Toward a Redefinition of Female Experience: 
The Poems of Adrienne Rich

An Honors Thesis (ID 499)

By

Ruth E. Reichard

Thesis Director

Dr. Thomas Koontz

Ball State University

Muncie, Indiana

May, 1982

Spring Quarter
It is a sad paradox that when male authors impersonate women, they are said to be dealing with 'cosmic, major concerns' -- but when we impersonate ourselves we are said to be writing 'women's fiction' or 'women's poetry.'

--Erica Jong

The entire history of women's struggle for self-determination has been muffled in silence over and over. One serious cultural obstacle encountered by any feminist writer is that each feminist work has tended to be received as if it emerged from nowhere: as if each of us had lived, thought, and worked without any historical past or contextual present. This is one of the ways in which women's work and thinking has been made to seem sporadic, errant, orphaned of any tradition of its own.

--Adrienne Rich
as the two epigraphs suggest, the very idea of "women's poetry" (or any other type of women's art) is indeed problematic. Certain questions almost automatically come to mind: what is "women's poetry?" Why is it different from other poetry? Why in fact does this distinction exist at all? Predictably, these questions do not have easy, concise answers; I personally believe that they will probably never be answered to every curious scholar's satisfaction. Nevertheless, we can begin to seek out the answers to these questions and, through our search, discover many insights into the poetry of Adrienne Rich.

It is worthwhile to examine the statements of other feminist scholars regarding the importance of female experience as a whole. In an essay which discusses the integral need for feminist scholarship, Elizabeth K. Minnich begins at what is perhaps the most fundamental level of justification for the inclusion of the female experience into the larger academic world:

'Mankind' and 'humanity,' 'man' and 'human' have been defined as synonymous. Unfortunately, they aren't and cannot be: half the human race has been omitted. If it were indeed true that women had always been believed to be exactly the same as men, the claim of inclusiveness for 'man' might make some sense, but whoever held that belief?! As a result of this long-standing and deeply-rooted bias, Minnich states that women have been given "...a peculiar status as some kind of intermediate being, not quite human (=male), yet not quite anything else, either." Traditional scholarship is limited, then, and not truly humanistic: "(w)e have not studied women except from the perspective of men, who took themselves to be the whole, all there is, humans, leaving no room for other humans unlike them. We have not studied
humans, but only men." While Winch's words apply to the very broad area of feminist scholarship, I believe they are applicable to a discussion of poetry, as well.

Similarly, even though Gerda Lerner is a distinguished historian, her comments on the validity and subsequent need for the inclusion of female experience into the study of history also apply to poetry: "The single thing, the major commonality women share, is the peculiar way in which men have controlled women's sexuality. Through historical time, women have been defined in their sexuality by men or male-dominated institutions, and they have been confined within the family as their assigned area of functioning." The expression of the "commonality" described by Lerner in an artistic fashion is one of the main ingredients of "women's poetry." Lerner points out how incomplete our culture and its collective, official knowledge really is, because "(e)verything that explains the world has in fact explained a world that does not exist, a world in which men are at the center of human enterprise and women are at the margin 'helping' them. Such a world does not exist -- never has...." Thus, "women's fiction" and "women's poetry" (as well as other types of expression) help to make complete our culture's art.

For Adrienne Rich, examining women's experiences through poetry is not only a personal affirmation and statement; it is also political: 
"...this drive to self-knowledge...is more than a search for identity; it is part of [Rich's] refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society." In the world of the woman-centered artist, as in the larger society, "...connections have been drawn between our sexual lives and our political institutions, which are inescapable and illuminating." Although critics have sometimes remarked that Rich's
woman-based poetry has been and still is too political and/or polemic, it is clear from her comment above that for her, as for most feminists, "the personal is political." Her art reflects the truth of many women's lives, whether they identify themselves as feminists or not. Creating "women's poetry" is a struggle against many odds, which ultimately has some political significance along with a social, cultural, and artistic impact -- this is a fair means of approaching Rich's poetry, since it is the attitude she describes in her essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision." The types of struggles involved -- along with the ultimately political results -- are outlined below:

