

Free to be, you and
me



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Adrienne Rich uses free verse to separate herself from the male-dominated literary tradition in her poem “Diving Into the Wreck”. Her poem addresses the role of women in past literature while promising hope for the future generations. Rich’s reclamation of the literary tradition is achieved through both her context and her choice of form. The very first lines of the poem establish a challenging tone. She starts, “Having read the book of myths/ and loaded the camera/and checked the edge of the knife-blade”. The first image is of a book that she defines as a collection of myths. “Myth”, as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary, is “a widespread but untrue or erroneous story or belief; a widely held misconception; a misrepresentation of the truth” (OED, 2003). In addition, this misrepresentation has been printed. It has a literary basis. The use of the word “myth” already raises the attention of the reader to find the misconception. The same effect is heightened by the enjambment used on the line. The line break after “myth” serves to hang the reader’s attention on it for a second longer as they scan down to the next line. With the reader searching for the falsification established in the first line, the second provides a concrete image, a camera. The camera creates a tone of exploration for the poem. Once again, as will be true in the third line, the enjambment puts the emphasis on the object. The camera serves to capture reality without distortion. The exploration in this poem is going to be a challenge presented to the establishment of old ideas. Rich is looking to redefine the literary tradition’s myths and insert her photographs, her own true images. In the third line, that peaceful exploration becomes edged, literally. As she “checked the edge of the knife-blade” the reader becomes aware of the danger in doing this. Rich is bringing the knife with her with the idea of using it as she checks it. The imagery invokes the

tradition of the hunt. Instead of scope and rifle, Adrienne Rich is bringing along camera and knife. The same sense of danger is resonated throughout the first stanza as Rich dons “ the body-armor” wetsuit and “ the grave and awkward mask”. Rich is going to brave the adversity and go explore herself. The use of free verse throughout the first stanza allows Adrienne Rich to choose her enjambments more freely. In addition, the form allows for the line itself to become a measure of emphasis. The brevity of a line like “ I put on” really accentuates the loneliness of the activity. She is the only identity on the line. Since free verse allows her to shorten the line, the reader feels more of the solitude of this adventure. It is the brevity of “ I put on” that allows the reader to fully understand the deep contrast of Rich’s dressing and Cousteau’s “ assiduous team”. Rich as a writer will explore the depths by herself where science will use many explorers. Yet, more importantly, Rich will explore the depths herself as a woman while Cousteau will travel with his team of assistants as a man. The literary tradition is based upon the writing produced by men. Females were rarely educated and, even rarer, was the female who was encouraged to publish publicly. Women in literature, therefore, are the product of males’ visions. Rich’s poem is about reclaiming that persona in literature for females. The method in which she is going to get to that persona is to change into the sexually ambiguous wetsuit. It’s “ body-armor of black rubber...absurd flippers...grave and awful mask”, serve to cover the parts of her body that would identify her as female. The wetsuit’s effect is doubled by her choice of free verse. Her poem is not written in the forms of poetry that were established by men. She is not on Cousteau’s team or part of the troubadours creating the villanelle. Instead, Rich uses free verse to hide her sex. Her image of descending the

ladder serves two functions. First, Rich uses the ladder as a sign of rebirth. It hangs “innocently” inferring childhood innocence. As she descends it into her new environment she finds herself being immersed in “the oxygen...the blue light...the clear atoms/ of our human air”. She is unable to walk with her new appendages, the flippers. It is a birthing experience. Yet, at the same time, the ladder motion of descending a latter rung by rung is one similar to the motion of the eye going down the lines of a poem line by line. Rich is going to dive into the literary tradition as she moves down the poem. Rich’s involvement with the literary tradition blends form and free verse. As she moves deeper into the water, becomes more involved in the literary tradition, she finds herself being faded out as a female writer. In order to regain her consciousness, she uses a line of iambic tetrameter. Rich regains her legitimacy, and her breath, through the use of meter in the middle of her free verse. She concludes the stanza with the idea that she must learn to finesse her way into the sea, the male-dominated literary tradition. She does so through the use of two lines of iambic meter. The regular sounding meter smoothly gives her that same legitimacy as “my mask is powerful” and allows her to give the poem legitimacy. Rich defines herself as different from those around her, those “who have always/ lived here”. She is not male and, therefore, deprived of the being in the literary history. Yet, she is there to see what damage has been done to the idea of women since the beginning of literary history. The wreck represents the female in literature. Ships were always named after females and Adrienne Rich plays upon this. Her actions towards the ship “stroke” it. She is gentle with it implying abuse. Rich continues to expand upon the double imagery by pointing out that the ship is “more permanent/ than fish or weed.” Not only is Adrienne Rich referring to

the life of the decaying hull, but also, Rich challenges the antiquated idea that women were to be treated as objects. She has stated that this woman is more permanent than animal or plant. Afterwards, she establishes her intentions to reclaim the truth about women. She came to for “ the wreck and not the story of the wreck”. She has brought her camera to capture the truth. Her diction continues to serve the double imagery of ship and female as it has a “ face”, “ ribs” and is “ threadbare”. Rich uses the ongoing metaphor to dive into the wreck as a “ mermaid” and a “ merman”. As a writer in the literary tradition, she doesn’t want to be seen as female or male. Instead, Rich is rewriting herself as sexually androgynous. She embodies both male and female as the writer. The clearest example of this begins the second to last stanza. Rich uses an alternating line rhyme to indicate herself capable of both partaking in the male-dominated literary tradition and in the modern style of androgynous free verse. It is in her conclusion that Rich states that both reader and writer are the ones who can reclaim the sexual connotation of language, “ find out way/ back to this scene”. She is inspiring the reader to reclaim their myths and erase their names out of the book of myths. Only in understanding the literary traditions and expectations of the past, such as meter and rhyme, can the writer break free of its limitations, such as form. Rich’s use of free verse in “ Diving Into the Wreck” demonstrates how the literary tradition works. Her use of free verse stands as a challenge to those poems before itself, but also, is flexible enough to incorporate the stylistic elements of the tradition in order to use their power. She is able to reclaim the female identity in literature by combining both antiquated and modern form. In addition, Rich is able to reclaim the literary tradition in general to be one of sexual androgyny.

Where the villanelle or sestina might have been the form of male writers,
free verse is the form of the writer.