ADRIENNE RICH:

IMAGES OF MARRIAGE AND MOTHERHOOD

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English

by

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.   Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II.  Institution of Marriage</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. Institution of Motherhood</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV.  Individual Self</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V.   Connection With Other Women</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI.  Creativity</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII. Conclusion</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ABSTRACT

ADRIENNE RICH:
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Candace Michelle Haskell
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This thesis demonstrates how Adrienne Rich's poetry has identified and given voice to women's experiences within the institutions of marriage and motherhood. After exploring the physical, emotional and spiritual consequences of entrapment with socially defined roles, the final section concludes with Rich's solution for the future.
INTRODUCTION

Adrienne Rich's poetry spans over thirty years of rising feminist consciousness. From 1950 through the present, she has slowly developed a body of work which examines how women feel about themselves and their roles within society. As a woman and a poet she stands in a unique position to voice women's experiences within the male-dominated culture which has hitherto considered women to be the subjects of poetry rather than the creators of it ("When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision" 39).

As a social critic, Rich perceives her American culture as a patriarchy in which

...males hold dominant power and determine what part females shall and shall not play, and in which capabilities assigned to women are relegated generally to the mystical and aesthetic and excluded from the practical and political realms. ("The Antifeminist Woman" 78)

One of the assumptions of the patriarchy is that these realms are "separate and mutually exclusive," each imbued with specifically male or female principles. The female's realm is the "personal" or home sphere (Of Woman Born 32), wherein her roles are those of wife and mother.

Rich perceives the fundamental base of the patriarchy as the "individual family unit with its division of roles...unpaid domestic services of the wife, obedience to authority, judgement and punishment for disobedience."
("Antifeminist Woman" 78-79). Within the hierarchy of roles and functions, women were systematically denied access to the public realm and males held the positions of power wherein they wrote about and defined women's roles as wife and mother. Through male domination and female acquiescence these roles have solidified into the social institutions of marriage and motherhood.

I intend to demonstrate how Rich's poetry has identified and given voice to women's experiences within these two institutions. Part one explores the feelings of bondage and powerlessness which result from being trapped within the institution of marriage. Part two examines the draining of female energy which occurs from providing endless care and attention to others within motherhood. The bulk of my paper then analyzes in detail Rich's depiction of the physical, emotional and spiritual consequences for women who are restricted within these roles. I focus primarily on the damage to the individual self, to connection with other women, and to creativity, as revealed by the poetry. The final section closes with Rich's vision for the future as women break free from their roles and define their own experiences.
II.

Historically, marriage as an institution has given men power over women both legally and socially. Rich's poetry examines how this submissive position feels for women. She rejects romantic idealism which posits the woman as an angel in the house, a happy dependant whose greatest joy comes from subsuming her needs in serving her family. Rich asks how does it feel to be constricted in a role? How does it feel to be bound by custom, decorum, and the demands of others?

Four poems in particular demonstrate a representative progression of the trapped, constricted feeling women have experienced in this institution. The first poem, "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" (Change of World 19), was written in 1951. The narrator looks detachedly at the oppressive nature of marriage as embodied by the heavy gold ring Aunt Jennifer wears. This "massive weight" makes her freedom of movement nearly impossible. Even in death, her hands will be "still ringed with ordeals she was mastered by." Thus one image stands out: that of a terrified woman who cannot move, cannot withstand the pressure of custom to be still. In contrast, the tigers she has embroidered on a screen "prance" and are "proud and unafraid." These tigers symbolize Aunt Jennifer's spirit expressing itself. However, the weight of her ring makes it difficult for her to pull the
needle. Her hand struggles to express her inner yearnings, but that same hand is burdened by the weight of her marriage. The contrast of her "fluttering," "terrified" fingers with the tigers who "prance" "unafraid" illustrates the disparity between what is trying to be expressed and the internalized forces which deny that opportunity.

In 1971, Rich looked back at this poem and the period of her life in which she wrote it ("Dead Awaken" 40). She was surprised to see that beneath the conscious craft are glimpses of the split I even then experienced between the girl who wrote poems, who defined herself in writing poems, and the girl who was to define herself by her relationships to men.

Even as a student before age twenty-one, Rich was examining this split. She had thought Aunt Jennifer was an imaginary woman; but at age forty-two she realized that she had been expressing a reality she experienced at a deep unconscious level. She had tried to herself detach from the woman in the poem, but later she could see the similarity, for "this woman [also] suffers from the opposition of her imagination, worked out in tapestry, and her life-style." Stifled creativity is a frequent theme in Rich's work, as shall be seen throughout this paper.

The second poem concerning the bondage of marriage is "An Unsaid Word" (Change of World 51). This short, seven-line poem vividly juxtaposes the enforced stillness of a wife with the free activity of her husband. When his mind
"forages alone...free," she "stands where he left her."

This is the hardest thing for a woman to endure. The poem does not explore why these two people are engaged statically, or why it is difficult for a woman to accept it. The dynamics are simply stated as known facts, constructs of the institution of marriage as women know it. Thus another thread of Rich's poetry is revealed which recurs often: the female as defined in relation to the male, not on her own terms. She is still and inactive in relation to his activity. She does not stand alone as an individual, nor can she leave him. She must wait, be still, and try and quiet her own feelings which make this waiting "the hardest thing to learn."

The third poem illustrating cultural constraints is "The Lioness." It was written in 1975, twenty-four years after the previous two poems. The tone is more personal, less detached, as the speaker describes her attraction to a caged lioness who paces back and forth in a pen. The animal's eyes express all the beautiful expansiveness of nature: "rivers, seacoasts, volcanoes." The speaker objectively addresses the lioness, revealing her own perception from outside the cage. From this angle, she imagines the problem for the animal is "one of straying too far, not of staying within bounds." The animal cannot go out to her own country of desert stretches, and she sniffs toward them yearningly. As Judith McDaniel notes in her article
"Reconstituting the World" (23), "there is no overt recognition that the lioness is caged...[the] poet...must...enter the lioness' frame of reference." I would amend this to say that there is little recognition of the importance of the cage as it limits the lioness. It is not until the speaker enters the creature's eyes and looks out from her viewpoint that she really sees how the bars affect the soul of the animal. She paces, her power is restricted and she dreams of freedom she cannot reach. In between the rivers, the rainbows, stand the bars of the cage, "the penance" for wanting to be free.

The analogy is between a lioness and a woman caught in institutional, legal bonds. There is a difference between objectively looking at a woman in bound circumstances and actually entering her consciousness and seeing the bars of custom or law which prevent her from acting. The phrase "the penance" suggests that punishment is how society deals with those who dare explore or think further than the prescribed limits.

Several formal elements appear here which differ from the previous poems about being bound. The form of the other poems was strict meter and rhyme, as opposed to "The Lioness" which is in free verse. The others also used objective description, as opposed to a more subjective dream sequence mode. Additionally, "The Lioness" is in first person, whereby the speaker actually enters the consciousness
of the lioness and tells her viewpoint.

Although the poem does not specifically state that the lioness in a cage is analogous to a woman in marriage, it is suggested by Rich's overall work which repeatedly uses constrictive images in marital contexts. The analogy is clear in poems like "Living in the Cave" (Diving into the Wreck 42), "Mother-Right" (Dream of a Common Language 59), "The Trees" (Necessities of Life 15), and others which will be examined later.

The "lashed bars" of the lioness' cage symbolize the laws of society which prevent women from fully participating in the culture. Rich examines how the social compact of marriage as an institution creates powerlessness in women. The lioness could not explore beyond her cage; she could only pace with "half-abnegated power." Another poem, "Heroines" (A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far 33-36) uses the metaphor of a "pyre of driftwood" for this power smouldering under convention. The speaker addresses women of the nineteenth century who tried to speak out in public about the injustices they perceived in society, such as slavery. She names the laws which prevented them from expressing themselves and then tries to acknowledge the effort they made, to "honor their legacy" and yet still to recognize that it was not enough.

