at that time. The implication is that the woman who lives in an African wilderness is free and safe, while the poet, in civilization, is not. Rich mentions her imprisonment in one passage of the poem:

> I wake in the old cellblock
> observing the daily executions,
> rehearsing the laws
> I cannot subscribe to ...
>
> (L, p. 47)
> (1968)

"Cellblock," "executions," and "laws" are images of restriction which convey the patriarchal culture's effect on women. The persona's unwillingness to observe these standards is shown by her "rehearsing the laws" instead of respecting them.

The poem "Planetarium," written in 1968, reacts to the fact that superior women generally go unrecognized for their accomplishments, particularly in areas dominated by men.

Rich was motivated to write this poem "after a visit to a real planetarium, where [she] read an account of the work of Caroline Herschel, the astronomer, who worked with her brother William, but whose name remained obscure, as his did not." (CE, p. 25) This poem not only presents an examination of the female condition, but in many ways becomes Rich's self-examination.

At its beginning, this poem is very loosely constructed so that in structure and movement it resembles the apparently random arrangement in the sky. Figuratively, as well as structurally, the poem uses an astronomical basis: "skies," "clocks and instruments," "8 comets," "moon," "night sky," "polished lenses," "Galaxies," "spaces," "NOVA," "light," "pulsar," "galactic cloud," "light wave," "pulsations." (W, pp. 13-14) (1968) Thematically and stylistically this poem combines the activities of outer space with those of inner space. The woman who worked to help understand outer space, through her efforts, also helped to reconstruct the female mind. The fact that she accomplished so much scientifically could inspire other women to do the same.

About midway through the poem, Rich writes of a "'virile'" "eye encountering the NOVA." (W, p. 13) This solar explosion of energy is then related to women, "every impulse of light exploding/from the core/as life flies out of us." (W, p. 13) In astronomical terms, a nova involves a star's expanding until it explodes, sending a tremendous amount of

energy into surrounding space, but destroying itself and anything close to it, in the process. The suggestion is that a female nova could also be the release of frustrated energy and destructive, as well.

By the end of the poem, the structure is tighter and the use of astronomical imagery has become the woman:

> I am bombarded yet I stand
>
> I have been standing all my life in the
> direct path of a battery of signals
> the most accurately transmitted most
> untranslateable language in the universe
> I am a galactic cloud so deep so invo-
> luted that a light wave could take 15
> years to travel through me And has
> taken I am an instrument in the shape
> of a woman trying to translate pulsations
> into images for the relief of the body
> and the reconstruction of the mind.
>
> (W, p. 14)
> (1968)

Initially, in this passage, it appears that "I" represents woman in general. Woman has been "bombarded" and continues to "stand." Woman has been subject to all types of prejudice and abuse. The fact that woman was the object of this injustice is expressed by the "signals" being "most accurately transmitted." There was no reason for the "signals" judging from the "untranslateable language" of the message. Because of the treatment she has received, woman has been forced to protect herself, to draw in upon herself for protection. She has become so twisted in the process that her real thoughts and feelings are almost impossible to locate and express: "so invo-/luted that a light wave could take 15/

years to travel through me." This same phrase could refer to the complexity of the problem facing woman as she seeks her liberation. By the end of this passage it appears that "I" is now Rich, herself. She mentions it has taken "15 years" to become aware of her problem and a solution. And her conclusion is that she will use her poetic talent to express her experiences and feelings in order to rebuild herself and help other women in the process: "a woman trying to translate pulsations/into images for the relief of the body/and the reconstruction of the mind."

In "I Dream I'm the Death of Orpheus," Rich finally deals with herself in terms of the threat that, as a creative woman, she is to man. As a result, out of resentment and anger, she chooses to throw over the tradition of male dominance in the professional field:

> I am walking rapidly through striations of light and
> dark thrown under an arcade.
>
> I am a woman in the prime of life, with certain powers
> and those powers severely limited
> by authorities whose faces I rarely see.
> I am a woman in the prime of life
> driving her dead poet in a black Rolls-Royce
> through a landscape of twilight and thorns.
> A woman with a certain mission
> which if obeyed to the letter will leave her intact.
> A woman with the nerves of a panther
> a woman with contacts among Hell's Angels
> a woman feeling the fullness of her powers
> at the precise moment when she must not use them
> a woman sworn to lucidity
> who sees through the mayhem, the smoky fires
> of these underground streets
> her dead poet learning to walk backward against the wind
> on the wrong side of the mirror.
>
> (W, p. 19)
> (1968)

In Greek mythology, Orpheus was a poet and a musician. Rich's treatment of that figure has been influenced heavily by a movie version of that myth. "I Dream I'm the Death of Orpheus"

> derives from Cocteau's version of the myth in his film Orphée; in this version a modern poet goes to the underworld (which looks like a bombed-out city) and confronts Death, a handsome middle-aged lady whose car is escorted by two men on motorcycles. Rich points out that the poem assumes the perspective of Death who, in the film, comes and goes through a mirror.[14]

