

# A.B.M. College, Golmuri

## English Core

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## Aunt Jennifer's' Tigers

-Adrienne Rich

### **About the poet**

**Adrienne Cecile Rich** (May 16, 1929 – March 27, 2012) was an American poet, essayist and feminist. She was called "one of the most widely read and influential poets of the second half of the 20th century", and was credited with bringing "the oppression of women and lesbians to the forefront of poetic discourse." Rich criticized rigid forms of feminist identities, and valorized what she coined the "lesbian continuum"; which is a female continuum of solidarity and creativity which has impacted and even filled women's lives.

### **Introduction**

"Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" is a 1951 poem by American poet Adrienne Rich. It appeared in her first published book of poems, *A Change of World*. Told from the perspective of an anonymous speaker, the poem describes a woman, Aunt Jennifer, who crafts vibrant tapestry panels (depicting tigers) to escape—mentally, at least—her unhappy marriage. Written at a time when divorce was unacceptable, the poem criticizes the traditional institution of marriage, suggesting that it oppresses women.

## **Central Idea**

The central idea of the poem “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers” by Adrienne Rich is how the power of the patriarchy controls women’s forms but not their minds. The poem makes this point by presenting the wild, interesting, powerful tigers embroidered by Aunt Jennifer and contrasting them with Aunt Jennifer herself. The poem characterizes the tigers as topaz residents of a world of green who do not fear men and pace in certainty around their perfect world. The happy words and assured verbs in the stanza are suggestive of self-possessed power. The next part shifts to Aunt Jennifer, who is stitching this vivid picture on a screen. She does not seem powerful at all. Her fingers are fluttering through the wool, and she can hardly pull the tiny needle because the massive weight of Uncle’s wedding band sits heavily on Aunt Jennifer’s hand. This image suggests something like a prisoner’s ball and chain, and very clearly symbolizes the dominating power of patriarchal institutions, such as marriage. The poem also predicts the future. There is no hope for Aunt Jennifer. Her bondage lasts until her death, when her frightened hands lie in a coffin, still dominated by men. Her tigers, however, continue unafraid on the screen she made. Although her body has died, still mastered by her ordeals, the tigers, the denizens of her imagination, persevere, royal and powerful. This is a feminist twist on the classic signature tune of art’s ability to live longer than human life.

## **Summary**

Aunt Jennifer creates a needlepoint that shows tigers leaping across the canvas. Bright and vibrant, like topaz gems, the tigers live within the green world of the canvas. They are not afraid of the men standing underneath the tree, who are also depicted in the image. The tigers walk with certainty, shining and courageous. Aunt Jennifer's fingers swiftly and delicately work the yarn, yet she finds it physically difficult to pull even a small needle made of ivory through the canvas. Her husband's wedding band feels huge, and weighs down heavily on her hand. When Aunt Jennifer dies one day, her frightened hands will finally be still. Yet they will still be marked by the difficulties that ruled over her while she was alive. Meanwhile, the tigers she created will continue to leap across her needlepoint without shame or fear.

## **Main Points**

1. In this poem, the poet addresses the constraints of married life, experienced by a woman.
2. Aunt Jennifer weaves tigers into the panel. These tigers are brave & have no fear of men.
3. Aunt Jennifer is terrified by her dominating husband. Her finger flutters due to the mental suppression. She is not happy with her married life.
4. She will die but her art will express her desire to move proudly and fearlessly like the tigers she has made

## Theme

The theme of women and feminist can be found in this poem. "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" sounds like a bead of good times. In reality, it is about a woman whose life has been limited by the patriarchal or male-dominated society in which she lives. But, the poem does not give us any facts about this. It does not tell us, for example, that Aunt Jennifer was not allowed to go to college, or that Aunt Jennifer's husband didn't give her any say in financial matters. But the poem does firmly suggest that Aunt Jennifer's prospects in life have been limited by her gender, and also by her marriage, which left her terrified in her bad times.

