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BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

Feminism in the Poetry of Adrienne Rich: A Comparison of Her Early
and Late Poems

Feminismus v poezii Adrienne Rich: Srovnání její rané a pozdní
tvorby

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Declaration

I declare that the following BA thesis is my own work for which I used only the sources and literature mentioned, and that this thesis has not been used in the course of other university studies or in order to acquire the same or another type of diploma.

Prague, 14 January 2014

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Permission

I have no objections to the BA thesis being borrowed and used for study purposes.

Souhlasím se zapůjčením bakalářské práce ke studijním účelům.

Abstract

This BA thesis examines the development of feminism in the poetry of Adrienne Rich between the 1950s and the 1990s. Feminism in Rich's poetry took years to develop from strict formalism in the 1950s that only alluded to the unequal status of women in patriarchal society, to bold free verse and feminist attitudes in the 1970s, and finally to an engagement with marginalization of certain groups of people due to their race, nationality, class or religion. Rich examined the marginalization of women in society already in her first collection, *A Change of World* (1951), through poems such as "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" or "An Unsaid Word," which are characterized by the perfection of form. Formalism was still a prominent hallmark of the poems in Rich's second collection, *The Diamond Cutters, and Other Poems* (1955), but a certain loosening of Rich's style, deviations from the tight stanzaic structure and a bolder approach to criticizing male authority over women can be seen in these poems. This concerns for example poems "Living in Sin" and "Perennial Answer," which address traditionally assigned gender roles. Between the 1950s and the 1970s, there was a major change in Rich's poetry, because it became significantly radical both in terms of feminism and free-verse. This significant shift is most prominent in Rich's eighth book of poems *Diving into the Wreck* (1973), in which Rich openly criticizes men's oppressive authority over women, calls for recognition of women's equal status and expresses her unity with women. This approach is typical for example of the poems "Diving into the Wreck" or "Insipience." This radical feminism, however, did not remain the only hallmark of Rich's poetry. In the 1980s and 1990s, there was another shift in her poetry, because she realized that if she wanted to be politically influential, it was not sufficient to be a feminist poet only. An example of this change is the collection

An Atlas of the Difficult World (1991), in which Rich points to a wider range of social issues in the contemporary United States, such as unemployment, racism, class, illiteracy and poverty. In the title poem “An Atlas of the Difficult World,” Rich criticizes the marginalization of all those who do not fit into the dominant white, patriarchal and heterosexual North American culture. In her later works, knowing that poetry has the power to transform readers’ awareness and lead to action, Rich consciously called on her readers to take responsibility for political and social change.

Abstrakt

Tato bakalářská práce zkoumá vývoj feminizmu v poezii Adrienne Rich od 50. do 90. let 20. století. Trvalo roky, než se feminizmus v poezii Rich vyvinul ze striktního formalizmu typického pro 50. léta, který jen nepřímo poukazoval na nerovné postavení žen v patriarchální společnosti, do odvážných feministických postojů a použití volného verše v 70. letech, a nakonec do zohledňování marginalizace určitých skupin lidí kvůli jejich rase, národnosti, společenskému postavení nebo náboženství. Rich se zaměřila na marginalizaci žen již ve své první sbírce s názvem *A Change of World* (1951), a to například v básních “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers” nebo “An Unsaid Word,” pro které je charakteristická dokonalá forma, která šikovně zakrývá feministické postoje a emoce autorky. Formalizmus sice zůstal typickým znakem básní i v její druhé sbírce, *The Diamond Cutters, and Other Poems* (1955), nicméně zde je možné zpozorovat jisté uvolnění stylu, odchýlení od pevné struktury slok a odvážnější kritiku mužské kontroly nad ženami. Toto se týká například básní “Living in Sin” a “Perennial Answer,” které hovoří o tradičním přidělování genderových rolí. Mezi 50. a 70. léty 20. století se poezie Adrienne Rich zásadně změnila, neboť se stala výrazně radikálnější jak v souvislosti s feminizmem tak s použitím volného verše. Tento významný posun je nejvíce prominentní v osmé sbírce básní Adrienne Rich, *Diving into the Wreck* (1973), ve které otevřeně kritizuje mužskou autoritu nad ženami, volá po uznání rovného postavení žen ve společnosti a vyjadřuje svou jednotu se ženami. Tento přístup je typický například pro básně “Diving into the Wreck” nebo “Insipience.” Radikální feminizmus nicméně nezůstal jediným charakteristickým znakem poezie Adrienne Rich. V 80. a 90. letech se v její tvorbě vyskytla další změna, neboť si Rich uvědomila, že proto, aby mohla být politicky vlivná, nestačí být pouze feministickou básnířkou.

Příkladem tohoto posunu je sbírka *An Atlas of the Difficult World* (1991), ve které Rich poukazuje na širší spektrum sociálních otázek v soudobých Spojených státech amerických, jako je například nezaměstnanost, rasismus, společenské postavení, negramotnost a chudoba. V básni “An Atlas of the Difficult World” Rich kritizuje marginalizaci všech, kteří nezapadají do dominantní bělošské, patriarchální a heterosexuální severoamerické kultury. Rich si byla vědoma toho, že poezie má moc přeměnit uvědomělost čtenářů a tím pádem vést ke změně. Proto v tomto smyslu ve své pozdní tvorbě vyzývala své čtenáře k odpovědnosti za politickou a sociální změnu.

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Chapter I: Introduction

Adrienne Cecile Rich (1929 – 2012), a major American poet, essayist and second-wave feminist, managed to bring the oppression of women to the forefront of social discourse. The concepts of women's identity and power have been the core of the seven decades of Rich's career. Her work gradually developed from detached observations of the 1950s to radical feminism and political activism in the 1970s, and finally to a concern for the rights of all those who are marginalized for their race, nationality, class, gender, or sexual orientation.

What were the circumstances of Rich's life that formed her political opinions and her firm feminist stance? Rich was born in Baltimore, Maryland on May 16, 1929. Her father, Arnold Rice Rich, was a researcher of pathology at the Johns Hopkins Medical School, and her mother, Helen Elizabeth (Jones) Rich, was a concert pianist and a composer. Rich's father was of Jewish origin. He placed high demands on Adrienne's education. In her essay "Split at the Root: An Essay on Jewish Identity" (1982), Rich wrote about her father: "His investment in my intellect and talent was egotistical, tyrannical, opinionated, and terribly wearing."¹ He also "demanded absolute loyalty, absolute submission to his will."² Nevertheless, he also taught her "to believe in hard work, to mistrust easy inspiration, to write and rewrite; to feel that [she] was a person of the book, even though a woman, to take ideas seriously."³ There is no doubt that it was Adrienne's father who in part shaped her brilliance, fierce intelligence and precision of her work. Rich's mother was not of Jewish origin. She was southern

¹ Adrienne Rich, "Split at the Root: An Essay on Jewish Identity," *Blood, Bread and Poetry: Selected Prose 1976 – 1985*, 113.

² Rich, "Split at the Root: An Essay on Jewish Identity" 116.

³ Rich, "Split at the Root: An Essay on Jewish Identity" 113.

Protestant and raised her two daughters in a Christian way. Adrienne described the environment in which she grew up as “christian virtually without needing to say so — christian imagery, music, language, symbols, assumptions [were] everywhere. It was also a genteel, white, middle-class world [...]”⁴

In 1953, Rich married a professor of economics at Harvard University, Alfred Conrad, with whom she had three sons. Her inner struggle between being a devoted wife and mother according to social expectations on the one hand, and becoming a renowned poet on the other, is one of the main factors which formed Adrienne’s feminist thinking and her perception of men as oppressive. In 1984 she wrote that in the middle of the 1950s, “[she] knew that marriage and motherhood, experiences which were supposed to be truly womanly, often left [her] feeling unfit, disempowered, adrift.”⁵

Rich’s early poetry was influenced by the most distinguished modern poets like W. H. Auden, Wallace Stevens, Robert Frost and W. B. Yeats. She admired them and imitated their highly developed poetic styles and forms. Rich’s first collection of poems, *A Change of World* (1951), is thus characterized by strict formalism which neatly covers up her feelings and early feminist attitudes. In the first chapter of this thesis, I am going to illustrate how Rich achieved the aforementioned perfection of form in the poems “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers” and “An Unsaid Word” from *A Change of World*. In these poems Rich only obliquely pointed to the way women are deprived of power by the traditional patriarchal society, and she did not assume any radical feminist attitudes.

In the second chapter, I will discuss Rich’s second collection of poems, *The Diamond Cutters, and Other Poems* (1955). Formalism is still a prominent hallmark of

⁴ Rich, “Split at the Root: An Essay on Jewish Identity” 103.

⁵ Adrienne Rich, “Blood, Bread and Poetry,” *Blood, Bread and Poetry: Selected Prose 1976 – 1985* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1986) 175.

the poems in this collection; nevertheless, a certain loosening of Rich's approach can be seen in these poems, too. Rich also seems to be a little bolder in criticizing the male authority over women in *The Diamond Cutters, and Other Poems* than in her first collection. In this chapter, I am going to analyze poems "Living in Sin" and "Perennial Answer," which address traditionally assigned gender roles in relationships. Rich points to the fact that these roles are strictly imposed by social conventions and can become oppressive for women and as a result lead to the degradation of their relationships with men. Unlike in "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers," there occur slight irregularities in terms of stanzaic organization, rhyme and meter in both of these poems. "Perennial Answer" does not consist of detached observations of the speaker, but it is a personal experience of the female poetic persona speaking in the first person. In other words, though the poems in *The Diamond Cutters, and Other Poems* largely rely on traditional poetic devices, we may note a slight release from the perfection that characterized her first collection.