...the specter of this kind of male judgement, along with the active discouragement and thwarting of her needs by a culture controlled by males, has created problems for the woman writer: problems of contact with herself, problems of language and style, problems of energy and survival... Our struggles can have meaning only if they can help to change the lives of women whose gifts -- and whose very being -- continue to be thwarted. 8

As I shall illustrate below, Rich at first adhered to a traditional aesthetic, one that was inspired by her chiefly male predecessors:

"...I wanted women poets to be the equals of men, and to be equal was still confused with sounding the same...I had been taught that poetry should be 'universal,' which meant, of course, non-female." 9 This statement by Rich of what her ideal was like before she began to conscientiously write as a "women's poet" is instructive, therefore, because it tells us that a female aesthetic in poetry does not necessarily incorporate usual or commonplace images and experiences.

We have thus just considered how "women's poetry" fits into the larger context of "traditional" poetry by way of parallels with feminist scholarship, why it exists at all, and why it is different from "traditional" Western poetry. Before I discuss Rich's poems and how they, as examples of "women's poetry," help redefine women's experience,
I should like to address the larger issue of how any "women's poet" -- as an artist -- performs a very necessary and fundamental function for the audience to which the poems are addressed. For the purposes of this discussion, then, I would like to relate W.E.B. DuBois' concept of the "double consciousness," which was originally applied to the position of Blacks in American society, to the position of women in Western society. According to DuBois, the "double consciousness" occurs as a result of being a minority group and still retaining that group's history, values, culture, images, and experiences but being forced to accept the dominant culture's history, values, culture, images, and experiences. The group's consciousness can easily become blurred or even lost in the face of the pervasive, dominant consciousness. Just as Blacks have been historically subjected to the white consciousness, so have women been historically subjected to the male consciousness. The role of the artist/poet is, I believe, to help redefine the roles, images, and experiences of women in terms of female images and experiences, instead of the more pervasive male definitions. Of course, not every female artist/poet will choose to become a "women's poet;" however, Rich is definitely a "women's poet," and I believe that she does succeed in providing an alternative affirmation of the female consciousness to those who wish to pursue it.

The realm of women's experience throughout history is far too broad to define specific, limited images, motifs, even words that combine to form some ideal "female aesthetic." Nevertheless, we can identify certain elements in Rich's work that are woman-based or -centered, that do address certain universal (truly universal) issues for women in the Western world. In this paper, then, I will explore some various, general aspects of Adrienne Rich's poetry that indicate a female consciousness,
and then focus my discussion upon the more specific motif of Nature -- i.e., how Rich's uses of Nature help distinguish her poetry as "women's poetry."

Most of the poetry I will discuss as "women's poetry" was written by Rich in the latter half of her career, from the late 1960's to the present. A consideration of a select few of her earlier works should help to both illustrate why they are not woman-based and what the term "woman-based" actually means.

Rich's earlier poems are well-crafted and meaningful, dealing with a diverse range of subject matter. She does write about women's lives, but her poems reflect the dominant consciousness instead of a female consciousness. One of her earliest works is "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers," a poem which does contain the seeds of Rich's later works but is defined by the dominant, or male-centered, standard. Nonetheless, it is extraordinarily perceptive: the tigers within the pattern of Aunt Jennifer's exotic tapestry are brave, free-spirited creatures, "proud and unafraid;" the woman herself, though, is "mastered" by her life, her marriage, even her gender. We learn that "(t)he massive weight of Uncle's wedding band/Sits heavily upon Aunt Jennifer's hand.""10 According to Rich, "(i)n writing this poem, I thought I was creating a portrait of an imaginary woman...It was important to me that Aunt Jennifer was a person as distinct from myself as possible -- distanced by the formalism of the poem, by its objective, observant tone -- even by putting the woman in a different generation."11 However, Rich was also experiencing a period of conflict at this time in her life: she wanted to weave a tapestry of poetry, yet also define her worth in terms of her relationships with men. Likewise, the poem "An Unsaid Word" also has a great deal of potential for illustrating a disturbing aspect of male-female relationships
but also is rather objective and detached: "She.../Stands where he left her, still his own..."12

