# Aunt Jennifer's Tigers

## SUMMARY

Aunt Jennifer creates a needlepoint that shows tigers leaping across the canvas. Bright and vibrant, like topaz gems, the tigers live within the green world of the canvas. They are not afraid of the men standing underneath the tree, who are also depicted in the image. The tigers walk with certainty, shining and courageous.

Aunt Jennifer's fingers swiftly and delicately work the yarn, yet she finds it physically difficult to pull even a small needle made of ivory through the canvas. Her husband's wedding band feels huge, and weighs down heavily on her hand.

When Aunt Jennifer dies one day, her frightened hands will finally be still. Yet they will still be marked by the difficulties that ruled over her while she was alive. Meanwhile, the tigers she created will continue to leap across her needlepoint without shame or fear.

## THEMES

### MARRIAGE, GENDER, AND POWER

In "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers," a woman referred to only as Aunt Jennifer uses embroidery as a creative outlet while living (and ultimately dying) in an unhappy marriage. The poem describes the "terrified" Aunt Jennifer's fear-filled existence in a marriage full of "ordeals" in which she is ruled over by her husband, referred to simply as "Uncle." Published in 1951, a time when women were expected to get married (and divorce was frowned upon), the poem suggests that the power dynamic of a traditional heterosexual marriage oppresses women.

Aunt Jennifer is trapped in a difficult marriage with a man who terrifies her. Her fear is first hinted at by the contrasting imagery of the tigers in the tapestries she creates, which are unafraid of "the men beneath the tree." This could refer to hunters in a forest, out to kill the tigers. But the poem suggests that the tigers are well-equipped to take on these men and, as such, have no reason to be afraid—something that is certainly not the case with Aunt Jennifer herself.

The animals are also personified, described specifically as "chivalric." This is an old term often used to describe the moral code of knights and is used in modern times to refer to the courteous treatment of women. In likening the tigers' lack of fear to a "chivalric certainty," the poem thus ties their bravery and pride to *masculinity*. This, in turn, suggests that such carefree "pranc[ing]" is simply not possible for Aunt Jennifer, who is a woman living in a patriarchal world (that is, a world in which men hold most of the power).

Thus even as the tigers "do not fear the men beneath the tree," Aunt Jennifer is not just fearful but "terrified" of her husband, and this fear infuses every part of her life. In the second stanza, Aunt Jennifer's fingers are "fluttering," suggesting anxiety and nervousness. The hints of anxiety escalate until, in the third stanza, Aunt Jennifer's hands are described outright as "terrified."

The source of Aunt Jennifer's fear is clearly her marriage, which is presented as an oppressive institution within which she is trapped. The nervousness of Aunt Jennifer's hands is directly linked to the "massive weight of Uncle's wedding band," a symbolic representation of how stifling and burdensome this marriage feels. Aunt Jennifer's fingers are further portrayed as weak, finding "even the ivory needle hard to pull" against the weight of this ring. This reflects the oppressive nature of Aunt Jennifer's fear, which leaves her immobilized, meek, and unable to stand up to "Uncle."

The psychological weight of Aunt Jennifer's marriage stems from the dynamic inherent to traditional marriage, in which men dominate their wives. The ring is associated with "ordeals" that Aunt Jennifer "was mastered by." The use of "mastered" suggests her husband as the master. A "master" implicitly has a subject to dominate—a "slave." It's thus hinted that the Uncle/Aunt dynamic in the poem is one of Master/Slave.

The fact that it is "Uncle's" wedding band and not Aunt Jennifer's again affirms Uncle's dominance in this relationship. It is *his* wedding band, not her own, that weighs her down. Uncle owns the wedding band and, in a way, he also owns Aunt Jennifer. He is her master, reflecting the reality that a woman in marriage is traditionally considered the man's property.