As opposed to the 1950s, Rich's poetry became significantly radical both in terms of feminism and free-verse in the 1970s. The American poet, novelist and literary critic, Carlo Muske, noted in 1985 that "[Rich] has progressed in life (and in her poems, which remain intimately tied to her life's truth) from a young widow and disenchanted formalist, to spiritual and rhetorical convalescent, to a feminist leader, lesbian separatist and a doyenne of a newly-defined feminist literature – becoming finally a Great Outlaw Mother."⁶ This considerable shift is most prominent in Rich's eighth book of poems *Diving into the Wreck* (1973). In this collection, Rich openly criticizes the dominant status of men and their oppressive authority over womanhood, and expresses her unity with women. In the third chapter, I will analyze the reflection of this change in Rich's

⁶ Carol Muske, "Lingua Materna: The Speech of Female History," *The Official Website of Carol Muske-Dukes*, 20 Jan. 1985, <<http://www.carolmuskedukes.com/lingua.htm>>, 16. 1. 2015.

poems “Insipience” and “Diving into the Wreck.” The title poem “Diving into the Wreck” is not a detached description of the unequal status of women anymore. In this poem, the female persona sets out on an underwater journey to see with her own eyes the damage that has been done to womanhood. The wreck symbolizes the originally precious and powerful female identity ruined by social prejudices and patriarchal traditions. Rich does not follow a tight formal structure and traditional poetic devices here anymore. She assumes free verse which stylistically corresponds with her feminist liberation movement of the 1970s.

Radical feminism, however, did not remain the only hallmark of Rich’s poetry. In the 1980s and 1990s, there occurred another major shift in her art. Rich realized that if she wanted to be politically influential, it did not suffice to be a feminist only. She tried to comprehend what it meant for her to be white, Jewish, lesbian and feminist in Western culture, and she understood that all these factors shaped her identity. In the collection *An Atlas of the Difficult World* (1991), Rich points to a wider range of social issues in the contemporary United States, such as racism, class, unemployment, illiteracy or poverty. In the fourth chapter of this thesis, I will analyze this further shift in Rich’s poetry with the example of the poem “An Atlas of the Difficult World,” in which Rich criticizes the marginalization of all those who, for various reasons, do not fit into the dominant white, patriarchal, Christian, and heterosexual North American culture. In her later works, Rich also became fully aware of the power of poetry to transform the readers’ awareness and lead to action on political and social levels. Therefore, in the late 1980s and 1990s, Rich called on her readers to take responsibility for political and social change. She herself aptly depicted the course of her later poetry, when she wrote in 1984:

We are trying to build a political and cultural movement in the heart of capitalism, in a country where racism assumes every form of physical, institutional, and psychic violence, and in which more than one person in seven lives below poverty. [...] As a lesbian-feminist poet and writer, I need to understand how this *location* affects me, along with the realities of blood and bread within this nation.⁷

As a feminist theorist, Rich refused to be limited by the boundaries between theory and practice.⁸ She managed to create “dynamic between poetry as language and poetry as a kind of action.”⁹ Through her poetry, Rich led a dialogue with the outside world, drew the readers’ attention to social injustice and tried to mobilize them to protest against external oppression and social inequality. That is why Rich’s poems leave us with a wish for a more compassionate and equal society.

⁷ Rich, “Blood, Bread and Poetry” 183.

⁸ Liz Yorke, *Adrienne Rich: Passion, Politics and the Body* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd., 1997) 130.

⁹ Rich, “Blood, Bread and Poetry” 181.

Chapter II: The Beginnings of Adrienne Rich's Poetry

Timid feminist attitudes hidden behind formalism and perfection of the form are a typical hallmark of Adrienne Rich's early poetry and the reason of her success in the 1950s. No strong feminist ambitions can be found in these poems, nor do these works clearly indicate the strong feminism and political activism which are an integral part of her later poetry. At a poetry reading in 1964, Rich admitted that in her early formalist poems: "[...] in many cases, [she] had suppressed, omitted, and falsified even certain disturbing elements to gain that perfection of order."¹⁰ At the beginning of her career, young Rich was admired for example by W. H. Auden, who stated in his foreword to Rich's first volume of poems published in 1951, *A Change of World*: "Miss Rich, who is, I understand, twenty-one years old [...has] a love for her medium, a determination to ensure that whatever she writes shall, at least, not be shoddily made."¹¹ Auden also stated that "the poems a reader will encounter in this book are neatly and modestly dressed, speak quietly but do not mumble, respect their elders but are not cowed by them, and do not tell fibs."¹² So before Rich's transformation into a radical feminist and political poet in the 1970s, her poems were rather timid and strictly structured. Regular meter and rhyme, as well as strictly organized stanzas are typical of *A Change of World*.¹³ Rich's early poems at most pointed to the fact that women possess creative power, but it is frequently repressed by the patriarchal society. I am going to illustrate this on the poems "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" and "An Unsaid Word" from *A Change of World*.

¹⁰ Adrienne Rich, [Poetry and Experience: Statement at a Poetry Reading], *Adrienne Rich's Poetry*, ed. by Ch. Gelpi and A. Gelpi (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1975) 89.

¹¹ W. H. Auden, "Foreword to *A Change of World*," *Adrienne Rich's Poetry*, ed. by Ch. Gelpi and A. Gelpi (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1975) 126.

¹² Auden 126 – 127.

¹³ Cheri Colby Langdell, *The Moment of Change* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc., 2004) 15.

As Liz Yorke observed, in “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers,” the power of women is praised and the “feminine woman’s life — of constraint, fear and subjection — is mourned.”¹⁴ Rich asserted that the preceding generations of women were frequently subdued by their husbands, sons or male authorities in general; yet, through their artistic works such as embroidering or knitting, they were able to produce something remarkable and unforgettable. In “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers,” this is addressed through the character of Aunt Jennifer, who is embroidering bright yellow tigers on a screen:

Aunt Jennifer’s tigers prance across a screen,
Bright topaz denizens of a world of green.
They do not fear men beneath the tree;
They pace in sleek chivalric certainty.¹⁵

In the first stanza, the tigers prance about freely, fearlessly and confidently, which reflects Aunt Jennifer’s inner power and desire for freedom from the bondage of marriage. In the first line, Rich uses sibilance in “tigers prance across the screen” to create a smooth opening, suggesting an air of the tigers’ confidence, so that the mood appears to be positive and cheerful. The alliteration in “prancing proud” (line 1) also stresses the feeling of courage expressed in the animals’ movement. The speaker compares the tigers to the gemstone, topaz, which signals how precious and admired they are. The end rhyme (screen, green, tree, and certainty) adds a playful rhythm, contributing to the energetic atmosphere of the first stanza. The visual imagery in the first stanza also creates an exciting mood: the yellow color (bright topaz) can be connected with the sun and the green color is reminiscent of spring, life and zest.

¹⁴ Yorke 24.

¹⁵ Adrienne Rich, “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers,” *Collected Early Poems 1950-1970* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995) 4.

Thanks to Rich's usage of these poetic devices, the first stanza reflects the inner desire of women for independence. Yet, as Yorke writes, though the tigers are powerful, they are "fixed and framed within the screen [...] just like the feminine woman, ornamental and decorative object of male dominion is caged, her energy restricted, within a patriarchal culture."¹⁶

In the second stanza, there is a sudden and fierce contrast between the courageous tigers' energy and the submissive, silent and anxious Aunt Jennifer.¹⁷ She is nervous, frail, and anything but courageous and competent. So in the second stanza, fear gradually becomes the main mood:

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.¹⁸

Aunt Jennifer finds it difficult to even pull the ivory needle that she uses to make her embroidery. The wedding ring around her finger is a symbol of the burden of commitments and bindings of married life that take away her freedom and confidence to live the life she desires. What contributes to the mournful effect of this stanza is the assonance of the long "/ i: /" and "/ ai /": "find the ivory needle" (line 6). This onomatopoeia creates an internal rhythm, and these sounds can be associated with a wailing of a person or an animal. Therefore they help to develop the sorrowful mood of these lines, which corresponds to the theme of the poem.

Further, the alliteration of "f" sounds ("fingers fluttering") highlights the fact that Aunt Jennifer's hands nervously tremble, which contrasts with the "chivalric

¹⁶ Yorke 25.

¹⁷ Langdell 26.

¹⁸ Rich, "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" 4.

certainty” of the tigers. The “f” sound can be associated with fast and light movement, such as that of a swarm of small flies flying confusedly above something. It suggests a fleeting movement; nothing that would characterize the self-confident, elegant and firm tigers. Such an opposition creates irony when one realizes that Aunt Jennifer would love to possess the tigers’ independence and self-confidence, but in reality she is an insecure and terrified person. Finally, by using hyperbole in lines 8-9 and the alliteration of the “h” sound (“heavily”, “hand”), the speaker exaggerates the weight of Uncle’s wedding ring in order to highlight his dominant position. Aunt Jennifer’s husband’s name, however, is not explicitly mentioned in the poem and the speaker addresses him simply as an Uncle. This might also be a sign that Rich in her early poetry does not openly criticize concrete men, but rather alludes to the negative consequences of oppressive patriarchal authority.

In the final stanza, the speaker states that the tigers will live on freely and while Aunt Jennifer will die, they will continue to symbolize her dreams and be a reminder of her aesthetic power¹⁹:

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.²⁰

Uncle’s wedding ring symbolizes a burden for Aunt Jennifer, and this idea is echoed and stressed again in the last quatrain by the use of the word “ringed.” Aunt Jennifer’s inner suffering stems from her traditional role in marriage and her husband’s being an

¹⁹ Claire Keyes, *The Aesthetics of Power: The Poetry of Adrienne Rich* (Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 2008) 22.

