

“Only now, under a powerful, womanly lens, I can decipher your suffering and deny no part of my own.” (Rich)

By Lauren Shea

She thinks she's on her way to freedom. She thought her strength would have to come from things of the past. She thought her father was someone she must overthrow. She thought her future could only follow one path. She thinks she can find strength in herself. She does not need to free herself from the past. She sees her father as a symbol of patriarchy. She knows she has choices.

So Adrienne Rich's *Sources* goes, showing the way in which her perspective is constantly shifting. Both Rich and Nietzsche in his *Genealogy of Morals* use their texts to illustrate a process, such as that of changing perspectives, in which they look back on previous conditions in order to discuss their present purpose. These processes are used to show that the life of an individual and the life of a society are processes in themselves, and an understanding of past events, past perspectives, and past meanings are essential to understanding their personal or societal current states of existence.

Nietzsche stresses that an objective mindset would be ideal in understanding the world and people over the course of time. However this ideal condition cannot exist. He warns philosophers to avoid using “such contradictory concepts as ... ‘knowledge in itself,’” for this would imply seeing with “an eye turned in no particular direction.” He says “there is *only* a perspective seeing, *only* a perspective ‘knowing’; and the *more* affects we allow to speak about one thing, the more complete our ‘concept’ of this thing, our ‘objectivity,’ be” (119). Therein lies the purpose of studying history, whether the history of a culture as Nietzsche discusses or of an individual as in Rich's poetry—it is not so much to learn from the mistakes of the past in

attempts to improve the future, but to gain an understanding and knowledge of different perspectives and different influences throughout time.

Thus, Nietzsche's essays are not entitled, "The Origins of Morality," nor is Rich's poem entitled, "The Source," for the origin of morals cannot be used alone to describe their present existence, nor can Rich use only one part of her past, of her origins to construct her own identity. Life, and history, must be looked at as a whole, as compositions of changes, as embodiments of the past and the present.

Nietzsche begins his *Genealogy* by describing how the concept of good was originally created by the nobles to describe their own actions, and "bad" was then used to describe those of the lower ranks of society. In response to the assertion of power by the nobles, the oppressed recreated the notion of "good," using it to describe themselves under the creation of a God who will reward them in an afterlife, and punish the strong. The strong, previously associated with "good," became the "evil" in accordance with the meaning of the word. This small part to the evolution of the meanings of the most basic moral concepts illustrates to the reader that words and their meanings should not be taken as absolutes, for they are constantly being reinterpreted and altered so that how a word came into being and how it is used now are not in the least synonymous.

While through Nietzsche's process of tracing the evolution of moral concepts he shows the ever-changing state of things, so does Rich's poem describe a quest through many different paths for her own identity to illustrate the ever-changing perspectives of humans on the forces of influence on their lives. Thus, it is essential for a person to consider not only the origins and background into which one was born, but all of the factors which have influenced the person one

is today. In the same way, the dismissal and denial of each aspect of one's personal history is a step away from that goal.

Sources focuses on Rich's own search for her own personal identity. In the context of the poem, she is journeying back to her childhood home for her father's funeral. In this return she had hoped to be able to bury her father's influences and begin a life of her own, a free life. She describes her journey home as one of freedom, "heading North where the Drinking Gourd / stood cold" (line 115-116) as if she were a slave like those in the South, journeying north to start their own independent lives.

Rich says, "I thought I was following a track of freedom / and for awhile I was" (line 118-119), implying that this journey did not turn out to be one of freedom, for it did not need to be. Nor did she need to "take what [her father] taught her and use it against him" (line 98-99) as she had previously planned to do as her revenge. Doing so would be detaching herself from a part of her past, not only hindering her quest for self-knowledge but actually following in her father's footsteps as well. She describes both her husband and father as "in a castle of air, the floating world of the assimilated" (line 99-100), alienating themselves from part of their culture, from their Jewish background and those associated with that culture; and both of them died in alienation. Though she was "raised as a son, taught ... not to pray" (line 96) by her father, and so "split at the root" (line 37) from a part of her background, she comes to realize that she does not need to accept this alienation.

In the end, Rich comes to recognize that life is a "connective link" (line 222), and one aspect of it cannot be separated from the next. However, the links are not linear; one's life is not predetermined, and the past is not a "desert absolute," a pre-determinant of the course life must inevitably follow. Life, rather, is a "series of choices" (line 387) building upon one's

foundations to create a unique individual path. “Dragged by the roots of her own will / into another scene of choices” (line 320-321) suggests that while Rich was described as being split at the roots in her youth, separated from her Jewish religion, she has reconnected herself with these roots which causes her to begin to live her life on her own, with her own choices.

A key element in the above line from the poem is “own will” (line 321). This will is a desire for control, a desire for the authority to decide for oneself, which is also an essential distinction discussed by Nietzsche in the differences between the strong and the weak. He describes the slave mentality as one of “reactivity” as contrasted with the “essence of life, its *will to power*” which is an ever-present quality in the strong (79). Thus, when Rich describes herself now as “powerful” (line 389), she is right. She has a will to power, “a mission... to change the laws of history” (line 311-312)—the laws which her father imposed on her, the laws which labeled women as the weaker sex and enslaved them under the men, the laws which implied these conditions could not be changed.

While Nietzsche states that the weak will always be weak and the strong will always be strong, even though society may be under the illusion that the weak have come into power, he also argues that things such as “a social custom” or “a political usage” (77) which are created by humans are constantly changing. Are the concepts of weak and strong and powerful and oppressed not part of a social custom or political uses in themselves? And if Nietzsche is illustrating the changes over the course of time in his text, then perhaps he has come to the conclusion throughout the creation of this genealogy that the irreversible, innate qualities of weak and strong are in fact not absolutes.

Thus, although some may argue that according to Nietzsche, Rich’s mission would be impossible to accomplish for the weak will always be weak, the opposite is in fact the case. Rich

is correct in saying that the “laws of history” that not only constricted her, but other women to be the subservient and weaker sex dependent on men, are not laws at all but truly, “simply, *what must change*” (line 147). This realization of the ability to overcome social conceptions of the past and to re-establish one’s present condition illustrates both Nietzsche’s and Rich’s views on time relationships. The present is not dependent on the past, and today’s society and personal lives should use the present to create this part of history now and not simply react to history past. For as Nietzsche says, reactivity is a trait of the weak, and so at the end of *Sources*, Rich is correct in calling herself “powerful” (389), acting to define her own identity and her own part of history despite her past.