In the early 1950s, a woman like Aunt Jennifer would have been expected to marry (a man) and stay home to take care of the household. Not only would divorce be considered socially unacceptable, but Aunt Jennifer would also have limited options to support herself financially outside of her marriage. Aunt Jennifer is thus trapped in her marriage, and her seemingly hopeless state is put into stark relief against the tigers' freedom.

**Where this theme appears in the poem:**

- Lines 1-12
- Lines 5-10

## CREATIVE EXPRESSION AND PERSONAL FREEDOM

The unnamed speaker of the poem describes the life of Aunt Jennifer, a woman who cannot escape her subservient role in her marriage. She also can't escape the marriage itself: written in 1951, the poem references a time where divorce was a social no-go. Hampered by her fear, the one form of escape Aunt Jennifer does have is through her creative work—crafting tapestry panels that show colorful scenes of bold and proud tigers. The poem argues that through her art (which will live on well after Aunt, Uncle, and the unhappy marriage are long gone) Aunt Jennifer finds an escape that not even death will grant her—a hint of freedom in the immortal nature of her work.

Aunt Jennifer turns to needlework as a creative outlet, a means of coping with her difficult marriage and escaping her oppressive everyday reality. The tapestry panels she crafts with her needle and wool show tigers "prancing, proud and unafraid." This mood contrasts sharply with the seemingly meek and scared character of Aunt Jennifer herself. While the tigers are walking confidently, Aunt Jennifer can barely pull the ivory needle through her wool, due to the weight of "Uncle's wedding band."

The speaker describes how Aunt Jennifer's marriage is an obstacle to her creativity, but the poem makes it clear that, at least in life, she continues her art nonetheless. The second stanza describes Aunt Jennifer as fearful and anxious, with "fluttering" fingers. But despite the "weight of Uncle's wedding band," she insists on creating, remaining resilient and perseverant.

The third stanza then describes Aunt Jennifer in death. Finally her hands "lie" still, highlighting that her days of needlework are over. However, they remain "ringed with ordeals she was mastered by," indicating that her marriage is still with her—perhaps literally, if she's buried wearing her wedding ring.

Although Aunt Jennifer can't escape, in life or death, the weight of her difficult marriage or her subservient role in it, her creative work remains a liberating force. Jennifer herself may not be free, but her tapestries and their tigers are. What's more, the tapestries will outlive Aunt Jennifer, Uncle, and their marriage, indicating that art can create an immortal kind of freedom that goes beyond human oppression.

The tigers exist in their very own universe, as "topaz denizens of a world of green." This is a plane of existence apart from the one Jennifer and Uncle share, and a world that is technically immortal, as the artwork is inanimate. When Aunt Jennifer is dead, "the tigers in the panel that she made / Will go on prancing, proud and unafraid."

In creating vibrant, colorful art that depicts proud and unafraid tigers—tigers who aren't afraid of men—Aunt Jennifer confronts her fear. While she may be stuck "ringed with ordeals" of her marriage (even after death), the tigers will remain free in their "world of green." Perhaps Aunt Jennifer finds comfort in this creative expression, crafting a bold tapestry that will outlive her and Uncle both, and that shows nature's creatures living wild and unafraid, liberated from man-made constraints like marriage.

**Where this theme appears in the poem:**

- Lines 1-12

# LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

## LINES 1-2

*Aunt Jennifer's tigers ...*
*... world of green.*

The poem opens with vibrant imagery describing the tigers pictured in Aunt Jennifer's craftwork. The reference to a "screen" in line 1 signals to the reader that these tigers are part of a tapestry or canvas—a hint that is confirmed in the second stanza, which describes the actual act of Aunt Jennifer's working with a needle and wool.

The words used to describe the tigers establishes them as bold and confident. They are "bright" and colored "topaz," a translucent yellow hue associated with the gem of the same name (topaz can also be a vivid blue in color, which would add a fantastical element to the tigers' appearance). Associating the tigers with a glittering precious stone gives them value. The use of the verb "prance" then suggests a light-hearted, proud, springing action; the wild cats don't simply walk, they stride proudly and with confidence.