²⁰ Rich, “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers” 4.

oppressor; we learn that even “When Aunt is dead, her terrified hands will lie / Still ringed with ordeals [she was] mastered by.”²¹ Nevertheless, the tigers will linger on as well — prancing, proud and unafraid. At the end, the speaker’s attention is again shifted towards the courageous tigers and their effervescence. It looks as if the death of Aunt Jennifer and her pitiful life in oppression was not the main focus of the poem. Instead, the poem praises the tigers’ courage, and the beauty and capability of female artistic work. It seems that the speaker is not so interested in Aunt Jennifer’s death — she is captivated by those “gorgeous tigers — those ‘Bright topaz denizens.’”²²

As the heroines in Rich’s early poetry are conventional and obedient, so are the verses. The rhyme pattern for “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers” is AABB. This strict pattern mirrors the rigid life of Aunt Jennifer. Full stops are placed regularly at the end of every second line, which suggests that the whole poem is controlled just like its subject. The poem is composed of three perfect quatrains, written in couplets with only slight variations in the iambic pentameter. This stanzaic structure heightens the formal distance from what the speaker is describing: just as Rich in her early poems celebrated female inner energy and mourned women’s life of constraint, fear and subjection only from a distance. In this poem, the speaker stands outside the action in the poem and only describes it, and because of the impersonal tone she seems to be fairly detached from Aunt Jennifer’s life and fate.²³

According to Alan Shima, “Rich comments that the cool, objective tone of the poem was a way of distancing herself from the emotional oppositions that are depicted in it”²⁴ and that “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers” was an “example of how she utilized formal

²¹ Rich, “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers” 4.

²² Keyes 23.

²³ Keyes 22.

²⁴ Alan Shima, *Skirting the Subject: Pursuing Language in the Works of Adrienne Rich*, Susan Griffin, Beverly Dahlen (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Uppsaliensis, 1993) 46.

devices to control the smoldering tensions of her own inner misgivings.”²⁵ To sum up, the fact that women possess creative power but are not able to explicitly express it because it has been suppressed in them by the patriarchal society can be observed on Aunt Jennifer’s mere embroidering the tigers, which are the symbol of her inner independence and strength. The tigers (as well as Aunt’s longings) emerge from Aunt Jennifer’s embroidery, which indicates the fact that she is not able to naturally express her inner emotions connected with her desire for independence — her normal language has to be replaced with the encoded symbols of her handiwork.²⁶ Aunt Jennifer is not mute or silenced, but it is probable that because of her husband’s firm authority and control, she is not able to talk freely about her personal longings, and embroidering is an alternative way to express them.

“An Unsaid Word,” another poem included in *A Change of World*, also deals with the theme of women’s power that is suppressed by the patriarchal society. As Yorke writes, “in this insightful poem, a close to feminist voice points to the difficult tension in the woman for whom the social expectation is that she will learn to stand and wait for her man.”²⁷ The society expects her to automatically provide her man with undisturbed privacy and freedom to withdraw to the world of his own thoughts and contemplations, while she is expected to wait for him to return to her²⁸:

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

²⁵ Shima 46.

²⁶ Shima 46.

²⁷ Yorke 25.

²⁸ Yorke 25.

Stands where he left her, still his own,
Knows this the hardest thing to learn.²⁹

The poem consists of a single sentence that may be scanned as iambic tetrameter (although it is not always regular). The rhyme scheme is ABABAAA, the fluidity of the syntax, and Rich's avoidance of any slang or colloquialisms contribute to the formal elegance of the poem.³⁰ Therefore similarly to "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers," in this poem, intense emotions of the female persona and the tension between power and denial are muted by the properly elaborated formal structure and the regularity of the poem. Again, there is a connection between the self-restraint of the female in the poem and the structure of the poem — both of them are neat and limited.

Even though the poem consists of only one sentence, it contains a lot of meaning. Rich again points to the fact that the female in the poem possesses power (line 1) but at the same time the poet highlights silence and submissiveness which are externally imposed on women by the patriarchal society. The female persona is not allowed to step into her man's private sphere and thoughts. He can live in the free space of his mind where no one disturbs him, whereas the woman can only devotedly wait for him to return. Karen Alkalay-Gut, an award-winning poet, editor and literature professor, wrote that in this poem, "the woman with 'power' to keep her man from his thoughts, to prevent, in a sense, his self-fulfillment, possesses the only power granted to the traditional wife – the power to destroy the husband's creativity, depth and peace, and the strength to endure the isolation and frustration in silence."³¹

²⁹ Rich, "An Unsaid Word," *Collected Early Poems 1950 – 1970*, 28.

³⁰ Keyes 20.

³¹ Karen Alkalay-Gut, "Rich's An Unsaid Word," *Explicator*, Winter 1985: 54, EBSCO <<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=7089770&lang=cs&site=ehost-live>> 18. 1. 2015.

To sum up, the atmosphere which prevails in Adrienne Rich's early poetry can be described as a tension between constraint and power.³² As Keyes put it, Rich's female poetic personas accept the fact that "women's energies should be checked while at the same time longing for more active expression: the ability to change sex roles and social structures that limit women's freedom."³³ Rich in her first volume *A Change of World* rather diffidently points to the problem that women are oppressed by patriarchal society and through her poems imitates the generally accepted social roles. She implies that in the existing world of the 1950s power is granted to males only, which has a destructive effect on women's self-fulfillment. The social formalism in the 1950s is also reflected in the strict structure and regularity of Rich's early poems, but we can observe that muted feminist voice gently pierces through their formal neatness. When Auden praised the craft of young Rich, saying that "it is the evidence of a capacity for detachment from the self and its emotions without which no art is possible,"³⁴ he was right. However, about twenty years later, these unsure feminist attitudes turned into bold and open statements as Rich consciously wanted to radically influence the traditional status of women in society through her poetry.

³² Keyes 20.

³³ Keyes 20.

³⁴ Auden 126.

Chapter III: Feminism in *The Diamond Cutters, and Other Poems*

The Diamond Cutters, and Other Poems, first published in 1955, is Adrienne Rich's second collection. Except for slight differences, the collection resembles *A Change of World*. The poems in *The Diamond Cutters, and Other Poems* are still traditional and Rich again expresses her disapproval of patriarchal authority. In 1956, Randall Jarrell reviewed *The Diamond Cutters, and Other Poems* for the *Yale Review*, and praised the perfection of Rich's poetry, saying that "[...] the poet whom we see behind the clarity and gravity of Miss Rich's poems cannot help seeming to us a sort of a princess in a fairy tale."³⁵ Jarrell stated that even when a few subtle imperfections occurred in Rich's early poetry, he admired her poems because "[...] her imperfections themselves are touching as the awkwardness of anything young and natural is touching."³⁶ As I have already argued, the perfection of Rich's early poetry may have been caused by the fact that the highly valued poetry writing was mainly produced by men such as Frost, Stevens, Auden, Yeats or Eliot, and therefore Rich's style was influenced by them.³⁷ Throughout *The Diamond Cutters, and Other Poems*, Rich alludes to the themes of sin and decay of the society and the flawed relationships within it (mainly between men and women).³⁸ Rich tends to blame the dominant male authority for being responsible for the origin of the flaws and degradation of these relationships. This can be seen in the example of two poems from this collection: "Living in Sin" and "The Perennial Answer."

"Living in Sin" is one of the most famous poems in the collection *The Diamond Cutters, and Other Poems*. Rich describes here the hopelessness and boredom that the

³⁵ Randall Jarrell, "Review of *The Diamond Cutters and Other Poems*," *Adrienne Rich's Poetry*, ed. by Ch. Gelpi and A. Gelpi (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1975) 127.

³⁶ Jarrell 127.

³⁷ Keyes 30.

³⁸ Keyes 32.

protagonist feels in a relationship which does not meet her expectations. Through this poem, Rich aims to point to the assignment of the traditional gender roles in relationships which are expected and enforced by the society.³⁹ The title of the poem suggests that there is something deeply sinful about the cohabitation of the couple presented in the poem. In the poem, there is a constant shift between the atmosphere of a mundane life and that of an ideal form of love, because the female protagonist is in a boring relationship with a man whom she does not love any more. Because of the fact that she is not a loving partner, completely devoted to her man, she goes against the traditional (biblical) principles and therefore, from this traditional perspective, the relationship is sinful.

In 26 lines, “Living in Sin” focuses on a female protagonist who had always dreamed of a happy-ever-after kind of a relationship but instead of that she stepped into a boring and monotonous life. This unfulfilled hope of hers is apparent already in the first two lines of the poem: “She had thought the studio would keep itself; / no dust upon the furniture of love.”⁴⁰ The past perfect tense indicates the unfulfilled dreams of the woman who had thought that everything would be perfect in the relationship and there would be no need for any clean up. This also brings about the hopeless mood of the whole poem.

In the next five lines, the speaker describes the present sad atmosphere of the studio, which represents the relationship and mentions the presence of the man for the first time:

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

³⁹ Alan Douglas Burns, *Thematic Guide to American Poetry* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002) 108.