These women are defined as "outlaw," "deviant" and "exceptional." By law, they were "forbidden to vote, for-
bidden to speak in public”; and when they try to go against this, "human excrement/is flung" at them. The speaker lists the laws which circumscribed these women's existence. A woman could not own property; she was property herself. First she belonged to her father, then to her husband who had the rights of a slaveholder, "If married, you are legally dead/ the law says." The diction of the poem imitates the legal voice of the nineteenth century: "law, possess, property, belong, forbidden, bequeath, right, power." These words are like the bars on the cage of the lioness. The speaker goes on to repeat the analogy between "a pyre of driftwood" and the power these women could have wielded. They were not "harbor beacons" lighting the way for women who followed. They were extremely limited in their indignation, restricted to "personal circumstance." Again, the enclosure image recurs to underscore how women were not permitted out of a personal and inactive sphere.

Marriage as an institution has, in Rich's poetry, two primary aspects for women. The first is that women are constrained by their culture to stay within certain prescribed limits of appropriate behavior. The repeated images of boundaries and cages illustrate this. Those who stray risk punishment. The second aspect is the powerlessness women have experienced. Not only are there legal and social constraints, but women have difficulty expressing their own frustration within the system. Their energy is supposed to
be directed towards their husbands and caring for others' needs, not their own. A tremendous sense of powerlessness pervades the poems where Rich captures the yearning of women who want to break free from their social boundaries and yet find the effort daunting and intimidating.
In her numerous essays, Rich has examined the social assumption that women belong in the personal or private sphere, while only men can operate in the public sphere. The poems thus far examined expose this bias in the images of women being bound and restricted in activity. She suggests that both marriage and motherhood are social institutions which restrict women emotionally, physically and mentally, as well as legally. In "Husband-Right and Father-Right" (215) she writes:

...fundamental to women's oppression is the assumption that we as a group belong to the "private" sphere of the home, the hearth, the family, the sexual, the emotional, out of which men emerge as adults to act in the "public" arena of power, the "real" world....

She goes on to say that this dichotomy polarizes thought and feeling so that men are considered to be the thinkers and doers, and women are restricted to being the emotional sustainers of men and children, limited to the home sphere. She suggests that motherhood "is not only a core human relationship but a political institution, a keystone to the domination in every sphere of women by men" (216).

Motherhood, therefore, as an institution, sets on women the burden of caring for the daily necessities of life. They are responsible for nurturing others to go out into the
world. This is a kind of bondage, as discussed earlier. In marriage a woman must nurture her husband, and in motherhood she must also nurture her children. Both demand sacrifice of herself and her own needs. Rich states:

...only when women recognize and name as force and bondage what has been misnamed love or partnership, can we begin to love and nurture out of strength and purpose rather than out of self-annihilation and the protection of a crumbling form or fiction. ("Husband-Right" 217)

The poem "Mother-Right" (Dream 59) presents several images which reiterate the concept of marriage as bondage, discussed earlier, and which introduce the concept of needing a new image of mothers. Instead of being passive, submissive to male demands and selflessly giving at the expense of self-definition, the woman of this new image bursts out to save herself and her child from being trapped in a male world. This five-stanza poem opens with the image of a woman and her child running away from a man who is "planted." He "believes in what is his," for example, the land, the air and, implied, the woman and child. He represents a way of perceiving the world which is property-oriented, believing in the male's right to ownership of people and of nature.

As in "Heroines," marriage in this poem is seen in terms of boundaries for the woman and ownership of her. But the fact that he is "planted" now extends here the concept, to suggest that the man is also owned, trapped by his own
concept of owning the earth, the woman and child. This running woman not only flees the man and his world-view, but carries her child with her to a new land. She is active, claiming her power and fully participating in her own and her child's life. Both are valuable. Yet both are at risk.

Susan Stanford Friedman in "Adrienne Rich and H.D.," suggests that this determined mother with "freedom, strength, and motion" evokes prehistory from a feminist perspective (181). The woman, attuned to the earth rather than possessive of it, has been trapped within the patriarchal boundaries and must recapture her freedom and her own power of self-determination. This woman dares to leave her personal sphere and go out into the "real" world herself.

The primary effect of motherhood that Rich deals with in her poetry is the persistent, unending diversion of personal energy, both physical and psychic, into sustaining and encouraging of men and children. This theme recurs frequently later in this paper, in the chapter on loss of individual self and the conflict between artistic and domestic demands. At this point, I primarily want to introduce the topic by discussing two poems in the light of Rich's own feelings about the draining of female energy into the daily necessities of life.

After Rich's third child was born, she felt "a sense of drift, of being pulled along a current which called itself my destiny" ("Dead Awaken" 42). She was writing little,
partly from

...that female fatigue of suppressed anger and
the loss of contact with my own being; partly
from the discontinuity of female life with its
attention to small chores, errands, work that
others constantly undo, small children's con-
stant needs....(43)

Because her energy was being drained and because of her
guilt at feeling greedy for time for herself, she often felt
like a "monster." Anger and guilt vied for predominance.
She saw two different realities – one where she was most im-
portant, and one where her importance lay in what she could
giveto others.

These two perspectives are both revealed and compared
in "Living in the Cave" (Diving 42). The speaker describes
her life as busy with caring for others. She makes the
analogy between mothering, in the limited home sphere, and
living in a cave where all the occupants depend on her to
sustain them and help them grow. The poem begins:

Reading the Parable of the Cave
while living in the cave.

These lines refer to Plato's cave in The Republic, and imply
that while she reads about life being a reflection of ideal
forms lived in a shadow world, she is in that shadow world
and giving it life by her presence. Everything there needs
her:

These things around me, with their
daily requirements
fill me, empty me
talk to me, warm me, let me
suck on you.
She sees them, hears and responds to them, and they are totally preoccupied with themselves. None of them perceives her as a person with her own requirements: "not one/sees me/as I see them." Thus the poem reflects two contrary perspectives on what a woman should do. From one angle, she must give unceasingly to support the growth of those dependent on her. From another angle, she has feelings and needs which are not being expressed nor even seen, and slowly her giving is "deadening" and "weakening" her own person.

The role of mother is that of selfless giver. This role is further examined in "From An Old House In America" (Poems: 1950 - 1974 235-245). This sixteen-part meditative poem moves back and forth between the speaker's present and the history of all women who came to America "shipped here to be fruitful" (part 7). This short line identifies one of the poem's major themes: that women were traditionally defined by their usable sexuality, their ability to conceive and to populate the land.

The driving force behind the poem is the speaker's effort to understand how the past lives of other women have influenced her present life. In part six she says:

All my energy reaches out tonight
...to watch
back on the road of birth.

She proceeds to slip back into the past and, maintaining the first person pronoun, identifies with the Indians who came across the Bering Strait, with the Puritans from England,
and with black slaves from Africa. The descriptions of motion are progressively degrading, from "foot-slogging" to "chained." She compares her body to a "hollow ship" and sees her function as child-bearing:

    sons to the wilderness

    ...daughters
    whose juices drain like mine
    into the arroyo of stillbirths, massacres.

As Marianne Welchel notes in her paper, "Mining the Earth Deposits" (62), the frontier experience came to represent, for Rich, the draining of female energy. All a woman's resources focused on reproduction and survival. As will be examined later, the other result of this preoccupation was isolation from other women.

The birth metaphor which runs throughout "From An Old House in America" reflects the speaker's concern for uncovering the origins of the division of power between women and men. Welchel notes that these "divisions...have constricted most women. Mothering both men and children, most are...yet unborn to themselves" (62). Judith McDaniel, in "Reconstituting the World," agrees and further states that "whatever the history of individual lives has been, each [woman] was a victim of a power that took her life out of her own control" (19). This power was the male-dominated society which perceived women as primarily mothers, nurturers.

When women's self-esteem was based solely on their
ability to conceive and nurture, their failure to do so resulted in tremendous self-hatred. Part ten of "From An Old House", based on quotes from Wisconsin Death Trip by Michael Lesy, creates three horrifying vignettes of women's "desperate responses to failure in their mother roles" (Welchel 64). One woman set herself on fire with kerosene after all her children died of diphtheria:

(Oh, Lord I was unworthy
Thou didst find me out)

Another woman suffered from barrenness and felt:

"What I have failed to do, is me...."