The vivid imagery continues as the topaz tigers are set against a color-contrasting backdrop, "a world of green." This color suggests a natural setting, such as a forest, which the tigers are denizens—inhabitants—of. The use of consonance with the /z/ sounds in the phrase "topaz denizens" emphasizes this sense of belonging, asserting the animals as permanent residents in the world of green.

As the rest of the poem will make clear, this "world of green" is vastly different from the world that Aunt Jennifer inhabits: While the tigers roam freely in their green world—ironic, given that they are technically "trapped" in a tapestry screen—Aunt Jennifer is trapped in the world of her oppressive marriage.

The use of the possessive case with "Aunt Jennifer's tigers" reminds the reader that the tigers would not exist without Aunt Jennifer. She has made the "world of green" that these proud creatures prance through, putting her in the role of a God-like creator. Although the poem goes on to describe Aunt Jennifer as an anxious, "terrified" woman, these first three words serve to remind the reader of this meek woman's power—namely, the

power of creativity and creation. *She* has crafted the world of green that the tigers live in.

The first two lines of the poem also set up a rhyme scheme that will continue throughout, with the perfect end rhyme of "screen"/"green." The rest of the poem will uphold the use of rhyming couplets, presenting a rigid regularity that reflects the rigid confines of Aunt Jennifer's marriage. (This formalism will ultimately be disrupted in other ways, however, reflecting the subversive nature of Aunt Jennifer's handiwork.)

The speaker of the poem is not introduced in the first lines or at any other point in the poem. "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" is told from an anonymous outsider's point of view, describing Aunt Jennifer and her tapestries. Although the speaker can be presumed to be a relative, given that they use the terms "Aunt" and "Uncle," this is in no way confirmed at any point in the poem. No details about the speaker—not their gender, age, nor precise relationship to Aunt Jennifer—are ever revealed.

## LINES 3-4

*They do not ...*
*... sleek chivalric certainty.*

Lines 3 and 4 immerse the reader fully in the "world of green" that the tigers inhabit. There is zero mention of Aunt Jennifer here: the focus is entirely on the tigers. The lines' imagery continues to uphold a depiction of these creatures as brave and bold. They "pace," an active verb that suggests a measured, steady walk—the kind of walk that doesn't stop for anybody or anything.

The tigers' confidence is unmistakably clear in line 3: "They do not fear the men beneath the tree." The reader already knows that the tigers inhabit a "world of green," so the reference to "the tree" reaffirms that the tigers are depicted in a natural, forest-like setting. Given this context, the "men" may be hunters. Indeed, men would normally enter a forest in a group for the activity of hunting. They are thus positioned in *opposition* to the tigers: predator versus prey. While one might think that the tigers should be afraid—after all, they are being hunted—they remain confident. They are at home in their forest while the hunters are intruders.

Although the men beneath the tree may seek to kill the tigers, the animals are well-equipped to handle any threat that may come their way. The animals are personified—that is, given human traits—and specifically describes as having "chivalric certainty."

Chivalry is an old term used to refer to the code of conduct a medieval knight would adhere to. In a fairytale, for example, a knight's adherence to the code of chivalry would motivate him to rescue a damsel in distress. In modern times, the use of the term chivalrous or chivalric is still used to imply a gentleman who is courteous and considerate of women. The tigers are thus associated with heroic *men*—again differentiate them from the reality of Aunt Jennifer's life.

The use of rhyming couplets is continued in lines 3 and 4 with the end rhyme of "tree"/"certainty." The third line of this quatrain (four-line stanza) also uses assonance of the long /e/ sound, which echoes all the end rhymes of the stanza: "fear," "beneath," "sleek."

The final rhyming couplet of this stanza also presents a relatively strict adherence to iambic pentameter: Each line consists of five feet with an unstressed-stressed beat pattern (reading like da-DUM):

They do | not fear | the men | beneath | the tree;
They pace | in sleek | chival- | ric cer | tainty.