Rich displays the same perspicacity about intimate relationships in two later poems, "Living in Sin" and "Autumn Equinox." While both of these are accurate and sensitive works, they still do not show any evidence of a subjective effort to sort out the meaning of these relationships in terms of women's experience. In "Living in Sin," for example, the woman was disillusioned with romance at the beginning of the poem. But, "(b)y evening she was back in love again,/though not so wholly but throughout the night/she woke sometimes to feel the daylight coming/like a relentless milkman up the stairs."13 By the end of the 1950's, though, Rich was married and becoming a mother. The distance of her earlier works was lessened: "(i)n the late fifties I was able to write, for the first time, directly about experiencing myself as a woman...Until then I had tried very much not to identify myself as a female poet."14 "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law" is the poem in which Rich first started to relate her experiences as a woman in a more direct manner, though she still remained objective in the sense of referring to the woman in the poem as "she" instead of "I." An indirect statement is made about the loss of one's individuality to a spouse and children in the eighth section of the poem: "...all that we might have been,/all that we were -- fire, tears,/wit, taste, martyred ambition --/stirs like the memory of refused adultery/the drained and flagging bosom of our middle years."15

A 1964 selection, "Night-Pieces: for a Child," evokes very accurately the sensation of waking in the night to attend to an infant. Rich also uses "I" in this poem, as she addresses a child: "If I could hear you now/mutter some gentle animal sound!/If milk flowed from my breast again..."16 One senses that she is beginning to see the
merit in expressing her experiences in this more subjective, connecting way. "Night-Pieces: for a Child" is found in her *Necessities of Life: Poems 1962-1965* volume, her next edition of published poetry under consideration, *The Will to Change: Poems 1968-1970*, reflects a definite shift in her style, subject matter, degree of subjectivity, and attitude or tone. Events in her personal life undoubtedly had to influence this type of change in Rich's poetry: her estrangement from her husband, his eventual suicide, the impact of the Viet Nam war, and a growing feminist consciousness among many American women all left their mark on her work. The result? A sense of historical perspective heretofore absent in the poetry crafted by Rich that was to become one means of connecting with the female experience.

A fine example of this new type of poetry -- which could be called, I believe "women's poetry" -- is "Planetarium." In an introductory note, Rich tells us that she was "(t)hinking of Caroline Herschel (1750-1848) astronomer, sister of William; and others." In the last stanza, Rich identifies herself as a poet with Herschel the astronomer, and concludes with an excellent statement about her craft as it relates to interpreting and redefining women's experience in terms of a female consciousness:

I am bombarded yet I stand

I have been standing all my life in the direct path of a battery of signals the most accurately transmitted most untranslatable language in the universe I am a galactic cloud so deep so involuted that a light wave could take 15 years to travel through me And has taken 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.
In "The Burning of Love Instead of Children," also found in The Will to Change, Rich refers openly to resistance against the Viet Nam war, but she also includes two arresting motifs that hint at a connectedness with the female experience. The first is the repetition of the statement "I knew it hurts to burn," in which Rich links herself not only with Joan of Arc (mentioned earlier in the poem) but with the millions of women who, accused as witches or "wise women," were burned at the stake during the Middle Ages and beyond. The second is the naming of this language "the oppressor's language," and recognizing that it contains certain limitations that inhibit Rich's ability to perform her task as a poet: "this is the oppressor's language/ yet I need it to talk to you...." These two themes occur and re-occur often in her poetry, and I believe they serve as distinguishing characteristics of her work that help to identify it as "women's poetry."

Diving into the Wreck: Poems 1971-1972 contains some of Rich's best-known poetry. It reflects the evolutionary path her work had taken to reach the level of consciousness of Diving into the Wreck — anger, passion and desire — the history of her own struggle, the desire for an integrated structure rather than fragments, a new sense of time and women's, and a new appreciation for the energy required to maintain an intimate, loving relationship with another human being with every force in society seems to work against it. Her themes are both more personal and more political, and they are expressed with a concern for poetic craft and a skill for phrasing the truth of the female consciousness in the face of the larger and more dominant male consciousness.
"Diving into the Wreck" itself is a poem rich in meaning. It dares to explore what masculinity and patriarchy have meant for both women and men in society -- indeed, what they have meant for civilization itself. Rich makes a journey that is necessary for her to make in order to discover another "hidden" or "female" consciousness. She explores and surveys the "wreck" that patriarchy has made of civilization, and of Nature. Essential conflicts are contained within this survey, conflicts between patriarchal society and those it would conquer, between different "leaders" and "powers." According to Rich, 