It is significant that the poem is told from the point of view of Death. This could mean that Rich desires and/or foresees the end of male dominance in the area of poetry. Symbolically, the entire procedure of "driving her dead poet" through the underworld becomes the progress of women in poetry. Rich stays primarily with Cocteau's imagery. It is heavy with suggestions of destruction: "black Rolls-Royce," "twilight and thorns," "panther," "Hell's Angels," "mayhem," "smoky fires." However, she uses it to her own aim, i.e., the end of male dominance in poetry (the "death of Orpheus"). Because Rich is dreaming that she is the woman in the poem, Death, she identifies herself with the question of female ascendancy in the art. Lines 2-5 speak directly about woman's oppression: "I am a woman in the prime of life, with certain powers/and those powers severely limited/by authorities whose faces I rarely see." Lines 12 and 13

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[14]Hunter, p. 493.

continue this idea: "a woman feeling the fullness of her powers/at the precise moment when she must not use them." The woman in the poem, however, can see ahead; and she sees the end of male control in her field. She sees "her dead poet learning to walk backward against the wind." Men who have generally had the wind at their backs professionally, now must learn to function in a less amiable environment. In Cocteau's film, the mirror represented Death's passage-way. Since Rich places her dead poet on the "wrong side of the mirror," she could be suggesting that the outlook for men is not encouraging.

This poem not only represents the hope ("dream") of women in the field of poetry, but could also signify a change in Rich's attitude about herself as a woman and a poet. In this poem, those two roles seem to mesh. She adopts a first person point of view throughout the work. Rich had said that she "had been taught that poetry should be 'universal,' which meant, of course, non-female." (CE, p. 24) In this poem she is speaking about a personal attitude and about a personal process. Change must occur at this level before it can influence greater changes. This work represents for Rich a breakthrough in self-expression. She is no longer afraid of revealing herself as a woman in her work. In fact, she reminds us seven times in the poem that she is a woman. By coming to terms with herself as a woman and as an artist, she is now in a position to use her poetry to encourage female liberation in other fields as well.

A feeling of discontent runs through several of Rich's poems. Those which investigate women in a working world, a man's world, dwell heavily upon this discontent. It appears to be Rich's conviction that women have suffered unnecessarily in the professional world by having to compromise their standards, pander to the men in control, and deny themselves the satisfaction that creative achievement alone can bring.

CHAPTER IV

POLITICAL AREA

"Your mother dead and you unborn
your two hands grasping your head
drawing it down against the blade of life
your nerves the nerves of a midwife
learning her trade."

-Adrienne Rich
"The Mirror in Which Two
Are Seen as One"

"The myth of the strong black woman is the other side of the coin of the myth of the beautiful dumb blonde. The white man turned the white woman into a weak-minded, weak-bodied, delicate freak, a sex pot, and placed her on a pedestal; he turned the black woman into a strong, self-reliant Amazon and deposited her in his kitchen ... The white man turned himself into the Omnipotent Administrator and established himself in the Front Office."

-Eldridge Cleaver
"The Allegory of the Black Eunuchs'
Soul on Ice

Within the thematic areas of personal, domestic, and professional situations, Rich's poetry focuses on the present and/or the past. The political poetry she writes investigates present and past also, but is especially directed toward the future. During the mid-sixties, Rich became increasingly aware of the power men held in our world and she realized that power was not only suppressive, but could be totally destructive. Consequently, her poetry of this period reflects a concern for the condition of the world and an encouragement

for women to become an active force in changing it.

Value choices which determine the culture of any civilization also serve to direct its economic and political systems as well. The nature of western political systems has traditionally been patriarchal. Within such a structure men are charged with making decisions and setting policy which extends male oppression into the lives of virtually every woman living in the United States today. On this level, patriarchal power represents much more than subtle manipulations. Its consequences could mean the total destruction of mankind. With her political poetry, Rich uses language as an instrument to probe, reach, and eventually unite women. She believes that to preserve the world a reversal in the present power structure must occur. But before this will happen, the consciousness of modern women must change. "A change in the concept of sexual identity is essential if we are not going to see the old political order re-assert itself in every new revolution." (CE, pp. 18-19) It is time that women stopped viewing politics as remote and insignificant and started becoming an active force. "I began to feel that politics was not something 'out there' but something 'in here' and of the essence of my condition." (CE, p. 24) Rich agrees that many women have been victimized by "real sources, everywhere in the environment, built into society." (CE, p. 25) The anger deriving from this condition had been repressed by a large number of women.

It is now being expressed and Rich suggests that women use their anger and energy to finally effect some changes. To a large degree Rich uses her political poems to release her anger and effect change. Her significance in this area was examined by a feminist writer and editor, Wendy Martin, who concluded:

> As a feminist poet, Rich contributes her radical subjectivity to political process: that is, by analyzing and articulating her experience as a woman in a patriarchal culture, by making private perceptions public, she establishes a coherent point of view, a feminist identity and poetic vision which becomes part of the composite reality of the community.[15]

In some of her earliest political poetry, Rich turned to her historical predecessors for support. "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law," for example, contains a passage credited to eighteenth century feminist, Mary Wollstonecraft:

> 'To have in this uncertain world some stay
> which cannot be undermined, is
> of the utmost consequence.'
>
> Thus wrote
> a woman, partly brave and partly good,
> who fought with what she partly understood.
> Few men about her would or could do more,
> hence she was labelled harpy, shrew and whore.
> (S, p. 23)
> (1958-1960)

Contemporary men are often threatened by the active, productive woman. The envy and resentment which derive from feeling threatened can become very destructive.

