

MIND MAP

SUMMARY OF THE POEM

In this feminist poem, which is critical of the male world, Aunt Jennifer creates an alternate world of freedom in her tigers. The tigers of Aunt Jennifer's stitchings are representative of her desire of a free spirit.

The first stanza opens with Aunt Jennifer's tapestry of tigers who are fearless of their environment. "Bright topaz denizens of a world of green" – evokes an image that these regal tigers are unafraid of other beings in the jungle. Bright here signifies their powerful and radiant persona. The Tigers stride in sleek chivalric certainty. The pacing of the Tigers may characterize fluid and controlled motion, as compared to the rhythmic movement of the first line. Nevertheless, the Tigers may be marching back and forth, because their movement is constrained to their tree top since there are men present there. There is a sense of certainty and confidence in the way these tigers move as can be seen in the line – "They pace in sleek chivalric certainty".

In the second stanza, the reality of Aunt Jennifer is revealed as she is feeble, weak and enslaved, very much the opposite of the tigers she was creating. Her fingers are fluttering through her wool as she sews. This fluttering may be the nervous movement of her fingers as she works. Her physical and mental trauma is depicted in the line – "find even the ivory needle hard to pull". Even though a wedding ring doesn't weigh much, "the massive weight of uncle's wedding band, sits heavily upon Aunt Jennifer's hand" signifying the amount of dominance her husband exercised over her. This also means that her inner free spirit has been shackled by the patriarchal society.

The last stanza starts on a creepy note about Aunt Jennifer's death. Even her death couldn't free her from the ordeals she went through which can be seen in "When Aunt is dead, her terrified hands will lie still ringed with ordeals she was mastered by". But her art work which was her escape route or in a way, her inner sense of freedom, will stay forever, proud and unafraid.

5. AUNT JENNIFER'S TIGERS

ABOUT THE POET

One of America's leading public philosophers, Adrienne Rich, was a poet, essayist, and feminist. She was called "one of the most extensively read and powerful poets of the second half of the 20th century" and was credited with bringing "the oppression of women to the forefront of poetic discourse". She published twenty-five volumes of poetry, three collections of essays and more than half a dozen other writings. Rich's prose collections are widely-acclaimed for their erudite, lucid, and poetic treatment of politics, feminism, history, racism and many other topics.

"Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" was an early attempt by Rich to define male and female relationships. She eloquently voices the poem in a third-person narrative which sets herself apart from Aunt Jennifer. The prevailing theme of "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" is Aunt Jennifer's oppression through marriage, and her utilization of embroidery as her only form of self-expression.

POETIC DEVICES/FIGURES OF SPEECH IN THE POEM

1. Irony

- Chivalric certainty, weight of wedding band, prancing proud.
It is ironical that Aunt Jennifer's creations will continue to prance freely, when she continues to be chained by the woes of life.

2. Alliteration

- "Fingers fluttering."
The repeated "f" sounds in her "fingers fluttering" make the poem enjoyable to read aloud as the repeated consonant sounds allow the words to appear perhaps, playful, continuing the 'mood' from the first stanza.

3. Repetition

- tigers prance across a screen; will go on prancing.
It creates a horrifying ambience of the oppressor and the oppressed. The theme of male chauvinism runs throughout the poem creating a fearsome atmosphere of fierce and fearless tigers on the prowl.

4. Metaphor

- Ringed ordeals – Aunt's woes surrounded her so that even death would not fall her.
- Bright to paz denizens – The poet compares the yellow stripes of the tigers to a precious stone, topaz.

5. Transferred epithet

- "terrified fingers" – Aunt Jennifer is terrified; so, her fingers flutter.

6. Personification

- "They pace in sleek chivalric certainty."
In this line, Adrienne Rich has given the tigers a chivalric characteristic through personification. As much as fairytales and stories disagree, tigers in real life, are not noble or gentlemanly, they are wild animals.
- "The tigers in the panel that she made/Will go on prancing, proud and unafraid."
Here, Adrienne Rich uses pride, a humanly attribute, to offer a way for the reader to really understand how important these tigers are, and how they have the courage and pride that Aunt Jennifer never had.

Reference to Context

Read the extract given below and answer the questions that follow.