"(m)y flippers cripple me..."21 I believe her "flippers," which she describes as "absurd" earlier in the poem, represent her learning or education and her values, obtained from the patriarchy (so they are, in a sense, false, since they do not truly speak to her as a woman). Once she has plunged into the sea, where she can gain some insight into what I believe can best be described as the "double consciousness" of which I wrote above, she must redefine her attitudes toward power:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{the sea is another story} \\
\text{the sea is not a question of power} \\
\text{I have to learn alone} \\
\text{to turn my body without force} \\
\text{in the deep element.}^{22}
\end{align*}
\]

Also, she must realize that, in the sea (water has cleansing properties), she needs to revise her notions of what is "good" -- her standards must change: "and besides/you breathe differently down here."23 Rich tells us she "...came to explore the wreck" of masculine civilization, and that "(t)he words are purposes./The words are maps."24 As she has expressed earlier in her poetry, Rich again hits on the idea that language (the "oppressor's language") has been twisted, false images have been constructed, to keep women "in their places." The words are clues to women's oppression. We learn that Rich made the journey in order to find "the
wreck and not the story of the wreckage, the thing itself and not the myth. 25 In other words, she does not want the history of civilization, because it is not valid, not really representative of humanity. And, she does not want the anti-female mythos of the culture, either; these might be represented by literature, art, etc. While she is exploring the ruin of patriarchal civilization, Rich is an androgynous figure; after all, the adversary is not the male half of the population; it is masculinity, patriarchal power. The final image in the poem is stirring; part of the "baggage" the journeyer carries is the book of myths -- history. But, for women, it is "a book of myths/in which/our names do not appear." 26 Women have been written out of history, as have Blacks and other people of color. Western history and civilization, we are reminded, has a false identity and a false history. "Diving into the Wreck" contains many elements in it that serve to establish a female consciousness: the historical perspective, the exposure of language as a means of manipulation, the importance (at that time) for Rich of androgyny, and the over-all need to make this journey -- this voyage is comparable to the emotional voyage one makes as a new consciousness is established. This poem is a powerful redefinition of what it is and has been to be female in Western society.

Other poems from this volume echo the main ideas expressed in "Diving into the Wreck." "Merced," for example, writes of the terror of living "in a world masculinity made/unfit for women or men...." 27 "Rape" speaks to a victim of the crime with anger, sarcasm and pain; Rich has a very cynical tone in this work, and she speaks to an experience which, if not encountered by all women, is at least feared by them. The clinical sense of this poem reminds one of the blazing, artificial lights of a police station after midnight, of reality. Rich expresses
this victimization by both the rapist and by one's supposed protectors very well:

and if, in the sickening light of the precinct,
and if, in the sickening light of the precinct,
your details sound like a portrait of your confessor,
will you swallow, will you deny them, will you lie your way home?28

"August," also from this collection, is a rather short poem containing a wealth of images and ideas pertaining to women. In a way, this poem (like so much of Rich's work) articulates for women what they themselves may sense, but not be able to express. Rich lists some of the different ways in which women have been defined by the male culture (as objects, chiefly) and then rejects those definitions:

If I am flesh sunning on rock
if I am brain burning in fluorescent light
If I am dream like a wire with fire throbbing along it
if I am death to man
I have to know it29

She does not "know" that women are these things, really, to men; therefore, they are not true definitions of women's consciousness. She makes a tentative break with the patriarchy and its wars, its destruction of Nature, its brutalization of women, by evoking a powerfully disturbing image of a mother's separation from her children for destructive purposes:

His mind is too simple, I cannot go on sharing his nightmares
My own are becoming clearer, they open into prehistory
which looks like a village lit with blood where all the fathers are crying: My son is nine!30

In summary, then, Diving into the Wreck is a key collection of Rich's poems, for it represents her first total expression of her new, woman-centered and woman-defining art. They are more intensely personal, yet more true to the reality of women's historical and social and sexual experience, than her earlier work. They are also more politically
explicit, but not at the expense of artistic integrity. In many ways, in fact, these new images are powerfully archetypal and, in that sense, just as universal as her earlier, traditional expressions.