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[15] Wendy Martin, "From Patriarchy to the Female Principle," Adrienne Rich's Poetry, eds. Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1975) pp. 188-189.

The masculine stereotype has oppressed women and has stunted male potential as well.

In the late 1950's, when Rich wrote "Snapshots...," she was beginning to realize the condition of women in this country. In her youth, however, she was optimistic that a change was soon coming. She ended "Snapshots..." in a picture of female deliverance and simultaneous emergency borrowed from Simone de Beauvoir's Le Deuxieme Sexe.[16] The task will not be easy for she "who must be/more merciless to herself than history." (S, p. 24) Rich suggests, however, that the end will prove worthwhile, "palpable/ours." (S, p. 25)

By the following decade, Rich's poetry had lost much of its earlier optimism as it awoke to the violence of the age. War, revolt, destruction, death dominated her poems of these years. And the blame for such a blood-thirsty world derives fromthe male need for mastery. In "5:30 A.M." Rich compared the situation of awaking to the state of the world with coming face to face with one's killer:

> No one tellsthe truth about truth,
> that it's what the fox
> sees from his scuffled burrow:
> dull-jawed, onrushing
> killer, being that
> inanely single-minded
> will have our skins at last.
>
> (L, p. 31)
> (1967)

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[16] Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex, tr. H. M. Parshley (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), p. 729.

The "truth" rushing in like death is, of course, that the male dominated culture is one tending toward destruction. The means are violent, the end only female "skins." This implies that women are used and victimized, all the while being really unappreciated for any actual value they may have beyond the surface of their appearance.

In "Leaflets," Rich is becoming more explicit about the condition of the world as she perceives it in 1968. Her conclusion seems to be that the violent orientation of our culture is becoming even too much for the men who created it. Under the strain of living in such an atmosphere, the rigid male facade begins to collapse:

> Your face
> stretched like a mask
>
> begins to tear
>
> as you speak of Che Guevara
> Bolivia, Nanterre...
>
> now
> the bodies come whirling
> coal black, ash-white
> out of torn windows
> and the death columns blacken
> whispering
> Who'd choose this life?
>
> (L, p. 53)
> (Winter-Spring 1968)

The circumstance of Rich's own awakening to the world she inhabited was responsible for several of her poems. One of them, a ghazal, deals with her new awareness.

Last night you wrote on the wall: Revolution is poetry.
Today you needn't write; the wall has tumbled down.

We were taught to respect the appearance behind the reality.
Our senses were out on parole, under surveillance.

A pair of eyes imprisoned for years inside my skull
is burning its way outward, the headaches are terrible.

I'm walking through the rubble of broken sculpture, stumbling
here on the spine of a friend, there on the hand of
a brother.

All those joinings! and yet we fought so hard to be unique.
Neither alone, nor in anyone's arms, will we end up
sleeping.

(L, p. 71)
(July 26, 1968

The structure of the ghazal allows for a mental rambling, a jumping from one image to another. This method succeeds in isolating and emphasizing individual ideas within the totality of the poem. Thematically, the whole ghazal is working toward the idea that revolution is of two levels: personal and political. The first two lines express the idea that the revolution is underway and nihilistic in its approach. Rich's own instrument of change is language. It is appropriate, then, for her, albeit through a friend, to compare revolution with poetry. Both are methods of reforming, of replacing, the results of a different attitude or perception. The extent of the revolution was perhaps unexpected because it is destroying foundations, "the wall has tumbled down." On the other hand, if the wall represents a barrier, then tearing it down will facilitate change. If the revolution is of and for women, Rich seems to be saying here that men underestimated its impact. Prior to the change people were

expected to live superficially and be satisfied with "appearance." Women with a new vision are insisting on seeing reality. If the cost of the revolution is one another, that is the result of men's rules. By the end of this poem, Rich has concluded that there will be no quick or expedient solutions. Activity is the only way to gain ends. There is no way that women, if they are to succeed, "will end up sleeping."

By the time Rich had published The Will to Change in 1971, she had become increasingly open in her anger and her refusal to ignore male tyranny:

> Early and late I come and set myself against you,
> your phallic fist knocking blindly at my door.
>
> (W, p. 20)
> (September 23, 1968)

At this point in her life, Rich appears to have been feeling some doubt about the feminist fight and its possible consequences. In her final "Blue Ghazal," she suggests that the male culture uses force and fear to intimidate and manipulate women. Their control derives from their ability to hurt women:

> Pain made her conservative.
> Where matches touched her flesh, she wears a scar..
>
> The moment when a feeling enters the body
> is political. The touch is political.
>
> (W, p. 24)
> (May 4, 1969)

Discouraged by their pain, women become easily controlled. This position, Rich fears, will cause a collective resignation

for women who would rather surrender than suffer:

> Sometimes I dream we are floating on water
> hand-in-hand; and sinking without terror.
>
> (W, p. 24)
> (May 4, 1969)