There are some variations, depending on how people read the words "chivalric" and "certainty," but in general the rhythm is strong, clear, and feels almost sing-song-like after the free verse of the previous two lines.

On a formal level, the poem feels neat and tidy right now. It's similar to a nursery rhyme. This simplistic style lulls readers into a false sense of security that makes the dawning realization of Aunt Jennifer's fear and pain all the more powerful.

## LINES 5-6

*Aunt Jennifer's fingers ...*
*... hard to pull.*

The second stanza disrupts the happy-go-lucky picture painted in the first. The focus shifts from the bold tigers to fearful Aunt Jennifer. The parallel between the first words of the stanzas puts this shift into clear focus: stanza 1 is about "Aunt Jennifer's tigers" (line 1) while stanza 2 is about "Aunt Jennifer's fingers" (line 5).

By pointing to Aunt Jennifer's fingers, the line foreshadows exactly what the second stanza addresses—Aunt Jennifer's marriage. The choice to refer to "fingers" calls to mind the idea of a *ring* finger. The second stanza's subsequent emphasis on the "wedding band," a symbol of marriage, will support this reading.

Lines 5 and 6 only set the scene for the depiction of Aunt Jennifer's marriage, however, and do not yet mention the topic directly. Line 5 simply introduces Aunt Jennifer as a nervous and fragile woman. The alliteration used to highlight her "fingers fluttering" creates a sense of nervous energy. The word "fluttering" is also used to describe a "fluttering" heartbeat, for example.

The imagery surrounding Aunt Jennifer's hands further supports her conception as a woman who is not only nervous but also weak. Even the weight of a small "ivory needle" is too much for her, as she finds it "hard to pull" through the wool of her tapestry/canvas.

To that end, the information in lines 5 and 6 clarifies Aunt Jennifer's craft: line 1 only provided a hint by referencing the "screen," but the reader now knows that Aunt Jennifer is working with a needle and wool—suggesting some sort of needlepoint or embroidery. Ironically, then, while engaging in a traditionally "female" pastime (needlepoint would usually be associated with sewing, historically a woman's task), Aunt Jennifer is creating a world that challenges the patriarchal system—a world in which free tigers roam, unafraid of men.

The abrupt transition in terms of imagery—from carefree tigers to anxious Aunt Jennifer—is reflected in the poem's form as well. The strict, smooth adherence to iambic pentameter in lines 3-4 is immediately challenged with line 5, which has added syllables that make the continuation of the rhythm impossible and leave the reader stumbling. The double stress at the start of "Aunt Jennifer's" itself is one stumbling block:

> Aunt Jennifer's fingers fluttering through her wool

Enjambment also breaks with the steady, measured pace of the first stanza. In lines 1 through 4, each line had some sort of concluding punctuation mark—a comma, period, semi-colon, and period, respectively. Line 5 breaks this pattern, resulting in a less measured pace of reading and spurring the reader from Aunt Jennifer's "finger fluttering through her wool" onwards to the next line. This mirrors the nervous energy being described, quickening the pace of the poem.

Meanwhile, the fact that Aunt Jennifer insists on continuing her craft despite the difficulty of pulling the needle speaks to her perseverance. Although she is afraid and lacking strength, she carries on with her creation. And while the word "fluttering" can connote nervousness, it also suggests that her fingers moved swiftly and lightly as she works on her needlepoint, implying a certain level of skill.

## LINES 7-8

> *The massive weight ...*
> *... Aunt Jennifer's hand.*

Lines 7 and 8 explicitly bring to light a primary theme of "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers": marriage, gender, and power. While lines 5 and 6 introduced in greater detail the nervous yet dedicated character of Aunt Jennifer, lines 7 and 8 reveal just *what* makes her so anxious: her marriage.

