English & Cultural Studies 1A03: Study Notes

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Adrienne Rich, "Diving into the Wreck" (1973)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c03sWpt62vw

Adrienne Rich (1929-2012) is among the most important poets to emerge in the latter half of the 20th century. She was a brilliant writer and feminist activist who influenced generations of thinkers, especially those thinkers who focus on the politics of gender and sexuality. What is "the politics of gender and sexuality"? Rich formed part of a much larger movement--whose origins go back at least as far as the end of the 18th century--that treats gender and sexuality not as an individual or private matter but as public, social, and cultural concern. Our gendered lives and our sexual lives are for Rich the site of enormous and sustained *normative* pressures, i.e., cultural norms or scripts or myths that administer and police our bodies by insisting that there are "healthy," "normal," and "right" ways of being gendered and having a sexuality . . . and "unhealthy," "abnormal," and "wrong" ways. Rich wrote powerfully *against* such norms which for her had no basis in fact. In particular, she was unusually frank about the struggle to reshape and reimagine what it means to be a woman. She became a central figure in the emergence of feminism as a political and ethical force in North America. In her essays, she carefully pointed out the weaknesses of what she famously called "compulsory heterosexuality," i.e., the unwritten laws or scripts or charters that insist that for a man "truly" to be a man he had to desire women, and for a woman "truly" to be a woman she had to desire men. To *resist* that compulsory script risked exclusion, violence, and even death. Rich instead saw that there were many more ways of being a human being than "compulsory heterosexuality" permitted or endorsed. "Compulsory heterosexuality" was, she argued, a withered "book of myths," and was the central reason why contemporary culture had wrecked itself. Men and women both drowned in the impoverished world of "compulsory heterosexuality," but women in particular suffered the most. So she characterized herself as a "woman in the kingdom of the fathers," i.e. as a woman forced to be answerable to the whims and desires of

men. Against that myth, she wrote essays and poems that affirmed women-centred experiences, knowledges, concerns, hopes and histories. She sought ways to honour the importance of the myriad relationships and communities that women forge with other women, including the relationships between present-day women and women that history had all but forgotten. Whether women enjoyed the company of other women, learning from them and working with them, or whether women loved other women, forging erotic relationships with them, didn't make much of a difference to Rich. *All* women-centred experiences fell somewhere along what she unabashedly called "the lesbian continuum," the unbroken and unbreakable thread joining the enormously varied lives of women, a thread running through history that deserved to be affirmed. In the volume of poems in which "Diving into the Wreck" was published, Rich described herself as "white acetylene" that might "burn away" some of the ruinous effects of a culture overwhelmingly dominated by male-centred experience.

The metaphor knitting "Diving into the Wreck" together is of course that of an undersea diver who seeks to explore a sunken ship and its contents. But this explorer voyages alone . . . at least for the first part of the dive. I say that because something strange happens to the "I" of the poem, *in* the poem and *because* of the poem. The speaker undergoes several transformations that we are invited to observe and contemplate. Tracking those transformations and how Rich captures them in poetry is a key to understanding the text at hand. In English, such a transformation is sometimes called a "sea-change," a phrase from Shakespeare's play, *The Tempest*, in which immersion in the ocean is associated with magical forms of alteration and the arrival of unexpected perspectives on human life. "Diving into the Wreck" is a poem about sea-changes, about the difficulties and the possibilities that come with these transformations.

The diver notes that she goes it alone: "I am having to do this / not like Cousteau," she says, but whether she dives without company out of necessity or out of choice remains unclear. What is clear is that she dives without men, here represented by the "assiduous team" of Cousteau's fellow divers.

(Jacques Cousteau was a French undersea explorer whose group of manly divers was the subject of a popular series of documentaries that aired on television from the 1960s to the 1980s. The casual heroism, intimate camaraderie and the beautiful bodies of the male divers, who lived and worked closely together on a ship, was a much a subject of the documentaries as the undersea worlds those

divers explored. Both the ship and the undersea worlds the divers explore were, it seemed, worlds without women.)

