

Adrienne Rich

1929 - 2012

### **Early Life**

She was born in 1929 in Baltimore, MD.

Father – Arnold Rich – Dr. and Pathology Prof. at Johns Hopkins

Mother – Helen Jones – musician, pianist, gave up career to raise family

Adrienne received early encouragement from her parents. She was a “dutiful” daughter. She was educated at home with her younger sister Cynthia until 4<sup>th</sup> grade.

Her father was Jewish but had assimilated into Gentile society. She was never taught about her Jewish heritage, and resented her father for that. Yet she says she grew up in a home that was white and middle class..full of books, with a father who encouraged her to read and write.

But she also desired his approval, which led to an adversarial relationship. Early on she conformed to his standards. She attended Radcliffe, and graduated in 1951. She won the Yale Younger Poets Prize for her first book *A Change of World*. This book was very conventional. The famous poet W.H. Auden wrote the preface, which was later viewed as condescending and paternalistic.

In 1953 she married Alfred Conrad, a Harvard Economist. They moved to Cambridge, MA. From her ground breaking book *Of Woman Born*, she writes: “I have a very clear, keen memory of myself the day after I was married: I was sweeping a floor. Probably the floor did not really need to be swept; probably I simply did not know what else to do with myself. But as I swept that floor, I thought: ‘Now I am a woman. This is an age-old action, this is what women have always done.’ I felt I was bending to some ancient form, too ancient to question. This is what women have always done” (25). She gave birth to three sons in five years, which was an emotionally and artistically difficult period for her: “Two days before my first son was born, I broke out in a rash which was tentatively diagnosed as measles, and was admitted to a hospital for contagious diseases to await the onset of labor. I felt for the first time a great deal of conscious fear, and guilt toward my unborn child, for having ‘failed’ him with my body in this way....If during pregnancy I had felt in any vague command of my situation, I felt now totally dependent on my obstetrician, a huge, vigorous, paternal man, abounding with optimism and assurance, and given to pinching my cheek. I had gone through a healthy pregnancy, but as if tranquilized or sleep-walking. I had taken a sewing class in which I produced an unsightly and ill-cut maternity jacket which I never wore; I had made curtains for the baby’s room, collected baby clothes, blotted out as much as possible the woman I had been a few months earlier. My second book of poems was in press, but I had stopped writing poetry, and read little except household magazines and books on child-care. I felt myself perceived by the world simply as a

pregnant woman, and it seemed easier, less disturbing, to perceive myself so. After my child was born the ‘measles’ were diagnosed as an allergic reaction to pregnancy” (26).

**Before moving on to the next lecture, consider the price Adrienne pays for jumping through the hoops society prescribed for her; while she was permitted to attend college, unlike many of the women we studied previously, she wasn’t expected to do anything with the knowledge she gained. She came of age in the 1950s, and was expected to marry and have children. Do you think that the socially prescribed hoops have changed for women today?**

### **Adulthood**

In 1963 she published *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law*, a book that took her eight years to write. In this book there is a clear shift in her poetic development. Themes include boundaries, resistance, escape, and life altering choices. The critical reaction to the book was negative. She reacted to this criticism by feeling as if her voice was being denied. She next wrote *Necessities of Life* in 1966, focusing on death as the sign of how erased she felt.

The family moved to NY in 1966 when her husband took a teaching position at City College. She taught in a remedial English program for poor, minority and third world students entering college. Through this work she became drawn to the Civil Rights movement and feminism.

In 1969 she published *Leaflets*.

In 1970 she left her husband, and chose to leave the children with him. He subsequently committed suicide.

In 1971 she published *The will to Change*, and in 1973 she published *Diving into the Wreck*, a work that was accused of being too anti-male, but won the National Book Award. This book marks a progressive coming to power.: “to write directly and overtly as a woman, out of a woman’s body and experience.” Yet it was not overly confessional. In this work she is serving as more of a witness. She recognized that language could both liberate and entrap.

In 1976 she moved in with writer Michelle Cliff, 17 years her junior. They remained together until Rich’s death in 2012. Her children never blamed her for the death of their father, and were supportive of her relationship with Michelle Cliff. She credits honest, open communication with keeping her relationship with her children healthy.

### **Later Life**

In 1976 she published *Of Woman Born*, which also received negative criticism, as it was a strong indictment of the patriarchy.

She started writing it in 1972, because she realized that nothing was being written about motherhood as an issue. She wanted to examine motherhood in a social context, as embedded in

a political institution – in feminist terms. You will be reading just the first chapter out of this book, in which she examines the following issues:

- The guilt of wanting to get away from our children is unimaginable.
- She felt what she was going through was a burden to her husband.
- Men decided if she had valid reasons to have a tubal ligation!
- Poetry was where she lived as no one's mother – where she existed as herself.
- She felt she shouldn't have become a mother.
- Child care is still the individual responsibility of the individual woman.
- No one mentions the psychic crisis of bearing a first child.
- Motherhood is only one part of the female process – not an identity for all time.
- It is not enough to let our children go. We need selves to return to. We have to painfully learn what is believed comes naturally to us.
- She became dissociated from her present experience and from her reading, thinking, writing life.

As a poet and essayist Adrienne Rich was one of America's foremost public intellectuals. She was widely read and hugely influential, with a career that spanned seven decades: "Through over sixty years of public introspection and examination of society and self, Adrienne Rich...chronicled her journey in poetry and prose. 'I began as an American optimist,' she commented in *Credo of a Passionate Skeptic*, 'albeit a critical one, formed by our racial legacy and by the Vietnam War...I became an American Skeptic, not as to the long search for justice and dignity, which is part of all human history, but in the light of my nation's leading role in demoralizing and destabilizing that search, here at home and around the world. Perhaps just such a passionate skepticism, neither cynical nor nihilistic, is the ground for continuing'" (poetryfoundation.org).