

Poetry
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Lecture 59
Adrienne Rich

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Adrienne Rich (1929-2012)

- Historical and Literary Context
- Adrienne Rich
- Rich's Theory of Revisionism
- "The Phenomenology of Anger"
- Selections
- Analysis
- Feminist Consciousness Raising
- A Visual Reading
- A Phenomenological Reading



Hello, we are going to deal with the poetry of Adrienne Rich with specific reference to one of our well-known poems "The Phenomenology of Anger." First, we will look into the historical and literary context, then briefly see her life, then examine a theory of Revisionism which is close to the heart of Adrienne Rich. Then read some selections from "The Phenomenology of Anger," analyse the poem, and then deal with three topics- Feminist Consciousness Raising, A Visual Reading, and A Phenomenological Reading of this poem called "The Phenomenology of Anger."

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Historical and Literary Context

- Vietnam War (1955-1975)
- A long-drawn war and heavy casualties
- Protests from all sections against the US war policies
- Exposed the inadequacy of the US Army capabilities
- The second wave of feminism, 1960s-1980s
- Employed women losing jobs and confined to home created the need for solidarity among women in the US
- Women began to establish their positive images in the public discourse
- Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963)
- Changed the perceptions and portrayals of women



Let us see the Historical and Literary Context. The second part of the twentieth century in the US was dominated by what is known as this Vietnam War. The US was involved in this long drawn, heavy casualties war called Vietnam War. Something like 20 years and because of this long war and because of this heavy casualties people affected by different sections were protesting against the US war policies. And at this time, this particular war exposed the inadequacy of the US Army capabilities.

Considered to be one of the best Armies in the world, it could not tackle the problem of Vietnam within a short time, 20 year is not a short time. At the same time, we have the Second Wave of Feminism in the 1960's and 80's. What happened was, some women employed in government or organisations, they began to lose their jobs and began to be confined to home and that created some kind of un-rest among women and also it led to the solidarity among women in the US. They began to establish their own positive images in public discourse. Betty Friedan's book, "The Feminine Mystique" demystified the women's pictures presented by the media, the society. And it changed the perceptions and portrayals of women in life.

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Adrienne Rich

- Ventured as a conventional modernist poet in 1951
- Went through a broken marriage after three children
- Emerged as a radical feminist poet and activist
- Led the second wave of feminism in the US
- Played a key role in the anti-war movement, Vietnam War
- Advocated "lesbian continuum" and sisterhood
- Examined issues of social injustice, identity, & sexuality
- Dedicated to humanity through her poetry and prose
- Revised the social myths of women and men
- Salvaged the wrecked women and built a new tradition



Adrienne Rich was a girl born into a conventional family and she had good education. In her initial life, she ventured as a conventional modernist poet in 1951. But later on, she went through a broken marriage after three children and that is where she was able to gain lot of experience and emerge as a radical feminist poet and also activist. In fact, she led the Second Wave of Feminism in the US along with other prominent women activist of the time, particularly Alice Walker and Audre Lord. She played a key role in the anti-war movement that is Vietnam War and many other wars actually.

She advocated "lesbian continuum" and sisterhood. That means, there is a kind of different levels of relationship between people, particularly women and they should build up that kind of network, so that they can help each other. In her life, she examined the issues of social injustice, identity and sexuality, dedicated herself to the humanity through her poetry and prose. She started revising the social myths of women and men. And salvaged the wrecked women and built a new tradition in poetry and American culture.

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Adrienne Rich's Re-Visionism



"Re-vision - the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction - is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival.... And this drive to self-knowledge, for woman, is more than a search for identity: it is part of her refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society."



This is what we have about Adrienne Rich's Re-Visionism which is close to her heart. It is not just having a vision but a revision. What does it mean?

"It is an act of looking back of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction which is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival... And this drive to self-knowledge, for woman, is more than a search for identity: it is part of her refusal of the self-destructiveness of male dominated society."

What Adrienne Rich tries to emphasise through this extract is, seeing and seeing with critical eyes, seeing with fresh eyes, being able to survive in this world with self knowledge and more than self identity as a woman.