Whereas The Will to Change revolved around the climate of destruction in this country, the volume Diving into the Wreck, published in 1973, accuses man as the creator of that condition. The anger a young Adrienne Rich repressed or re-channeled is direct and scathing in this collection of poems. The general tendency of the selections in this volume is toward few poetic devices, with volatile language and imagery. She also uses intense personal involvement and political themes. "Trying to Talk with a Man" utilizes consistently bleak images to convey the idea of man's accountability for the state of the world:

> Out in this desert we are testing bombs,
>
> that's why we came here.
>
> Sometimes I feel an underground river
> forcing its way between deformed cliffs
> an acute angle of understanding
> moving itself like a locus of the sun
> into this condemned scenery.
>
> What we've had to give up to get here--
> whole LP collections, films we starred in
> playing in the neighborhoods, bakery windows
> full of dry, chocolate-filled Jewish cookies,
> the language of love-letters, of suicide notes,
> afternoons on the riverbank
> pretending to be children.
>
> Coming out to this desert
> we meant to change the face of
> driving among dull green succulents
> walking at noon in the ghost town
> surrounded by silence

that sounds like the silence of the place
except that it came with us
and is familiar
and everything we were saying until now
was an effort to blot it out--
coming out here we are up against it

Out here I feel more helpless
with you than without you
You mention the danger
and list the equipment
we talk of people caring for each other
in emergencies--laceration, thirst--
but you look at me like an emergency

Your dry heat feels like power
your eyes are stars of a different magnitude
they reflect lights that spell out: EXIT
when you get up and pace the floor

talking of the danger
as if it were not ourselves
as if it were testing anything else.

(D, pp. 3-4)
(1971)

Rich believed that language not only reflects, but shapes reality. Consequently, when she employs such stark imagery to convey the male-female situation, she is forecasting as well as reporting. The people in this poem have rid themselves of any emotional attachments in an effort to reach the essentials of their beings. Without distractions, they hope to be able to change the nature of their relationship. Leaving all other commitments behind perhaps will allow them to communicate more freely. So, in the barren desert of their thoughts, they realize that they have only succeeded in continuing their silence. The desert, if anything, emphasizes the silence. Together with the silence image are other suggestions of emptiness, impotence and death: "desert," "testing bombs," "condemned scenery," "ghost town," "helpless,"

"danger," "emergencies," "laceration," "thirst." The possibilities of the people ever communicating appear to be remote. The silence is overwhelming; the man nervous and seeking an escape ("EXIT"). The truth of the situation in this poem is that the people are never going to achieve a truce, because their motives do not lie in that area. Their meeting is purely political, to "test" the power of the other side. The divisiveness of this condition taken in the extreme is quite destructive because someone eventually loses.

The thrust of Rich's political poetry is basically three-pronged. First, it develops the idea of "man's world" which is failing and/or doomed. Then it deals with woman's discovering her identity and thus liberating herself. Finally she brings the two ideas together by showing how the emergence of women is a significant political phenomenon.

One of Rich's political focal points was the unstable condition of the world. Her resultant anger poured out in "Merced":

> I think of Norman Morrison
> the Buddhists of Saigon
> the black teacher last week
> who put himself to death
> to waken guilt in hearts
> too numb to get the message
> in a world masculinity made
> unfit for women or men.
>
> (D, p. 36)
> (1972)

The culture, Rich implies, has assumed the masculine character, with its value of immovability, aloofness, and false strength.

The result of this "numbing," Rich says later in the same poem, is that individuals are becoming lobotomized, mechanized beyond feeling and caring:

> taking over our minds
> a thing that feels neither guilt
> nor rage: that is unable
> to hate, therefore to love.
>
> (D, p. 37)
> (1972)

Traditionally the feminine character has valued compassion, caring, gentleness, warmth, sensitivity. The masculine character has associated itself with almost the opposite of these characteristics. Also, the masculine stereotype seems to reduce relationships, confrontations, even chance meetings to winner-loser. The extension of this syndrome, of course, is that no real man ever wants to lose and nearly every dealing with human beings becomes a contest. To be really masculine is to be a winner. Consequently material success is not only of value financially but reflects a political stature as well. When these characteristics are expressed as a nation, the implications become suddenly terrifying. When lives become secondary to winning, men become more comfortable with machines because they reduce humanity to statistics.

Consequently, man has established himself into the very real role of "enemy." What he is doing to our civilization becomes the theme in part three of "The Phenomenology of Anger":

Madness. Suicide. Murder.
Is there no way out but these?
The enemy, always just out of sight
snowshoeing the next forest, shrouded
in a snowy blur, abominable snowman
--at once the most destructive
and the most elusive being
gunning down the babies at My Lai
vanishing in the face of confrontation.

The prince of air and darkness
computing body counts, masturbating
in the factory
of facts.
(D, p. 28)
(1972)

The expedience and the answer to contemporary life appear to be violent. Turned upon oneself this violence becomes "madness" or "suicide," while directed against someone else it is "murder." The machismo psychology responsible for this can gun down babies but is too weak and/or afraid to confront its accusers. Rich aligns masculinity with Satan in the last stanza, whose stimulation comes with "computing body counts." It is significant that she combines the pictures of masturbation, factory and facts to convey the self-centered, mechanical, and sterile nature of the masculine mind. This poem represents one of the most direct and graphic attacks on the patriarchal culture. Rich deliberately selected typically masculine language and references to display man's own ugliness.