⁴⁰ Adrienne Rich, “Living in Sin,” *Collected Early Poems 1950 – 1970*, 94.

stalking the picturesque amusing mouse
had risen at his urging.⁴¹

The noise of the leaky faucet and dirt in the studio are metaphors for the desperate woman's life. But immediately, the readers are presented with the woman's dream of a perfect life, which is represented by the image of the fruit and the luxurious shawl on the piano. The poem constantly shifts from the past to the present and from dreaming to reality, which brings about an atmosphere of unfulfilled expectations. This quaint imagined picture of the studio stands for the kind of a harmonious relationship the woman had hoped for. The alliteration of the "p" sound stresses the luxurious, paradisiacal atmosphere ("A plate of pears, / a piano with a Persian shawl [...]). But what follows is a picture of a cat "stalking the picturesque amusing mouse," which might symbolize the fact that the place is infested with vermin and point to the problems in the relationship.⁴² The presence of the mouse (which is vermin and could be a carrier of dirt, illness and death) in the room evokes the realization that the couple's home and life is not actually as picturesque as it seemed.⁴³

Then the speaker describes another image: there comes a milkman waking the woman up into the cold morning and the reality. The character of the milkman presented in this part of the poem emphasizes the image of the woman's tedious everyday life and hinders her from her unrealistic dreaming. With this image the poem loses its dream-like sound again:

Not that at five each separate stair would writhe
under the milkman's tramp; that morning light
so coldly would delineate the scraps

⁴¹ Rich, "Living in Sin" 94.

⁴² Langdell 31.

⁴³ Langdell 31.

of last night's cheese and three sepulchral bottles;
that on the kitchen shelf among the saucers
a pair of beetle-eyes would fix her own—
envoy from some village in the moldings...⁴⁴

The woman wakes up into the cold reality in which only depression and dusting awaits her, which alludes to the fact that her and her partner's relationship is in need of a proper cleaning. The three sepulchral bottles contribute to this image, and perhaps also to the fact that the woman herself feels as if she was not fully alive or as if she lived in a lifeless place. Moreover, the place might also be infested with beetles whose presence is suggested by their staring eyes.

In the following lines, the woman's companion is finally revealed. The fact that Rich uses only a few lines to describe him might indicate that he is perhaps emotionally separated from the woman and she is apparently annoyed with him:

Meanwhile, he, with a yawn,
sounded a dozen notes upon the keyboard,
declared it out of tune, shrugged at the mirror,
rubbed at his beard, went out for cigarettes;
while she, jeered by the minor demons,
pulled back the sheets and made the bed and found
a towel to dust the table-top,
and let the coffee-pot boil over on the stove.⁴⁵

The speaker does not criticize the man in the poem directly; he is portrayed as lazy and ignoring the women, but he is not intentionally abusive or evil.⁴⁶ He seems to be bored in the relationship as well. The fact that he declares the piano out of tune suggests that

⁴⁴ Rich, "Living in Sin" 94.

⁴⁵ Rich, "Living in Sin" 94.

⁴⁶ Burns 108.

he too believes that the relationship needs to be fixed. She is, nevertheless, probably expected to be spiritually devoted to such a person but it is obvious that she cannot do so. The image of the coffee-pot boiling over on the stove perhaps indicates that the woman acts as if everything was in order but inside she is fuming.

In the final lines of “Living in Sin” Rich suggests that the woman is trapped in an endless cycle of dreaming and fantasizing about harmony in the relationship but then always awakens into the harsh reality of the suffocating and somehow oppressive cohabitation with her man:

By the 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.⁴⁷

Judging from the lines 23-24, it seems that the night is linked with fantasizing about ideal love and a perfect relationship, while the day represents the woman’s quotidian life.⁴⁸ The permanent presence of the milkman, who arrives every morning, indicates the end of the night’s idealism and awakening into another boring day.⁴⁹ The woman is not as much in love as she once was and this gradually intensifies, and at the end of the poem it seems as if she lived in a tomb created by the lifeless and loveless relationship with her man. As I have already suggested, the relationship is most probably declared as sinful because the woman does not identify herself with her role of a devoted wife that is assigned to her by the traditional society. In this poem, Rich might be highlighting the fact that women are oppressed by the society’s expectations and are condemned if they do not meet them.

⁴⁷ Rich, “Living in Sin” 94.

⁴⁸ Burns 108.

⁴⁹ Burns 108.

Another poem included in *The Diamond Cutters, and Other Poems*, “The Perennial Answer,” is said to have been influenced by Robert Frost.⁵⁰ In this poem, Rich used blank-verse, rhythms and themes which are typically Frostian.⁵¹ Randall Jarrell wrote in his “Review of the *Diamond Cutters and Other Poems*” that “this poem is typical neurotic-violent Frost.”⁵² Nevertheless, Rich uses Frostian poetic techniques and themes in order to point to women’s silence and brokenness.⁵³ The “Perennial Answer” is set in the rural area in New England, and it is a poem about the life of an aging and widowed female protagonist who describes her oppressive marriage, and expresses no remorse over her husband’s death. Keyes says that “Rich takes geography from Frost along with the iambic pentameter, the rhymes and the soliloquies, and the tone which is as blunt and austere as the people’s lives.”⁵⁴ Similarly to the female persona in “Living in Sin,” the woman in “The Perennial Answer” is not able to play the role of a completely devoted and loving wife, for which she might be criticized by the society.

The poem opens with the atmosphere of death, violence and fright. There is a woman who is told by a doctor that she had a miscarriage. To hear this is naturally a terror for the woman and she thinks to herself:

[...] have the blackest word told straight,
 Whether it was my child that couldn’t live,
 Or Joel’s mind, thick-riddled like sieve
 With all that loving festered into hate.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Jarrell 128.

⁵¹ Alice Templeton, *The Dream and the Dialogue* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1994) 12.

⁵² Jarrell 128.

⁵³ Keyes 39.

⁵⁴ Keyes 39.

⁵⁵ Rich, “Perennial Answer,” *Collected Early Poems 1950 – 1970*, 103.

The death of a child is mentioned only at the beginning of the poem. However, this background theme “significantly contributes to the frightening atmosphere of the whole poem.”⁵⁶ In the second stanza, the female persona describes how a murderer was hiding in a barn:

Under the eaves than when the idiot killer
Hid in the Matthews barn among the hay
And all the neighbors through one August day
Waited outside with pitchforks in the sun.⁵⁷

The woman’s husband, Joel, is the only man who is not scared of the murderer hiding in the barn, so he climbs the ladder into the barn and fights the killer. But his wife does not admire his courage and instead regards his behavior as aggression: “A man not made for love, / But built for things of violence; [...]”⁵⁸ After defeating the man in the barn, the husband requires appreciation from his wife. But she refuses to acknowledge her violent husband’s actions:

[...] as if by rights his wife
Should go to him for having risked his life
And say— I hardly knew what thing he wanted.
I know it was a thing I never granted,
[...]
I never went to him, I never clung
One moment on his breast. But I was young.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Keyes 39.

⁵⁷ Rich, “Perennial Answer” 103.

⁵⁸ Rich, “Perennial Answer” 103.

⁵⁹ Rich, “Perennial Answer” 103.

The woman's inner refusal of her husband's behavior and the following unwillingness to submit to his expectations is a sign of her self-awareness.

The woman in the poem feels emotionally estranged from her husband: "[...] a girl-bride seeing only / Her marriage as a room so strange and lonely."⁶⁰ It is evident that the woman feels so unhappy in the marriage that "she [looks] outside for warmth"⁶¹ which indicates that she falls in love with another man in order to escape from the suffocating marriage. This action is something that women in Rich's previous collection *A Change of World* would not dare to do, and this might suggest an increase in the emancipation of the female subjects of Rich's poems. Evans, the man the speaker fell in love with, is a clergyman, because he is described as a:

[...] man of God indeed,
Whose eye had seen damnation, and whose heart
Thrust all it knew of passion into one
Chamber of iron inscribed *Thy will be done*.⁶²

Rich uses the woman's love for the preacher to highlight her husband's brutality and uncontrollable jealousy. His cruelty is consequently confirmed, because after Evans walks the woman home, Joel rapes her:

[...] I knew
That he could kill me then, but what he did
Was wrench me up the stairs, onto the bed.⁶³

⁶⁰ Rich, "Perennial Answer" 104.

⁶¹ Rich, "Perennial Answer" 104.

⁶² Rich, "Perennial Answer" 104.

⁶³ Rich, "Perennial Answer" 107.

The woman has to bear all this, which leads to a greater hatred towards her man and as a result she feels relief when he finally dies:

The night of Joel's death I slept alone
In this same room. A neighbor said she'd stay,
Thinking the dead man lying down below
Might keep the living from rest. She told me so:
"Those hours before the dawn can lie like stone
Upon the heart – I've lain awake – I know."
At last I had to take the only way,
And said, "The nights he was alive and walking
From room to room and hearing spirits talking,
What sleep I had was likelier to be broken."
Her face was shocked but I was glad I'd spoken.
"Well, if you feel so –" She would tell the tale
Next morning, but at last I was alone
In an existence finally my own.⁶⁴

Keyes writes that in this poem, "Rich returns to the image of 'An Unsaid Word' with several crucial differences. The man wanders in intensity close to madness: 'hearing spirits talking', and the woman does not 'stand where he left her, still his own' but breaks away into 'an existence finally [her] own.'"⁶⁵ On the mental level, she is now able to set herself free of her previous submissive position and live independently on her own. She notices that her neighbor was shocked by her statement, which again points to the way the uncompromising traditional society views wives' disloyalty towards their husbands. But now her existence belongs to her only and is not affected by her oppressive husband or society: it is clear that the woman has managed to let go even of the pressure of the society's judgment, which is apparent from her conversation with her

⁶⁴ Rich, "Perennial Answer" 107.

