

## Rich's "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law as Evidence of Feminist Philosophy

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In her essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," Adrienne Rich relates that writing her poem, "Snapshots of a Daughter-In-Law," was an "extraordinary relief" (175). "Until then," she writes, "I had tried very much *not* to identify myself as a female poet" (175). A casual reading of this work illuminates Rich's concern with feminist issues; however, the poem can only be clearly understood through familiarity with Rich's philosophy of societal structure. Comparing the poem "Snapshots of a Daughter-In-Law" with her essays "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision" and "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" allows the reader to trace Rich's views on the traditional role and limitations of women through her poetry.

Interpretation of Rich's poem can begin even in the title. Why does Rich choose a "daughter-in-law" as the focus of the poem rather than any of numerous other female roles? For example, the opposition between the young woman and her mother-in-law—emphasized by Rich's use of words such as "belle," "peachbud," and "fantasy" for the older woman in contrast with the "nervy" and "glowering" character of her daughter-in-law—presents an effective vehicle for comparing the status of women in their respective generations. However, this contrast could just as easily have been made in the context of any other inter-generational female relationship, such as between a mother and her own daughter. In representing generational disparity with a mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship, however, Rich establishes the connection between her women through their relations with men—namely, the son and husband. As Rich notes in her essay, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Experience," women have, according to the research of Kathleen Barry, consistently viewed interaction with other women as "a lesser form of relating on every level" than interaction with men (214). Through the example of a female relationship that is the product of interaction with men, Rich effectively demonstrates the magnitude of the male influence over the lives of and even the relations between women.

Though the masculine figures never explicitly enter the poem, it is the very nature of the relationship between female and male that establishes the theme of the poem—female slavery. Male domination begins, as Rich notes in her essay, with the mother-child bond—"maternal affection," she asserts, "is used to establish male right of sexual access, which, however, must ever after be held by force (or through control of consciousness)" (215). Both of the central women of "Snapshots" struggle under the weight of the male "control of consciousness." Rich's fictional mother-in-law has carried out a traditionally "feminine" existence, defining herself by her relationships with her husband (as evidenced by the reference to her mind "moldering like wedding-cake") and her son. From the observations that she "still has her dresses copied from that time" and that her mind is "crumbling to pieces under the knife-edge of mere fact," it is evident that this woman has neither the chance nor the ambition to escape from this existence. Her daughter-in-law, however, is acutely aware of the bonds that are keeping her chained to domestic tasks ("wiping the teaspoons") while the angels urge her to "save herself."

In the second stanza of “Snapshots,” Rich uses domestic metaphors to illuminate the torturous and slave-like aspect of what she terms in her essay “all enforced conditions under which women live subject to men” (212). The daughter-in-law has “let the tapstream scald her arm, a match burn to her thumbnail, or held her hand above the kettle’s snout right in the woolly steam,” and yet nothing hurts her anymore save the daily drudge (“each morning’s grit”) of playing the conventional role of the “woman.” For a “thinking woman,” as Rich notes, this menial labor is enough to cause nightmares (“sleeps with monsters”) and even, it may be implied from the poem, thoughts of death (“they are probably angels, since nothing hurts her anymore”). However, because the role of women is governed by social restrictions, the poem implies, in the line reading “the beak that grips her, she becomes,” that women are in fact keeping *themselves* trapped out of fear of alienation, although these restrictions have been dictated by men. To illustrate, in her essay, “Compulsory Heterosexuality,” Rich notes among the characteristics of male control their power to “confine [women] physically” and to “cramp their creativeness” through “restriction of female self-fulfillment to marriage and motherhood” (208). And even in speaking about compulsory heterosexuality, which forms the basis of this essay, Rich states that women are forced to sustain the accepted image of “womanhood” (namely one of servility, both sexual and social)—in effect, this role is not inherent, but must be “imposed, managed, organized, propagandized, and maintained by force” (216).

In “Snapshots,” Rich emphasizes this submission to convention by listing the contents of Nature’s “steamer-trunk of tempora and mores [times and customs].” The objects that are commonly *supposed* to represent femininity, such as flowers and “female pills” (indicative of menstruation and, consequently, motherhood), conspicuously hide the “terrible breasts of Boadicea,” representative of women’s real power and strength. When Rich begins to speak of the aspirations and limitations of the woman writer in the fourth verse-paragraph, she illustrates the “thinking” woman’s desire to reveal these underlying strengths. Rich describes the existence of the aspiring female writer with an intriguing play on the phrase “waiting for the iron to heat”—indicating both the domesticity of a woman’s existence as well as the anticipation of the right moment for women to be accepted as creative beings, as in the old adage “strike while the iron is hot.” Rich addresses male suppression of female creativity in detail in her essay, “When We Dead Awaken,” concluding that women are finally learning to address, in their creative efforts, their anger at and “furious awareness” of man’s power over them (168). Here Rich refutes Virginia Woolf’s opinion that anger is an impediment to complete expression in writing. In fact, Rich states, “it is...the woman’s sense of *herself* that gives the poetry its dynamic charge, its rhythms of struggle, need, will, and female energy” (168). These sentiments are also reflected in “Snapshots” with the lines “gifts no pure fruition, but a thorn, the prick filed sharp against a hint of scorn.”