A third woman was tortured by repeated pregnancies and prayed for a miscarriage, but promised:

I will live for the others, asking nothing
I will ask nothing, ever, for myself.

All three express the psychological and physical torment endured by women in their thwarted attempts to fulfill the only avenues of personhood open to them.

The draining of female energy and precarious self-esteem are only two of the consequences women experience of acquiescence to the institution of motherhood. Another, and more insidious, experience is that of trivialization. The mother's role is that of caretaker. When her children come of age, she is expected to turn them over to society. After producing off-spring, her role terminates and she is relegated to oblivion. "Amnesia" (The Fact of A Doorframe 208-9) explores this phenomenon and contrasts the social
value of women at different stages of mothering.

Two images are compared as if they were scenes from an American Western. The first captures a mother in the act of "handing over her son" to his new life - being a man in the world, no long a child. The falling snow, obliterating the scene, serves as a metaphor for the denial by society that her role, hitherto, is significant. The second image calls forth the further past, when the young man was a child putting away his childish toys in order to grow up. His mother and "the childish thing" are associated as one and the same, while becoming a man is characterized as,

...leaving someone, or something.

The poem then returns to the first picture of the son leaving his mother, but the angle focuses on the rapidly obliterating snow blocking the view of the "something that gets left behind." Thus the mother fades in importance when her role as caretaker ceases. "Snow" is repeated three times, increasing the analogy between the cold, heavy and blinding qualities in the picture, and the sadness and coldness of this act by the mother which nullifies her, leaves her forgotten. Additionally, she becomes associated with objects, not with human beings. As her diminution is completed by her son's entrance into manhood, the narrator questions why the snow must blot her out.

Rich frequently uses filmic terminology to reinforce
the snapshot analogy. These two images of the mother and her son are referred to as "scenes" three times, and as a "picture of the past" which is "shot in black and white." But even taking a picture of her cannot save her image, as the snowflakes blot her out.

Rich's poetry demonstrates her conviction that motherhood as an institution sets a burden on a woman to nurture and caretake selflessly, with no attention paid to her own needs. She is bound to motherhood, as marriage, by being owned by both men and children. Her energies are drained and, to add insult to injury, she is trivialized in the role to which she dedicates herself. Marriage as an institution also has her bound, unable to express her longings or desires, within rigid cultural and legal laws. The basic assumption underlying both institutions is this: that a woman's energy should be directed to men and children and not towards satisfying her own needs. The three primary results of this assumption will form the core of the rest of this paper. I propose to demonstrate these results as being a loss of individual self, a loss of connection with other women, and a stifling of creativity.
When Rich writes about the loss of one's self she writes from personal experience. In the late 1950's, at age twenty-nine, she was beginning to feel a great inner conflict between the demands of her culture and the inner demands of her own psyche. In order to write poetry she had to have a certain mental freedom, the space to let her imagination run wild and turn all her values upside-down and transform her thoughts into images. But marriage and motherhood demanded her time and energy. In "When We Dead Awaken" (31-49) she discusses her experience of conflict. She identifies the poem "Snapshots of a Daughter-In-Law" as an expression of her own frustrations in rebelling against a role which took away from her sense of self.

The title poem of the book, Snapshots of a Daughter-In-Law (21-25) examines the role of a woman as she is defined by her relationship to a man. She is a man's mother's daughter-in-law, his wife, and his children's mother. These are her legally and socially defined roles. The poem explores how a woman can feel insane from the tension of trying both to fulfill her duties as defined by society, and also to express that inner self which feels stifled. Through vivid imagery Rich demonstrates that the ethic of self-sacrifice and the power of male disapproval combine to sabotage any autonomy a woman may try to express.
The entire ten-part poem works like a filmic montage, one brief image of suppression or rebellion layered on top of the other. The poem opens with a description of the daughter-in-law's mother, as representative of the conditioning which the woman received as a child. The mother's mind "mouldering like wedding cake" has deteriorated under the inertia of an oblivious life devoted to acting out the male ideals of beauty, refinement, and comfort-producing efficiency. She accepted the conditions and terms of marriage, produced a child, and contents herself with reliving the days of her youth as a popular belle. The result of her preoccupation with the past and with her physical appearance is an inability to live in reality, her mind crumbling to pieces under the knife-edge of mere fact....

Her daughter, "nervy, glowing," does not respect her and grows away. Thus the childhood of the daughter-in-law set up certain values which, to some extent, she later rejected.

In part two, the daughter-in-law is pictured in her home, weighted down by the trivial duties of everyday life and unable to energize herself into action. Voices of rebellion taunt her in her mind, "angels chiding." They say:

Have no patience.
...Be insatiable.
Save yourself: others you cannot save.

But she cannot act, and nothing really bothers her but the
grit that blows in her eyes every morning.

The image of angels hovering around the woman represent a positive force which is trying to wake her from apathy. Often she is distracted by them, and lets herself get burned in the domestic duties she's trying to do. A tapstream scalds her, a match burns her, or she abstractedly holds her hand above the steam of a teakettle. Yet although she hears the urging voices, she cannot act.

Parts three to seven present brief, capsule images of the forces working against a woman in the wifely role. One force is Nature, a "steamer-trunk of tempora and mores," which is defined by the culture as the reason women should remain at home, be passive and do as they are told. The speaker sarcastically asks:

...has Nature shown her household books to you, daughter-in-law, that her sons never saw?

Throughout the poem, Nature and woman are linked, implying that it is only natural for women to be caretakers of family and home: also, that women are by nature only capable of such activities. Images of birds, as characterizing woman in her natural state, illustrate how woman has been defined as hostile to her own kind, inconsequential, susceptible to love as a bond and trapped in a cage made for her by others. Thus two women are portrayed in part three as Furies fighting one another with arguments "ad feminium." Another woman is "iron-eyed and beaked and pur-
posed as a bird" dusting in her house, an unimportant
nobody, (part 4). The third and most degrading image
appears in part six, in which a bird is trapped by its own
love-bound consciousness in an unlocked cage:

...pinned down
by love, for you the only natural action.

The last three parts of the poem work to redefine selfishness for women. The speaker believes that in the face of male disapproval, women have succumbed to half-hearted expressions of themselves. Instead of boldly expressing a rightful selfishness which frees the self, they remain in a narrow, static state of mind unconducive to creativity. They have accepted mediocrity. The speaker directly addresses women and says:

...we hear
our mediocrities over-praised,
indolence read as abnegation,
slattern thought styled intuition. (part 9)

This is not enough. Excellence is demanded. The speaker imagines the future where a woman will emerge brave, beautiful and "merciless" in her pursuit of high standards. She will demand full self-expression and will not cower behind any indulgent weakness.

Throughout "Snapshots of a Daughter-In-Law" runs a critical tone which berates women who have accepted mediocrity and have avoided brave exhibition of their talents. Parts eight and nine are particularly disparaging, sarcastic of those whose eyes
inaccurately dream

... Deliciously, all that we might have been. (part 8)

Here the speaker reveals her own anger at women, at their self-betrayal:

...Yes, think of the odds! or shrug them off forever. (part 9)

She seems to set herself apart from them in judgment, and reports that they lack courage and clear vision. This same tone is found in "Apology" (Snapshots 51), but is accompanied by inner self-awareness on the speaker's part.

This short, first person poem begins with the speaker declaring she wouldn't want to keep a cat, a dog or a bird, because she would rather love her equals. But when she thinks again, she realizes that what she really doesn't want in her house is a woman. But the woman she describes and rejects is the one she unconsciously sees as herself. For example, her imagined woman has "a mindful of fog," but the speaker herself says she is thinking about this problem "in the fog of my mind." The speaker is being catty, yet hates "bloodletting claws"; and the vision she describes is a nightmare, like the imaginary woman with "the nightmares of a dog." The poem illustrates the self-hatred the speaker has developed towards herself as a result of accepting the common stereotypes of women.