The hyperbolic reference to the "massive weight of Uncle's wedding band" in line 7 makes this clear. A wedding band would not be *that* heavy. This over-the-top description suggests that the "weight" of the ring is more mental than physical. The phrasing also calls to mind the idea of a "heavy" topic or the concept of having something "weigh on one's mind." It's now clear that the cause for Aunt Jennifer's nerves is the psychological weight of her marriage.

This is emphasized by the fact that the wedding band referred to is specifically *Uncle's*, not Aunt Jennifer's. The wedding band is a symbol not only the institution of marriage but also more specifically of the "possessive" nature of marriage. Historically, marriage was seen as a transfer of goods—a woman went from being dependent on her father to being dependent on her husband. The wedding band that "sits heavily upon Aunt Jennifer's hand" is thus a marker of her as a possession—Uncle's possession, since it is *his* wedding band that is weighing her down.

Aunt Jennifer's fear is more understandable when considering the poem's historical context. Written in 1951, "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" points to a time when a woman was expected to get married and be a homemaker. A woman like Aunt Jennifer would likely not have had the means to care for herself financially if she were to leave her husband. Plus, getting divorced could well leave her a social outsider.

Aunt Jennifer is *trapped* and thus relies on her handiwork as a creative outlet. This means of expression allows her to envision and create a "world of green" beyond the confines of male-controlled societal institutions like marriage. The reader thus gains understanding for Aunt Jennifer's creative perseverance and just how valuable her handiwork is to her.

The use of alliteration in line 7 reiterates the fact that Aunt Jennifer's marriage is a burden. The repeated /w/ sounds in "weight" and "wedding" band in line 7 directly align the marriage with something heavy and cumbersome.

The poem's use of end rhyme also continues in the second stanza, with "wool"/"pull" in lines 5 and 6, and "band"/"hand" in lines 7 and 8. This pattern of rhyming couplets is upheld throughout the entire poem. Although some formal rules—like the consistent use of iambic pentameter—are challenged, this one is not. The consistent rhyme reminds the reader that, any subversive actions aside, Aunt Jennifer remains within the confines of her marriage.

The use of enjambment to emphasize the weightiness of Uncle's wedding band underlines this fact. Line 7 introduces the object but then leaves the reader hanging by not offering a concluding verb at the end of the line—you simply have Uncle's wedding band, waiting to take action, looming over the end of the line:

> The massive weight of Uncle's wedding band
> Sits heavily ...

Line 8 then brings the ring, metaphorically, clunking *down* with its weight, as it "sits heavily." Breaking up this thought over two lines underlines the oppressive weight of the wedding band, which, again, symbolizes marriage more broadly.

## LINES 9-10

> *When Aunt is ...*

*... was mastered by.*

The final stanza of "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" continues the pattern of inserting a jarring, unexpected turn into the poem's narrative. Stanza 1 of the poem portrayed the confident and free tigers. Stanza 2 exhibits an abrupt shift in its portrayal of scared Aunt Jennifer as nervous and burdened by her marriage. Stanza 3 again presents a shocking turn, this time by jumping ahead to a theoretical future point in time "When Aunt is dead."

It's clear that this is a hypothetical situation that has not yet happened, thanks to the conditional use of "When" and the future tense "will lie." Still, the reference to Aunt Jennifer's inevitable death is surprising. Line 9 also shocks the reader with its reference to Aunt Jennifer's "terrified hands." The previous stanza presented a slowly escalating depiction of Aunt Jennifer's nervousness, hinting at her scared state primarily through descriptive imagery. However, line 9 definitively characterizes her as fearful with its reference to her "terrified hands."

The uncomfortable shift is emphasized by the use of caesura in line 9:

> When Aunt is dead, her terrified hands will lie

The first stanza of the poem offered some sort of concluding punctuation at the end of each line. The second stanza disrupted this regularity with the use of enjambment. In line 9, the line *itself* is interrupted for the first time in the poem, with a comma placed in the very middle of the line. This leaves the reader pausing over the word "dead," emphasizing the unexpected turn that has just occurred.

