

ANALYSING A POETRY READING BY

ADRIENNE RICH

See *Literature for Senior Students*, Chapter 4, Adaptations and transformations, p.131

Notes by Katy Marriner

This document provides an example of how a poetry reading can be analysed. Three poems by the American poet Adrienne Rich are discussed in order to show how their being read aloud impacts on their meaning. The texts used are Rich's *The Fact of a Doorframe* (Norton, 2002) and recordings of Rich reading her own poems. This discussion could form the basis of a response to Outcome 1, Unit 3 of VCE Literature (Adaptations and Transformations).

See Chapter 4 of *Literature for Senior Students* (Insight, 2006) for a wide-ranging discussion of the ways in which the adaptation or transformation of a text affects its meaning. In particular, see pp.130–1 of this chapter for a generic approach to analysing a poetry reading, including a model structure for the response.

The task

Listen to Adrienne Rich reading her poetry and discuss how meaning is enacted when the texts are read aloud.

Overview of the recording

The Voice of the Poet – Adrienne Rich (Random House, 2002) is one of a series of audiobooks featuring distinguished twentieth-century American poets reading their own work. The series acknowledges that poetry is meant not only to be read but also heard. *The Voice of a Poet – Adrienne Rich* provides a faithful account of each poem: it would probably be fair to say that meaning is not changed or compromised by Rich's readings of her poetry but rather made more apparent.

Through voicing the victimisation and anger experienced by women, Rich has rejuvenated the American tradition of political poetry and weakened the boundaries imposed by patriarchal definition. Rich's inspired poetry questions and challenges, while encouraging the audience to transform their existence. The readings reflect Rich's urgent desire to motivate changes within society, and intensify the ways in which her poetry challenges lives shaped by oppression and cultural norms. By giving her ideas a personality and voice, these readings make Rich's concerns seem more relevant, convincing and tangible to her audience.

The poems selected as a focus for this discussion are:

- ▶ 'Storm Warnings'
- ▶ 'Snapshots of a Daughter-in-law'
- ▶ 'Necessities of Life'.

Analyses of three poems

'Storm Warnings'

'Storm Warnings' challenges our natural instinct to reject rather than confront change. As the unsettled weather closes in, the persona is disturbed from the comfort of her 'pillowed chair' and forced to leave behind the imaginary world of her book. Observing the force of the wind from the closed windows of her home, she secures the house in an effort to protect herself from the tempest outside. Despite her actions she remains anxious, aware of the inevitability of change and conscious that there is little that she can do to avert it. Having closed the shutters and drawn the curtains, she is protected from the storm. Yet Rich's acknowledgment of 'the insistent whine' of 'the keyhole draught' establishes that the persona cannot completely isolate herself. Rich's shift from 'I' to 'we' in the third and fourth stanza of the poem is empowering, offering an honest admission that it is not unusual to fear change and feel besieged by life itself.

Given that we hear no criticism in Rich's voice, her reading of 'Storm Warnings' acknowledges the protagonist's apprehension of the approaching storm and the decision to barricade herself inside as reasonable reactions. Rich varies the pitch and volume of her voice during the reading, reflecting the changeability of life and

foregrounding her message that a ‘proof against the wind’ does not exist. Rich describes the ferocity of the storm by ominously stating it will come ‘regardless of prediction’, pausing between each word and effectively conveying the understanding that we cannot prevent change. The intense but balanced nature of the reading consolidates Rich’s desire to establish the fundamental concerns of individuals, particularly women, ‘who live in troubled regions’. Rich’s young, piping voice can be heard throughout this reading of one of her early lyrics.

‘Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law’

‘Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law’ was Rich’s first overtly feminist poem; it expresses her interest in resisting and rebelling both as a woman and as a poet. She writes of women whose gifts have been buried and aborted and whose very beings have been thwarted and silenced. The belle of Shreveport has denied her own potential by conforming to romantic feminine ideals and is now ‘moldering’ away like the remnants of her wedding cake. Her daughter ‘wipes the teaspoons’ nervously, agitated by what could be her destiny unless she ‘grows another way’. Corinna denies her own talents to sing the words and music of men. Rich expresses her regret that Corinna is seduced by images of beauty perpetrated by the patriarchal psyche. Yet, Rich also acknowledges women who refuse to conform. Emily Dickinson reads ‘while waiting for the iron to heat’ and writes ‘while the jellies boil and scum’. Then there is Mary Wollstonecraft who ignored attempts to distort and diminish her achievements and who challenged social conventions that undervalued the intelligence of women. Rich asserts that women should not settle for mediocrity and a world where ‘time is male’, articulating in the final snapshot of the poem a vision of a thinking woman who no longer ‘sleeps with monsters’.

Rich’s reading of ‘Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law’ is bitter and poignant as she offers listeners a snapshot of each woman’s story. She indulges in long pauses throughout the reading, suggesting indignation and seeking to convince the audience of the importance of initiating change in the name of women whose existence has been stifled by male-dominated convention. As the poem progresses and the women of each snapshot become more aware of both their oppression and potential, Rich speaks with growing confidence, hopeful of change. In the final stanza Rich

optimistically predicts a future ‘delivered, palpable, ours’, leaving listeners with a clear understanding of Rich’s anticipation of a society that does not oppress women.

‘Necessities of Life’

In ‘Necessities of Life’, Rich describes the process that she believes is integral for regenerating a strong sense of identity. While the ‘I’ of the poem can be identified with Rich, the poem is not openly autobiographical. The fragmented structure of the lyric mirrors the persona’s fragmented sense of self, while the untraditional form reflects the influence of Emily Dickinson, a poet whom Rich admires.

The print text of ‘Necessities of Life’ begins with the persona’s recollections of a period when she unconsciously accepted external definitions of self, eventually becoming so overwhelmed by the personalities and influence of others that she felt ‘wolfed almost to shreds’. The external world is presented as threatening and the persona withdraws from the world into a metaphorical cellar where she yearns to make herself ‘unappetizing. Scaly as a dry bulb’. From this crisis comes the persona’s repositioning of self. She begins the next stage of her journey to selfhood, determining ‘the bare necessities of her life’. The persona resorts to ‘brickmaking’ – an occupation that allows her to create a basic necessity of life. Here Rich expresses her belief that poetry should be useful to society. In the final lines of the poem, Rich imagines the persona’s future as an expansive self, resisting simple definitions as she once again ‘dare(s) to inhabit the world’.

In the reading of ‘Necessities of Life’, Rich’s initially anxious voice reveals the persona’s sense of dissatisfaction with their ‘blurred’ identity, and the consequent desire to regain the boundaries of self through isolation and reflection. Rich clearly and deliberately announces each stage using the words ‘First’, ‘Now’, ‘Till’ and ‘Soon’ to describe the process of transformation. Her anxious pronunciation of words like ‘swallowed’, ‘blurring’, ‘wolfed’ and ‘dead’ convey the persona’s sense of herself disappearing. Having made the decision to become ‘unappetising’, Rich speaks in a voice that seems to stem from a newly realised courage. Her voice remains deliberate and firm as she alerts listeners that the wait for self-acceptance is a long and taxing one requiring much ‘practice’. Yet there is also joy and reassurance as Rich asserts, ‘I have invitations’, revealing the persona’s satisfaction with all she has

discovered. The voice of the ageing but by no means less determined Rich inspires women to take control and effect change for themselves.

About the author

Katy Marriner BA, Dip. Ed. teaches at St Columba's College. She has taught VCE Literature and English and has presented revision lectures for Literature students as well as workshops for Literature teachers.