- I. **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.**
 - (a) How are Aunt Jennifer's tigers described?
 - (b) What are her tigers symbolic of?
 - (c) Why are they described as 'denizens of a world of green'?
 - (d) Which poetic device is used in the last line here?
- II **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.**
 - (a) Why are Aunt Jennifer's fingers fluttering?
 - (b) Explain: 'massive weight of uncle's wedding band'?
 - (c) Why does she find it hard to pull the ivory needle?
 - (d) How is Aunt Jennifer affected by the 'weight of matrimony'?
- III. **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.**
 - (a) Why has Aunt Jennifer created the tigers so different from her own character?
 - (b) Why is she "ringed with ordeals"?
 - (c) Why are Aunt Jennifer's hands 'terrified'?
 - (d) What is Aunt Jennifer's death symbolic of?
- IV. **They do not fear the men beneath the tree;
They pace in sleek chivalric certainty.**
 - (a) Name the poem and the poet of these lines.
 - (b) Who are 'they' in the above lines and where do you find them?
 - (c) Why are 'they' not afraid of the men?
 - (d) What does the word 'sleek' mean?
- V. **The tigers in the panel that she made
Will go on prancing, proud and unafraid.**
 - (a) Who terrified the Aunt?
 - (b) What did she do to face the terror?
 - (c) Why did Aunt Jennifer make the tigers?
 - (d) What will happen to her tigers after her death?

ANSWER KEY

- I. (a) Aunt Jennifer's tigers have been described golden yellow in colour. They are chivalric, bold and fearless as they prance across the screen with confidence.
- (b) Her tigers are symbolic of Aunt Jennifer's desire for freedom. They are also symbols of great strength and self-confidence.
- (c) They have been called 'denizens of a world of green' because they are the natives of dense green forests where they are known for their strength and valour.
- (d) In the above lines, 'chivalric certainty' is an example of alliteration.
- II. (a) Aunt Jennifer lives in constant fear of her husband. Her fluttering fingers are a sign of nervousness as she is traumatized and terrorized by the constraints of her married life.
- (b) The expression is symbolic of male authority and power. Marriage seems to bind the woman mentally as well as physically. In the poem, Aunt Jennifer is trapped in gender oppression and does not get enough freedom to express

herself. She is burdened by the domestic responsibilities and the authority of her husband.

- (c) Aunt Jennifer finds it very hard to pull through the ivory needle because she is enslaved and enfeebled. She finds it hard to pull more because of mental suppression rather than physical weakness.
 - (d) Aunt Jennifer cannot do things freely. In trying to meet the expectations of her husband, she seems to lose her identity. The freedom that she dreams of through her art, is itself symbolic of her oppressed self.
- III.**
- (a) Aunt Jennifer is weak and submissive, whereas the tigers are strong, bold and powerful. The tigers of Aunt Jennifer's tapestry are representative of her desire of a free spirit, emphasising the fact that she pines for freedom from her burdensome wedlock. She is bound by the constraints of her married life, while the tigers are free to move about in the green woods.
 - (b) The 'ring' here refers to her wedding band or ring, which has brought with it a host of family responsibilities. She feels so surrounded (i.e., ringed) by her marital constraints that it seems like an ordeal to her. This also means that her free spirit has been jailed by the patriarchal society. There is no escape for her even after death.
 - (c) Aunt Jennifer has been enslaved by the wedding ring. After undergoing the harsh and bitter experiences of her married life, she feels weak and shaken. Even in death her hands will continue to be afraid and continue to be surrounded, or "ringed", by the ordeals of her life.
 - (d) Aunt Jennifer's death is symbolic of her complete submission to her suppression.
- IV.**
- (a) The poem is 'Aunt Jennifer's Tigers'. The poet is Adrienne Rich.
 - (b) They are Aunt Jennifer's tigers. We find them in the forests and also in the panel being embroidered by Aunt Jennifer.
 - (c) They are not afraid of the men because they are brave and confident.
 - (d) The word 'sleek' means 'elegant' or 'glossy'.
- V.**
- (a) Her husband (Uncle) and the immense pressure of conforming to the stereotype laid down by patriarchal society terrified the Aunt.
 - (b) She embroidered tigers on the panel to face the terror. It served as a vent to her burdened spirit and an escape to freedom.
 - (c) Aunt Jennifer crated the tigers which are symbols of confidence and fearlessness because she wants to be like them. She wants to break free from the marital responsibilities that have tethered her all her life.
 - (d) The tigers are eternal. They will keep on prancing even after her death.