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Adrienne Rich's Re-Visionism

"A radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to **how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us; and how we can begin to see-and therefore live-afresh.** ... We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us." (Rich 1972: 18-19)



The passage actually continues. According to Adrienne Rich, the Re-vision is,

"A radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, **how we have been led to imagine ourselves, and how our language has trapped us, as well as liberated us; and how we can begin to see and therefore live-afresh...** We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us.

She was committed to this kind Re-visionism throughout her life. She closely examined how language traps woman and men into a kind of conventional way of life. This new vision she expected to bring about changes in language as well.

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“The Phenomenology of Anger”-1



The **freedom** of the wholly mad
to smear & play with her madness
write with her **fingers dipped in it** (metaphor)
the length of a room
5
which is not, of course, the freedom
you have, walking on Broadway
to stop & turn back or go on
10 blocks; 20 blocks
but feels enviable maybe
to the compromised 10
curled in the placenta of the real (metaphor)
which was to feed & which is strangling her.



Let us see some selections from this poem “The Phenomenology of Anger.”

“The **freedom** of the wholly mad
to smear & play with her madness
write with her **fingers dipped in it**
the length of a room

which is not, of course, the freedom 5
you have, walking on Broadway
to stop & turn back or go on
10 blocks, 20 blocks

but feels enviable maybe
to the compromised
curled in the placenta of the real 10
which was to feed and which is strangling her.”

We can see some crucial images used in this poem regarding these fingers dipped in and curled in the placenta with reference to freedom.

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“The Phenomenology of Anger” - 4

White light splits the room.
Table. Window. Lampshade. You. 35
My hands, stick in a new way.
Menstrual blood (female experience)
seeming to leak from your side.
Will the judges try to tell me
which was the blood of whom? (RQ) 40



Here we have another extract,

“White light splits the room.

Table. Window. Lampshade. You 35

My hands, stick in a new way.

Menstrual blood

seeming to leak from your side.

Will the judges try to tell me

which was the blood of whom?” 40

Specifically, Rich focuses on female experiences of this broken life, table, window, lampshade, you that division she is able to see and then asks a rhetorical question ‘will the judges try to tell me which was the blood of whom?’

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“The Phenomenology of Anger” - 6



Not enough. When I dream of meeting
the enemy, this is my dream:

white **acetylene** (metaphor)
ripples from my body 60
effortlessly released
perfectly trained
on the true enemy

raking his body down to the thread
of existence 65

burning away his lie
leaving him in a new
world; a changed
man (a new vision of man)



Another extract,

Not enough. When I dream of meeting

the enemy, this is my dream

white **acetylene**

ripples from my body 60

effortlessly released

perfectly trained

on the true enemy

raking his body down to the thread

of existence 65

burning away his lie

leaving him in a new

world; a changed

man.”

Here again we have a violent metaphor in this acetylene, a gas used for violent purposes in army and also it is used for welding and all that. Now, at the end of this burning of a woman that she imagines, she has a new vision of a man for her.

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“The Phenomenology of Anger” - 7



I hate you.
I hate the mask you wear, your eyes
assuming a depth 80
they do not possess, drawing me
into the grotto of your skull
the landscape of bone
I hate your words 85
they make me think of fake
revolutionary bills
crisp imitation parchment (metaphor)
they sell at battlefields.



One more extract, here we have the powerful voice of Adrienne Rich against man;

“I hate you.

I hate the mask you wear, your eyes

assuming a depth 80

they do not possess, drawing me

into the grotto of your skull,

the landscape of bone.

I hate your words

they make me think of fake 85

revolutionary bills

crisp imitation parchment

they sell at battlefields.”

Here again we can see a powerful metaphor, words connecting with this ‘crisp imitation parchment.’ What she hates is this masking of men and women particularly men?

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“The Phenomenology of Anger” - 9



The only real love I have ever felt
was for children and other women. 110
Everything else was lust, pity,
self-hatred, pity, lust.
This is a woman’s confession.
Now, look again at the face
of Boticelli’s Venus, Kali, 115
the Judith of Chartres
with her so-called smile.



“The only real love I have ever felt

was for children and other women. 110

Everything else was lust, pity,

self-hatred, pity, lust.

This is a woman’s confession.

Now, look again at the face

of Boticelli’s Venus, Kali, 115

the Judith of Chartres

with her so-called smile.”