The poem begins with the diver gathering together and itemizing her equipment. There is a palpable deliberation about her preparations ("First" is the first word, after all), in sharp contrast to the dreaminess and uncertainty and open-endedness of large parts of the rest of the poem, where, in the depths, she encounters a world and has experiences for which, perhaps, no preparation is finally possible. We are reminded that the place where she is going is not a matter of having the right equipment but of having a strong imagination, a visionary's imagination to see things as they are, and the courage to use that imagination. But for now, at first, getting ready to dive means getting her equipment ready: "First having read the book of myths, / and loaded the camera / and checked the edge of the knife-blade." It's a curious list, which is made up of recognizable gear—flippers, knife, camera—and something harder to understand, namely "the book of myths." The poem will return to this book at its conclusion, tying the start of the text to its conclusion. Your task as a reader is to imagine what "the book of myths" entails: the vast history of scripts, charters, bans, stories, narratives, metaphors, and languages that determine on our behalf what masculinity and femininity mean, and what it means to embody these things. Whatever the "book of myths" is, it is as important as the rest of the equipment that the poem lists. It is something the diver must take with her if she is to survive. But it is not only the diver who will change as the poem unfurls. The book of myths too will undergo a transformation.

There is a very long tradition of poems pausing to itemize equipment. In classical antiquity, epic poems always included an "arming scene," a section of the poem that pauses to describe the male hero's weapons and his preparations for combat. You still see this sort of scene in action movies: the hero ritualistically selecting his weapons, putting on his armour, getting ready to do battle. But in this case, the poem's hero is a woman who seeks to explore a wreckage deep beneath the sea. She does battle, but not against a foe of the sort that you would see in epic poems. Not quite.

What is the wreckage below? Again, we are invited to consider the many possible meanings of the wreck into which the diver dives: the wreckage of countless women's lives drowned by a culture dominated by men, by their fears and desires and tribulations; the wreckage of contemporary civilization, riven by the war in Vietnam, which—by 1973--Rich saw, like so many Americans, as a debacle of wastefulness and death; the wreckage of an environment that is repeatedly assaulted in the name of progress. Rich, after all, was a feminist activist who, like many other activists, saw powerful links between militarism, environmental degradation, and the unjust treatment of women. Throughout her work, Rich argues that these catastrophes are all linked. "I want to connect the Vietnam war and the lover's bed," she wrote. A culture that idealizes certain violent forms of masculinity is a culture that also treats women and the environment as so much collateral damage. Rich tells us in this poem that the first step is to immerse oneself in the depths of that wreckage and to seek to understand how it happened, how it is happening. "I came to see the damage that was done," she says with determination.