Lines 9 and 10 likewise make use of enjambment and wordplay. In death, Aunt Jennifer's hands finally "lie / Still." They are no longer creating and their nervous, fluttering energy is gone. Since her hands are at rest, the reader might think that, finally, Aunt Jennifer is at peace.

However, "Still" is granted two meanings here by the enjambment of these lines. It connotes not just calm/quiet/a lack of motion, but also essentially the opposite of all that: the idea that something is *ongoing* even in death. Her hands are "Still ringed with ordeals."

The metaphor "ringed with ordeals" shows that Aunt Jennifer has not escaped the burdens of her relationship. When something is "ringed" by another thing, it's surrounded, implying a lack of escape. Aunt Jennifer fails to escape her marriage: she never attains freedom but dies a married woman. She may even be buried in her wedding ring, symbolizing her ongoing subservience to Uncle, even after death—in this case, her hands are literally, not only metaphorically, "ringed with ordeals."

The concluding words of line 10 provide one final summation of Aunt Jennifer's relationship opposite Uncle: she was "mastered" not only by ordeals in her marriage but by *him*. The traditional marital power dynamic would equate the roles of man/woman with dichotomies like strong/weak, owner/owned, and—as suggested by this diction—master/slave. Uncle is the head of the household and he's not only in charge, he *owns* Aunt Jennifer in the same way a master would claim ownership of a slave. Again, compared to the more subtle depiction of Aunt Jennifer's oppressed state in the second stanza, such strong language and what it implies as far as Aunt and Uncle's relationship is quite shocking.

The punctation at the end of line 10, a period, makes it clear that this is a definitive conclusion. "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" doesn't leave the reader with any hope that Aunt Jennifer might "escape" the confines of married life. Aunt Jennifer will die as she lived—a married woman, a subject and slave to the whims of a man. She is trapped, making this outcome inevitable.

## LINES 11-12

*The tigers in ...*
*... proud and unafraid.*

The third stanza brings together the two main "characters" of the poem: Aunt Jennifer and the tigers. While stanza 1 was devoted primarily to a depiction of the tigers, stanza 2 was devoted to a depiction of Aunt Jennifer. Stanza 3 unites them, devoting the first two lines to terrified Aunt Jennifer and the second two lines to the wild animals.

This poetic symmetry places Aunt Jennifer and the tigers on an almost equal footing, as each "character" is given an equal amount of attention. The last lines of the poem make sure to emphasize that Aunt Jennifer is the *creator*, however, the one who envisioned and crafted the tigers and their world. The poem thus concludes by emphasizing that, through her creative work, Aunt Jennifer seizes some power in a world where she is otherwise dominated by patriarchal structures like marriage.

Lines 9 and 10 make it clear to the reader that Aunt Jennifer will not escape the terror of her marriage. Lines 11 and 12 leave the seemingly doomed world of Aunt Jennifer behind and bring the reader back to the brighter world of the tigers. The use of caesura in line 9 to call attention to the word "dead" speaks to an inevitability that neither Aunt Jennifer nor Uncle can escape—death. This sets the stage for a subsequent emphasis on the tigers' immortality in lines 11 and 12.

Since the tigers are inanimate, *they* can metaphorically "live" forever in their "world of green." The imagery of the last two lines of the poem emphasizes their ongoing freedom in this alternate universe, as the tigers are described as "prancing" and "proud and unafraid." The use of alliteration of /p/ sounds here emphasizes the bold nature of the tigers while also specifically linking them to the "panel" they inhabit—reminding the reader that these wild creatures are in fact just images in a tapestry, created by Aunt Jennifer.