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“The Phenomenology of Anger” - 10



many sleep
the whole way
others sit
staring holes of fire into the air
others plan rebellion: 130
night after night
awake in prison, my mind
licked at the mattress like a flame
till the cellblock went up roaring
Thoreau setting fire to the woods 135
Every act of becoming conscious
(it says here in this book)
is an unnatural act 138



Here we have the last extract,

many sleep

the whole way,

others sit

staring holes of fire into the air,

others plan rebellion; 130

night after night

awake in prison, my mind

licked at the mattress like a flame

till the cellblock went up roaring.

Thoreau setting fire to the woods 135

Every act of becoming conscious

(it says here in this book)


is an unnatural act.” 138

This unnatural act of becoming conscious, becoming aware was a whole lifetime mission of Adrienne Rich.

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Thematic Contrast

- Equanimity and Anger
- Freedom and Slavery
- Normality and Madness
- Friend and Enemy
- **Truth and Lie**
- Love and Hate
- Original and Imitation
- Obedience and Rebellion
- Conscious and Unconscious
- Natural and Unnatural



Let us see the Thematic Contrast between anger and equanimity, freedom and slavery, normality and madness, friend and enemy, truth and lie, love and hate, original and imitation, obedience and rebellion, conscious and unconscious, natural and unnatural. This is a kind of awareness that Adrienne Rich brings about in the readers, specifically women to arise from this lie, from this so-called madness, from this normal life, from this unconscious life. That is why she wants to unravel the lie and show the truth to both men and women.

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Poetic Devices

Rhetorical Question:
Will the judges try to tell me
which was the blood of whom? (39-40)


Metaphor: acetylene (59)

Anaphora: I hate (79, 80, 84)

Metaphor: words
they make me think of fake
revolutionary bills
crisp imitation parchment
they sell at battlefields. (84-88)

Chiasmus: Everything else was lust, pity,
self-hatred, pity, lust. (111-112)

Simile: my mind
licked at the mattress like a flame (132-33)



A number of poetic devices can be found in this poem. We refer to many of them, let us look at them now specifically. First, we have this rhetorical question, “Will the judges try to tell me which was the blood of whom?” Judges usually men and then we have this metaphor, ‘acetylene,’ the gas that destroys people and objects. Anaphora we have in three lines, 79, 80, and 84; “I hate you, I hate your mask, I hate your words, I hate your eyes assuming a depth which you do not possess.” Then we have another metaphor here;

“words
they make me think of fake
revolutionary bills
crisp imitation parchment
they sell at battlefields.”

This kind of war consciousness is always there in her and words are imitations, they are not originals, they do not have meaning, they do not have sense, they tell lies. That is why she hates words; she hates this patriarchal language which suppresses truth.

Then we have a very interesting case of Chiasmus in these two lines; “everything else was lust, pity, self-hatred, pity and lust.” The kind of reversal that she wants to bring about in society can be easily seen through this kind of Chiasmic structure that she brings into her poem. Lastly, we have a Smile, ‘my mind licked at the mattress like a flame.’ Mind becoming like fire and catching fire and creating distraction for renewal of life, that is what Adrienne Rich tries to do in this particular poem.

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Rhyme, Rhythm, and Meter



Rhyme: no fixed rhyme; some unusual initial rhyme in three words: raking, burning, leaving (64, 66, 67)

Line Length: varies 1 syllable to 10 syllables

Rhythm: dynamic through variation in line length

Meter: tetra, penta, mono, di, tri- meter with extra syllables in many cases

Caesura, Enjambment and End-stopped Lines:

The o | nly real | love | I | have e | ver felt | ➤ (5 feet)
was for | children | and o | ther wo | men. (4 feet)
Every | thing else | was lust, | pity, | (4 feet)
self-ha | tred, pi | ty, lust. |(109-112) (3 feet)

Majorly **iambic and trochaic measure**



Now let us examine Rhyme, Rhythm and Meter in this poem. There is no fixed rhyme actually in this poem. Some unusual initial rhyme can be seen in three words, raking, burning, leaving in line 64, 66, and 67. We have line length which varies from one syllable to ten syllables and the rhythm is dynamic through variation in line length. We have again many different metrical patterns; tetra, penta, mono, di, tri; everything is there. In some cases, we have extra syllables as well. So, we can say this poem has metrical patterns, so we call it polimetrical. We have Caesura, Enjambment and End-stopped lines; one example is there,

“The only real love I have ever felt

was for children and other women.