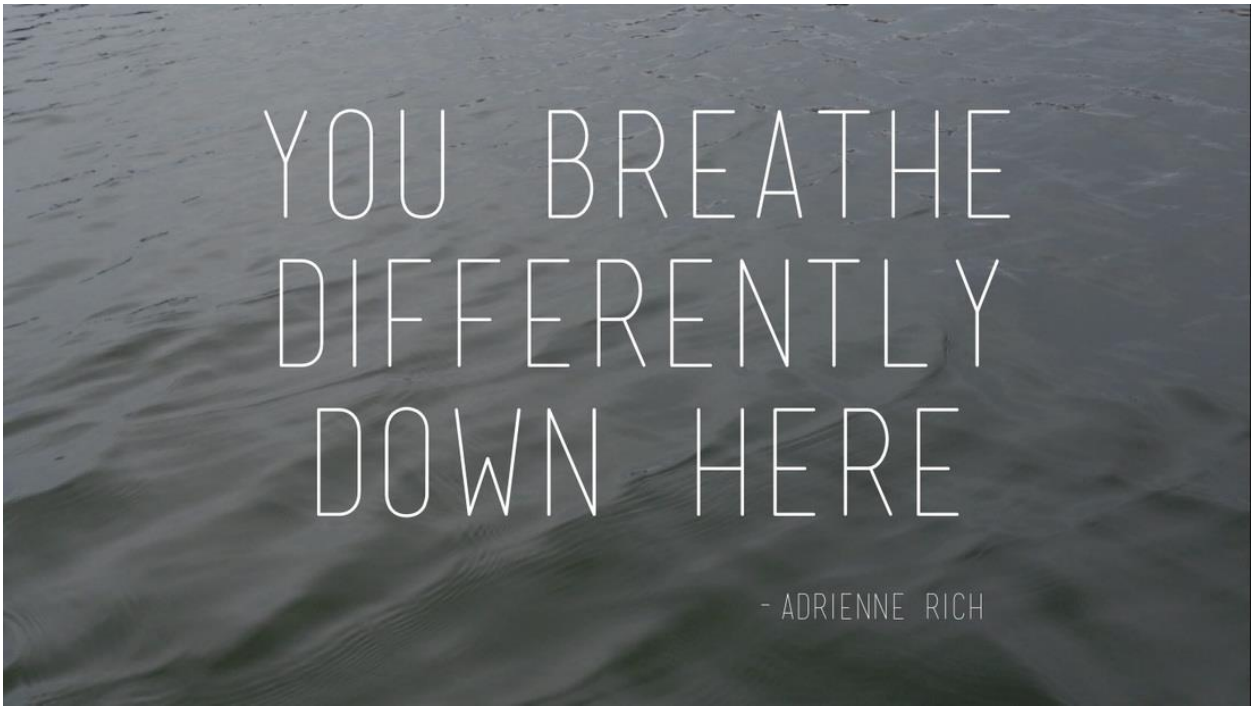
And so the diver dives, clambering first over the edge of the "sun-flooded schooner," using a ladder that usually hangs "innocently" over the side. To many, the speaker notes, the ladder is of no consequence. It

just blends into the background. But for some it means something else: "We know what it is for, / we who have used it." This is the first suggestion in the poem that the diver may dive alone, but she is not the only person to have undertaken this dangerous voyage. Understanding how to get into the depths, how to take the first steps towards descending to observe the wreckage, is not a mystery. The ladder, the path into the ocean, is there to be used. So why don't more people use it? Many choose not to see the ladder; but a few do, and Rich's speaker is one of those explorers. Many choose instead to loll about on the deck of the "sun-flooded schooner," pretending like the wreck never took place or that they aren't themselves involved in the catastrophe. Others, the ones the speaker knowingly calls "we," choose differently, moving past the surface to immerse themselves in the complexity of the depths. In different ways, every poet on this course makes an analogous decision. Each might have remained oblivious, basking in the sun; and yet each poet decided to see the ladder for what it is, gather the right equipment, and undertake the dangerous voyage. It helps that others have preceded them. It is strange to think that some will have no idea what it means to undertake this kind of task. But the surface is not all that there is to the world and poems have a unique power to make that fact both felt and known to those who have the eyes to see these things and the ears to hear of them.

The diver dives, the repeated phrase, "I go down," reminding us of extent of the descent. As she descends, the world takes on different hues. At a certain depth, she feels like she will lose consciousness. "I am blacking out," she says, but in the next breath she revives, and acknowledges that "my mask is powerful / it pumps my blood with power." Yet she no sooner affirms that her preparations enable her to fight back against the sea, and that in this contest, she is the one who "wins," then another and very different thought and feeling overtakes her. The poem quietly and unobtrusively shifts gears (it is interesting to note that poems sometimes do not call attention to these shifts). There is another way of living in the depths, one in which the diver is not at odds with the sea but somehow blended with it: "I have to learn alone / to turn my body without force / in the deep element." --Not to fight the sea, then, but somehow to move with it.