The tigers are specifically contextualized as being "in the panel" in line 11 while line 12 points out that the animals "will go on." This phrasing speaks to the sustainable nature of a work of art, revealing another subversive aspect of Aunt Jennifer's tapestry crafting. Not only does she create images that show wild animals free from the influence of men or manmade concepts like marriage—she creates images that will *outlast* any man. An artwork like a tapestry panel will last beyond any man, woman, or marriage.

The phrase "that she made" again calls the reader's attention to the fact that Aunt Jennifer is the one who created this artwork, and reveals another major theme of the poem: creative expression and personal freedom. While she may not achieve emancipation in her personal life, Aunt Jennifer may take comfort in knowing that her tapestries depict lasting images of liberty.

The use of assonance in line 11 to echo the end rhyme of lines 9 and 10 drives this point home. The words "lie"/"by"/"tigers" are brought together with repetitive long /i/ sounds. While Aunt Jennifer will "lie" in the ground herself and remain mastered "by" her marriage, she is aligned with the "tigers" that she made, suggesting that they represent a sort of mental liberation for her. The images this fearful woman created, which may be superficially seen as "women's work" and a frivolous hobby, thus allowed her to take a small yet significant step, using her creative expression to achieve a small sense of personal freedom.

## SYMBOLS

### THE TIGERS

The tigers in the poem symbolize the freedom and confidence that seem unattainable to Aunt Jennifer in her real life. While the tigers are vibrant and bold, described with powerful, active verbs like "prance" and "pace," Aunt Jennifer is too weak to even handle her needle. While the tigers live freely in a beautiful "world of green," Aunt Jennifer is stuck being a homemaker. While the tigers "do not fear the men," Aunt Jennifer is scared of her own husband.

Aunt Jennifer's innermost desires for freedom—in a time when a woman requesting a divorce was likely extremely rare and certainly frowned upon—are thus expressed through the tigers. They are symbols of the liberated, joyous state of being that evades Aunt Jennifer.

The tigers represent not only a freedom from man-made constraints (like marriage) in the tangible world but also represent a unique freedom that no man or woman can hope to attain—that is, a freedom from *death* itself. The final lines emphasize that the tigers "will go on" even "When Aunt is dead." Since the tigers are inanimate, captured within a tapestry, they can theoretically exist forever. As a symbol of immortality, they highlight the fact that even men—who might try to rule the world through patriarchal institutions like marriage—are not all powerful. They are all fallible and none of them will exist forever.

**Where this symbol appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 1-4:** "Aunt Jennifer's tigers prance across a screen, / Bright topaz denizens of a world of green. / They do not fear the men beneath the tree; / They pace in sleek chivalric certainty."
- **Lines 11-12:** "The tigers in the panel that she made / Will go on prancing, proud and unafraid."

### THE TREE

The tree referenced in line 3 can be seen to symbolize one of two things. One reading of the tree can see it simply as a symbol for the natural world. This single tree is a small representation of the larger forest, the "world of green," that the tigers presumably inhabit. The "men" referred to might in this case be hunters. Positioning the men "beneath the tree" suggests a power hierarchy, namely that the natural world will always persevere over the machinations of men. Indeed, certain species of animals and trees live much longer than humans—and even a tiny creature like a cockroach can outlive conditions that a human cannot.

This reading ties in with the view of the tigers as a symbol of freedom from the mortal world: since the tigers are technically inanimate, captured as part of an artwork that literally cannot die, they will outlive Aunt Jennifer, Uncle, and any human institution like marriage.

Another reading of "the tree" is that it is a reference to *the* tree, as in, it is an allusion to the biblical Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. In Genesis, when Eve ate fruit from the tree at the urging of the serpent, the Fall of man resulted; human beings were cast out of paradise, and shame and sin were introduced into the world. Eve was subsequently marked as the "weaker" sex, since she gave into the serpent's temptations (while Adam did not).

At the same time, the biblical tree is associated with free will and deviation from a higher power. Thinking of the tree as a symbol for the Tree of Knowledge thus speaks to the theme of female subordination within traditional male/female relationships like marriage. Whereas in her real life Aunt Jennifer is treated as subservient to her husband, in the tapestry it is "men" who are "beneath"—subservient to—"the tree," and to the tigers that Jennifer has created.

