

ADRIENNE RICH

(b. 1929)



Aunt Jennifer's Tigers

The Uncle Speaks in the Drawing Room

Trying to talk with a Man

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

Prance – To bound, to walk with high, bouncing steps.

Screen – This refers to the fire screens used to shelter people from the intense heat if they sat near the fire, or to the screens placed in front of an empty fireplace.

Topaz – A yellow or golden semi-precious stone.

Denizens – Inhabitants

Sleek – Smooth, shiny, glossy.

Chivalric – Behaving in a courteous, gallant way like the knights of old.

Ivory – Elephant tusk

Ordeals – Difficult or painful experiences.

Stanza One

The poet describes the imaginary world created by Aunt Jennifer as she embroiders tigers on a fire screen. The tigers "prance" across the screen, implying that they are full of energy, strong, proud, carefree and unafraid. They are bright and golden – standing out against the green background. They are not full afraid and their brightness is not hidden. This is in contrast to the men "beneath the tree". This is the tigers' world and they "pace" through it in a confident, powerful manner. They are linked to the old system of knighthood by the word "chivalric", thus reminding us again of their power and strength. Yet there is a gallantry and dignity associated with the word "chivalric" which makes us wonder if the tigers are symbols of a positive sort of male power, compared to the men who are lurking in the shadows "beneath the tree".

Stanza Two

The poem now shifts away from the tigers and towards Aunt Jennifer. The power and energy of the first stanza vanishes as Aunt Jennifer is described. She is nothing like the strong, bright, confident creatures she has created. She does not move with strength and confidence. As she embroiders, her fingers are "fluttering through her wool". This suggests that she is weak and nervous. Even the act of creating this tapestry is difficult for her. She finds the "ivory needle hard to pull." The whiteness of the needle is in contrast to the bright golds and greens in the world she is creating on the screen. The colours associated with Aunt Jennifer are pale, almost lifeless. We imagine bloodless, white fingers and a white, ivory needle. It is worth noting that ivory is taken from the tusks of elephants – linking this stanza back to the jungle where the tigers live. Men hunted elephants for their ivory – dominating the natural world and taking what they wanted. They also rode elephants when hunting tigers, again conjuring up the image of men as destructive and dominant. This idea of male dominance is picked up in the next lines when we read that Aunt Jennifer is weighed down by her wedding ring. The hyperbole in the description of the ring as being a "massive weight" emphasises how powerless and weak Aunt Jennifer is and how

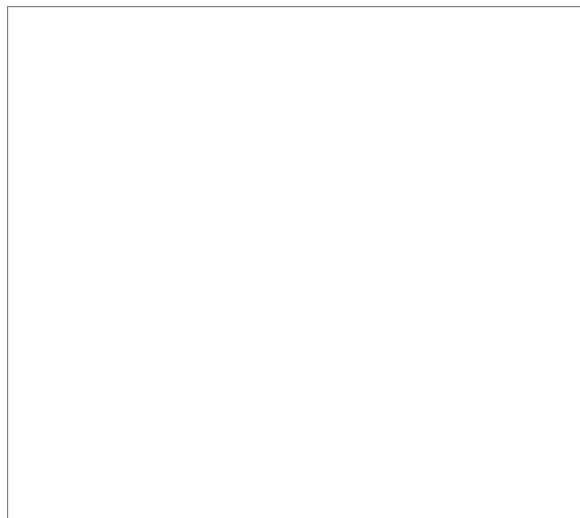
oppressed and controlled she is in her marriage. The wedding ring is more like a shackle than a piece of jewellery.

Stanza Three

In the final stanza, Rich imagines how Aunt Jennifer will be after death. She will, even in death, be "terrified" and the painful "ordeals" of her life will have marked her forever. She was "mastered" or conquered by these trials and will never be truly free. She is a victim, whether dead or alive. This is a negative view of marriage and there is no hint of love or equality in it. Instead, it has utterly crushed and defeated Aunt Jennifer. Life, for her, was something to be endured. The tigers, on the other hand, will carry on "prancing, proud and unafraid" in the screen that she created. The tragedy is that Aunt Jennifer never got to live life to the full and could only hint at her unhappiness by depicting the strength and freedom of the tigers in her tapestry. But of course they are not alive and are only symbols of her longing.

Note

This poem was written when Rich was still a young student. The formal structure of the poem and the distance she keeps from its subject are marks of her early work. She deals with the issue of female subjugation, but at a remove. Instead of commenting directly on marriage and the male/female divide, Rich uses symbolism to get her message across. The tigers represent all that Aunt Jennifer is not. They are strong, free and in control of their own destiny, while she is a victim of an unhappy marriage – her only small act of rebellion being the creation of this image of power.



I have seen the mob of late
Standing sullen in the square,
Gazing with a sullen stare
At window, balcony and gate.
Some have talked in bitter tones,
Some have held and fingered stones.