The poetry from 1973-1974 in Poems: Selected and New affirms Rich's standing as a "women's poet." She is aware of that standing, of that responsibility, as evidenced in "Essential Resources:" "I'm wondering how/I long to create something/that can't be used to keep us passive...."31 In "From an Old House in America," Rich once again combines a historical perspective of women's place in society with arresting images and chilling statements. A good, representative excerpt would be this sample, from the seventh stanza:

I am washed up on this continent
shipped here to be fruitful
my body a hollow ship
bearing sons to the wilderness
sons who ride away
on horseback, daughters
whose juices drain like mine
into the arroyo of stillbirths, massacres
Hanged as witches, sold as breeding-wenches
my sisters leave me....32

That is part of what Rich uses to define what it means to be an American woman. Later in the poem, she chronicles women's madness on the isolated frontier, men's guilt, and women's need to confront their past in order to change their future. We are left with a memorable line at the poem's conclusion: "Any woman's death diminishes me(.)."33

The Dream of a Common Language/Twenty-one Love Poems, published in 1978, continues to provide an artistic redefinition of the female experience both throughout history and during the present. Rich also expanded this artistic treatment to include the openly lesbian Twenty-one Love Poems in this collection, thus validating for women another aspect of the female consciousness so deftly ignored or degraded
as a result of the "double consciousness." A new theme was also introduced in this book, that of the possibility of a "common language."

This language must of necessity be different from the "oppressor's language," since that has helped to undermine women's existence; yet, I believe that, by choosing this motif, Rich was expressing some optimism that the convenient (for the patriarchal system) dichotomy between the two sexes could be mended, possibly via this "common language." Of course, this term could also apply only to her attempt to reach all women, to increase her audience and to encourage more women to make the journey, to expand their consciousnesses to include their own, female experiences.

Whatever the intent, this new, "common language" is the language of Rich's poetry in this volume: suggestive, sublime, yet also at times blatant, angry, forceful, and tender. Rich begins the book with a poetic discussion of "Power," using Marie Curie as her focus:

She died a famous woman denying her wounds denying her wounds came from the same source as her power

Another, quite dramatic, poem is "Hunger," (For Andre Lorde). Just as most of this nation's poor and hungry are women and children, so are most of this planet's poor and hungry. This is an angry poem, raging openly against "that male State that acts on us and on our children/till our brains are blunted by malnutrition...." For Rich, "(t)he decision to feed the world/is the real decision. No revolution/has chosen it. For that choice requires/that women shall be free."

Rich has a fine connection in this volume with the past. She makes use of it in such a way that women's past experiences live for the readers on the page, yet she reminds us in the fifth of the
Twenty-one Love Poems of "...the ghosts -- their hands clasped for centuries --/of artists dying in childbirth, wise-women charred at the stake,/centuries of books unwritten...."37

Another excellent example of Rich's use of history to help redefine women's experience is the poem "Paula Becker to Clara Westhoff," in which she expresses Paula Becker's feelings about her marriage, her pregnancy, and her painting in the form of a letter to the sculptor Clara Westhoff, her close friend and colleague. Rich tells us, before the poem begins, that Becker died in childbirth, "murmuring, What a pity!"38 This poem is very poignant as we learn of Becker's love for her work, and the sacrifices which she had to make in order to be married, and of her remarkable, supportive relationship with Westhoff: "Clara, I feel so full/of work, the life I see ahead...."39 Even though Becker lived from 1876 to 1907, her conflicting goals, attitudes, and feelings are just as real today as they were at the turn of the century. Just as death from childbirth is a uniquely female type of death, so often is death from breast cancer. "A Woman Dead in Her Forties" is highly emotional and also poignant, as the former poem. Rich uses the method of addressing the now-dead friend and employs a familiar, natural style that rings very true to life: "Of all my dead it's you/who come to me unfinished..."40