A far more objective and gentle tone pervades "The Trees" (Necessities 15). Again, there are two subjects: a
woman writing letters, and a number of trees in her living room symbolizing her inner self. All night long the trees are straining to go outside, trying to uproot themselves and flee to the sun and the waiting empty forest. The speaker's wry detachment is reflected in her comment on the letters she writes,

in which I scarcely mention the departure of the forest from the house.

Underlying the imagery is the sense of a woman bound in, confined to, the personal home sphere while her spirit craves the freedom of being outside. There is no belittlement of the effort, only a watchful, attentive observation of the phenomenon.

This image of a woman's spirit or soul being trapped and denied overt expression appears again in "A Primary Ground" (Diving 38-9). A traditional relationship is described where the man is the head of the house and the wife essentially a servant to him and to their children. Besides providing for his daily needs, she also serves to make him feel important and alive. The epigraph is a quotation from Virginia Woolf's novel To The Lighthouse:

he must...be assured of his genius...be taken within the circle of life, warmed and soothed...his barrenness made fertile.

The speaker addresses the husband directly in a conversational tone, and describes how she perceives his life:

a woman, children protect you from the abyss.
His wife creates a nurturing protective environment for him, symbolized by one image of a "cloth ironed by a woman with aching legs." The steam iron that presses this cloth seems to flatten her spirit also.

As in "The Trees," the wife's spirit is personified, this time by a twin-sister who lives in the attic. She is "speechless" and "dying" and unable to leave her room. The wife and husband take turns "trying to make her understand." Both the man and the woman act in collusion, attempting to justify why the woman's spirit must be hidden away, why it must die. It is necessary for the household to keep functioning and only one spirit can be dominant. The man believes that he is important and valuable, and the woman puts her energy into protecting this image of himself, for himself. "Protection is the genius of your house" the speaker notes. The woman again must sacrifice her needs to his, and be the selfless giver of all she has.

The word "wedlock" in stanza two particularly reveals the speaker's bias. The wife is locked into her marriage, and juxtaposed is the word "sin" which implies this is not a holy union but an abomination against even religion. The result of this sin, the sufferer for it, is the speechless twin-sister.

The image of a silent woman dying reappears in "To A Poet" (Dream 15). The subjects, a poet-mother and an ordinary mother, are stifled by the needy children dragging on
their energy and attention. The poet's life is "landlocked," recalling the previous poem's "wedlock." The other woman is dying and "dumb" with loneliness. Language, symbolizing the expression of one's inner self, has been aborted. This poem's further implications will be explored later, in the section dealing with creativity.

The theme of selfless continual giving having internal consequences damaging to a woman's spirit is obviously frequent in Rich's poetry. "Grandmothers" (Wild Patience 37-9), a three-part poem written in 1980, captures this experience beautifully, particularly in part two subtitled "Hattie Rice Rich." It illustrates Hattie's degeneration as an elderly woman who was forced to shuttle back and forth between her two sons' homes after her husband died. She had money of her own, but was homeless. Her life had consisted of caring for others' needs, but when the time came to care for herself, she failed. Hating to go back and forth between her sons every six months, she still couldn't muster the courage to do as she pleased. Hattie's dilemma resembles the woman in "Snapshots of a Daughter-In-Law", who could hear voices telling her to rebel, but who could not act. Once, Hattie tried to follow her heart, "sobbing/your one brief memorable scene of rebellion," but her self-denying nature disallowed further action.

Your sweetness of soul was a convenience for everyone.
repeats the speaker, and she lists all the little things Anana did for everyone else.

Hattie Rich's caretaking skills were the only ones encouraged in her by society. Also, as was shown in "Amnesia," society often trivializes and denies not only the woman herself, but the roles and characteristics previously encouraged in her younger days. When she was no longer needed to nurture her husband or children, even these abilities weren't valued and she was left with no sense of self, nothing on which to base her self-worth.

The third part, "Granddaughter," seems to be Rich's own feelings about her effort to capture her grandmothers' essences in the poem. She is not sure she did them justice, that she truly captured all the layers of meaning and nuance of their lives. She believes that both women accepted their domestic roles, and that their spirits were subsequently maimed. She doesn't accept the concept of "amnesia," or denial as a way to deal with the pain of losing your self. Asking herself what are the lessons to be learned from their lives, she says she doesn't know. But what is important is not to let these lives be forgotten or denied.

"Transit" (Wild Patience 19-20) captures a woman's glimpses of the person she might have been had she not been forced by society to conform to a role. The speaker imagines herself a cripple, walking slowly and haltingly. Her other self is a skier "free-swinging,"
her fifty-year-old, strong, impatient body
dressed for cold and speed.

The skier passes her on the path, but the speaker will never
be able to ski "in this life."

Yet the speaker remembers a time when they were sixteen
years old, and they climbed mountains together with equal
vigor and the same dreams. The skier now zips past "without
let or hindrance." The woman asks herself if, at the point
of passing, they will look at one another in recognition.
In other words, she wants to reclaim her spirit, to recon-
nect with her strong, free self from whom she separated over
the years. It is only by claiming both the cripple and the
skier as belonging to her that the woman can feel whole, as
is reflected in the next poem, "Integrity."

"Integrity" (Wild Patience 8-9) has an epigraph which
is the Webster's dictionary definition of the title word:
"the quality or state of being complete; unbroken condition;
entirety." The speaker makes an analogy between her journey
on a boat to her old island cabin and her inward journey to
wholeness within herself. Sun beats on her, burning her
shoulders and hands, but she keeps on. The only map she has
on this trip is her own self -- her "selves." At this point
in her life, aged forty-nine, she realizes that anger and
tenderness, previously seen as incompatible polarities, are
both part of her. Like a spider, she spins and weaves them
"in the same action/from her own body." She refuses to
separate them as one good and one bad, or as one associated with women, one with men. She claims both, thus feeling integrated and no longer splintered.

Progression from vague, angry outbursts to precisely defined concepts marks Rich's poetry from 1958-1980. In the book *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* she raged at both society and its acquiescent female victims. But as time went on, her statements became more precise and she began to identify the specific institutions and roles women have had to contend with. Her critical eye sharpened and she named the loss of individual self she perceived. In "Integrity" she demonstrates what is necessary to feel complete. One needs to claim all that one is: not denying one's self or giving endlessly until nothing is left.
The second major consequence of accepting a creed of self-sacrifice is the difficulty of connecting with other women. When women's loyalty is primarily directed towards men and their children, there is a rift between women. The next poetry to be examined demonstrates how, and in what ways, women fail to bond with one another for their mutual benefit, as a result of believing that their allegience and energy should be directed elsewhere.

The first poem, "Sibling Mysteries" (Dream 47-52), traces the personal estrangement of two sisters' within an historical estrangement under the male-dominated society. As Welchel noted in "Earth Deposits" (51-71), knowledge of how the culture broke down women's original bonds helps the speaker reaffirm her connection with her mother and sister. The poem juxtaposes images of strength and connectedness in a prepatriarchal period with images of separation under the demands of the patriarchy. It suggests that women were taught from a young age to bond with men, not with other women, and that this misdirected loyalty deprives women of a primary bond necessary to their wholeness as human beings.

The six-part poem opens with a chanting, rhythmical beat evoking positive images of primitive women attuned to nature and to their own creative power. The phrase "Remind me" is repeated three times in part one as the speaker begs
her sister to recall their rituals. It recurs three times again in part two, as she summons the memory of their original, primal connection to their mother. They learned love and nurturance from her,

our mouths drawing the first
thin sweetness from her nipples.

Their mother's nipples and the milk they sucked represent their first experience of love. At this point in the poem, however, came the beginning of their estrangement. They learned from their mother that men come first, that men's feeding and nurturance is primary:

and how we thought she loved
the strange male body first
that took, took, whose taking seemed a law.

This is the way the speaker imagines a daughter is introduced to her role in society: she learns from her mother that a woman's primary energy and loyalty should be directed towards men. This concept, internalized by the mother, of an immutable law, with dire punishment given to transgressors, is amplified throughout the rest of the poem.

