

## POEM – 5

### AUNT JENNIFER'S TIGERS

#### About the poet

**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.



#### Enrich your vocabulary

Prance	:	Walk or move around with high springy steps.
Topaz	:	A bright yellow coloured stone.
Denizens	:	(here) an animal that lives or is found in a particular place.
Sleek	:	Elegant
Chivalric	:	Being courteous esp. to women, an act of a gentleman.
Ordeals	:	Extremely severe tests or experiences.
Prancing	:	To move around proudly.
Fluttering	:	To move in quick, irregular motions as if being agitated.

#### GIST OF THE POEM

- The desire of a woman for freedom & strength has been brought out by the poet.
- Aunt Jennifer has embroidered bright yellow tigers on a screen.
- These tigers move about freely, fearlessly & confidently in the green forests.
- They are not afraid of the hunters.
- In contrast, Aunt Jennifer is weak & nervous.
- To make her embroidery she finds the ivory needle hard to pull.
- The wedding ring is symbolic of the burden of commitments & bindings of married life.
- Her marriage with uncle has taken away her freedom & confidence to live life the way she wishes.
- After her death, the mark of the wedding ring will continue to show her sad, burdened life.
- She is mortal (dies) whereas the embroidery of tigers (Art) that she has made is immortal.

#### RELEVANT BACKGROUND

Adrienne Rich is an American poet who was born in 1929. She was brought up in a well-off family. Adrienne was the elder of two daughters. Her father was a doctor and her mother was a music composer. She grew up in with a Jewish father and a Protestant mother. As a result of this mixed marriage she was used to tensions between her parents. Rich felt dominated by her father's strong personality while growing up. It was he who most guided her as a young poet. This wasn't always to her liking as he expected her to write her poems his way. When Rich was growing up men dominated and women were expected to become dutiful wives in their adult lives. All these elements may have influenced the picture of marriage which Rich drew in this poem. At the heart of, the poem is an image of a husband who controls and frightens his wife. Rich wrote a lot of poems based on everyday experience. In the poem 'Aunt Jennifer's Tigers', Rich mocks the weakness of Aunt Jennifer, and the **clout (punch)** and authority of her husband in their marriage. Rich was also fascinated by how people could use a hobby like art-work to create a happier and prettier world than their daily life. Rich has been one of America's most important female poets for the past fifty years.

## VALUES RAISED IN THE POEM

Respect for women, equality, equity, gender sensitivity, empathy, feminism, value for art.

## THEME OF THE POEM

**1. Marriage is unequal due to male domination/Inequality:** The woman is the centre of the poem, Aunt Jennifer, is a nervous and fearful wife. She lacks inner conviction or 'certainty', unlike the tigers she portrays. Aunt Jennifer is 'mastered' in her life. She lives a life of inequality. She is so nervous that her fingers 'flutter' through the wool she is using in her tapestry or panel. The poet portrays the marriage of Jennifer as an unhappy one for her. Aunt Jennifer feels the burden of duty and obedience. This is shown by the symbol of the wedding ring that she wears. It is described as her husband's property: 'Uncle's wedding band'. It 'sits heavily' on her hand because he dominates her life. Her life with her husband is described as a life of 'ordeals'. The poem, therefore, provides a negative picture of marriage. The poem is probably saying that the 'Uncle' or husband is behaving like a tiger, and the tigers are 'chivalric' like the husbands. Each world is the reverse of what it should be.

**2. The world of art is happier than the real world/Dream versus Reality:** Aunt Jennifer's hobby is making designs and pictures from wool. Jennifer produces wool tapestries that she places on panels. The creatures she places there are free and proud, the opposite to herself. She is 'ringed' or mastered in marriage and, therefore, she is not free, but controlled. It seems that she creates a happier looking world than the one she lives in. She makes precise and brightly coloured pictures like the sharp yellow tigers of the poem, pictured against a green background. These bright contrasting colours are probably much more vivid than Jennifer's everyday world. Her artistic work will live on after she dies, as, according to the poet, her tigers will 'go on prancing'. The figures she creates are stronger and happier than she is. They are proud and 'prance' about, unlike their creator, who is nervous and fears her husband. The word 'prance' or parade contrasts sharply with 'fluttering', meaning trembling. The tigers do not fear the men the aunt places under some trees in her tapestry. Therefore, the imaginary tigers produced by Aunt Jennifer live a type of proud and free life that she can only dream about. Perhaps Aunt Jennifer uses art as an escape from her troubles. In her artwork Jennifer imagines the kind of life she would have liked.

## TITLE OF THE POEM

"Aunt Jennifer's Tiger" is an appropriate title in that it refers to a tapestry Aunt Jennifer has made. It contains some ferocious tigers. The title also suggests the "tiger like terror" Aunt's husband was. She was in constant fear of him and felt trapped and suffocated in marriage. She felt that her husband was her master and she was a tame animal who must carry out his command. It is a very suggestive title, indeed.

## CENTRAL IDEA OF THE POEM

"Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" by Adrienne Rich is how the power of the patriarchy controls women's bodies but not their minds. The poem makes this point by presenting the wild, exotic, powerful tigers embroidered by Aunt Jennifer and contrasting them with Aunt Jennifer herself.

## MESSAGE OF THE POEM

"Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" is a statement of conflict in women, specifically between the impulse to freedom and imagination. Aunt Jennifer wants a life that she embroiders on the panel. She wants a colourful vibrant life which every woman should have the power to create.

**Answer the following questions in 30 to 40 words.**

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

**Ans.** Denizens means inhabitants of a forest. Tigers are the inhabitants of forest. They live in the world of green. They love to live in their natural habitat. They are brave and warlike. They freely prance and unafraid of human beings. They walk elegantly.

**2. 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?**

**Ans.** Aunt Jennifer seems to have grown very old and weak. That is why her hands are fluttering through her wool. She is finding it hard to pull the ivory needle because her weak hands are trembling.

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

**Ans.** Aunt Jennifer's marriage was just like a heavy band put on her. With her marriage, she lost all of her former freedom. Now she was tied to the daily chores of uncle's home. She had no liberty or will of her own.

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

**Ans.** Aunt Jennifer is terrified of the hard chores she has been performing so far in her life. She is afraid that she will have to do the same ones even after her death.

**5. 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?**

**Ans.** Aunt Jennifer's ordeals are the ordeals of keeping her husband happy. She can do nothing against the wishes of her husband. The word 'ringed' conveys the idea that Aunt Jennifer can never get out of her slavish routines.

**6. 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?**

**Ans.** Perhaps Aunt Jennifer has created through the tigers a picture of her own husband. There is also a suggestion that women create men but those very men dominate and tyrannizes over women when they grow up.

**7. Interpret the symbols found in this poem.**

**Ans.** The two main symbols used in the poem are the tigers and the screen. Tigers represent the creative energy of woman. The screen represents the range on which that creative energy works. Thus tigers are symbol of men produced by woman. The screen is a symbol of the woman's life on which men prance about.

**8. Do you sympathize with Aunt Jennifer? What is the attitude of the speaker towards Aunt Jennifer?**

**Ans.** Aunt Jennifer wins all our sympathy. She works tirelessly to create her tigers. The tigers prance across the screen fearlessly. The speaker feels great sympathy for Aunt Jennifer. She says that while Aunt Jennifer will be lying dead in her grave, her tigers will still go on prancing proud and unafraid.

**9. After Aunt Jennifer's death, where will the tigers in the panel go?**

**Ans.** Even after Aunt Jennifer's death the tigers in the panel can't run away. They are made by Aunt Jennifer by her fine design work with her wool. The tigers will go on jumping, proud and unafraid as before.