



### Adrienne Rich: Aunt Jennifer's Tigers

- Imagine a corpse with 'terrified hands'. This is typical of the slightly exaggerated and comical imagery of this poem.
- In form alone, it appears to be a traditional lyric of three stanzas, each with four-lines. In fact it's as traditional in form as the main subject of the poem who is a female trapped by traditional expectations. Rich deliberately mirrors an aspect of the subject matter in the form taken by the poem.
- The simplicity of the Aunt is captured in the mundane [dreary] rhyme; each stanza contains two rhyming couplets, which on the face of it could have been rhymed by a child: 'made, unafraid', 'screen', green' etc.
- But this is a deliberate technique that Rich uses to express the infant-like character of the main subject of the poem.
- The poem is centred on a woman whose spirit is caged and on imaginary tigers whose spirit is un-caged.
- The Speaker, probably the poet Rich, comically describes a middle-aged adult who has been constricted by society's expectations and by marriage. Rich also speaks of a traditional male authority figure, an oppressive husband.
- The use of 'Jennifer' suggests that the aunt in question is reserved and has hidden in formalities all her life. After all, why not refer to her as Aunt Jenny?
- The childlike titles given to the male and female subjects of the poem suggests that they live in an immature world.
- Aunt Jennifer has stitched a pattern on a screen that reveals freedom loving tigers, showing off their liberty by their 'prancing' movement. 'Prance' is emphasised by repetition in the first and final lines, as well as by alliterating 'p' sounds in the final two lines.
- The use of bright colours heightens the contrast between the Aunt and the tigers she fashions. Just as the art form she pursues for a hobby is a little primitive, the garish contrast between the colours 'topaz' and 'green' suggests the childlike nature of the Aunt's sensibility.
- On the screen pulled into being by the weak aunt's ivory needle, there are men who do not scare the tigers. This is the opposite to the impact her husband has on her, as revealed in the second stanza where the wedding ring represents the burden, 'massive weight', of her husband's authority over her.
- Rich uses the slightly ridiculous verb 'fluttering' to convey the nervous disposition of the dutiful, submissive wife, Jennifer. She is a wife, though she behaves like a child might expect an aunt to behave, as a comic book aunt.
- Through these imaginary creatures, the panel tigers, Aunt Jennifer reveals her innermost wishes for a life where she could feel proud and without fear. The aunt is projecting her subliminal desires for proud independence, unknown to herself per se.
- There is a 'certainty' about the tigers that Aunt Jennifer lacks. They are 'denizens', independent inhabitants of their world. The word 'denizen' is a sarcastic way of referring to animals such as tigers. Perhaps it is a way of showing that the quality of Aunt Jennifer's art is



Website: [www.leavingcertlecturedays.ie](http://www.leavingcertlecturedays.ie) Email: [info@leavingcertlecturedays.ie](mailto:info@leavingcertlecturedays.ie)

somewhat cumbersome. Also, 'Denizen' has connotations of citizen, something that is a cut above the woman who crafted them, who appears to lack the equal rights of a citizen.

- It would seem that Jennifer is not an independent citizen of her own world. She is instead a wife, weighed down by duties as we learn in the second stanza.
- The interesting phrase 'chivalric certainty' suggests the tigers might behave in a more gallant and respectful way towards a woman such as Jennifer than her husband does.
- It is an interesting bit of mischief on Rich's part to allow this tiger loving aunt to use the remnants of elephant's tusks to stitch a pattern of tigers in the wild. Rich is a master of understated irony here, as elsewhere.
- It is a surprise that Rich describes the 'wedding band' worn by Aunt Jennifer as something that belonged to her husband—a hint that she is a part of his property.
- Overall this poem portrays the early mindset of the future feminist, Rich. She wrote this poem as a somewhat giddy look at unequal aging females who nervously accept their lot in life.