Rich's most recent collection of poems, A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far: Poems 1978-1981, continues the "common language" ideal expressed in its immediate predecessor and also continues to provide a new consciousness for women. The poems are absorbing and finely constructed from the very beginning. The first poem, "The Images," offers a complex variety of images and experiences set against a fairly typical urban background. As readers, our thoughts and emotions are provoked at once, in the first stanza: "(t)wo women sleeping/together
have more than their sleep to defend." Rich then turns to a discussion of pornography, using vivid visual images and a powerful political statement: "in the name of freedom of speech/they are lynching us no law is on our side...." She also reminds us that language itself is also a tool of oppression at times, creating images of destruction. Like many women bombarded by the dominant consciousness's anti-woman images (some explicitly destructive, some subtly so), Rich returns home, "a woman starving/for images...my hunger is so old/so fundamental...," and is "re-membered" by her loved one. "The Images" gives us a sample of what lies ahead in the rest of the volume: both tenderness and anger, destruction and healing. Over-riding it all, though, is the sense that this is indeed "women's poetry" at some of its best forms of expression yet.

A major theme in the book is expressed in "Integrity," the first line of which is: "A wild patience has taken me this far." This apparent contradiction in terms makes sense, though, when Rich expresses her idea of the possibility of "constructive anger." Women, who are taught to hide their anger, often think of it as destructive. However, it is a nice discovery to make when one realizes that anger, too, has its uses. Thus, patience can be "wild" and, so often, is. "Anger and tenderness: my selves/And now I can believe they breathe in me/as angels, not polarities."

As usual, Rich employs history to further her building of a female consciousness. In this volume, the noteworthy poems are "Culture and Anarchy," which uses the words of Susan B. Anthony, startlingly appropriate to the author's message, "For Ethel Rosenberg" ("Ethel Greenglass Rosenberg would you/have marched to take back the night/collected signatures...." ); and "Heroines," which was inspired by the words of Gerda
Lerner: "The history of notable women is the history of exceptional, even deviant women, and does not describe the experience and history of the mass of women."47

"Frame" is an extremely intense and moving description of victimization, issues of violence, and issues of racism. A young woman, a university student, is accosted and brutally handled by the police; throughout the poem, a sort of shroud seems to hang, as Rich repeats that the incident occurs in silence, that no one sees it happen. The fear, the pain, and the anger of the young woman are all very clear to the reader, and the silence is inescapable. No one will believe this victim's word against the police officers; the silence is pervasive.

A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far is a fine representative of what "women's poetry" is, in a general sense. It is clear, through the reading of these works, just what types of experiences are validated or re-defined (or, as Rich might put it, re-membered) for women seeking a manifestation and/or expression of the female consciousness in the face of the "double consciousness." On a more specific level, then, I believe it would be instructive to examine one of the recurring motifs in Rich's "women's poetry" to show how it too contributes to the development of a female consciousness. This motif is Rich's use of Nature in her poetry that is woman-based. In a very basic way, the treatment of Nature by the patriarchy has paralleled the treatment women have suffered: when we speak of "the rape of the land" in reference to strip-mining, for example, it is no small accident of word choice. Masculinity "conquers" Nature just as it "conquers" women. Nature is viewed as something to be controlled, for it is mysterious. Women, too, are viewed by patriarchal institutions as mysterious and in need of control -- one example of how women are viewed as mysterious might be the fact of their reproductive cycles. Therefore, Rich can use Nature as both a literal victim and as a symbolic victim of
oppression. As might be expected, the use of the Nature motif grows along the same lines in Rich's poetry as her "women's poetry" does as a whole. I would like to note that many different motifs could be explored here, as specific illustrations of "women's poetry"—some other possibilities are anger, male-female relationships, war, mythology, healing, and language.

The poem "August," discussed above, is one of the earliest examples of the use of Nature as a type of correlative for women's experience. The third stanza of the poem offers the patriarchy's unnatural, contrived-sounding explanation for the thunderstorms of sultry August:

They say there are ions in the sun
neutralizing magnetic fields on earth...

The patriarchal system has used science and technology to distance itself from the natural world, so that that world can be more easily objectified and eventually exploited. It does the same with women -- recall the following passages from the same poem: "...flesh sunning on rock/
...brain burning in fluorescent [read: unnatural] light..." In another poem from the same volume (Diving into the Wreck), "Meditations for a Savage Child," Rich addresses the phenomenon of men asking women to pity them for the damage they have done, for the control they have exerted, by using this comparison in the fifth section:

Does the primeval forest
weep
for its devourers

does nature mourn
our existence

Again, the destruction of Nature is linked with the destruction of humanity and/or civilization (the "wreck") via patriarchy.

