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Adrienne Rich: Examining Change Through Individual Introspection

In “Diving into the Dream: A Poet's Reflection on the Influence of Adrienne Rich's Poetry”, Robin Becker expands on her experience identifying poetry that aligned with the internalized feminine experience. A Research Professor of English and Women's Studies at Penn State, Becker declares that Rich illustrates how authentic speech feels out of reach especially during periods of change (20). Undoubtedly, Rich's emotions are well documented through her writing across largely recognized historical events. While Becker's analysis celebrates Rich's work for its antipatriarchal honesty, I find her constant self-examination to be more timeless and universal. Moreover, I find that this writing style allows for readers to apply the subject to themselves. Adrienne Rich's poems “Origins of History and Consciousness,” “Diving into the Wreck,” and “Splittings” bring to light self-reflection and how we navigate change through introspection.

Rich's writing is praised and studied for her analysis of the poem to poet relationship. An Associate Professor of English at the University of Oregon, Marilynn Farwell claims that across prefeminist and feminist writings Rich focuses on feelings of belonging and relating art to life (193). While she navigates the discovery of feminism, Rich experiences internalized grievances with herself due to her traditional past. Due to this internal conflict, Rich's personal growth and self-undoing bleeds out in her writing. This aligns with previously mentioned research by

Becker, as she reflects on the modern feminist imprint Rich has particularly on the lesbian perspective. Becker admires Rich's exploration of other's consciousness to communicate to her readers (21). Rich is found directing feelings, that may be personal, into a character's self-discovery to show readers experiences that may be shared. Moreover, Literary Critic Robert Boyer finds Rich's poetry to highlight her connection with her repressed self (135). Rich's repressed self is found to hold passion for activism across feminism to her own sexuality. This identity, thought to be lost, is rediscovered through her own personal evolution that she illustrates for her audience. Making eventual peace with her own reflections throughout her major life changes.

Rich's collective work addresses the multiple facets of her own personal life. Her early poetry follows through her heterosexual marriage, having three sons before the age of thirty, protesting the Vietnam war, and the eventual personal evolution that addresses her qualms with women's societal roles. Professor of English Willard Spiegelman finds that the Vietnam war brought for more public displays of activism out of many including Rich, and what follows is a full nosedive into feminist writing (393). An example of this change in expression is found in Rich's poem "Splittings", "I believe I am choosing something new / not to suffer uselessly yet still to feel" (lines 23-24). This particularly may be noted as Rich defining her desire to share what her own reflections bring versus traditional expectations for women. Following this public activism from Rich, she separates from her husband; making her free to lean heavily into feminism and experiment with her sexuality. As result, Rich identifies as a lesbian and remains an influential writer for the subject of homosexuality. Within her accumulation of published works, Rich consistently takes the reader along her journey of introspection. All her dramatic

shifts and personal realizations are placed delicately in her writing, utilizing self-reflection to relate to others.

Perhaps the poem best known for its venture inwards, Adrienne Rich's "Diving into the Wreck" tells the story of exploring legacy. Rich is recognized for her feminist lens, and this piece comes equipped with her courage to cover the topic of self-examination post-divorce. Feminism, when critiqued, consistently reflects on the past to show the effects sexism has on a society. This poem metaphorically dissects the myths women are under in history from the perspective of a woman seeking truth. A diver, representing the woman reviewing history, describes her motives as, "I came to see the damage that was done / and the treasures that prevail" (lines 55- 56). The truth is desired, and seeing the wreck would contrast the myths that circulate. Farwell writes that the use of persona, as used here, allows for readers to see themselves in poetry (198). Utilizing the "I" in writing allows for writers, like Rich, to bring readers into a feminist position of internal reflection (199). This examination of self and history leads our story to end with the importance of collective remembrance. After examining the wreck, Rich writes, "We are, I am, you are / by cowardice or courage / the one who find our way / back to this scene" (lines 100-104). Implying that as time moves forward, we are called to return to reflect on historical truth.

In a more specific scenario, Adrienne writes about a woman's experience navigating the world in the poem "Splittings." Living as a woman involves constant self-awareness in actions and how one's perceived. Despite this, our experiences often end up forgotten due to the feelings these standards evoke. Rich begins her poem describing an internal battle on recent pain versus moving forward. She writes, "Yet if I could - instruct myself, if we could learn to learn from pain / even as it grasps us..." (lines 6-8) as if to show the shared feeling that women, as a collective,

wish to have control of painful emotions. Rich continues this poem by showing the use of choice to defer from typical suffering. Choosing a different perspective Rich writes, "...like a man / I refuse these givens the splitting / between love and action I am choosing / not to suffer uselessly..." (lines 46-49). Like the last poem, this involves reflecting on the collective past. The reason our speaker feels the need to deny herself the marrying of her own love is because of her internal wounds of womanhood. Boyer comments on this in his analysis of Rich, finding that her need for authenticity results in her ability to apply her wisdom (148). He mentions, "The will to change has turned the poet from whole-ness to analytic lucidity" (147). Meaning, Rich remains genuine when writing on topics personal to her own growth. Ending powerfully, Rich writes, "I choose to love this time for once / with all my intelligence" (lines 50-51). This choice, decided after reflecting internally, breaks her free to continue navigating emotions in her own best interest.

Different than the two previous poems, the poem "The Origins of History and Consciousness" touches on what can be learned through an intimate connection. Rather than a broad history, this poem relies on the political climate of the 1970s. Consequently, it serves to comment on the required discreteness of lesbian connections in Rich's experience. The speaker begins by describing her room, and how all the poetry and media on her walls influence, "...the drive / to connect. The dream of a common language" (lines 11-12). A common language being that of two women with the same intention of love. This feeling of connection is more complicated for Rich when she tries to navigate it internally. She describes it by writing, "It was simple to meet you, simple to take your eyes / into mine..." (lines 34-35). Only to immediately follow that with the extreme contrast of, "What was not simple: to wake from drowning / from where the ocean beat us like an afterbirth / into this common, acute particularity" (lines 40-42).

Images of drowning and violence in a poem that introduced romance serves as jarring. This is the poet's way of showing readers that a connection may form with ease but evolves into something more strenuous to maintain. Published writer Mary Slowik examines Rich's willingness to give up security for her pursuits, and this poem would exemplify the desire for an unscathed love (242). This conclusion comes from Rich's expression while exploring her sexuality, and much of her growth came from her self-reflection. It is a hushed experience of homosexuality, and the space it takes up in Rich's writing shows how this affected her. Living under these difficult circumstances, she concludes her poem by writing, "I want to call this, life. / But I can't call this life until we start to move / beyond this secret circle of fire" (lines 66-67). The inability to love openly results in a life unfulfilled to Rich. Mentioned earlier, her need for authenticity remains a high priority. Indicating that after Rich's own reflections, this continues to be a topic she brings attention to in poetry.

Following through the constantly changing phases of her own life, Rich's relationship with her own poetry remains her priority. Addressing all women in her poem "Diving into the Wreck" to examine myths and legacy pertaining to them, Rich presents her introspective examinations for pondering. "Splittings" stands to reference the self-reflection of aligning actions with expectations. Then writing "Origins of History and Consciousness" to highlight the internalized feelings of inauthenticity while exploring a romantic connection in a dismissive environment. Self-reflection on her activism and personal growth benefited Rich and allowed for those consuming her poetry to ruminate on the topics she chose themselves. This, overall, is largely why Rich is considered influential in feminist poetry. Coming into her most authentic identity was a journey, and her poetry perfectly encapsulates her navigation through change.

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