⁶⁵ Keyes 40.

neighbor. This can be regarded as evidence that there is some kind of a move toward emancipation and daring not only of the female personas in the poems, but also of Rich as a female poet.

The poems included in Adrienne Rich's second collection, *The Diamond Cutters and Other Poems* are still traditional, although Rich again expresses her discomfiture with the marginalization of women by the traditional patriarchal society. In "Living in Sin," Rich creates a picture of a depressive life of a woman who had dreamed of love but instead of that, she found only loneliness, boredom and routine in the relationship. The feeling of sadness is supported by words like sepulchral, jeered, demons or grime, and all the images in the poem suggest a never-ending cycle of shifts between dreaming of a fairytale-like relationship and disappointment. The most probable interpretation of the reference to living in sin is the fact that the woman does not love her husband and does not accept her role as a devoted wife. "The poem expresses dissatisfaction with women's roles in or out of wedlock,"⁶⁶ and Rich questions the traditional roles of the partners in relationships and suggests that such assigned roles might become oppressive. But it is also obvious that the man is not happy in such an unharmonious and somehow enforced relationship, and does not love his wife, either. So the traditionally assigned marital roles of both partners can be the cause of tension and oppression in relationships.

A similar situation is described in the poem "The Perennial Answer," in which the female subject dares to consciously resist her brutal husband's commands, communicate with another man and even openly express her opinion on her husband's death, admitting that she felt relieved. Such a behavior was not at all typical of Rich's previous collection of poems, where the poems' female subjects only felt oppression,

⁶⁶ Burns 108.

but would not dare to complain about it and accepted their roles as submissive wives. So unlike *A Change of World, The Diamond Cutters and Other Poems* demonstrates a slightly higher degree of emancipation of the poems' female subjects.

Chapter IV: Feminism and Politics in Rich's Poetry in the 1970s: *Diving into the Wreck*

In the early 1970s the United States were involved in the Vietnam War, there was an ongoing fight for women's rights, and the decade evolved under the impact of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Adrienne Rich played an active role in this social and political situation. She became a major feminist poet and political activist who openly expressed her desire for social justice. This is evident from Rich's eighth book of poems entitled *Diving into the Wreck* (1973). In 1973, Rich described how she felt about *Diving into the Wreck*:

A coming-home to the darkest and richest sources of my poetry: sex, sexuality, sexual wounds, sexual identity, sexual politics: many name for pieces of one whole. I feel this book continues the work I've been trying to do — breaking down the artificial barriers between private and public, between Vietnam and the lovers' bed, between the deepest images we carry out of our dreams and the most daylight events "out in the world." This is the intention and longing behind everything I write.⁶⁷

Rich's concern with sexual politics in *Diving into the Wreck* is something that could be seen neither in *Change of World* nor in *The Diamond Cutters, and Other Poems*. These issues are clearly reflected in the tones and images of the poems in *Diving into the Wreck*.⁶⁸ Open anger at men and bold feminism are typical signs of his collection. In her review of *Diving into the Wreck*, Margaret Atwood wrote that when she first heard the author read from the collection, "[she] felt as though the top of [her] head was being

⁶⁷ Adrienne Rich, *Diving into the Wreck* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1973), Jacket cover of the collection.

⁶⁸ Keyes 133.

attacked, sometimes with an ice pick, sometimes with a blunt instrument: a hatchet or a hammer. The predominant emotions seemed to be anger and hatred, [...].”⁶⁹ Adrienne Rich probably took a huge risk of getting under barrage of criticism when writing the radical poems included in *Diving into the Wreck*.

In many poems from *Diving into the Wreck*, Rich pointed to experiences and activities women have in common: “experiences such as giving birth, certain biology, particular kinds of fantasies and dreams.”⁷⁰ This radical feminism became Rich’s new political and social philosophy in the 1970s, despite the fact that to some, her views concerning gender issues seemed extremist and even absurd.⁷¹ In the late 1960s and early 1970s, she was able to sympathize with women who had experienced oppression and spoke for them as a supporter of women’s rights. When Rich was granted the National Award for *Diving into the Wreck* in 1974, she “accepted it along with Audre Lorde and Alice Walker, two other nominees, in the name of all women”⁷²:

We [...] together accept this award in the name of all the women whose voices have gone and still go unheard in a patriarchal world, and in the name of those who, like us, have been tolerated as token women in this culture, often at great personal cost and in great pain [...] We symbolically join here in refusing the terms of patriarchal competition and declaring that we will share this prize among us, to be used as best we can do for women [...] We dedicate this occasion to the struggle for self-determination of all women, of every color, identification or derived class [...] the women who will understand what we are

⁶⁹ Margaret Atwood, “Diving into the Wreck,” *New York Times* Dec. 30 (1973): 161.

⁷⁰ Keyes 134.

⁷¹ Keyes 135.

⁷² Keyes 136.

doing here and those who will not understand yet; the silent women whose voices have been denied us, the articulate women who have given us strength to do our work.⁷³

In the early 1970s, Rich's love for women rapidly grew and she also started to be sexually orientated toward women. She started to anticipate that women's perception of themselves and their social status would change.⁷⁴ To illustrate this shift, we will focus on the poems "Insipience" and "Diving into the Wreck."

In the poem "Insipience," for example, Rich expressed her allegiance toward women, and idealized and supported the sisterhood of women⁷⁵:

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.⁷⁶

In this poem, the man is described as a passive, negative and bored person. The nature of his daylong activity (i.e. throwing stones into the ever black pool), suggests vainness, doom and a lack of hope. The female emphasizes the need for the unity of women, and encourages them to help each other in their endeavor to change their position within society. She knows that it will be extremely difficult to break free from male authority

⁷³ Keyes 135.

⁷⁴ Keyes 135.

⁷⁵ Keyes 135.

⁷⁶ Adrienne Rich, "Insipience," *Diving into the Wreck* 11.

and compares it to waking over the scarred volcanic rock — a treacherous, unknown place no women dared to cross before. However, the unity of women makes their efforts more effective than if they were isolated. In this poem, the female speaker does not directly fight with the man. Rather, her strategy is to leave him alone, and escape his authority and his dreams unnoticed.

Rich encouraged other women to actively fight with their subordinate societal status and constant humiliation. She openly supported their independence and a sense of power. This feminist ideology of Rich was aimed first at women's thinking, the change of which was to subsequently undermine societal beliefs in the traditional feminine subjection. In other words, this process was supposed to cause a transformation of the traditional social order in terms of women's role.

Rich's active efforts to bring about social change are particularly obvious in her collection *Diving into the Wreck*. Atwood wrote that "*Diving into the Wreck* is simply a book of explorations — the wreck Rich is diving into, [...], is a wreck of obsolete myths, particularly myths about men and women. She is journeying to something that is already in the past, in order to discover the reality behind the myth."⁷⁷ The poem entitled "Diving into the Wreck" is considered by many to be one of the most influential American poems of the twentieth century.⁷⁸ According to Catharine R. Stimpson, this poem "has been a mandate for feminist critics as they measure the damage patriarchal cultures have inflicted and the treasures that a female tradition has nevertheless accumulated."⁷⁹ In the poem, the poetic persona dives into the deep ocean in order to explore the immense unknown (or long-forgotten) space. If the persona wants to catch sight of womanhood as it had been before being subjected by patriarchy, she has to set

⁷⁷ Atwood 161.

⁷⁸ Langdell 97.

⁷⁹ Catharine R. Stimpson, "Zero Degree Deviancy: The Lesbian Novel in English," *Critical Inquiry*, Winter 1981: 363, JSTOR < <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343168>>, 18. 1. 2015.

out for this adventure.⁸⁰ She describes the adventures of scuba diving and the wreck she finds. The wreck is a symbol of the harm that was done to women's identity and the relationships between men and women in general. In order to see the harm that was done and to find out whether there remain any treasures, the persona has to descend into the sea which contains records of history.⁸¹ As a result of this underwater journey, the persona undergoes a complete transformation of her female identity as she re-discovers her great worth and sees the evidence of the damage that has been done to it. After the realization of how precious the female persona is, she can stop believing in the myth that women are inferior beings, and start to act confidently in the public and political sphere. She can feel equal to men. "Diving into the Wreck" can be viewed as Rich's manual for other women on how to regain their self-trust and strengthen their status in the male-dominated society. So as a result, it is not transformative only for the particular female person in the poem, but also for the whole society.

"Diving into the Wreck" is a poem of ten stanzas written in free verse. Compared to the 1950s, this indicates that Rich's poetry ceased to be so strictly formal. This brought more freedom to Rich's writing. Her free and open style is used throughout the whole poem, which enables her to clearly express her feminist attitudes, which the institutionalized conventions of poetic formalism would not fully allow her to do.⁸² The poem begins with the speaker's preparation for a journey—an underwater dive into a shipwreck that symbolizes her rebirth:

First having read the book of myths,
and loaded the camera,
and checked the edge of the knife-blade
I put on

⁸⁰ Langdell 113.

⁸¹ Stimpson 363.

⁸² Mary S. Strine, "The Politics of Asking Women's Questions: Voice and Value in the Poetry of Adrienne Rich," *Text and Performances Quarterly*, January 1989: 30.

the body-armor of black rubber
the absurd flippers
the grave and awkward mask.⁸³

The speaker is absolutely conscious of what she is doing. She prepares by loading her “camera,” indicating that it is important that she remember this journey and that she keep a record of what she finds in the depths of the ocean. She dons “body armor” and a “knife-blade” in an attempt to protect herself from pain she may find in this new place. This might seem a little absurd because she is going to explore the wreck in which female power is supposedly hidden, and therefore there should be no need to protect herself in a place where she can embrace her true identity. Yet this is evidence that women’s natural power has been ruined, suppressed and forgotten for so long that the female persona does not find the place familiar and is even afraid of it.