This relationship is also expressed in The Dream of a Common Language/Twenty Love Poems. "The Dineness" offers a detailed descrip-
tion of a gorgeous animal, with her "proud, vulnerable head," powerful (and dangerous) body, "truthful" eyes, who is pitifully locked inside of a cage three yards square. We are thus given a very striking image of control, and the controlling and/or harnessing of Nature is related to the domination of women. In the seventh poem of the Twenty-one Love Poems, Rich asks herself a moral and ethical question:

And how have I used rivers, how have I used wars to escape writing of the worst thing of all -- not the crimes of others, not even our own death, but the failure to want our freedom passionately enough so that blighted elms, sick rivers, massacres would seem mere emblems of that desecration of ourselves?

Here Rich directly relates the destruction of the natural world with the degradation of women. In "Mother-Right," Rich describes a woman, a child, and a man. The woman and the child are running, the child (a little boy) is singing, and the man is stationary at first, in contrast to the other two. Then, however, he begins "...walking boundaries/measuring He believes in what is his/the grass the waters underneath the air...." We begin to question: who really "owns" the earth?

A final example of this motif may be found in "For Julia in Nebraska," from A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far. In one passage, Rich describes the meaning of the frontier:

On this beautiful, ever-changing land
-- the historical marker says --
man fought to establish a home
(fought whom? the marker is mute.)

She goes on to remark that, among others, man fought the Indians. But he also fought Nature. And, in having to fight in the first place, one battle led almost automatically to another. The use of Nature as one example of the domination of patriarchy by Rich adds a great deal to her poetry and helps make the "women's poetry" she writes more universal. A redefinition of women's experience must include Nature, I believe.
When I attempt to form some all-encompassing, general conclusions from this discussion of Adrienne Rich's poetry as "women's poetry," I find it quite difficult. I cannot say that Rich has succeeded in creating an entirely new female consciousness, nor can I claim that she has managed to re-define women's experiences in an accurate and faithful manner; no one person, no one artist, could ever accomplish that feat. Rich does not work in a vacuum, which makes her poetry charged with realism, with anger, and with an occasional chance taken on hope. Nevertheless, her poetry has been extremely effective in establishing new ways of defining female experience artistically, and it has achieved a good deal of acceptance within traditional literary circles as well. I think artists like Rich are indispensable to the movement that seeks to re-define female (and thus male) experience, because she is able to focus her lens of artistic expression upon worthy subjects and produce not only art, but a valid statement of what it is to be female in the Western world. She gives to the phrase "women's poetry" a sort of integrity and sense of purpose that serve to create interest, action, consciousness-raising, and hard questioning of values, standards, and beliefs like few other "women's poets;" and, if for that reason and nothing else, we should be glad she is here during our age.
Notes

Epigraphs --


Text --


2 Minnich, p. 7.

3 Minnich, p. 7.


5 Stimpson, pp. 94-95.


7 Rich, "When We Dead Awaken," p. 90.

8 Rich, "When We Dead Awaken," pp. 92-93.

9 Rich, "When We Dead Awaken," pp. 94 & 97.

11 Rich, "When We Dead Awaken," p. 94.


14 Rich, "When We Dead Awaken," p. 97.


16 Rich, Poems: Selected and New, p. 82.


22 Rich, Diving into the Wreck, p. 23.

23 Rich, Diving, p. 23.


27 Rich, Diving, p. 36.


Notes, cont'd.

37 Rich, Dream, p. 27.
38 Rich, Dream, p. 42.
39 Rich, Dream, p. 44.
40 Rich, Dream, p. 57.
43 Rich, A Wild Patience, p. 5.
46 Rich, Wild Patience, p. 29.
47 Rich, Wild Patience, p. 60.
48 Rich, Diving into the Wreck, p. 51.
49 Rich, Diving, p. 51.
50 Rich, Diving, p. 61.
52 Rich, Dream, p. 28.
54 Rich, A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far, p. 17.
Bibliography