The law is that women must turn toward men the tenderness they learned from their mother. The nipple image recurs, this time in an atmosphere of "terror" and "resignation" in which the female is forced to succumb. Then she must instruct the male in her mysteries:

...how we taught them tenderness--
the holding back, the play,
the floating of a finger
the secrets of the nipple
...
...how we served them
in silence. (part 3)

Jane Vanderbosch, in "The Education of Adrienne Rich"
(126), suggests that the evil of the taking by males lies in
the legality of it and in the childlike selfishness which
gives no thought to the provider. The vindication of their
taking is:

an institutionalized mimicry of the experi­
ential bond between mother and daughter. The
father's "taking," as if he were a child, is
an act of imitation of the mother-child bond.
The legitimization of this mimicry is, then,
an intrinsic irony of the "law"...culmination
of the irony: the daughters will grow into
women who will henceforth only give to husbands
who will take.

Women are portrayed, by Rich, as needing to trade
"secrets" with men for survival in a male-dominated world.
The consequence of this betrayal of womanly-knowledge is a
severing of the vital connection between women themselves.
In part five of the poem, the speaker gives a diary excerpt
describing her estrangement from her sister who has just
given birth to a baby. She writes "we don't get through to
each other, or say what we really feel...I don't really know
what gives her pain or joy...." As a result of directing
all their emotions towards men, the two women have lost each
other.

The final section, part six, echoes the chanting of
part one as the speaker calls to her sister "from another
planet." She wants to hold her, to tell her the truth of
their essential connection to one another:

The daughters never were
ture brides of the father

the daughters were to begin with
brides of the mother

then brides of each other
under a different law.

The first law was a woman's connection to her mother
and sister; only a secondary law is the male claim on female
energy and emotion. By evoking their primary bonding the
speaker endeavors to re-establish her female strengths.

The question of where one should direct one's loyalty
is also explored in "For Ethel Rosenberg" (Wild Patience 26-
30). The speaker married her husband the same week that
Ethel Rosenberg was executed for "conspiracy to commit
espionage." She identified with Rosenberg and felt her
death poignantly at the time, although she didn't fully
grasp why. Twenty-seven years later, writing the poem, she
realizes some similarities in their situations. Rosenberg
was called a traitor to her country and to the code of mar-
riage. She allegedly sold secrets to the Russians, and she
wanted to be an artist, "to distinguish herself." The
speaker recalls:

And I walking to my wedding
by the same token a bad daughter a bad sister.

The speaker also wished to distinguish herself by being an
artist. The repetition of the word "bad" four times in
sequential stanzas (part 2) reinforces the similarity in the
way society viewed the two of them.

What strikes the speaker most is how Rosenberg's family, particularly the women, punished her:

- her mother testifies against her
- her sister-in-law testifies against her. (part 4)

The question raised by the poem is: what was Rosenberg's crime? Disloyalty to her country or disloyalty to the marriage code? Her labels are "wife," "mother," "daughter" in the poem. The speaker asks:

What would you have to tell us
Would you have burst the net (part 3)

The "net" is the social laws governing female behavior, which Rosenberg was caught in and could not escape. Her family, her mother especially, betrayed her and she was unable to defend herself. Evidently the price for disloyalty is twofold: ostracism by other women and denial of life itself.

Contrasting sharply with the betrayal experienced by Rosenberg is the supportive friendship between two women in "Paula Becker To Clara Westhoff" (Dream 42-44). This poem presents the image of two women encouraging each other artistically and emotionally in ways they do not get support within their marriages. Based on two historical figures in the early 1900's, the poem is cast as a letter from the painter Becker, who is pregnant, to her close companion, Westhoff, a sculptor. The epigraph explains that the women were friends before their marriages and had worked together
in Paris in 1900. Becker died giving birth in 1907.

Becker recalls their months together in Paris when they worked side by side. They had created a plan that they would bring

against all odds, our full power
to every subject. Hold back nothing
because we were women.

Becker identifies both their strengths in their mutual "struggle for truth" and "our pledge against guilt." Their marriages are represented as impediments to both their friendship and their work.

Becker recalls Westhoff's marriage and postulates:

...Maybe I was jealous
of him, to begin with, taking you from me,
maybe I married Otto to fill up
my loneliness for you.

The next image is of men feeding on women, being protected by women, which suggests that in both cases their emotional energies were diverted away from each other to their husbands. This is reinforced by a dream Becker relates, in which she died and Westhoff's husband gave the requiem:

...calling me his friend.
I was your friend
but in the dream you didn't say a word.
...
Clara, why don't I dream of you?

Thus the images contrast the immense strength of their premarital relationship with the conflicted loyalty of the postmarital one. These images echo from "Sibling Mysteries" in which female connection was severed as a result of male
intervention. Marriage is the significant act which altered the pure, supportive friendship.

Another female friendship is examined in "After Twenty Years" (Diving 13). But this one is characterized by the isolation each experiences within it. They lived side by side for twenty years, "bathed their children in the same basin," but were unable to confide secrets to one another. The poem implies that those secrets were the emotions they really felt deep within themselves about their boxed-in, child-oriented lives. The phrase "prime of life" recurs, recalling the Shreveport belle in "Snapshots of a Daughter-In-Law." It suggests the potential each woman had to be more than she was. But neither had a life outside their families. When they talked spiritedly, passers-by in the world saw only a "glitter in the glass" of the window. Each one was locked into her own denial of how she felt about her life. Although they saw one another constantly, neither could really connect to dispel their mutual loneliness.

"Mother-In-Law" (Wild Patience 31-2) is another poem which reflects the loneliness consequent on denial. As the title indicates, one of the women in the poem is identified by her relationship to a man and to that man's wife. The poem is a dialogue between a mother-in-law and her daughter-in-law. Their lines are visually juxtaposed with one another, the former in italics, the latter in regular type indented five spaces. Repeatedly, six times, the mother-in-
law pleads "Tell me something", wanting the younger woman to confide in her. The insistence of the tone increases, the mother-in-law wanting truth and a meaningful relationship with her daughter-in-law. But this is impossible, because she has accepted her role in society and subscribes to the belief that women should be selfless nurturers, happy in their home sphere. The younger woman rejects this belief, and over the years had tried to be truthful about her feelings:

I've been trying to tell you, mother-in-law that I think I am breaking in two

I can polish this table to satin because I don't care

The mother-in-law responds with household advice and a standard consolation, "You'll feel better when the children are in school."

These two women cannot communicate because the older one has surrendered to conventional standards of behavior, "I agreed to this long ago," she says. Although she tries to listen, tries to care, her own denial of how she herself feels about her role is revealed in the above statement. She knows she has given in somehow, but she cannot really hear what her daughter-in-law is saying. It is too threatening.

In Of Woman Born, Rich notes that:

...this institution [of motherhood]--the foundation of human society as we know it--allowed me only certain views, certain expectations, whether embodied in...the novels I had read
[or] my mother-in-law's approval....(20)
The daughter-in-law in "Mother-In-Law" tries to express her rebellion, her anger which "takes fire from yours and in the oven/the meal bursts into flames." But the mother-in-law seeks validation for her own role. Rebellion terrifies her, and she rejects what she hears until near the end of the poem when, before she dies, she asks for truth. The reply she receives is blunt:

Your son is dead
ten years. I am a lesbian
my children are themselves.
...
Ask me something.

Truth thus becomes the means of breaking down the systematized denial, and of women's reconnecting. The mother-in-law's response is not given. What is important is that the younger woman speaks her mind, declares her truth, and sets the stage for potential communication.

Loneliness and isolation also characterize the lives of the frontier women discussed previously in "From An Old House In America." In part seven, the speaker has identified her connection with women from the past by using the first-person pronoun. As such, she states about her prairie life:

I have lived in isolation
from other women, so much
...
Most of the time, in my sex, I was alone.

Throughout the poem vivid images of lonely, struggling women stand out. For example: "Hanged as witches, sold as breed-
ing wenches/my sister leave me." The speaker identifies with all persecuted women, white and black.