These are follies that subside.
Let us consider, none the less,
Certain frailties of glass
Which, it cannot be denied,
Lead in times like these to fear
For crystal vase and chandelier.

Not that the missiles will be cast;
None as yet dare lift an arm.
But the scene recalls a storm
When our grandsire stood aghast
To see his antique ruby bowl
Shivered in a thunder-roll.

Let us only bear in mind
How these treasures handed down
From a calmer age passed on
Are in the keeping of our kind.
We stand between the dead glass-blowers
And murmurings of missile throwers.

Stanza One

Rich adopts the persona of a man watching a mob which has gathered in the square. The words "of late" suggest that this disorderly crowd has been assembling more than once in recent times. A gathering mob may seem threatening, especially since they are "sullen" and carrying stones, but the uncle does not seem unduly disturbed. He does not shout or rant: he simply speaks. By calling the crowd a mob, he seems to imply that he feels contemptuous towards them. There is no mention of the reason for the crowd's discontent, and the uncle does not seem to care why they are gathering in the square. He stands in the drawing room, which indicates that he is wealthy and removed from these "sullen" people. Their concerns do not concern him, except insofar as they affect his possessions. The mob stare resentfully at the "window, balcony, and gate" of the uncle's house. The distance between the gathering crowd and the uncle is not just a physical one, of course. They are also separated by class. The uncle represents a bygone era and a genteel, upper-class lifestyle. We get the impression that his house is a large one, and that this may be fuelling the mob's discontent and anger. They play with the stones they carry, but they do not go so far as to throw them. They talk in "bitter tones" but again, they do nothing.

Stanza Two

The uncle talks about the mob's behaviour as "follies that subside". It appears that he has seen this sort of thing before and he dismisses it as the type of foolish behaviour which will soon die down. He is not worried. However, he is concerned for his valuables. Glass is delicate, so he fears that his "crystal vase and chandelier" – obvious symbols of wealth - will be damaged if the mob should act.

Stanza Three

In the opening line of this stanza, the uncle repeats his assurances that nothing will be damaged and that the mob will not throw stones. None of them dare to lift an arm, he says. The words "as yet" lend a slightly more threatening note to this stanza, however. There is a suggestion that, while the mob has not acted to date, they may

do so at some point in the future. They are like a storm brewing. This idea of the storm is picked up again in the third line, when the speaker recalls how his grandfather's ruby bowl was shaken in a storm, much to its owner's horror. The word "But" at the beginning of this line adds to the slight sense of doubt in this stanza. What if the mob should throw their stones, after all? What if they should translate their "bitter" words into action? There is a rather ominous tone, here.

The language in this stanza reinforces the notion that the uncle is from a different class to the mob in the square below. His choice of words sets him apart as much as his wealth. He talks of his "grandsire": a formal and rather archaic way of saying "grandfather".

Stanza Four

In the last stanza, the speaker tells us how he and his type of people have a responsibility to protect the valuables that they have inherited. Those items were made in a "calmer age" – presumably when people knew their place and would not dare to rise up against the ruling classes – but now they are threatened. The uncle states firmly that he and his kind will stand their ground and will guard these treasures against the mob. Note the use of the words "we" and "us" in this stanza and "our" in the last. The uncle sees himself as a representative of the upper class, and he is determined to preserve the class divisions. This poem is a metaphor for a political idea: that class distinctions exist and that there are those who want to maintain the status quo. They view their way of life as more important and valuable than that of the lower orders. Like the crystal vase, the chandelier and the ruby bowl, their social is both frail and precious in their eyes. If their class is threatened, they will defend it.

This is a political poem, written in the 1950s. The story itself is a metaphor for the deeper political ideas. We are reminded of "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" and the fictional uncle in that poem. Both men are domineering, confident and in control. They are the rulers; they are in charge. But their attitude fosters resentment and disquiet among those who do not share their privileged lifestyle. There is a deep undercurrent of unhappiness and discontent in both poems.

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 a 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 we were testing anything else.

1971

Rich and her husband have travelled out into the desert to observe the army's testing of nuclear weapons. Their marriage is falling apart, and in this poem, Rich uses many unusual comparisons to link her husband and their failing relationship to the nuclear bombs and the desert.

As this is quite a complex poem, I have divided the poem into sections and followed each of the sections with a brief analysis.

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that's why we came here.

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1971

The end of a marriage

The poem deals with the pain associated with the end of a relationship. Rich and her husband have been trying to ignore the fact that their relationship is failing, but now that they are alone together in the desert, they realise that they have nothing important left to say to one another. They must face the fact that the marriage is over.

Male power

Like "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers", this poem looks at the danger inherent in a relationship with a man. The husband is likened to a dangerous weapon; he has the power to destroy Rich. Marriage is not portrayed here as a meeting of equals, but rather as the mastery of the woman by the man. If she is to survive emotionally, she must escape.