Only by recognizing the identity of her oppressor can a woman ever liberate herself from him. Essentially, recognition is what Rich has accomplished with this poem. Emotion which had been repressed has now spilled out in the form of

a poem which abandons the structured control of her earlier work. Anger, like the construction of the poem, is not carefully designed, but spontaneous. It is daring, energetic, and loosely controlled. The detachment Auden praised in her early work is gone now. Without it Auden felt art was impossible. The poetry of a mature Rich invalidates his theory. She is involved personally in this poem and she uses her poem to judge her enemy. By Auden's standards this would not be a poem. But Rich is a poet of language and her imagery and analogies are effective here. Artistically, Rich rejects confining tradition, just as she does in her personal life. The result is not a loss of poetic stature, but rather an innovative direction in the art of poetry.

Once Rich has identified the source of her anger, she is then in a position to reject what she has discovered:

> I suddenly see the world
> as no longer viable:
> you are out there burning the crops
> with some new sublimate
> This morning you left the bed
> we still share
> and went out to spread impotence
> upon the world
>
> I hate you.
> I hate the mask you wear, your eyes
> assuming a depth
> they do not possess, drawing me
> into the grotto of your skull
> the landscape of bone
> I hate your words
> they make me think of fake
> revolutionary bills
> crisp imitation parchment
> they sell at battlefields.

> Last night, in this room, weeping
> I asked you: what are you feeling?
> do you feel anything?
>
> Now in the torsion of your body
> as you defoliate the fields we lived from
> I have your answer.
>
> (D, pp. 29-30)
> (1972)

The image association that Rich uses in this poem accuses man directly of being destructive to women and to the world in general. The man is described as "burning the crops," "spread[ing] impotence," wearing a "mask," "assuming a depth," "fake," "imitation," and in the process of "defoliat[ing] the fields." On the other hand, the narrator, a woman, does all the feeling: "I hate you," "I hate the mask you wear," "I hate your words," "weeping." The persona's question, "what are you feeling?" echoes a passage Rich included in "Autumn Equinox" fifteen years earlier. In that first poem, though, the speaker was a man asking his wife to express her hidden feelings. Now, a woman does the asking. The change shown between these poems illustrates Rich's own attitudinal changes. She no longer finds it viable for women, for anyone, to remain silent about their emotions.

"From the Prison House" also deals with the poet's anger. Here, the emotion is controlled to become resolve and intent:

> Underneath my lids another eye has opened
> it looks nakedly
> at the light
>
> that soaks in from the world of pain
> even while I sleep

Steadily it regards
everything I am going through

and more

it sees the clubs and rifle-butts
rising and falling
it sees
detail not on TV

the fingers of the policewoman
searching the cunt of the young prostitute
it sees

the roaches dropping into the pan
where they cook the pork
in the House of D

it sees
the violence
embedded in silence

This eye
is not for weeping
its vision
must be unblurred

though tears are on my face

its intent is clarity
it must forget
nothing.
(D, pp. 17-18)
(September, 1971)

The "eye" (I) of this poem has clarity as its intent while it observes the pain in the world around it. Because it is concerned primarily with recording what it sees, Rich has constructed her verse in a clipped, unadorned, and purposeful fashion. The deliberate control of emotion emphasizes the resolve of the persona who says that the time for tears is past, "This eye/is not for weeping//though tears are on my face." It is almost the resolve of a potential suicide

who had decided that the only option left to consider is death, perhaps as an attempt to awaken the world. Short lines emphasize each detail of the poem, and repetition drills the observations into the reader's mind. The tone of this poem is anticipation and preparation. If women are to do anything about the condition of the world, they must first know exactly what the status quo is and how it can be changed.

The responsibility of man for this situation is not explicit in "From the Prison House," but it is in "Waking in the Dark." As suggested by the title, this poem speaks of the poet's growing awareness of her situation. In the third section of that work, Rich views the necessary end of "man's world" with its ugliness and coarseness. At the same time she addresses herself to the role of women as one way of life finishes and another must replace it:

> The tragedy of sex
> lies around us, a woodlot
> the axes are sharpened for.
> The old shelters and huts
> stare through the clearing with a certain resolution
> -the hermit's cabin, the hunters' shack-
> scenes of masturbation
> and dirty jokes.
> A man's world. But finished.
> They themselves have sold it to the machines.
> I walk the unconscious forest,
> a woman dressed in old army fatigues
> that have shrunk to fit her, I am lost
> at moments, I feel dazed
> by the sun pawing through the trees,
> cold in the bog and lichen of the thicket.
> Nothing will save this. I am alone,
> kicking the last rotting logs
> with their strange smell of life, not death,
> wondering what on earth it all might have become.
>
> (D, p.8)
> (1971)

