

Adrienne Rich

Aunt Jennifer's Tigers

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Background to the Poem

- Written when Rich was a student at Radcliffe College
- Published when she was twenty-one
- Part of her first collection, 'A Change of World'
- Aunt Jennifer, the subject of the poem, is intended to be distinct from the poet
- No direct commentary on marriage, but instead uses clever symbolism to make the point



Fire Screens

- Used to shelter people from intense heat if they sat near a fire
- Also used to screen away an empty fireplace when not in use



First Stanza

- The tigers are full of energy, strong, proud, carefree and unafraid
- They 'prance' across the screen
- Their colour and energy contrast with the men who are hidden 'beneath the tree'
- This is the tigers' world
- The word 'chivalric' links the tigers to gallantry, dignity, power and strength: all positive aspects of male power
- All the figures in the tapestry are male: can Aunt Jennifer only imagine worlds in which men are in power?

Second Stanza

- Focus is on Aunt Jennifer now
- Power and energy of the first stanza vanishes
- Aunt Jennifer is weak and nervous: her fingers 'fluttering through her wool'
- Struggles to pull the 'ivory needle'
- Ivory is made from the tusks of elephants: elephants were ridden by men hunting tigers
- Male dominance is portrayed as negative and destructive
- The wedding ring weighs her down



Third Stanza

- Moves from the present to the future
- Poet imagines Aunt Jennifer after death
- She will be forever 'terrified' and 'mastered' by the painful 'ordeals' that have marked her life
- She will never be truly free but the tigers she created will at least continue 'prancing, proud and unafraid'
- The tigers are symbols of all that Aunt Jennifer wished to be



Themes

- Equality: Aunt Jennifer is the victim of a patriarchal society
- Marriage: no love or real union but a situation in which men dominate women; ring is a 'massive weight'
- Power: Aunt Jennifer neither has nor has any hope of achieving power; she dies 'ringed by the ordeals she was mastered by'
- Imagination: Aunt Jennifer expresses the unfulfilled part of herself in her creation on the screen



Language

- Formal and distant: separates poet from the subject of the poem
- Symbolism used effectively
- Dynamic verbs emphasise the tigers' power, grace and freedom: they 'prance' and 'pace'
- The tigers control their own destiny whereas Aunt Jennifer's only act of rebellion is the creation of this image
- Hyperbole: description of the wedding ring as being a 'massive weight' reinforces the idea of male dominance and Aunt Jennifer's powerlessness
- The wedding ring is more like a shackle than a piece of jewellery

Mood

- Bleak
- Aunt Jennifer can never be free or happy, even in death
- Marriage is not equated with love but rather with oppression and dominance
- Tigers are symbols of a longing Aunt Jennifer is afraid to express



Setting

- Contrast between dull gentility of drawing room and vibrant, wild, dangerous world of the jungle
- Colours and verbs emphasise the difference between the two
- Aunt Jennifer lives in a drab world: the white needle contrasts with the bright golds and greens in the world she creates on the screen
- Aunt Jennifer seems pale and lifeless, pulling the ivory needle with her weak, white fingers