But that shift in perspective exposes the diver to a new possibility, one that is very attractive and yet in the end jettisoned because it is *only* attractive. Telling herself to stop resisting the depths is associated with a kind of amnesia: "And now: it is easy to forget / what I came for." Rich's speaker acknowledges the temptation to give up the exploration, its worries, its preparations, its unknowns, and instead to float about admiring the pretty view. She could have become that kind of poet, i.e. a poet luxuriating in the richness that language has to offer, creating poems brimming with gorgeous images and metaphors . . . but little else. Other great American poets, it seemed to her sometimes, had fallen prey to exactly that trap. Let's call them the "Beauty is truth" school of poetry. And isn't it easier to be a spectator of life rather than an explorer of its darknesses? And if you are superbly gifted with words, isn't it more lovely to create gorgeous abstractions then immerse yourself in ugly truths? This is a temptation, after all, that we also see Keats exploring. In Keats, the "marble men" and the "Queen Moon" are glorious to observe and to create as a poet . . . but they aren't real, finally. They are only steps towards the kind of poetry that Keats really wants and needs to write. The imagination can sometimes produce self-indulgently beautiful objects to enjoy and so, in effect, anaesthetize the artist. But this is to reduce the undersea world into which the diver has plunged to a scene in which what is most interesting are

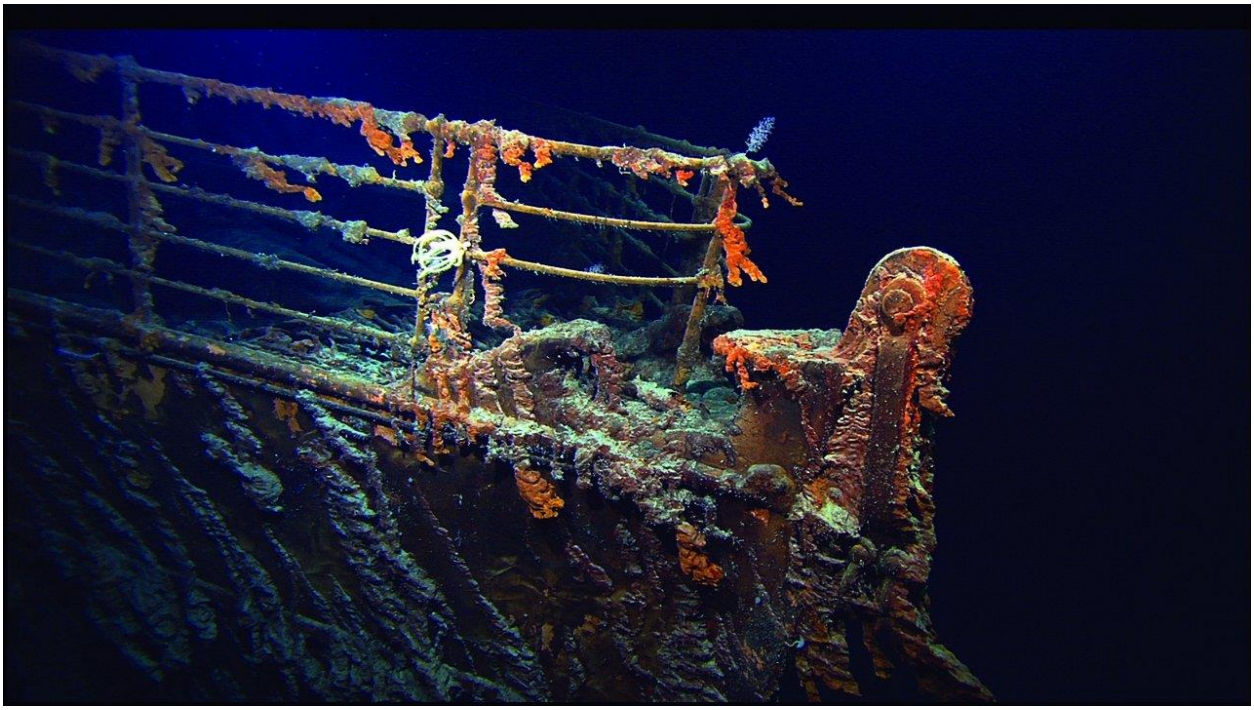
creatures “swaying their crenelated fans / between the reefs.” No one can blame the visionary for momentarily feeling attracted to such a scene, especially if you are exhausted by all the thinking and all the risks that come with wrestling rigorously with the book of myths. Rich is doing something very interesting here, turning our eyes to a danger that comes with writing poems or indeed writing literature: poems and literature can activate critical imaginations, to be sure, but these beautiful objects can also prettify the world, rendering problems and difficulties inert. Is art just a lovely object that you hang on a wall and admire for its beauty, or is art a living thing, designed to trouble you and electrify your critical imaginations? Great artists know that even they can feel the pull in the first direction. Keats feels it, and honours that potential distraction by holding a place open in his own poems for it. In the end, his poems, like Rich’s “Diving into the Wreck,” aren’t simply decorative, aren’t simply “crenellated fans” swaying beautifully in the currents; but it takes courage to acknowledge that the temptation to succumb to those beauties is always there for someone who, like a poet, works with beauty and creates beautiful things. Professors in the Humanities must wrestle with an analogous problem: do we teach our students to admire the pleasing objects of our study for their own sake or do we invite our students to let their critical imaginations be activated by these objects?