The pessimism generated by this poem comes primarily from the hopeless picture it draws of contemporary life, specifically of the polarity of the sexes. From the first line ("tragedy") to the last ("what on earth it all might have become") the sense of dying dominates the poem. This way of life, "man's world" is on the way out. The "woodlot" appears empty, the men's cabins vacant. A woman "in army fatigues" surveys the scene, "lost," "dazed" and "alone," but apparently ready for a fight. No battle is necessary. The "rotting logs" signify the forest is already dying. Men, themselves, have killed it, either through neglect ("hermit") or victimization and killing ("hunter"). Unable to generate or even continue life themselves, they "sold it to the machines." The only glimmer of hope in the bleak picture is the "strange smell of life" in the "last rotting logs." Perhaps there is a chance to reconstruct the world, though the woman here is too "dazed" to be really effective. In other poems, Rich says that a woman must be in touch with herself and re-establish her own identity before she can work to change anything politically. Even so, change is discouragingly slow and laborious. She reminds women in "Incipience," "Nothing can be done/but by inches." (D, p. 11) (1971)

"When We Dead Awaken" deals with the reconstruction of the female consciousness and identity. Rich describes the effect that men have had on women as a crippling disease: "everything outside our skins is an image/of this affliction."

(D, p. 5) (1971) Together women are trying to remodel their position without completely destroying themselves:

> even you, fellow-creature, sister,
> sitting across from me, dark with love,
> working like me to pick apart
> working with me to remake
> this trailing knitted thing, this cloth of darkness,
> this woman's garment, trying to save the skein.
>
> (D, p. 5)
> (1971)

Later in the poem comes the realization for the woman that she is a person and not just the appendage of some man: "The fact of being separate/enters your livelihood like a piece of furniture." (D, p. 5) Becoming is a difficult process, and for emergence a new woman understands that there will be many questions to answer about herself, "It has a huge lock shaped like a woman's head/but the key has not been found." (D, p. 6) The rebirth, however, is underway, "Slowly you begin to add/things of your own." (D, p. 6), and the woman becomes less concerned about her past and more aware of her present:

> You give up keeping track of anniversaries,
> you begin to write in your diaries
> more honestly than ever.
>
> (D, p. 6)
> (1971)

The result of all of this self-examination is that women's goals are slowly becoming near at hand: "...never have we been closer to the truth/of the lies we were living." (D, p. 6)

The burden of realizing the truth of their victimization and anger is real for women. In her essay Rich wrote, "They

(i.e., victimization and anger) are our birthpains, and we are bearing ourselves." (CE, p. 25) This image of birth is one which appears in "The Mirror in Which Two are Seen as One":

> you sit on the graves
> of women who died in childbirth
> and women who died at birth
> Dreams of your sister's birth
> your mother dying in childbirth over and over
> not knowing how to stop
> bearing you over and over
>
> your mother dead and you unborn
> your two hands grasping your head
> drawing it down against the blade of life
> your nerves the nerves of a midwife
> learning her trade.
>
> (D, pp. 15-16)
> (1971)

Contemporary women have "mothers" who are "dead," and consequently useless, so now women must be the vehicles of their own incarnation. The reason for the death of the mothers appears to be the fact that they abandoned themselves by becoming mothers, "your mother dying in childbirth over and over." That is, by assuming the role of mother, a woman sacrificed whatever else she could have become, and in essence, died. Consequently, the emerging consciousness of a nation of women is their collective self-conception and birth. Once reborn, the "new woman" is going to be a cultural misfit. Because she is abandoning the security of her old roles, she will be in a position to become sexless, to assume the best of masculine and feminine characteristics. The child of women's self-birth is "The Stranger":

> if I come into a room out of the sharp misty light
> and hear them talking a dead language
> if they ask me my identity
> what can I say but
> I am the androgyne
> I am the living mind you fail to describe
> in your dead language
> the last noun, the verb surviving
> only in the infinitive
> the letters of my name are written under the lids
> of the newborn child.
>
> (D, p. 19)
> (1972)

For a woman who has used language to effect and measure change, it is natural that she would describe her own new identity in linguistic terms. The emancipated woman characterized in this poem is so new that introducing her to the existing culture involves no pre-established references. She is "the androgyne," not exclusively male or female, sexless. She becomes the vision "of the newborn child."

The men in our nation have, in many ways, been the victims of their own stereotyping. In their personal lives, many men have suffered to maintain the image of virility and strength which is the measure of any "man's man." In the political realm, however, very few men have really suffered. Because of tradition, their dominant position has gone virtually unchallenged for centuries. Now, the mass arrival of women and of their insisting upon equality has posed a threat. It is true that any change uproots security, but this change would be so monumental that societal foundations would be shaken. Consequently, when faced with the growing strength of women, most men feel not only resentment, but fear.