In "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers," the restrictions that are problematic for Aunt Jennifer in life don't bind her in art. So, at least she has got that going for her. Aunt Jennifer's needlework allows her to experience a world of deep green forests and dancing brave tigers. That is entirely different from the real life that she leads the one that is weighed down by the sadness and limits of her marriage and her gender. Art in this poem is a kind of freedom, a freedom available to everyone, even the disempowered.

When it comes to this poetry, immortality is pretty much right up there with love. The poet seems to be passionate with the idea of their immortality. So it is really no surprise that the theme of immortality, of life after death, is reflected in "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers," too. The speaker sees that the tigers will continue dancing after Aunt Jennifer's death, and thus Aunt Jennifer will be able to live on through her art. Even though Aunt Jennifer's wall hanging might not be so famous, she still gets to be immortal in her own.

## Marriage, Gender, and Power

In "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers," a woman referred to only as Aunt Jennifer uses embroidery as a creative outlet while living (and ultimately dying) in an unhappy marriage. The poem describes the "terrified" Aunt Jennifer's fear-filled existence in a marriage full of "ordeals" in which she is ruled over by her husband, referred to simply as "Uncle." Published in 1951, a time when women were expected to get married (and divorce was frowned upon), the poem suggests that the power dynamic of a traditional heterosexual marriage serves to oppress women.

Aunt Jennifer is trapped in a difficult marriage to a man who terrifies her. Her fear is first hinted at by the contrasting imagery of the tigers in the tapestries she creates, which are unafraid of "the men beneath the tree." This could refer to hunters in a forest, out to kill the tigers. But the poem suggests that the tigers are well-equipped to take on these men and, as such, have no reason to be afraid—something that is certainly not the case with Aunt Jennifer herself.

The animals are also personified, described specifically as "chivalric." This is an old term often used to describe the moral code of knights, and is used in modern times to refer to courteous treatment of women. In likening the tigers' lack of fear to a "chivalric certainty," the poem thus ties their bravery and pride to masculinity. This, in turn, suggests that such carefree "pranc[ing]" is simply not possible for Aunt Jennifer, who is a woman living in a patriarchal world (that is, a world in which men hold most of the power).

Thus even as the tigers "do not fear the men beneath the tree," Aunt Jennifer is not just fearful but "terrified" of her husband, and this fear infuses every part of her life. In the second stanza, Aunt Jennifer's fingers are described as "fluttering," suggesting anxiety and nervousness. The hints of anxiety depicted in the second stanza escalate until, in the third stanza, Aunt Jennifer's hands are described outright as "terrified."

The source of Aunt Jennifer's fear is clearly her marriage, which is presented as an oppressive institution within which she is trapped. The nervousness of Aunt Jennifer's hands is directly linked to the "massive weight of Uncle's wedding band," a symbolic representation of how stifling and burdensome this marriage is. Aunt Jennifer's fingers are further portrayed as weak, finding "even the ivory needle hard to pull" against the weight of this ring. This reflects the oppressive nature of Aunt Jennifer's fear, which leaves her immobilized, meek, and unable to stand up to "Uncle."

The psychological weight of Aunt Jennifer's marriage stems from the dynamic inherent to traditional marriage, in which men dominate their wives. The ring is associated with "ordeals" that Aunt Jennifer "was mastered by." The use of "mastered" suggests her husband as the master. A "master" implicitly has a subject to dominate—a "slave." It's thus hinted that the Uncle/Aunt dynamic in the poem is one of Master/Slave.

The fact that it is "Uncle's" wedding band and not Aunt Jennifer's again affirms Uncle's dominance in this relationship. It is his wedding band, not her own, that weighs her down. Uncle owns the wedding band and, in a way, he also owns Aunt Jennifer. He is her master, reflecting the reality that a woman in marriage is traditionally considered the man's property.

