

Adrienne rich on power in society

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Adrienne Rich on power in society Introduction The theme that interested me most in the poems by Adrienne Rich was the inadequacy of language as a means of communication. Rich shows that the reason for this lies in the way language expresses power relationships in society. Often this means the unequal relationship between women and men, but also between the powerful and the powerless. This theme is touched upon in almost every poem we studied, from Rich's early poems to those written later. To illustrate how Rich explores this theme I will look in detail at " Aunt Jennifer's Tigers", " The Uncle Speaks in the Drawing Room", " Our Whole Life".

Paragraph 1 In " Aunt Jennifer's Tigers", Rich creates a fantastic image of the aunt's nonverbal communication through her tapestry. The poem opens with a vivid picture of the colourful, energetic alive world depicted on the tapestry. The aunt infuses the world of the tigers with many of the attributes she misses in her own life: a sense of being truly alive and in tune with the environment, and a state of fearlessness: " They do not fear the men beneath the tree/ They pace in sleek chivalric certainty. The ee- sound in these lines introduces a note of terror that heralds what is to come. Indeed the phrasing suggests a reason for fear from men. The feelings that the aunt is projecting into her artwork, her own fears and desires are developed in the middle stanza. Her shaking, fearful hands " fingers fluttering" are very vivid and the fact that they find the " needle hard to pull" suggests physical weakness and contrasts very much with the tigers. Paragraph 2 The reason for this weakness is " Uncle's wedding band/ Sits heavily" on her " hand".

The possessive " Uncle's" suggests that this is a one-way marriage that drains all life out of the aunt. Her hands come to represent her person in this

poem and it is the hands that do the 'talking'. The Uncle's power over her seems to continue in death "When Aunt is dead, her terrified hands will lie/ Still ringed with the ordeals she was mastered by." However, her unspoken, yet very articulate legacy remains: "The tigers in the panel that she made/ Will go on prancing, proud and unafraid. The tigers represent happiness, confidence and thereby beauty. Interestingly, this image of self-determination and sense of entitlement to the world is projected into the jungle, i. e. outside of society. This is where freedom exists and Aunt's art gives expression to this. Paragraph 3 In contrast to Aunt Jennifer's indirect communication, "The Uncle Speaks in the Drawing Room" is the dramatic monologue of a wealthy, powerful man. He speaks as a representative of the ruling class looking out at a group of discontent working people.

These people have neither wealth nor power. They have gathered outside his big house to express their anger at this inequality. The uncle's attempt to convey confidence and reassurance to his family is undermined by the images of anger outside. The poem's sound expresses this threat. O- sounds and S- sounds dominate: "Standing sullen in the square [...] Some have held and fingered stones." As the poem develops, the Uncle's own fear becomes clear. The image of "glass" echoes and comes to symbolise "class".

He admits that the "frailties of glass [...] Lead in times like these to fear/ For crystal vase and chandelier." Even his reassurance "None as yet dare lift an arm" achieves the opposite - the suggestion of an uncertain future, "arm" in fact has two meanings in this context! Paragraph 4 In fact the two most vivid images in the poem are the angry crowd outdoors on the one hand and the terrified forefather (indoors - like this family) on the other: "When our

grandsire stood aghast/ To see his antique ruby bowl/ Shivered in a thunder-roll. Despite his attempts to reassure, the Uncle admits to deep unease at the end of the poem regarding the precarious position of his class as “ We stand between the dead glass-blowers/ And murmurings of missile-throwers. ” In terms of the theme of language, the Uncle uses it to express his position as a powerful wealthy man. Although his fears still become clear, it is still a useful tool for him. The workers outside do not have a voice, their language is not verbal: “ sullen stares”, “ bitter tones” and holding “ stones”. There is no common language between the powerful and the powerless.

Paragraph 5 “ Our Whole Life” was written later. There is a stark change in terms of form to the previous two poems. It is written in free verse and uses no punctuation whatever. This in itself indicates Rich’s thinking about language and the ability to express truth. Here, she strips it of its traditional appearance. In terms of theme, “ Our Whole Life” explores the shocking gulf between the powerful and the powerless at a new level. Language has failed the powerless completely. Language is used to manipulate people’s thoughts about the world, “ rendered into the oppressor’s language”.

In an incredibly vivid image Rich depicts language as a violent and self-destructive wild animal: “ and now a knot of lies/ eating at itself to get undone/ Words bitten thru words”. The biting and eating is enacted in the abbreviated spelling “ thru”. People’s actual lives and experience cannot be told: “ meanings burnt-off like paint/ under the blowtorch/ All those dead letters/ rendered into the oppressor’s language”. Paragraph 6 This poem places one shocking image after the other and language has become an instrument in a very violent world.

The vision goes much further than in “ The Uncle Speaks”, it encompasses the whole world and is in essence apocalyptic. The image of the burning Algerian walking away from his village to a doctor with no words to describe his pain is haunting: “ his whole body a cloud of pain/ and there are no words for this/ except himself”. The absence of punctuation and in particular of a concluding full stop suggests the ongoing nature of the problem. Language has completely and disastrously failed its purpose as a means of communication between humans.

In conclusion, Rich has opened up for me a way of looking at language that in some ways coincides with my own thinking and experience. However, she takes it unflinchingly and with amazing honesty and courage to a final analysis. She creates in her poetry unforgettable images for how women and all the powerless have been deprived of a means of expressing themselves. Language is an instrument of the powerful. Although Rich’s poetry is a reflection of radical feminism and political struggle in the USA during the 60s and 70s I feel that what it conveys is as true now as it was then.