Not only must the woman writer impart a sense of herself in her work, Rich says, but she must also have a unique style. “When to her lute Corinna sings,” Rich versifies, “neither words nor music are her own.” In “When We Dead Awaken,” Rich traces the path of her own life and her own search for “voice.” She relates that early in her career she constantly compared her own writing and that of other women poets to the work of the great masters—the male poets whose work she had read as an

undergraduate—because “I wanted women poets to be the equals of men, and to be equal was still confused with sounding the same” (171). Rich’s poetic Corinna has the talent to play the lute and to read the music, as a woman writer has the understanding of language; however, it was men who “perfected” the art of music, and Corinna, following in the footsteps of men, cannot call her music her own, just as a woman writer attempting to imitate the masters denies her own literary voice. The only inspiration allowed Corinna is her own soul, represented in the poem by her femininity, her body—“the long hair dipping over her cheek . . . the song of silk against her knees.” And, as Rich regrettably relates, even this is “adjusted in reflections of an eye,” understood to be the critical scrutiny of the male gaze.

As Rich illuminates in both the poem and her essays, men are fickle in their approbation of the “thinking” woman. While, as noted in “Compulsory Heterosexuality,” men often show support for a “token woman” by allowing her to be upwardly mobile socially, Rich qualifies in “When We Dead Awaken” that men will tolerate gifted women only “as long as our words and actions didn’t threaten their privilege of tolerating or rejecting us and our work according to *their* ideas of what a special woman ought to be” (170). In “Snapshots,” Rich demonstrates the calumny of men against one such “special” woman whose intelligence and ambition they find threatening—Mary Wollstonecraft, author of Thoughts on the Education of Daughters. Wollstonecraft “fought with what she partly understood,” namely the societal conventions that restricted the education of women, and she achieved much. However, for her accomplishments she faced the jealousy and, therefore, the scorn of men: “Few men about her would or could do more, hence she was labeled harpy, shrew, and whore.”

Rich even seems to imply, in the eighth verse-paragraph of “Snapshots,” that women might rather relinquish or at least downplay their art and ambitions than endure the criticism of men. Mediocrity seems to be the only means of pacifying the male critic, and this he “over-praises . . . every lapse forgiven.” Women who “cast too bold a shadow or smash the mold straight off” are immediately punished with, as Rich seemingly exaggerates, “solitary confinement, tear gas, attrition shelling.” Rich notes in “When We Dead Awaken” that women are forced to be conscious in their writing that they are directing their work toward a predominantly male audience, even when they are “supposed to be addressing women.” As a result, they must constantly judge their work by the standards of “convention and propriety” until the fear of violating these standards and facing the alienation of men becomes more important than what the woman herself has to relate (170). In “Snapshots of a Daughter-In-Law,” Rich notes that there are “few applicants” for the “honor” of becoming a martyr, or allowing her work to be martyred, as a result of male derision.

Through each of Rich’s “snapshots” runs a common thread—the power of men to suppress women, whether physically, intellectually, or emotionally. Rich said that she found this poem to be a relief to write because through this work she allowed herself to freely discuss such subjects—subjects that she had hitherto avoided out of apprehension; however, she also relates that the poem still depends too much on “authorities,” and she is still hesitant in the poem to identify herself with the daughter-in-law, the poetic “she.” Rich realizes this, perhaps subconsciously, in the poem itself—her ideal, independent woman, “her mind full to the wind . . . taking the light upon her,” is “long about her coming.” However, as Rich developed and began to identify herself as a woman writer,

she began to produce what she terms in the poem “cargo . . . delivered, palpable, ours,” in the form of such works as “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” and “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision.” In comparing “Snapshots of a Daughter-In-Law” to Rich’s philosophy as presented in these two essays, it is evident that Rich’s views on women and their subjection to men remained constant—the point of departure was the amount of freedom that she allowed herself to express these views. In “When We Dead Awaken,” Rich writes, “We all know women whose gifts are buried or aborted. Our struggles can have meaning and our privileges—however precarious under patriarchy—can be justified only if they can help to change the lives of women whose gifts—and whose very being—continue to be thwarted and silenced” (170). Rich’s “Snapshots of a Daughter-In-Law” was her own attempt to initiate these changes—in the name of the “daughter-in-law,” “thinking woman,” “Corinna,” and generations of others whose existence had been stifled by male-dominated convention.