

AUNT JENNIFER'S TIGERS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Adrienne Rich (1929) was born in Baltimore, Maryland, USA. She is widely known for her involvement in contemporary women's movement as a poet and theorist. She has published nineteen volumes of poetry, three collections of essays and other writings. A strong resistance to racism and militarism echoes through her work. The poem Aunt Jennifer's Tigers addresses the constraints of married life a woman experiences.

Before you read

What does the title of the poem suggest to you? Are you reminded of other poems on tigers?

Aunt Jennifer's tigers prance across a screen,
Bright topaz denizens of a world of green.
They do not fear the men beneath the tree;
They pace in sleek chivalric certainty.
Aunt Jennifer's fingers fluttering through her wool
Find even the ivory needle hard to pull.
The massive weight of Uncle's wedding band
Sits heavily upon Aunt Jennifer's hand.
When Aunt is dead, her terrified hands will lie
Still ringed with ordeals she was mastered by.
The tigers in the panel that she made
Will go on prancing, proud and unafraid.

LISTEN TO THE POEM

Click on the link below to hear the poem being read. Pay attention to the pronunciation of the words.

[Class 12 | Aunt Jennifer's Tigers | Adrienne Rich | Audiobook](#)

TIGERS IN A TAPESTRY



AUNT JENNIFER EMBROIDERING



SUMMARY

“Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers” is a poem by **Adrienne Rich** that explored the theme of **female oppression and male dominance in marriage**.

The poem describes Aunt Jennifer creating a panel of embroidered tigers. These tigers are bold, fearless, and free. They moved confidently through the forest and were not afraid of men. Through these tigers, Aunt Jennifer expressed the strength and freedom she herself did not have in real life.

There is one particularly interesting line here. 'They pace in sleek **chivalric** certainty.' The term chivalric is often used to describe a person who treats relationships (especially women) with dignity and respect. The use of the term '**chivalric**' suggests that Aunt Jennifer did not receive this respect from her husband.

Aunt Jennifer found 'even the ivory needle hard to pull'. Ivory is symbolic of exploitation of elephants by strong males. An ivory needle is very light, yet Aunt Jennifer found it hard to pull. This indicates that she is very weak.

Aunt Jennifer is shown as weak and burdened. Her hands trembled while stitching, and the "massive weight of Uncle's wedding band" suggests that her marriage was unhappy and oppressive. The wedding ring symbolizes male authority and control, showing that she felt trapped in her married life.

Even after Aunt Jennifer's death, she will remain "ringed with ordeals she was mastered by." This means that even in death, she will continue to wear the ring that was the symbol of her misery and bondage. However, the tigers she created will continue to live on, proud and fearless. This shows that artistic expression can survive even when the artist is no more.

Overall, the poem highlights:

- The oppression of women in a patriarchal society
- The burden of marriage
- The contrast between imagination (freedom) and reality (fear and control)
- The power of art to express suppressed emotions

It presents a powerful picture about the oppression of helpless women.

VOCABULARY

1. **Prance** : to move about in quick, high steps, often because you feel proud or pleased with yourself. Peacocks often **prance** across lawns, showing off their vibrant feathers.
2. **Topaz** : a clear yellow precious stone. Here it refers to the yellow colour of the tigers. **Topaz** is a strong mineral treasured as a gemstone.
3. **Chivalric** : the code of ideal behaviour which emphasises honour, courage and loyalty. He had a truly **chivalric** nature, always stepping forward to help those in need.

4. **Fluttering** : to move or make something move quickly and lightly, especially through the night. The flags were **fluttering** in the wind.
5. **Ordeals** : very unpleasant and difficult experiences. The hostages were deeply traumatised by their terrifying **ordeals**.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Q1. How do 'denizens' and 'chivalric' add to our understanding of the tiger's attitudes?

Q2. Why do you think Aunt Jennifer's hands are 'fluttering through her wool' in the second stanza? Why is she finding the needle so hard to pull?

Q3. What is suggested by the image 'massive weight of uncle's wedding band'?

Q4. Of what or whom is Aunt Jennifer terrified in the third stanza?