Perhaps if men would stop viewing women's liberation as a threat and began approaching it as an opportunity to solve many political problems, the change would not be so difficult. Most women are seeking equality with men for two major reasons: out of a need to assert themselves, and out of anger at the suicidal state of male-dominated cultures. In "Waking in the Dark," Rich explores the enigma that many women present to men. Men at once need women, yet hate and fear them at the same time:

> They are dumping animal blood into the sea
> to bring up the sharks. Sometimes every
> aperture of my body
> leaks blood. I don't know whether
> to pretend that this is natural.
> Is there a law about this, a law of nature?
> You worship the blood
> you call it hysterical bleeding
> you want to drink it like milk
> you dip your fingers into it and write
> you faint at the smell of it
> you dream of dumping me into the sea.
>
> (D, pp. 7-8)
> (1971)

For emphasis, Rich tends to repeat imagery and single words. Here, she has repeated her reference to blood seven times, and the word "you" six times; she almost forces the concept on the reader. This poem deals directly with the threat some women represent to men. The poet's realization of her own femininity is nearly overwhelming to herself, "Sometimes every/aperture of my body/leaks blood." The use of blood to represent women is especially effective because it serves the double purpose of suggesting suffering and biological femininity, menstruation. According to the poem, the male attitude toward women is always shifting, often contradictory.

On one hand, men recognize the need for women ("you want to drink it like milk"), yet can scorn them ("you call it hysterical bleeding."). They may love women ("You worship the blood") and fear them ("you faint at the smell of it"). They use women ("you dip your fingers into it and write") but ultimately want to destroy them ("you dream of dumping me into the sea").

Women's refusal to tolerate male oppression any further has meant sudden insecurities for men. No longer insured of a superior position, they feel impotent and ineffective. In "August," women represent a castration threat for them:

> if I am death to man
> I have to know it
>
> His mind is too simple, I cannot go on
> sharing his nightmares
>
> My own are becoming clearer, they open
> into prehistory
>
> which looks like a village lit with blood
> where all the fathers are crying: My son is mine!
>
> (D, p.51 (1972))

Again Rich uses the blood image to suggest femininity and violence. Obviously, the view of the future presented in this poem finds women in command and men in a panic. If man has lost his own potency, that is one thing. But if he has lost a future, then the castration suddenly becomes much more significant. The suggestion here is that if women achieve equal power with men, then the male birthright to superiority is lost forever. Therefore, in an effort at

least to save the future, men cling to their heirs, the sons who testify to their fathers' potency and also secure the future. Rich has captured the terrible nature of the threat that this prospect is to men with the simple line, "all the fathers are crying." Those few words spell out a reversal of roles which finds men concerned enough about themselves that they have shown a traditionally feminine emotion, "crying."

Much of the "panic" associated with the male loss of security derives from the fact that he no longer can maintain facades. Characteristically, men have avoided expressing strong emotion because they thought it showed weakness. Opting to hide their emotions, they are forced to spend lives of pretense. Rich writes about the pathetic nature of men like this in the poem "Meditations for a Savage Child." If men were to be liberated from their own prisons, then the world would have much to gain politically. As it is now, however, men have placed themselves in a position where, even though they control others, they cannot really control themselves:

> Does the primeval forest
> weep
> for its devourers
>
> does nature mourn
> our existence
>
> is the child with arms
> burnt to the flesh of its sides
> weeping eyelessly for man
>
> At the end of the distinguished doctor's
> lecture
> a young woman raises her hand:

You have the power
in your hands, you control our lives-
why do you want our pity too?

Why are men afraid
why do you pity yourselves
why do the administrators
lack solicitude, the government
refuse protection,

why should the wild child
weep for the scientists

why

(D, pp. 61-62) [1973]

The parallel established in this poem between a "forest/weep-[ing]/for its devourers" and the oppressed crying for their male oppressors signifies the contradictory nature of the situation. Rich questions why the same men who control women should want their "pity too." The implied resentment in the poem derives from the dual nature of men's dealings with women and with themselves. Men strong enough to control a country should be able to express emotion. The suggestion here is that men have established such an intricate collective mask, one disallowing the frailty of emotion, that they have nearly lost touch with themselves. Their masks have grown to their faces. But tight-fitting or not, the mask is a crutch and an artificial way of presenting oneself to the world. It is possible that years of dependence have caused men to be unaware of their own facades. Being their own captives, they "are afraid" but "refuse protection" and do nothing to change. True, men like these are pathetic creatures who elicit tears from onlookers, but the sympathy

is undeserved. Rich would have women shed the myth of the weeping woman, the delicate female, and start showing the strength which has sustained them over centuries. Women should stop being so forgiving if they are ever to achieve equality. If women are to really abandon this stereotype, then men will also be forced to abandon theirs, and the "man" and his mask, as we have come to know them, will be destroyed.

The concept of women destroying the existing male stereotype is the theme of "Incipience":

> A man is asleep in the next room
> We are his dreams
> We have the heads and breasts of women
> the bodies of birds of prey
> Sometimes we turn into silver serpents
> While we sit up smoking and talking of how to live
> he turns on the bed and murmurs
>
> A man is asleep in the next room
> A neurosurgeon enters his dream
> and begins to dissect his brain
> She does not look like a nurse
> she is absorbed in her work
> she has a stern, delicate face like Marie Curie
> She is not/might be either of us
>
> A man is asleep in the next room
> He has spent a whole day
> standing, throwing stones into the black pool
> which keeps its blackness
> Outside the frame of his dream we are stumbling up the hill
> hand in hand, stumbling and guiding each other
> over the scarred volcanic rock
>
> (D, pp. 11-12)
> (1971)