Everything else was lust, pity,

self-hatred, pity, lust. (109-112)

Generally, we can say that this poem has iambic and trochaic measure.

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Overall Impression

- This is obviously a feminist poem with a difference.
- It expresses anger about the atrocities of men against women and also suggests ways to overcome the oppression with a female bonding.
- The poet identifies the male language as a serious problem of experience and expression.
- Hence, she uses it to subvert the male dominance by incorporating female experience of togetherness, understanding, appreciation not only among women but also with children and the larger oppressed humanity.
- Her aim of **consciousness raising** is perfectly achieved with the unnatural act of becoming conscious of rebellion and womanistic retribution.



To give an overall impression of this poem, let us see these points. This poem is obviously a feminist poem with a difference. It expresses anger about the atrocities of men against women and also suggest ways to overcome the oppression with a female bonding. The poet identifies the male language as a serious problem of experience and expression.

Hence, she uses it to subvert the male dominance by incorporating female experience of togetherness, understanding, appreciation not only among women but also with children and the larger oppressed humanity. Her aim of consciousness raising is perfectly achieved with the unnatural act of becoming conscious of rebellion and the womanistic retribution. The anger, the revenge that she has expressed in this poem.

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Feminist Consciousness Raising

- Expanding awareness of ourselves and also in relation to others and the world
- Self-Reflection and Self-Awareness
- Self-examination: "**The unexamined life is not worth living**" (Socrates)
- Meditation and Mindfulness
- Poetry leads to self-awareness.
- Poetry is a survival tool (Rich).
- Meetings, Debates, Discussions, Demonstrations, etc.




Let us focus on this feminist consciousness raising which is important for Adrienne Rich and many other feminists of her times. It means expanding awareness of ourselves and also in relation to others and the world at large. It involves self-reflection and self-awareness, that means we ask questions about what is happening inside us and others and then we become aware of our own feelings and for this to happen, we have to ask questions about self, that is where we have this self-examination. Here we can quote Socrates famous statement, “The unexamined life is not worth living.”

Adrienne Rich is a Feminist but we are quoting a man’s words to support her. This further implies some kind of meditation, mindfulness which is at the heart of poetry that is why we say ‘poetry leads to self-awareness.’ For Adrienne Rich, she has said ‘poetry is a survival tool for her’ and this kind of awareness is raised through meetings, debates, discussions, demonstrations which she held throughout her life.

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Male and Female Language

- **Language is a weapon for Rich.**
“This is the oppressor’s language
Yet I need it to talk to you.”
(“The Burning of Paper Instead of Children”)
- **Mary Gentile on Language**
• “If I learn to express my experience as a woman in its entirety, in its physicality, in its complexity, without self-censorship, without employing eternally imposed categories and evaluations and with the conviction that my experience is valid, coherent and deserves attention, I will be speaking **a new language.**”



We have a special focus on this Male and Female language in this poem and we have also a quotation from another poem called “The Burning of Paper Instead of Children.” Because Rich considers language a weapon. She says, “This is the oppressor’s language, yet I need it to talk to you” From this poem The Burning of Paper instead of Children.

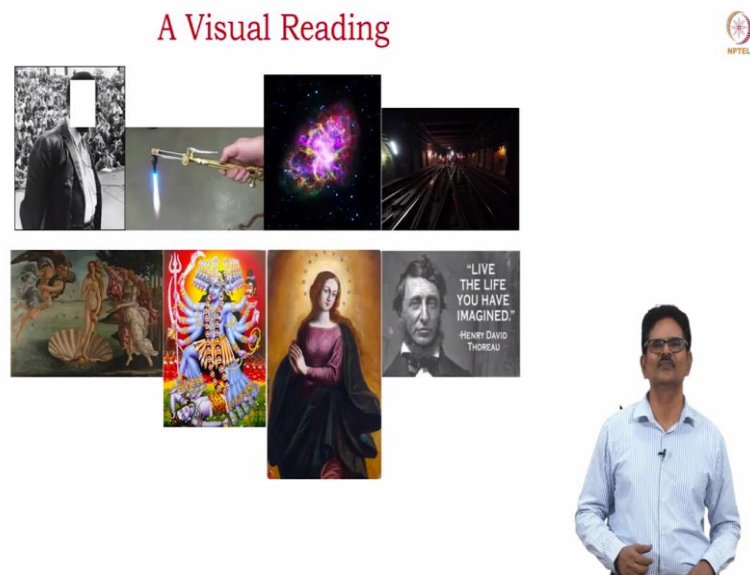
A feminist critique Mary Gentile has something to say on language, we have quoted her here,