Q5. What are the 'ordeals' Aunt Jennifer is surrounded by? Why is it significant that the poet uses the word 'ringed'? What are the different meanings of 'ringed' in the poem?

Q6. Why do you think Aunt Jennifer created animals that are so different from her own character? What might the poet be suggesting, through this difference?

Q7. Interpret the symbols found in this poem.

Q8. Do you sympathise with Aunt Jennifer? What is the attitude of the speaker towards Aunt Jennifer?

EXTRA QUESTIONS

Read the extracts and answer the questions:

**1. “Aunt Jennifer’s fingers fluttering through her wool
Find even the ivory needle hard to pull.”**

Questions:

1. Identify the poem and the poet.
2. Why are Aunt Jennifer’s fingers “fluttering”?
3. What does the “ivory needle” symbolize?
4. What does this extract reveal about Aunt Jennifer’s state of mind

**2. “Bright topaz denizens of a world of green,
They do not fear the men beneath the tree;”**

Questions:

1. Who are the “denizens” referred to here?
2. Why are they called “topaz”?
3. What is the significance of “do not fear the men”?
4. How does this contrast with Aunt Jennifer’s life?

3. “They pace in sleek chivalric certainty.”

Questions:

1. Who does “they” refer to?
2. Explain “chivalric certainty.”
3. What qualities of the tigers are highlighted here?
4. How is this line symbolic?

4. “Aunt Jennifer’s wedding band

Sits heavily upon her hand.”

Questions:

1. What does the “wedding band” symbolize?
2. Why is it described as “heavy”?
3. What does this suggest about Aunt Jennifer’s married life?
4. Identify the poetic device used here.

5. “When Aunt is dead, her terrified hands will lie

Still ringed with ordeals she was mastered by.”

Questions:

1. What does “terrified hands” suggest?
2. Explain “ringed with ordeals.”
3. What does “mastered by” indicate?
4. What theme of the poem is reflected here?

6. “The tigers in the panel that she made

Will go on prancing, proud and unafraid.”

Questions:

1. What will happen to the tigers after Aunt Jennifer’s death?
2. What do the tigers symbolize?
3. How is this line contrasted with Aunt Jennifer’s life?
4. What idea about art is conveyed here?

Q7. What do you learn about Aunt Jennifer’s tigers on reading the poem?

Q8. How will Aunt Jennifer’s hands look when she is dead?

LITERARY DEVICES

Aunt Jennifer's Tigers by Adrienne Rich uses a range of literary devices to highlight themes of oppression, fear, and the contrast between freedom and constraint. Here are the key ones:

1. Symbolism

- **Tigers** symbolize strength, freedom, and fearlessness—the life Aunt Jennifer desires but cannot live.
- **Aunt Jennifer's hands** symbolize her oppression and burden in marriage.
- **The wedding band (ring)** represents the heavy weight of marital obligations and patriarchal dominance.

2. Imagery

- Rich uses vivid visual imagery:
 - *"Bright topaz denizens of a world of green"* creates a colorful, lively picture of the tigers.
- This contrasts with the dull, lifeless reality of Aunt Jennifer's own world.

3. Contrast (Juxtaposition)

- The fearless tigers vs. the timid, oppressed Aunt Jennifer.
- The vibrant tapestry vs. her fragile hands.
- This contrast emphasizes her internal desires versus external reality.

4. Metaphor

- *"Massive weight of Uncle's wedding band"* is a metaphor for the burden of her marriage and her domination by male authority.

5. Alliteration

- Repetition of consonant sounds:
 - *"prancing, proud"*
 - *"sleek, chivalric certainty"*
- Adds rhythm and emphasizes the qualities of the tigers.

6. Tone

- The tone is initially admiring (of the tigers) but becomes somber and critical when describing Aunt Jennifer's life.

7. Irony

- Aunt Jennifer creates bold, fearless tigers, yet she herself lives in fear and submission—highlighting situational irony.

8. Enjambment

- Lines flow into each other without pauses, reflecting continuity and perhaps the ongoing nature of her oppression.

9. Repetition

- Repetition of ideas (fear, burden, strength) reinforces the central theme.

10. Personification

- Tigers are given human qualities like being “*proud*” and having “*chivalric certainty*.”