Moreover, the poetic persona in “Diving into the Wreck” is inexperienced and needs to undertake her journey “not like a Cousteau with his / assiduous team”⁸⁴ but alone. This might symbolize the fact that most women in the 1970s still did not dare to regain power and handed it submissively over to men, or they did not even believe that they may possess such a power. So the woman might be one of the first ones to do it and therefore she is alone in this venture. She has to “[return] to the sea, the origin of life, to explore ‘the wreck’ of civilization in an effort to determine what went wrong.”⁸⁵ The fact that the wreck is located in the deepest bottom of the ocean might be again symbolic of the fact that the patriarchal society had buried female power in a place that is hardly accessible, vast and desolate so most people have forgotten that it even exists.

This is evident in the third stanza when the courageous persona says:

⁸³ Rich, “Diving into the Wreck” 22.

⁸⁴ Rich, “Diving into the Wreck” 22.

⁸⁵ Wendy Martin, “From Patriarchy to the Female Principle,” *Adrienne Rich’s Poetry*, ed. by Ch. Gelpi and A. Gelpi (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1975) 185.

I go down.
My flippers cripple me,
I crawl like an insect down the ladder.
and there is no one
to tell me when the ocean
will begin.⁸⁶

It is obvious that the persona, as an active agent, willfully undertakes the gradual descent into the deep sea, even though the activity is accompanied by great difficulties.⁸⁷ The diver is fully aware of the extreme risks the underwater journey presents, but she still decides to confront the danger, anticipating that the new knowledge she might find, represents not only doom, but some kind of salvation as well.⁸⁸ Therefore, the sea in “Diving into the Wreck” is “a medium through which more specific, localized objects of knowledge like the wreck can be encountered and explored.”⁸⁹ The courageous speaker also aims to record the experience, present it to the world and transform it into action on social level.⁹⁰ This reflects Rich’s activism and determination to be politically influential.

Towards the end, “Diving into the Wreck” gives the impression that it depicts a process of transformation of the woman’s identity. The speaker must be completely independent and has to learn for herself how to adapt to the unknown waters. In the fifth stanza, the female persona says that the deeper she descends, the more power she gains:

⁸⁶ Rich, “Diving into the Wreck” 22.

⁸⁷ Roger Gilbert, “Framing Water: Historical Knowledge in Elizabeth Bishop and Adrienne Rich,” *Twentieth Century Literature*, Summer 1997: 146, JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/441566>> , 18. 1. 2015.

⁸⁸ Gilbert 148.

⁸⁹ Gilbert 148.

⁹⁰ Gilbert 148.

First the air is blue and then
it is bluer and then green and then
black I am blacking out and yet
my mask is powerful
it pumps my blood with power
the sea is another story
the sea is not a question of power
I have to learn alone
to turn my body without force
in the deep element.⁹¹

It is probable that the deeper she dives towards the wreck, the more confident she becomes. She starts to experience the power and independence she longs for and is not so fearful and uncertain as before. This is a transformative process. She gradually starts to be fascinated by the underwater world and at the beginning of the sixth stanza, she states that “[...] now: it is easy to forget / what I came for.”⁹² At the same time, the woman realizes that she cannot forget what the purpose of her risky diving in the ocean is and in the seventh stanza she recalls her goal:

[She] came to explore the wreck
The words are purposes.
The words are maps.
[She] came to see the damage that was done
and the treasures that prevail.⁹³

⁹¹ Rich, “Diving into the Wreck” 23.

⁹² Rich, “Diving into the Wreck” 23.

⁹³ Rich, “Diving into the Wreck” 23.

She aims to find out whether there ever existed a unique and precious women's identity, of which the wreck would be the evidence. She wants to see the destruction that has been done to the original female power by social prejudices and patriarchal authoritarianism:

the thing I came for:
the wreck and not the story of the wreck
the thing itself and not the myth
[...]
the evidence of damage
worn by salt and sway into this threadbare beauty
the ribs of the disaster
curving their assertion
among the tentative haunters⁹⁴

Even though the diver finds the wreck that gives evidence of disaster, her exploration leads toward beauty at the same time.⁹⁵ This is because the wreckage still bears witness to the ancient beauty of womanhood, which fills the persona with hope and power.

The courageous persona does not merely describe the oppressive stereotypes from a distance as was the case in Rich's early poems. This poem is a personal experience: the woman wants to see the core reality of the damage of female power with her own eyes, and have the evidence of the original worth of women's identity. The "tentative haunters" in this stanza might symbolize the ghosts of the women who were "drowned" (i.e. their female power was suppressed by force). They still haunt the wreck.

Finally, in the depths of the ocean, the poetic persona spots the hidden beauty of the wreck and its long-forgotten preciousness:

⁹⁴ Rich, "Diving into the Wreck" 23.

⁹⁵ Gilbert 148.

This is the place,
And I am here, the mermaid whose dark hair
streams black, the merman in his armored body.
We circle silently
about the wreck
I am she: I am he⁹⁶

This is an intense experience. Unlike the blurred and fairytale-like versions recorded in the book of myths, this experience is a source of women's power. When the woman finds the wreck, she imagines herself being both the mermaid and the merman. This could mean that she removes the tensions and divisions between men and women and experiences completeness in life.⁹⁷ This unity gives the persona strength and a sense of wholeness. Circling around the wreck, the persona realizes that she, too, belongs to those whose true identity has been suppressed and worn out by the social conventions. She is the one,

whose drowned face sleeps with open eyes
whose breasts still bear the stress
whose silver, copper, vermeil cargo lies
obscurely inside barrels
half-wedged and left to rot
we are the half-destroyed instruments
that once held to a course
the water-eaten log
the fouled compass⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Rich, "Diving into the Wreck" 24.

⁹⁷ Martin 185.

⁹⁸ Rich, "Diving into the Wreck" 24.

The woman sees that she had possessed the power to drive the ship which probably symbolizes the possibility to freely and confidently make decisions about the course of her life, and to have a chance to actively influence the world. She finally witnesses what patriarchy did to womanhood when it started to hold sway over it. However, the poetic persona does not lose hope for the renewal of women's identity. The seventh stanza reflects change and growth because the woman has found what she has come for. Her mask is removed, and her identity is becoming solidified. She gains confidence, becomes fully aware of the existence of her power and emerges transformed from the ocean. And in the last stanza, the speaker embraces every aspect of her identity:

We are, I am, you are
by cowardice or courage
the one who find our way
back to this scene
carrying a knife, a camera
a book of myths
in which
our names do not appear.⁹⁹

In this stanza, Rich invites other women to experience the same process of exploring their true, autonomous identity, and to refuse to accept their traditional roles. By undertaking the underwater journey and by seeing the wreck of the original beauty of womanhood, the persona managed to set herself free from the disastrous myths. That might be the reason why her name does not appear in the book of myths. She also

⁹⁹ Rich, "Diving into the Wreck" 24.

encourages other women to follow her example and to actively try to dispose of misinterpretations of female identity which are imposed on them by the patriarchal society. Her new enlightened outlook is permanent. It is something she will carry long after leaving the wreck behind her.

“Diving into the Wreck” is a radical feminist poem which reflects the atmosphere of not giving in to the social traditions but making a continual change concerning the role of women in society. In this poem, Rich takes a strong feminist stand and creates a persona who, in the face of danger, confronts the traditional misapprehensions of her gender, and as a result becomes empowered and finds her true identity. Thus this poem proves the fact that “Rich’s poetry records her struggle to create a strong independent self capable of demanding and sustaining egalitarian relationships and documents her efforts to create a new social and political vision.”¹⁰⁰ In contrast with the poem “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers,” the mood in “Diving into the Wreck” is not nervous or fearful; it rather celebrates the energizing power of women. Throughout “Diving into the Wreck,” Rich used free verse, which clearly indicates that her poetry ceased to be characterized by strict poetic formalism. This progressive shift in the structure of Rich’s poetry between the 1950s and the 1970s reflects her decision to set the female narrators of her poems (and women in general) free from oppression. In other words, *Diving into the Wreck* tops Rich’s development from a “humble” poet in the 1950s to a radical feminist poet and a political activist.

¹⁰⁰ Martin 175.

Chapter V: Rich's Poetry in the 1980s and 1990s: *An Atlas of the Difficult World*

In the 1980s and early 1990s, there occurred a significant shift in Rich's poetry because she widened the scope of her interest. Gradually she became aware of the fact that the realization of her identity cannot be based only on adopting a mere feminist stance — in the foreword to *Blood, Bread and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979 – 1985*, Rich says that “the woman trying to fit racism and class into a strictly radical-feminist analysis finds that the box won't pack.”¹⁰¹ So in the 1980s and 1990s, the poet started to meditate on what it means to be a middle-class, lesbian, white, Jewish woman in order to give a proper shape to her identity politics.¹⁰² As a poet, she felt responsibility for pointing to problems in contemporary society, and gradually realized that being only a radical feminist cannot fulfill this task perfectly. In order to have a greater political influence, she could not just say “I am a woman, I am a lesbian.”¹⁰³ As an immensely influential poet, Rich started to address a wider range of issues in society — such as racism, illiteracy and poverty, because people are marginalized also for their race, social status, ethnicity, religion, origin, lack of education, etc., and social oppression is not merely connected with the unequal status of women in relation to men.