The diver catches herself, snaps to. “I came to explore the wreck,” she says, straightforwardly, reminding herself to get back on track. The words she uses as a poet could be used to create gorgeous things but inert things, a poem about the fascinating “fish” and “weeds.” But the diver knows better, knows what work her most important equipment, *language*, is there to do: “The words are purposes. / The words are maps.” She will use the extraordinary resources of language to explore the wreck, *not* make something lovely to look at that happens to be about the wreck. “I came to see the damage that

was done," she says, and then adds "and the treasures that prevail," suggesting that amid the damage, possibilities do remain. And it is at that precise moment that the light from her head-lamp illuminates something enormous in the depths, "something more permanent that fish or weed."

Whatever the wreck is, the diver says now, it is "the think I came for." Note the oppositions that the diver unfurls for us to consider here: what she comes for is "the wreck and not the story of the wreck," and "the thing itself and not the myth." What would it mean to see the wreck without all the layers of myths and stories that surround it, to see it nakedly, as it were? By the end of the poem, it isn't at all obvious that the poet sees the wreck and not the story of the wreck, grasps the thing itself and not the myth. It may not be possible to take the wreck in in this way. Rich acknowledges that a part of her *wishes* she could grasp the wreck in its entirety, to see it in the purest and most unfiltered form, but there is "a difference between what the heart desires and the mind knows" (to recall a phrase I learned from my mentor). In the struggle to understand the wreck, who can blame an explorer for feeling a strong desire to understand it fully and completely? Rich honours that desire in the poem, acknowledges that her diver can feel it strongly, without necessarily saying, finally, that it is a desire that can or even should be met.



Indeed, the poem takes a new direction here. Note that we don't in fact ever see "the thing itself." Instead, the poem turns *from* the momentary desire to grasp the wreck all at once *to* the diver who undergoes a sudden and radical transformation. She becomes both a "mermaid" and a "merman." "I am she: I am he," the diver says of herself. And as the diver shape-shifts, he/she/we somehow merge *with* the wreck . . . exactly the opposite of what the diver had declared was her firm objective only a few lines before, when she said she had come to see and understand "the thing itself." We know the diver is now blended into the wreck because of the way she/he describes herself/himself: "the water-eaten log / the

fouled compass." Like the wreck, something about the diver is now also wrecked and resembles the wreck.