In the early 1950s, a woman like Aunt Jennifer would have been expected to marry (a man) and stay home to take care of the household. Not only would divorce be considered socially unacceptable, Aunt Jennifer would have limited options to support herself financially outside of her marriage. Aunt Jennifer is thus trapped in her marriage, and her seemingly hopeless state is contrasted by the freedom of the tigers.

## Creative Expression and Personal Freedom

The unnamed speaker of the poem describes the life of Aunt Jennifer, a woman who cannot escape her subservient role in her marriage. She also can't escape the marriage itself: written in 1951, the poem references a time where divorce was a social no-go. Hampered by her fear, the one form of escape Aunt Jennifer does have is through her creative work—crafting tapestry panels that show colorful scenes of bold and proud tigers. The poem argues that through her art (which will live on well after Aunt, Uncle, and the unhappy marriage are long gone) Aunt Jennifer finds an escape that not even death will grant her—a hint of freedom in the immortal nature of her work.

Aunt Jennifer turns to needlework as a creative outlet, a means of coping with her difficult marriage and escaping her oppressive everyday reality. The tapestry panels she crafts with her needle and wool show tigers "prancing, proud and unafraid." This mood contrasts sharply with the seemingly meek and scared character of Aunt Jennifer herself. While the tigers are walking confidently, Aunt Jennifer can barely pull the ivory needle through her wool, due to the weight of "Uncle's wedding band."

The speaker describes how Aunt Jennifer's marriage is an obstacle to her creativity, but the poem makes it clear that, at least in life, she continues her art nonetheless. The second stanza describes Aunt Jennifer as fearful and anxious, with "fluttering" fingers. But despite the "weight of Uncle's wedding band," she insists on creating, remaining resilient and perseverant.

The third stanza then describes Aunt Jennifer in death. Finally her hands "lie" still, highlighting that her days of needlework are over. However, they remain "ringed with ordeals she was mastered by," indicating that her marriage is still with her—perhaps literally, if she's buried wearing her wedding ring.

Although Aunt Jennifer can't escape, in life or death, the weight of her difficult marriage or her subservient role in it, her creative work remains a liberating force. Jennifer herself may not be free, but her tapestries and their tigers are. What's more, the tapestries will outlive Aunt Jennifer, Uncle, and their marriage, indicating that art can create an immortal kind of freedom that goes beyond human oppression.

The tigers exist in their very own universe, as "topaz denizens of a world of green." This is a plane of existence apart from the one Jennifer and Uncle share, and a world that is technically

immortal, as the artwork is inanimate. When Aunt Jennifer is dead, "the tigers in the panel that she made / Will go on prancing, proud and unafraid."

In creating vibrant, colorful art that depicts proud and unafraid tigers—tigers who aren't afraid of men—Aunt Jennifer confronts her fear. While she may be stuck "ringed with ordeals" of her marriage (even after death), the tigers will remain free in their "world of green." Perhaps Aunt Jennifer finds comfort in this creative expression, crafting a bold tapestry that will outlive her and Uncle both, and that shows nature's creatures living wild and unafraid, liberated from man-made constraints like marriage.

### “Aunt Jennifer's Tigers” Setting

There is no setting specified in "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" and the poem does not offer any hints as to where it might be contextualized. The most the reader can surmise is that Aunt Jennifer is living in a society where a traditional heterosexual concept of marriage (one man and one woman) dominates. Given that the poem's author, Adrienne Rich, was living in the United States at the time of the poem's publication in 1951, the reader can infer the setting to be 1950s America. This contextualization would fit the speaker's depiction of marriage and affirm the portrayal of Aunt Jennifer as being "trapped" in her marriage, since opportunities for a woman to gain self-sufficiency outside of her marriage would have been limited at this time.

### Question-Answer

Read the stanzas given below and answer the questions that follow each:

1. Aunt Jennifer's tigers prance across a screen,

Bright topaz denizens of a world of green.