“If I learn to express my experience as a woman in its entirety,
in its physicality, in its complexity, without self- censorship,

without employing eternally imposed categories and evaluations
and with the conviction that my experience is valid, coherent
and deserves attention, I will be speaking a new language.”

That is feminist language which Adrienne Rich speaks and wants other woman to speak.

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We have a visual reading of the poem here; in the whole poem we have many images and its starts from True enemy using acetylene to burn him and then see the whole universe and she refers to Subway in US. And then, we have images which are presented to as historically like Boticelli's, Kali's, and then we have this Chartres, and lastly, we have Thoreau. "Live the life you have imagined," Thoreau says, and it appears to be only for men, not for women that is why Rich wants to appropriate this kind of awareness for herself and for women in general.

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Poetry, Feminism, Phenomenology (SPD)

- **Poetry**: expression of emotion.
- **Feminism**: expression of emotion for & against wo(men)
- **Phenomenology**: a method of studying phenomena introduced by Edmund Husserl, a philosopher
- Rich's "The Phenomenology of Anger" has a rich semantic field of phenomenology: freedom, being, existence, world, man, phenomena, coexist, becoming, conscious act,
- Rich's object of study: the emotion of anger
- She identifies true love as a remedy
- Her true love is for women and children.
- **Rich** – a phenomenological feminist poet



We also have a special focus on this Phenomenological reading here, Poetry, Feminism and Phenomenology they have some kind of inter relationship, which we have attempted in this particular segment. Poetry is an expression of emotion. Feminism is also an expression of emotion for and against women and also men. Then what is Phenomenology? it is a philosophical method to study phenomena introduced by a philosopher called Edmund Husserl.

Rich's poem, "The Phenomenology of Anger" has a rich semantic field of Phenomenology. Referring to these words; freedom, being, existence, world, man, phenomena, coexist, becoming, conscious act. These words together contribute to the fact that this is a kind of phenomenological discourse. The object of study for Rich is the emotion of anger arising in a rebellious woman.

She identifies true love as a remedy after this kind of analysis and so she says, her true love is for women and children; that is what she understands after her analysis of the whole situation. After being married, after having three children and then interacting with the world at large by looking at this kind of phenomenological approach to this poem, we can say Adrienne Rich is a phenomenological feminist poet.

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Summary

- Historical and Literary Context
- Adrienne Rich
- Rich's Theory of Revisionism
- "The Phenomenology of Anger"
- Selections
- Analysis
- Feminist Consciousness Raising
- A Visual Reading
- A Phenomenological Reading



To give a summary of our discussion, we have looked into the Historical and Literary context of Adrienne Rich who became a rebellious poet after her broken marriage and went on writing about women's rights with her own theory of Revisionism to see things differently, to create a new tradition.

And then we read some extracts from this poem "The Phenomenology of Anger," analyse the poem rhetorically, linguistically and gave a feminist consciousness raising exercise in this context. And then, we also presented some pictures to convey how Rich is attempting to express her own thoughts and ideas about the world in general especially the status of women and children.

And finally, we attempted a Phenomenological reading using the semantic field of words like freedom, being, becoming, conscious, act and all that together, we put them together and related them to Edmund Husserl's phenomenology and understood that Rich was able to become a Phenomenological Feminist poet.

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References



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- Rich, Adrienne. 1972. "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," *College English*, 34 (1): 18-30.
- Spiegelman, Willard. 1975. "Voice of the Survivor: The Poetry of Adrienne Rich," *Southwest Review*, 60 (4): 370-388.



Here are some references, one of the articles I wrote about her long back which I have presented to you in this section Phenomenological Reading. Others, I hope you will get them and many others are there. You can read and enrich your understanding of Feminism and Adrienne Rich. Thank you.