In part ten, as analyzed earlier, three women are seen full of self-hatred for failing in their mother roles. It is clear that each assumes herself to be an anomaly, an individual woman having no connection with other women who might reveal that these ambivalent feelings are not unique. Each is isolated, and driven to desperate acts as she attempts to deal with life alone. But, in the final section, the speaker asserts that women must abandon "Isolation, the dream/of the frontier woman." She calls it "a suicidal leaf" that women have been proud of. The purpose it served was to keep women from bonding, prevent them from empowering one another. The speaker claims her history with these women as an integral part of coming to know herself and her own possibilities. John Donne's famous line from Meditation 17 is altered in the final line of the poem:

Any woman's death diminishes me.

By claiming her history, and by naming and rejecting the denial, secrets and silences of women's lives, the speaker breaks out of her own personal isolation and gains a sense of community.
VI.

This section will examine three elements found in Rich's poetry dealing with women's creativity. First, focusing on the conflict between the domestic and the artistic life, Rich shows how difficult it is for women to satisfy the opposing demands of each, and how the former constricts the latter. Secondly, she shows how the necessity has arisen for women to cross the traditional boundaries of their roles, to confront the pain and anger involved and to find their lost creativity and power. Thirdly, she re-examines the past and the present, to find out who women are without these roles. Thus the subversive imagination discovers creativity and can be used to expand further how a woman perceives herself.

In "When We Dead Awaken," Rich explores at length how difficult it is for women to reconcile being a culturally ideal loving woman with being a dynamic, creative artist. She writes:

The choice still seemed to be between "love"—womanly, maternal love, altruistic love—a love defined and ruled by the weight of an entire culture; and egotism—a force directed by men into creation, achievement, ambition, often at the expense of other, but justifiably so. For weren't they men, and wasn't that their destiny as womanly, selfless love was ours? (46-47)

The nature of the conflict, she believes, resides in women's needing two things: "time to think, time to write"
The roles women must play allow neither. To be creative demands a certain freedom of mind. The artist must be willing to allow her whole life's value system and ideals to be turned upside-down. "Nothing can be too sacred for the imagination to turn into its opposite," Rich asserts. "To be a female human being trying to fulfill traditional female functions in a traditional way is in direct conflict with the subversive function of the imagination." (43).

Three specific poems illuminate this theme of domestic and artistic conflict. The first is part one of "Grandmothers," subtitled "Mary Gravely Jones." The grandmother is addressed by her fictive granddaughter, Rich, the speaker: "Mary, widow of William, and no matriarch" is identified by her association to her husband. She was "impotent and brilliant." She had a startling intelligence, had written an unperformed play and could dazzle her grandchildren with quotations from a multitude of poets. But her mind was wasted, it had no place to blossom. She married right out of school and never had a chance to do or be anything other than a wife and mother. The speaker implies that conventional social requirements deprived her grandmother of an opportunity to do anything with her mind:

...you might have ended elsewhere than in that glider reciting your unwritten novels to the children.

Thus imagination and daily life remained in conflict and unresolved in this older woman's life.
As noted earlier, "Paula Becker to Clara Westhoff" presented a relationship between two artists which gave them port not found in the institution of marriage. The difference stems from the assumptions of the institution, which as Welchel noted is "the way patriarchally defined marriage and motherhood allot love and nurturance to women, power and creativity to men" (58). In the poem, Becker writes Westhoff that she is pregnant, but she doesn't want the child, because she is afraid it will be an obstacle to her work. She feels her husband's eyes follow her around, as if to say "Soon you'll have your hands full!" She knows she'll be responsible for the child:

...this child will be mine
not his, the failures, if I fail
will be all mine.

Contrasted with these confessions of not wanting the baby is an exultant outburst of love for her work:

I know now the kind of work I have to do.  
It takes such energy!

The middle of the poem also reveals her feeling toward her husband as a taker, a male who gets to feed on her and use her energy to support his own work:

...His whole life, his art
is protected by women. Which of us could say that?

Thus both marriage and motherhood serve to drain the female artist's energy in ways not experienced by males.

"To A Poet" (Dream 15) is more graphic in its portrayal of domestic duties strangling creativity and, by extension,
threatening the poet's life. The speaker addresses two women with small, needy children whose lives have shrunk to revolve solely around motherhood. Household chores characterize their lives:

Scraping eggcrust from the child's dried dish skimming the skin from cooled milk wringing diapers.

The hissing "s" sounds and present progressive "-ing" endings suggest a continuous present of drudgery, misery and monotony. The first woman hears words spoken by the fluorescent bulb—"incarnate"; by the floor—"primary"; and by the torn plaster—"imago." This is the language heard by poets, and the speaker fears that you will cease to be before your pen has gleaned your teeming brain.

The other woman is "dumb/with loneliness" in a house where language has been altogether aborted. The first woman has a chance, because at least she can hear the words; the speaker expresses deeper concern for the other, who has rid herself entirely of the conflict between motherhood and creativity.

Several complex images use the same verbs to create a grotesque metaphor of murdered creative talent. When "small mouths, needy, suck you," this is called love. In this passive state, a poet's language is killed, "but no one calls this murder." Her soul also dies: "you will cease to be," can refer simultaneously to her physical body or to her
talent. In stanzas two and three, language "floats," for one woman to the vanishing point, and for the other in a spinning down the toilet bowl. Language is like a fetus whose mother doesn't have the essential nutrients in her body to sustain it. The fetus would have been a product of her creativity. The abortion can be seen as spontaneous or deliberate, but still a result of the woman's inability to mother the child. Thus language has been killed before it had a chance to live. This is the consequence of the draining, daily requirements of motherhood, wherein love as the greedy monster devours the life-force of its caretaker.

These three poems demonstrate how difficult it is for women to give simultaneously themselves to both their art and the demands of their institutional roles. When one must constantly be giving energy to others, one has little left for imagination. Additionally, the roles of wife and mother demand a certain acceptance of the status quo which is antithetical to the challenge of confronting habitual ways of being. The traditional roles leave little mental or physical freedom for the female artist.

In "When We Dead Awaken"(49), Rich comments on the necessity of crossing other-imposed boundaries of thought and action to find out who one is. She writes:

Both the victimization and the anger experienced by women are real, and have real sources, everywhere in the environment, built into society, language, the structures of thought....A new generation of women poets is already working out of
the psychic energy released when women begin to move out towards what the feminist philosopher Mary Daly has described as the "new space" on the boundaries of patriarchy.

Much of Rich's imagery includes crossing boundaries, moving from one frame of consciousness to a more expanded one. Frequently there are penalties to be paid, as shown in "Heroines" where the society uses ridicule and ostracism as tools to manipulate rebellious women. Other examples include "For Ethel Rosenberg," which postulated that Rosenberg's crime was "wanting to distinguish her self." Also in "Snapshots of a Daughter-In-Law," the speaker describes the punishment for rebels as "solitary confinement/tear gas, attrition shelling," and wryly comments, "Few applicants for that honor."

This boundary, which can be crossed or not, is also portrayed as a door through which one can choose to go. The metaphor appears in "Prospective Immigrants Please Note" (Snapshots 59). The speaker presents the alternatives of crossing or not crossing a threshold. She warns:

If you go through there is always the risk of remembering your name.

There is a frightening world on the other side, where bravery will bring you a new vision. If you don't go through the door, you can still live worthily, but it will be in a static position of evasion and blindness, "at what cost who knows?"
Thus a choice is presented: staying where society can control what you see and do, or taking a leap beyond what is acceptable. The latter is what the female writer does when she uses the "subversive function of the imagination" ("Dead Awaken" 43). She dares to turn conventional values and ideas upside down and to create a new vision of alternative perspective. This is her power, to be a renegade.

Three poems especially stand out as representing the process of finding a new world by crossing boundaries. The first, "Planetarium" (Will to Change 13-14), meditates on Caroline Herschel, the astronomer, whose name was as obscure as her brother William's was not. The speaker, as poet, imagines that Caroline was seen as a monster, stepping out of her female role to dedicate herself to studying astronomy. The stars themselves are "galaxies of women" who are "doing penance for impetuousness." This phrase refers to the Greek myths, which frequently depicted women as stars, in order to protect them from Hera's jealousy after Zeus raped them.