In the collection of poems *An Atlas of the Difficult World: 1988 – 1991* published in 1991, Rich managed to accurately address social issues concerning race, gender, national identity, economic and political situation of the United States. The poems in *An Atlas of the Difficult World* are meant to carefully create a map of the world, primarily the United States,¹⁰⁴ critically marking out the social and economic difficulties the country had to face in the 1980s and 1990s. In this collection, Rich did

¹⁰¹ Adrienne Rich, “Foreword,” *Blood, Bread and Poetry: Selected Prose 1976 – 1985* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1986) xii.

¹⁰² Rich, “Foreword” xii.

¹⁰³ Yorke 125.

¹⁰⁴ Templeton 154.

not promote one-sided feminist views as in *Diving into the Wreck*, but took into consideration broader issues, mostly connected with the marginalization of various minorities in American society. She pointed to the fact that traditions, mainly those concerning nationality and cultural identity, are preserved and the dominant white American culture puts at a disadvantage various minorities living in the United States.¹⁰⁵ In 1994, Rich described her political and spiritual purpose in *Atlas of the Difficult World*, saying: “To a certain extent in *Atlas*, I was trying to talk about the location, the privileges, the complexity of loving my country and hating the ways our national interest is being defined for us.”¹⁰⁶ In this collection, Rich dreamt of a better world and tried to make American society understand that it is necessary to pay closer attention to the public life with all its problems, and assume responsibility for the future course of the United States. In the second part of this chapter, I will illustrate this attitude on the poem “An Atlas of the Difficult World.”

Moreover, in the 1980s, Rich also often included in her poetry the themes and symbols of her Jewish culture and identity. It was a part of her overall politics of the 1980s and 1990s, and *An Atlas of the Difficult World* includes poems which closely refer to Judaism. We can observe that Rich started to use transcultural and transnational elements in her poetry to express her arguments and speak to the public, regardless of people’s gender and race. I will use the poem “Tattered Kaddish” from this collection as an example.

Let us begin with this poem that is closely related to Jewish spiritual traditions — “Tattered Kaddish.” In *Adrienne Rich: The Moment of Change*, Langdell writes that in this poem, Rich “intones words of mourning and praise for her late husband,

¹⁰⁵ Templeton 155.

¹⁰⁶ Adrienne Rich, “Adrienne Rich: ‘I Happen to Think Poetry Makes a Huge Difference,’” *The Progressive*, Personal interview by Matthew Rothschild, Jan. 1994, 34.

vindicating his suicide.”¹⁰⁷ Her husband, Alfred Conrad, was of Jewish origin and committed suicide in 1970. The term “kaddish” is often used to refer to a Jewish prayer which is a part of the mourning rituals at funerals and memorials. The bereaved who say Kaddish express the fact that even despite the death of their loved ones, they will still praise and glorify the Lord. In the poem, this Jewish ritual is presented and the words of mourning and praise are intoned throughout the 16-line poem:

Taurean reaper of the wild apple field
messenger from earthmire gleaning
transcripts of fog
in the nineteenth year and the eleventh month
speak your tattered Kaddish for all suicides:

Praise to life though it crumbled in like a tunnel
on ones we knew and loved

Praise to life though its windows blew shut
on the breathing-room of ones we knew and loved

Praise to life though ones we knew and loved
loved it badly, too well, and not enough

Praise to life though it tightened like a knot
on the hearts of ones we thought we knew loved us

Praise to life giving room and reason
to ones we knew and loved who felt unpraisable

Praise to them, how they loved it, when they could.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ Langdell 195.

¹⁰⁸ Adrienne Rich, “Tattered Kaddish,” *The Fact of a Doorframe: Selected Poems: 1950 – 2001* (New York: Norton, 2009) 249.

The title of the poem says that the Kaddish is tattered. It might be so because suicide is traditionally against Jewish law and some may see it as desecrating the whole ritual. In the poem, the speaker remembers the death of the loved ones, and praises life even though “its windows blew shut,” and it tightened its grip on the loved ones. In “Tattered Kaddish” it is the collective “we” who mourn, praise and remember those who committed suicide, which might suggest that the speaker speaks to the whole society.¹⁰⁹ In this poem, Rich uses a transcultural and transnational theme to speak to all people (regardless of their race or gender) to transform the people’s inner attitudes to life. This element could be observed neither in *A Change of World*, nor in *The Diamond Cutters, and Other Poems*. Nor does the poem include any radical feminist attitudes as in *Diving into the Wreck*. This kind of collectivity which does not concern feminism indicates a further change in Rich’s poetry.

In connection with embracing her complex identity and imagining what it has historically meant to be Jewish, powerless, to belong to a constantly persecuted people, Rich made another major shift in the 1990s: she speaks to her country of those who have dwelt there oppressed, neglected, hated and assaulted.¹¹⁰ After her trip to Nicaragua in 1983, Rich suggested in her essay “North American Tunnel Vision” that “United States feminism has a peculiar potential to break out of the nightmare and place itself more intelligently with other liberation movements [...] because the spiritual and moral vision of the United States women’s movement is increasingly being shaped by women of color.”¹¹¹ As a poet who came to feel responsibility to comment on the social and political order and to speak for the oppressed, Rich expanded her mission and

¹⁰⁹ Langdell 196.

¹¹⁰ Yorke 125.

¹¹¹ Adrienne Rich, “North American Tunnel Vision,” *Blood, Bread and Poetry: Selected Prose 1976 – 1985* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1986) 165.

started to include in the picture other specific cultures – lesbian, queer, African American, Caribbean America, Puerto Rican, Native American Indian, etc. – all the “outsiders” who are displaced by the dominant, male, white, heterosexual culture.¹¹²

In another poem from this collection, “An Atlas of the Difficult World,” Rich also successfully incorporates wider social issues into her previously feminist poetry. The first section of the poem opens up with an image of a woman with a dark complexion, manually working with her head bent down: “A dark woman, head bent, listening for something [...] / dusting strawberries, each berry picked by a hand.”¹¹³ Here the readers can spot the new aspect of Rich’s political activism and her dealing with the question of identity – she adds to her feminist theory the disadvantage of people due to racial reasons. Apparently, the woman in the poem is a slave to patriarchy because the speaker claims “[she doesn’t] want to hear how he beat her after the earthquake, / tore up her writing, threw the kerosene / lantern into her face [...]”¹¹⁴ The marginalization of women has always been the main theme in Rich’s poetry, but now, it is important to notice that in this poem, it is a black woman who is the subject of subjugation. So in this poem, Rich does not depart from feminism, but sees it in a wider perspective. Yorke says that “Rich’s radical feminism transformed (through exchanges with Black feminist thought) into a new politics.”¹¹⁵ Being “lesbian” or an emancipated woman in general could no longer depict what “I” am or “she” is, as it did in “Diving into the Wreck” – for identity in Rich’s view became plural, complex and temporary.¹¹⁶

In the first section of the poem, the narrator also points to the poor economic situation of the mentioned woman because she has to work in a polluted environment,

¹¹² Yorke 126.

¹¹³ Adrienne Rich, “An Atlas of the Difficult World,” *The Fact of a Doorframe: Selected Poems: 1950 – 2001* (New York: Norton, 2009) 233.

¹¹⁴ Rich, “An Atlas of the Difficult World” 234.

¹¹⁵ Yorke 101.

¹¹⁶ Yorke 96.

which in the end destroys her health: “Malathion in the throat, communion, / the hospital at the edge of the fields, / prematures slipping from unsafe wombs.”¹¹⁷ From these lines, it is easy to see that Rich includes into her later poetry a larger scope of themes related to suffering of certain groups of people – themes such as economic disadvantage or environmental pollution, both of which decrease people’s living standards. In these lines, the narrator points to the paradox of the woman’s situation as she has to work hard to make a living, and in the end the job devastates her physically. It is apparent that in *An Atlas of the Difficult World*, Rich frequently pointed to the connections “between poverty and exploitation; between battered wives and swaggering boys; how military conventions and the institutionalized violence of civilian life cooperate; and how heedless entitlement of class or gender permits the starving of schoolchildren.”¹¹⁸

In “An Atlas of the Difficult World,” the speaker makes an allusion to how desperate and critical the working conditions of some (mostly non-white) people in the United States are, and how in some places inconceivable poverty prevails. So this poem can thus be described as “all-encompassing, ranging over American landscape and history, moving from personal to national concerns, from local to more universal positions.”¹¹⁹ But the speaker — like a cartographer — puts the grave social problems carefully on the map and thus tries to make the rest of the society conscious of them. The speaker calls these problems “wreckage, dreck, and waste,”¹²⁰ which are no materials pleasant to work with. However, she realizes that if they are to be removed, she has to identify and map them first.

¹¹⁷ Rich, “An Atlas of the Difficult World” 233.

¹¹⁸ Gertrude R. Hughes, “Eternal Vigilance,” *The Women’s Review of Books*, Dec., 1991: 11, JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4021091>>, 18. 1. 2015.

¹¹⁹ Carol Bere, “The Road Taken: Adrienne Rich in the 1990s,” *Literary Review*, Summer 2000, 552.

¹²⁰ Rich, “An Atlas of the Difficult World” 236.