Readers have often puzzled over this transformation of the diver in the poem. Rich appears to appeal to the ancient myth of the androgyne, a creature whose gender combines masculinity and femininity, male and female. When Rich wrote this poem in the 1970s, there was a renewed fascination with this story; some believed that the way to "solve" the problem of the pervasive inequalities characterizing a patriarchal society, a land of fathers that consistently treated women unequally, was to imagine a world that had in effect "abolished" or "neutralized" the differences between the sexes. But among the many problems with the myth of the androgyne is that dissolving the important differences characterizing human life into a fantasized "whole" *reduces* and *simplifies* that life. It is a myth that amounts to a dream of the complete cessation of political struggle and dialogue about sex and gender—a dream that suits those in power rather those without power. Rather than inviting us to imagine entirely *new* ways for a body to be sexed or gendered, the androgyne flirts with the idea that sexes and genders could be fused into a homogeneous whole. Now the myth isn't doomed to this possibility; there are instances in which androgyny has been a useful way to imagine an escape from normative understandings of gender. Was this the sort of gender and sexuality disruption that David Bowie was experimenting with at a certain moment in his career? But the myth can also be used as an alibi for the fusion or neutralization of gender. In other words, the myth of the androgyne can be deployed to foreclose the extraordinarily different ways human beings can and do live their embodied lives, lives that hardly fit into conventional understandings of "male" and "female," "masculine" or "feminine." If there is a future for human life, it doesn't lie in making us the same but, quite to the contrary, finding ways to affirm what makes us irreducibly different. (Another difficulty with the androgyne: What colour is an androgyne likely to be? Probably white. So that's going to be a big problem if you identify as a person of colour.) Only a few years after the publication of "Diving into the Wreck," Rich herself said that she had no interest in androgyny because the idea had "no shame" in it, meaning the concept was too easily marshalled to a "leap across the tasks and struggles of the here and now." Androgyny simply wished away what was most important to Rich, namely the struggle to affirm the distinctness of *women's* experiences, histories, writings, work, losses and hopes. Rich after all spent her life as a thinker, activist, and feminist emphasizing the importance of honouring a woman-centred life, a life dedicated to women loving women, women working with women, and recovering the often long-forgotten histories of women thinkers and writers. So the suggestion that the diver becomes both a man and a woman in the depths

surprised readers. But a close reading of the poem shows that Rich evokes this combination not in a simply idealistic way. The "we" made up of "I am she: I am he" is, after all, ruined: "we are the half-destroyed instruments," a mixture of "cowardice or courage." Whatever Rich imagines when her speaker says "I am she: I am he," the diver is now part of the wreck, no longer simply an explorer of the wreck. "We are, I am, you are," as she points out in the concluding stanza, al caught up in the wreck—again reminding us that it was never something to gawk at from a distance, as the speaker earlier suggested might be the case.

The concluding movement from "I" to "we" marks the moment when the diver's personal experience is firmly located in a wider political world, a world characterized by both the oppression of women and a long history of dissent against that oppression. Note that as the poem ends, we don't get a sense of what sank this ship. And there is no real indication of what the world might look like once free from the wreck. Indeed, Rich appears here to enmesh herself *in* the wreck, as if acknowledging that a woman-centred form of resistance can only take place amid the ruins of a patriarchal culture, not from some imagined "safe" vantage point. What we do see at the poem's conclusion is that, for now, she and we are both called upon to descend to the wreckage, again and again. That's one reason why the end of the poem returns us to the start of the poem. In the poem's last verses, we are brought back to the equipment that was so carefully enumerated as the poem began: knife, camera, and "a book of myths." When a poem returns to itself in this way, linking the beginning and the ending using the same words or images, that is called a *rondo*. But the *rondo* returns us to the beginning of the poem with a difference. Now we understand that the book of myths is hollowed out, lacking something centrally important: it is a book "in which / our names do not appear." Rich's "Diving into the Wreck" is a step towards ensuring that those names are never lost again.