"Seeing is changing," comments the speaker as she begins to feel herself as a galactic cloud. She feels "bombarded" by interstellar signals of the "most/untranslateable language in the universe." She has traversed the custom-bound male-dominated society and found a woman-centered, female one which values its own feelings, pains, and viewpoint:

...I am an instrument in the shape of a woman trying to translate pulsations
into images for the relief of the body and the reconstruction of the mind.

The image of women crossing boundaries recurs in "Power" (Dream 3), which meditates on Marie Curie and her discovery of radium:

her body bombarded for years by the element she had purified.

Her eyes developed cataracts, her fingers were "cracked and suppurating" and she died,

denying her wounds came from the same source as her power.

The theme of denial recalls the attitude of the mother-in-law in "Mother-In-Law", as she tried to pretend she had no worries, fears, or any anger. The word "bombarded" echoes from "Planetarium." Power resides in the truth about how women have lived, as revealed by these "earth-deposits of our history" surrounding us, like radium or galactic messages. Finding these truths is a nerve-racking process which demands a willingness to venture into unexplored areas and to risk pain.

The speaker of "I Dream I'm the Death of Orpheus" (Will To Change 50-1) crosses into the land of the dead to find her other self, her dead poet-self. She is in "the prime of life," echoing "Snapshots of a Daughter-In-Law" and "After Twenty Years." Yet she experiences her powers as:

...severely limited by authorities whose faces I rarely see.

These "authorities" are the pressures society puts on her to
conform to the traditional female role. She repeats "I am a woman" twice and "a woman [who]" five times as she attempts to convey her identity. She succeeds, reclaiming her poet-identity as well. In a Rolls Royce she drives her dead poet along a murky road back to the land of the living. She has had to cross into the region of death, as Orpheus did for Eurydice, in order to reach this part of herself which was condemned to the underworld.

A final poem extends this kind of threshold imagery. "For A Sister" (Diving 48) describes the political imprisonment of Natalya Gorbanevskaya as the speaker imagines it from "facts" in the newspapers. She throws her own "existence" out "like a towchain" and strains to pull up an image from the sea of mysterious circumstance. This poem echoes "For Ethel Rosenberg" as an attempt to go beyond newspaper facts and "willful omissions" looking for a different truth of why women are punished when they do not conform in society.

As has been seen, when women are limited in behavior, emotion or intellect to institutionalized roles they are prevented from full and joyful participation in life. One of the tasks for feminist poets is to re-examine the past to see how, in what ways, in what times, places and circumstances women have been oppressed (Rich, "The Use of 'We' in Feminist Theory"). The study of other women and of oneself are imperative to discovering the roots of oppres-
sion. This forms the bedrock, the foundation from which to reclaim lost parts of female selves. Additionally, it is not enough just to free one's mind and connect with just a few other women. One needs a new awareness of one's connection with all women—of all classes, cultures, races, ages.

Rich dreams of a "common language" with which all women can communicate. Through poetry, she names destructive silences and oppressions, denials and omissions. She works to create, instead, consciousness of the power of the female spirit to be larger than any single or dictated role can confine, and of its power to bond other women in a powerful, productive, mutual enhancement hitherto not found within the institutions of marriage or motherhood.

Much of Rich's poetry since 1970 has therefore examined women's history in an attempt to portray different aspects of how women have experienced their own lives. Two poems in particular use analogies to describe this process and to show why it is necessary. The first, "Diving into the Wreck" (DW 22-24) narrates the speaker's adventure of being a deep-sea diver who has gone out alone to explore a wrecked ship. She alternates describing a physical ship with the wreckage she is really exploring, the history of language and of women. She wants to find out the truth, "not the story of the wreck...not the myth."

She takes three tools for her job: the book of myths, a camera and a knife. She goes down a ladder, which is
"always there," and descends into the sea. The ladder sym­bolizes the path always available to those who are willing to risk finding new facts which may change their worldview. It resembles the door in "Prospective Immigrants Please Note" discussed earlier. Symbolically, the sea is both history and the female self she is exploring. It is a natural image, much like the earth in "Mother-Right."

Once below the water, she carefully learns how to move, "to turn my body without force." She finds the wreck and uses words such as "purposes" and "maps." She primarily wants to find out what women were really like in the past. The book of myths was inadequate because "our names did not appear." The poem itself represents the speaker's process of exploring and discovering what has been neglected, omitted, and falsified in history about women.

Another poem, "Natural Resources" (Dream 60-67) uses a major analogy of women as miners, physically mining the mountain of society and history in order to find truths about women not acknowledged within the male-dominated society. "The miner is no metaphor" states the speaker flatly. She is one woman, like many others, who on a daily basis is "pulled down by gravity," who contorts her body "to fit a crevice" and who breathes dust-heavy air into her lungs. These impediments symbolize the coercive and destructive forces in society which demand that women fit themselves into roles and which use custom and law to en-
force obedience. Juxtaposed to the miner is a woman in "the routine of life." She gazes at her family asleep in their bedrooms and feels the weight of her responsibility to care for them, for "It is only she who sees; who was trained to see."

Another burden the miner must bear, as an ordinary woman, is the illusion of her husband being a soul-mate with whom to share the toil of life. The speaker compares the romantic image of a husband, the "man-who-would-understand" which courtship promises, with the violence-loving, demanding "blind ramrod" which needs "women's blood for life" to "lay its nightmare on." She marvels that this is the creature she was asked to deny her sisters and mother for, echoing the similar questions posed in "Sibling Mysteries."

What the miner must dig up is revealed in part twelve; a plethora of small details of women's lives—letters, snapshots, "white rags for staunching blood." These are the small relics which represent what is left of women not mentioned in history books, the daily lives of women who cleaned and nurtured mankind: their memory must be restored and honored.

The purpose of digging into women's history, into the earth, is to recognize all that women have done to staunch violence and to free themselves from the bonds of custom. The speaker claims:

I have to cast my lot with those who age after age, perversely,
With no extraordinary power, 
reconstitute the world.

Putting women back into history is analogous to re-making the world. This poem is a celebration of the act of re-making society and an admonition to women to keep doing it. Distressed, the speaker sees that "so much has been destroyed," much as the diver noted in "Diving into the Wreck." All the more reason, then, to devote oneself to salvaging the wreck.

There is a major difference in viewpoint, however, between the two speakers in these poems. The diver claimed "I am she, I am he" as a means of invoking androgyny as a powerful concept, and of including men as well as women in the history to be explored. In "Natural Resources" the speaker says she cannot use the words "humanism" or "androgyne" again. For her, they are an affront to the experiences of her predecessors. These are weak words whose "glint is too shallow" and which cancel out the female experience of caring for sick children, or the constant interruption in whatever a woman is doing. These are female experiences which are lost when subsumed under umbrella terms.

When women share their common experiences they connect and create a power source. The two previous poems were analogies for the effort to unearth these shared histories. Another poem, "Culture and Anarchy" (Wild Patience 10-15)
contrasts excepts from the diaries of Susan B. Anthony, Jane Addams and Elizabeth Barrett, with the speaker's reflections on the power of female bonding. Although the history of women politically and personally was one of containment by the patriarchalsociety, the speaker names and quotes these women who struggled for their own and others' political rights. She identifies with their efforts and likens the entire process from the past to her present to the profusion of nature, overflowing manmade restraints. For example, she notes that "Daylilies /run wild, 'escaped' the botanists call it," and that "meadows roughen," in an "Anarchy of August." This building up of the power of women is also compared to a thunderstorm, "a stillness building all day long to thunder." The spirit of female history is "travelling the lines of storm."

This vivid imagery creates a textured climate nearly tangible, certainly dynamic and energized. The implications are of danger, from lightening and wind, and discomfort, from rain. Yet an exhilarating power is simultaneously released. The speaker intertwines with this history of assertive women her own power gleaned from the relationship she shares with another poet. Through both the past and the present of other women, she says:

How you have given back to me
my dream of a common language
my solitude of self.