With her first line, Rich establishes the belief that men are not fully conscious of the implications of the woman's movement and its effect on them. Perhaps the unconsciousness

is deliberate, perhaps not. In either case, the "man is asleep." Women, in "Incipience," are described as threats to man. They are "birds of prey." Sometimes they are "silver serpents," an interesting image because it is phallic, suggesting that women must assume male characteristics to effectively deal with men. While the man continues to be unaware, a woman begins to study his brain. It is necessary for her to wait until he is not conscious, implying that man has hidden and protected his real thoughts. Consequently she must probe his mind like a "neurosurgeon." Although Rich uses the feminine pronoun "she" in reference to the person working on the man's brain, she possesses characteristics which are equally male and female, "She is not/might be either of us." This reveals that Rich thinks the ideal individual would be free of roles and stereotypes and be able to be simultaneously and mutually "male" and "female." In the second stanza the woman appears to be seeking knowledge. In the last stanza she is seeking escape, freedom. While the man is still "asleep" women make their move toward liberation. The process is unsteady, "stumbling," "hand in hand," "guiding each other," and the terrain is marked by what man has made of it, "scarred volcanic rock." Nevertheless, they are moving. Through the entire procedure, the man has remained unconscious, "throwing stones into a black pool/which keeps its blackness." Rich's emphasis of man's lack of awareness perhaps signifies her belief that

what women will accomplish, they will do alone, and that eventually, they will leave the "sleeping" man behind.

In The Female Eunuch, Germaine Greer wrote, "The first significant discovery we shall make as we racket along our female road to freedom is that men are not free, and they will seek to make this an argument why nobody should be free."[17]

Self-enslavement would only be one more example of the self-destructive nature of patriarchal cultures. If Greer's observation is valid, then women are necessarily going to liberate men as they liberate themselves. The true nature of this process is described in the sixth section of "The Phenomenology of Anger," where Rich admits that her real desire as a feminist is not to destroy men, but to rid them of the artificiality, desperation, and self-destructive tendencies which now define their lives:

> Fantasies of murder: not enough:
> to kill is to cut off from pain
> but the killer goes on hurting
>
> Not enough. When I dream of meeting
> the enemy, this is my dream:
>
> while acetylene
> ripples from my body
> effortlessly released
> perfectly trained
> on the true enemy
>
> raking his body down to the thread
> of existence

---

[17] Germaine Greer, The Female Eunuch (New York: Bantam, 1971), p. 352.

burning away his lie
leaving him in a new
world, a changed
man

(D, p. 31)
(1972)

The simultaneous reconstruction of both male and female consciousness appears to be the goal that Rich sees for feminism. To express her vision Rich employs the dream metaphor, a technique she uses in several of her poems. The dream image is especially effective here because it not only describes Rich's hope for the movement but also captures the nebulous, undefined nature of the movement itself.

The poetry she wrote between 1965 and 1975 has been Rich's most explicitly political. Her desire has been "to create something/that can't be used to keep us passive:" (PS, p. 221). The active concern of women in politics is Rich's goal. In her opinion "we are confronted with the naked and unabashed failure of patriarchal politics and patriarchal civilization." (PS, p. xv) She is determined "that the sexual myths underlying the human condition can and shall be recognized and changed." (PS, p. xvi)

CONCLUSION

"Revolution is the festival of the oppressed."

-Germaine Greer
The Female Eunuch

"Perhaps liberation is becoming aware that there are choices and that no woman need be condemned to a grim life of quiet rage sealed by routine like her first prom orchid pressed in a book slowly rotting away."

- Ellen Frankfort
Vaginal Politics

Adrienne Rich's poetry is one revolution crying for another. Reading this woman's poetry is an adventure because she takes risks. She has shrugged off both literary conventions and societal limitations to create poetry which ranks her among America's superior literary artists.

The major strength of Rich's craft abides in her sense of and use of language. Energy generates from her work because it possesses the vitality of originality. Her tendency is to treat words as living entities, vehicles for her own personal growth. When she realized formal poetry would not serve her purpose, she developed her own form. That poetic form reads with the familiar rhythms of speech, and draws material from a variety of sources. Just as life is all-inclusive, so is Rich's poetic language. Its scope covers colloquialisms from a restroom wall to

classical allusions. It includes Greek mythology and avante garde theatre, the erotic language of lovers and the caustic phrases of a battle.

Just as Rich's use of language is progressive, so, too, are her themes. The failure of patriarchal society has been the focal point of poetry written from 1965-1975. She apprehends the self-destructive nature of such a society and calls for women to emancipate themselves. In four areas, specifically, Rich outlines male oppression. In a personal area, she says men's need for dominance discourages communication and severs relationships. Traditionally, domestic roles place tedious, frustrating responsibilities upon women, and prevent creative growth. In the professional area, the patriarchal culture has actively worked to prevent women from being successful. In the political area, men have held the power, controlling and manipulating women in order to maintain their position.

If women are to succeed in freeing themselves from the traditional limitations of sexual class systems, then they must become involved in their own lives. It is to this end that Rich's feminist poetry speaks. And if women seek the direction of realistic encouragement, they will be listening.

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