In the first section of the poem, the speaker also expresses her belonging to the United States and her love for the country:

I fix on the land. I am stuck to earth. What I love here
is old ranches, leaning seaward, lowroofed spreads between rocks
small canyons running through pitches hillsides
liveoaks twisted on steepness, [...] ¹²¹

But even though the speaker does not cease to love her country, she alludes to the fact that this land has continually changed – or rather decayed throughout the years as [she]:

drive[s] inland [...]
where trucks have crashed and riders of horses tangled
to death with lowstruck boughs. These are not the roads
you knew me by. But the woman driving, walking, watching
for life and death, is the same. ¹²²

In the second section of the poem, the speaker adds to the image of continual change more explicit examples of the serious economic problems in American society, such as images of desperation stemming from poverty, environmental damage or bankruptcy in the contemporary United States:

Here is a map of our country:
here is the Sea of Indifference, glazed with salt
This is the haunted river flowing from brow to groin
we dare not taste its water

¹²¹ Rich, “An Atlas of the Difficult World” 235.

¹²² Rich, “An Atlas of the Difficult World” 235.

This is the desert where missiles are planted like corms
This is the breadbasket of foreclosed farms
[...]
This is the sea-town of myth and story when the fishing fleets
went bankrupt here is where the jobs were on the pier
processing frozen fishsticks hourly wages and no shares
[...]¹²³

By providing the readers with a map of the country's problems, the speaker delegates responsibility to them and wants them to mobilize and change the situation. So even though the map is a painful depiction of the country's problems, it helps the readers solve them.¹²⁴ This alludes to the power of poetry to awaken the readers, make them aware of political and social issues, and inspire them to make a change. Therefore, poetry has the ability to destabilize world order and indirectly change reality. Thereby in "An Atlas of the Difficult World," Rich points to the incredible power of poetry — creative power which can undermine the social constructs built by the white, capitalist, patriarchal culture. She "[explores] poetry of revolution, poetry of change, poetry that describes what is, and indicates what can be."¹²⁵

Searching for the reasons behind Rich's transformation, we may mention, for example, James Baldwin or Gloria Anzaldúa. In "Split at the Root: An Essay on Jewish Identity" (1982), Rich writes about the influence of James Baldwin on her thinking. This might be the root of her belief that poetry has the power to change reality which seems to be given, because it can initiate a transformation in peoples' thinking. In the essay she states: "Reading James Baldwin's early essays in the fifties had stirred me with a sense that apparently 'given' situations like racism could be analyzed and

¹²³ Rich, "An Atlas of the Difficult World" 235.

¹²⁴ Hughes 11.

¹²⁵ Bere 554.

described and that this could lead to action, to change.”¹²⁶ In “An Atlas of the Difficult World,” Rich might be using a similar strategy to that of Baldwin as she draws the attention of Americans to serious problems and thus tries to reshape their perception of the world and awaken their compassion for those living “on the periphery.” In addition, Yorke compared this strategy of Rich in her later poetry to Anzaldúa’s mestiza consciousness, i.e. “one that moves between thresholds, breaking down the barriers and boundaries between conventional classifications that restrict our ability to imagine – and therefore to empathize with – those different from ourselves.”¹²⁷ This strategy makes people rethink their political allegiance, and question the labels and identity they and others have been given by the dominant society.¹²⁸

In the 1980s, Rich realized how abstract and perhaps even arrogant white feminism can be: “I had [...] been struggling, along with other white feminists, with the meanings of white identity in a racist society and how an unexamined white perspective leads to dangerous ignorance, heart-numbing indifference, and complacency.”¹²⁹ In her essay “Disobedience and Women’s Studies” (1981), Rich added to these thoughts that marginalization of black women was somehow invisible to the white feminists:

Women of color who are found in the wrong place as defined at given time by the white fathers will receive their retribution unseen: if they are beaten, raped, insulted, harassed, mutilated, murdered, these events will go unreported, unpunished, unconnected; and white women are not even supposed to know they occur, let alone identify with the sufferings endured.¹³⁰

¹²⁶ Rich, “Split at the Root: An Essay on Jewish Identity” 118.

¹²⁷ Yorke 129.

¹²⁸ Yorke 129.

¹²⁹ Rich, “North American Tunnel Vision” 162.

¹³⁰ Rich, “Disobedience and Women’s Studies,” *Blood, Bread and Poetry: Selected Prose 1976 – 1985*, 79.

Rich gradually realized how white feminists had neglected women of color and therefore represented only an idealistic, abstract and inaccurate theory of feminism. It became necessary for feminism to be more global. So knowing that America was a multicultural and multiracial continent, Rich included in the 1990s more geographically and socially diverse groups of people and wanted to build bridges of understanding between them.¹³¹ Promoting social change has always been a prominent feature of Rich's primarily feminist activism, but in the 1980s, it started to concern all those who are oppressed, neglected and disfranchised in American society, which according to Rich was in a dire need of help and improvement. In the 1990s, Rich did not return to the strict poetic formalism that was typical of her poetry in the 1950s. She continued to use free verse. For example, it is clear that throughout "An Atlas of the Difficult World," Rich used irregular lengths of lines and stanzas and let the speaker openly express her ideas. She put hope in her readers as those who can change the society they live in – *An Atlas of the Difficult World* can be seen as a journey to a place where dreams can come true.

¹³¹ Yorke 126.

Chapter VI: Conclusion

Adrienne Rich, one of America's finest poets and feminist theorists, was a "pioneer, witness and prophet" for the women's movement in the second half of the twentieth, and the beginning of the twenty-first century.¹³² She passionately devoted her whole life to poetry writing, and her art expresses her commitment to feminist and political influence. Throughout her creative life, Rich's poetry developed from strict formalism in the 1950s that only obliquely alluded to the unequal status of women in patriarchal society, to bold free verse and feminist attitudes in the 1970s, and finally to an engagement with a wide range of social issues in the contemporary United States. Rich's concerns in the 1980s and 1990s included marginalization of certain groups of people due to their race, nationality, class, sexual orientation or religion.

Rich's first collection of poems, *A Change of World* (1951), is typical of formally precise, muted and decorous poetry concerning oppression of women by traditional patriarchal society. In order to attain the desired perfection of form in her early poetry, Rich politely imitated the poetic style of the most distinguished poets such as Auden, Yeats, Frost or Stevens.¹³³ For instance, the poem "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" from this collection relies on a number of traditional poetic devices, by which Rich reached the "perfection of order" in her art.

The Diamond Cutters, and Other Poems (1955) — Rich's second collection of poems — closely resembles the formalism of *A Change of World*, but some deviations from the tight stanzaic structure, meter and rhythm can be seen here. Moreover, unlike in the previous collection, Rich's approach is no longer strictly descriptive and detached. Both "Living in Sin" and "Perennial Answer" address the expected (and often

¹³² Keyes 1.

¹³³ Keyes 30.

enforced) gender roles within marriage, which may be oppressive for women and consequently lead to the decay of the partnership.

In 1973, Rich made a major shift in her poetry with her masterpiece *Diving into the Wreck*. This volume significantly strengthened her status as one of the most radical feminist writers of the twentieth century. In this volume, Rich openly called for the change of the social order, and recognition of women's equal status and power. The title poem, "Diving into the Wreck," is often ranked as one of the most politically influential American poems of the twentieth century. In this collection, Rich ceased to conceal her feminist attitudes under the cover of carefully wrought formalism, and assumed the strategy of free verse which asserted her new direction of expression. Rich's work of the 1970s is by many designated as the finest and most influential, even though it is an extremely harsh and provocative criticism of men.

Although assertion of women's power in patriarchal society has always been the center of Rich's poetry, in the 1980s and 1990s she incorporated a wider range of issues into her writings. She became concerned with all those who are marginalized by the dominant North American society due to their race, ethnicity, class, or sexual orientation, and addressed economic and political problems of the contemporary United States. She endeavored to break the boundaries between the dominant culture and the "outsiders," by transforming people's consciousness through her poetry, and thus urging them to action on the political and social level. Rich aptly depicted her poetry of the 1990s, when she wrote in her essay "History Stops For No One":

I see the life of North American poetry as a pulsing, racing convergence of tributaries — regional, ethnic, racial, social, sexual — that, rising from lost or long-blocked springs, intersect and infuse each other while reaching back

to the strengths of their origins. (A metaphor, perhaps, for a future society of which poetry, in its present suspect social condition, is the precursor.)¹³⁴

Nevertheless, Adrienne Rich's poetic creation did not stop in the early 1990s. She continued to write for approximately two more decades. Some of her main volumes were *Midnight Salvage: Poems 1995 – 1998* (1999) or *Fox: Poems 1998 – 2000* (2001). In 1997, Rich refused to accept the National Medal of Arts because she strongly disapproved of the policy of the Clinton Administration regarding art, saying that they understand it only as a decoration, and do not recognize its true meaning and purpose.¹³⁵ In the early 2000s, as an anti-war activist, Rich strongly protested against the war in Iraq and published several further volumes concerning the United States during the “war on terror,” such as *The School Among the Ruins* (2004), *Telephone Ringing in the Labyrinth* (2007) and *Tonight No Poetry Will Serve* (2011), which she published a year before her death. Adrienne Rich never ceased to boldly defend the dignity of all people in the world where the defenseless are exploited and human rights are violated. In her own words: “If you are trying to transform a brutalized society into one where people can live in dignity and hope, you begin with the empowering of the most powerless. You build from the ground up.”¹³⁶

¹³⁴ Adrienne Rich, “History Stops For No One,” *What Is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., Inc., 2003) 130.

¹³⁵ “In a Protest, Poet Rejects Arts Medal,” *The New York Times*, July 11, 1997 [online] <<http://www.nytimes.com/1997/07/11/us/in-a-protest-poet-rejects-arts-medal.html>>, July 2014.

¹³⁶ Rich, “Going There and Being Here,” *Blood, Bread and Poetry: Selected Prose 1976 – 1985*, 158.

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