Again, the speaker reflects on the need for recalling and
connecting with women from the past and in the present. Strength, fortitude, and power are possible in relationships between women committed to crossing boundaries and exploring new levels of consciousness. Seeing and recognizing each other's strength enhances and encourages both to flower, to run over the fields and to culminate in a thunderstorm, as a demonstration of energy.

The power of a "common language" recurs in "Origins and History of Consciousness" (Dream 7-9) with the added element that it is necessary to move beyond just connecting in an intimate relationship. You must take self-discovery into action into the world. The speaker begins the three-part poem contemplating her room and the objects in it showing it to be a poet's room. There are poems "crucified" on the wall, which itself is a great white blank, like the blank the poet confronts in her own mind. It is impossible to live in this poet's room "without contemplating...the true nature of poetry." This is the "drive/to connect. The dream of a common language."

The speaker then compares herself to a warm, amphibious animal which has "broken the net" and slipped into a deep, safe pool, away from hunters, trappers, "wardens of the mind." This image symbolizes the poet's journey into her female consciousness and history, which gives her a common language. In the pool, she dreams of another animal beneath the water, the woman with whom she has an intimate love
relationship in part two.

The speaker experiences their relationship as both simple and animal-like, two creatures nurturing one another; but she also realizes that the two of them cannot isolate themselves from the larger world. It constantly intrudes, and call to parts of themselves:

...a scream
of someone beaten up far down in the street
causing each of us to listen to her own inward scream.

Their relationship strengthens them, but it is not enough to just hide out in this "secret circle of fire." If they do, their failure to reach out to life and to other women on the outside will be like an inner darkness, like a "dumb beast, head on her paws, in the corner." Like the lioness in the "The Lioness," they will be bound in another cage, one of fear.

Several images here recall others discussed previously. The act of finding consciousness and connection is compared, as in "Diving into the Wreck," with lowering oneself below water. Under water different images appear, and a new point of view is attained. This also resembles the process in "For a Sister," where the speaker had to bring up buried facts with a towchain. The image of a woman trapped by her mind in a cave echoes "Living in the Cave," in which shadows are also flung on the wall and give the illusion of reality while not truly partaking of it.
The redefinition of self-image as a woman is an integral part of Rich's poetry. "Phantasia for Elvira Shatayev" (Dream 4-6) celebrates the bonding of many women with one another and how it reforms their self-images and empowers each of them. The epigraph identifies Shatayev as

> Leader of a woman's climbing team, all of whom died on Lenin Peak...Later, [her] husband found and buried the bodies.

Shatayev, the narrator, contrasts her vibrant connection with her team members with the marriage she had with her husband. Recalling a climb with him "when I trailed you in the Caucasus," she asserts that her new female allegiance allows achievement not possible in traditional relationships with men:

> Now I am further ahead than either of us dreamed anyone would be.

Welchel notes that Rich's use of "anyone" clearly demonstrates that the "usual division of love and power in marriage hurts and limits men as well as women" (60). This woman refuses the traditional roles of self-sacrificing wife and mother. She refuses to "trail" her husband patiently and asserts the value of her preferred loyalty to her team members.

The love for one another these women experienced on their climb up Lenin peak demonstrates the power of female bonding. As Whelchel notes, "unlike the self-sacrificing love traditionally expected of women as wives and mothers,
this love is united with power" (60). The women have completely connected with one another:

...I speak
it's with a voice no longer personal
(I want to say \textit{with voices})

In her diary Shatayev wrote (according to the poem):

...I have never loved
like this I have never seen
my own forces so taken up and shared
and given back
...
we are moving almost effortlessly in our love.

She discusses the separateness that most women have felt, and declares that before she bonded with her team, "we had not touched our strength." Echoing Becker's cry to Westhoff in "Paula Becker to Clara Westhoff," she says:

...We have dreamed of this
all of our lives.

"Phantasia" represents a brilliant, moving tribute to the abilities and joys of women when they reclaim their lost connection to one another. Shatayev was married, and her husband climbed after her to bury her body. But she had not experienced communion with him, especially when she had been only "trailing" him. Her totality as a fully realized person, emotionally, spiritually, and physically, came only as a direct result of her bonding with other women, in "choosing ourselves each other...and this life."

The combined love of these women, taken into the world, is the step in female consciousness-raising advocated by "Origins and History of Consciousness." "Phantasia"
describes in joyful terms the possibilities inherent in letting go of female isolation, in breaking role prohibitions, and also in moving beyond a love that is only a "small circle of fire."

Rich's poetry abounds with metaphors for studying one's own life, going back within one's self and women's history to find out where one's connections lie and how one's consciousness has been formed. "Transcendental Etude" (Dream 72-77) meditates on this process, the mental and emotional exploration similar to the miner's efforts in "Natural Resources." How can one "understand it all, beginning with the huge/rockshelves that underlie all that life"?

The poem begins contemplating the strife between nature and mankind. The green world is fragile, filled with "sweetness," and violated by the "raw cuts bulldozed" through it. The contrast is captured in "a dead elm raising bleached arms/above a green so dense with life...slugs, moles, pheasants...hummingbirds...butterflies." The speaker identifies with this abundant life, and also with a deer she sees nibbling at apples, still enjoying life before the hunters come "glorying in a week-end's destructive power." She wants to know what underlies this life and beauty.

She next thinks about women's lives, implying this is one way to understand nature better. She wishes women's lives could be studied, like "natural history/or music," wherein one begins with simple exercises and advances
slowly. But the reality is that most women are plunged into it:

...we're forced to begin
in the midst of the hardest movement
the one already sounding as we are born.

Women, as a result of being born female, have been ripped from their mothers, their connections with other women:

Birth stripped our birthright from us
tore us from a woman, from women, from ourselves so early on.

Then they are pressured to connect with men, to give their energy not to themselves or other women, but to their families. The lament for this lost connection echoes from "Sibling Mysteries" discussed earlier. The solution entails "cutting away of an old force that held her/rooted to an old ground," and recognizing the forces in society working against women. This is the "new language," a "whole new poetry " which acknowledges the "homesickness" of women for one another and empowers them through self-recognition:

This is what she was to me, and this is how I can love myself-- as only a woman can love me.

What comes next is vision. Vision, truly seeing, like walking out of the caves in "Living in the Cave" or in "Origins and History of Consciousness." A woman gaining vision is compared to one leaving a crowded room full of argument and sitting down in the kitchen. She takes bits and pieces of her own life and other women's lives and weaves them into an enormous quilt. "Bits of yarn, calico...dark
petalblue of the petunia...whisker of a cat" are the different, small but essential elements the woman is working with. She is recreating a life:

with no mere will to mastery
only care for the many-lived, unending forms in which she finds herself.

This is the foundation of women's lives from which everything, including nature, grows. The woman is one with her body and her mind is musing -- she is connecting with her past, her present, all living things in nature as she creates a base from which to grow.

Thus women's creativity is essential for discovering who women can be without roles. The institutionalized customs and laws of society can be broken; the boundaries can be crossed by reaching out across historical, physical, and mental planes to touch all women's experiences. This is the foundation and touchstone of a new consciousness and a reclamation of valid and natural power.
CONCLUSION

Adrienne Rich demonstrates a deep commitment to creating a new poetry which identifies the wide variety of female experience within, but also beyond the social institutions of marriage and motherhood. She explores the physical, mental and spiritual consequences for women who are restricted to the "personal" sphere and denied access to the "real" world. She tells how it feels to be trapped within a role and expected to be endlessly nurturing, with little left over for oneself.

As revealed by her poetry, the injury then experienced by a woman is threefold: to her sense of individual self, her connection to other women and her creativity. The solution is twofold. First, the oppression -- legal, social and personal -- must be anatomized. It must be figured out in all its parts, and stated out loud. The second step lies in breaking free of the roles by re-examining the past to find out who women can be without institutionalized domesticity. Adrienne Rich's poetry performs both these functions, with grace, wit, humor, anger, sadness, and insight.
Works Cited


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