They do not fear the men beneath the tree:

They pace in sleek chivalric certainty.

Questions

- (a) Name the poem and the poet of these lines.
- (b) What are Aunt Jennifer's tigers doing? How do they look like?
- (c) Where do they live? Are they fearless? Give an example.
- (d) How do they pace?

Answers:

- (a) The poem is Aunt Jennifer's Tigers. The poet is Adrienne Rich.
- (b) They are jumping across a screen or a wall. They look like shining yellow topaz.
- (c) They live in green forests. They are fearless. They don't fear the men under the tree.
- (d) They run with a well-groomed, honourable confidence.

2. 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.

Questions

- (a) Why are Aunt Jennifer's hands called 'terrified'?
- (b) What are they still ringed with?
- (c) Where did she make the tigers?
- (d) What will happen to her tigers after her death?

Answers:

- (a) Her hands are called terrified because they passed through very hard and bitter experience of married life.
- (b) They are still ringed with those hard and testing difficulties which possessed her during her life.
- (c) She made the tigers in the panel.
- (d) Her tigers will go on jumping ahead, proud and unafraid even after her death.

Q3. How do 'denizens' and 'chivalric' add to our understanding of the tiger's attitudes?

Ans: Like all beasts of prey, the tigers are the denizens of the forest. They live far away from human settlements. They are called 'chivalric.' This indicates the majestic and honourable position that they occupy in the world of animals. So, the use of the words 'denizens' and 'chivalric' adds to our understanding of the tiger's attitudes.

Q4. What is suggested by the image 'massive weight of uncle's wedding band'?

Ans: It suggests the weight of the harsh and tough experience of Aunt Jennifer's married life. The image is quite suggestive. The wedding band is symbolic. It represents the unbreakable bond of marriage between the husband and the wife.

Q5. Of what or whom is Aunt Jennifer terrified in the third stanza?

Ans: In the third stanza, the poet refers to Aunt Jennifer's 'terrified hands'. The old unhappy memories are still fresh in her mind. She had passed through many testing and horrible times during her married life. These ordeals crushed and suppressed her. Their effect is still visible. So, she is still ringed with those ordeals that dominated her life.

Q6. What are the 'ordeals' Aunt Jennifer is surrounded by? Why is it significant that the poet uses the word 'ringed'? What are the different meanings of 'ringed' in the poem?

Ans: The poem addresses the experiences of marriage in the midst of constrictions. The word 'ringed' is significant. It suggests that the vicious grip of her unhappy married life is still holding her tightly. The word 'ringed' has been used in two ways. First is the conventional use. Here ring is a symbol of the sacred bond of marriage. The other is the figurative use of 'ringed'. It means encircled or surrounded.

Q7. How will Aunt Jennifer's hands look when she is dead?

Ans: When Aunt Jennifer dies, her hands will still look terrified. Perhaps she has experienced a lot of hardships and troubles in the past. Their effect has left its print on her hands. The ordeals that crushed her married life had surrounded and cramped her fingers and hands too.

Q8. What will happen to Aunt Jennifer's tigers when she is dead?

Ans: Aunt Jennifer's tigers will survive her. She has created the tigers in a panel. They are made of wool. These objects of art will survive their creator. The tigers will go on jumping, proud and unafraid.

Q9. Describe the poetic devices used in the poem 'Aunt Jennifer's Tigers'.

Ans: Adrienne Rich's 'Aunt Jennifer's Tigers' is a beautiful short poem rich in symbolism and imagery. The metaphor 'bright topaz' depicts the shining yellow complexion of her tigers. The effective use of alliteration in 'sleek, chivalric certainty' describes the pace of the tigers effectively. 'The massive weight of wedding band' symbolizes ordeals and hardships of Aunt Jennifer's married life. The images 'terrified hands' and 'ringed with ordeal' create the effect of oppression and terror as well as captivity.