**Where this symbol appears in the poem:**

- **Line 3:** "They do not fear the men beneath the tree"

### THE WEDDING BAND

The wedding band is a symbol of the institution of marriage and speaks to the poem's broader thematic ideas surrounding marriage, gender, and power. The depiction of the ring as burdensome speaks to the argument that the power dynamic of a traditional heterosexual marriage serves to oppress women.

The way that the band is described in lines 7 and 8 highlights this, as the band is described as sitting "heavily" on Aunt Jennifer's hand, as if it's weighing her down. It's also attributed with a "massive weight," a bit of hyperbole that confirms the reader's suspicion that it's not the *ring* itself that burdens Aunt Jennifer but what the ring represents—her marriage. The fact that it is *Uncle's* wedding band affirms this interpretation, making it clear that the man holds the power in the relationship, leaving Aunt Jennifer in the subservient role.

The reference to the symbol of the wedding band in lines 9 and 10 further supports this view. The phrase "ringed with ordeals she was mastered by" is a nod to the previously mentioned ring. The use of the word "mastered" in this instance again paints a picture of Aunt Jennifer as being in the subservient role, the "slave" to the "master" Uncle.

**Where this symbol appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 7-8:** "The massive weight of Uncle's wedding band / Sits heavily upon Aunt Jennifer's hand."
- **Lines 9-10:** "When Aunt is dead, her terrified hands will lie / Still ringed with ordeals she was mastered by."

## POETIC DEVICES

### PERSONIFICATION

The tigers are personified throughout the poem when they are described as being proud, confident, and unafraid of men. These qualities differentiate them from the fearful and timid Aunt Jennifer.

The most striking instance of personification, however, is when they are referred to as "chivalric." This term is traditionally associated with medieval knights, who were expected to adhere to a strict moral code known as chivalry. Such men might be described as chivalric or chivalrous. In modern usage, chivalry is typically used to describe courteous treatment toward women.

It's unusual to apply this term to an animal and in doing so, the poem associates the tigers with *male* figures. Their bravery and confidence is thus aligned with masculinity. That is, being certain and proud is directly linked to a specific idea of manhood.

This further highlights the contrast between the animals and Aunt Jennifer herself, the fearful woman depicted engaging in a traditionally female pastime of needlework. Stuck in a patriarchal institution (marriage) that dehumanizes her (by positioning her as an object to be owned) and oppresses her, Aunt Jennifer is unable to share the same pride and bravery of the tigers. She can't prance in the same carefree way that they do nor can she share their lack of fear in the face of men.

**Where Personification appears in the poem:**

- **Line 3:** "They do not fear the men beneath the tree;"
- **Line 4:** "They pace in sleek chivalric certainty."
- **Lines 11-12:** "The tigers in the panel that she made / Will go on prancing, proud and unafraid."

### IMAGERY

The imagery in "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" centers around two contrasting elements, which are seen throughout the entire poem: Aunt Jennifer's hands, and the tigers in the needlepoint she crafts. The vivid visual descriptions used to portray these two objects emphasize their differences, not only physically but also mentally.

The tigers are portrayed as vibrant, bold, and confident. They are described using powerful action verbs ("prance" and "pace"). Repeatedly, their courage is underscored using adjectives like "proud," "unafraid," and "chivalric." This last adjective aligns the tigers with knights, traditionally seen as brave men who would complete courageous feats like going into battle and rescuing damsels in distress.

When it comes to their relationship with men, the tigers are described opposite male figures in oppositional terms. The reference to "the men beneath the tree" suggests the men might be hunters in a forest, entering the tigers' "world of green"—perhaps with the intent of killing them. However, the poem specifies that the wild animals "do not fear the men."

This is a stark contrast to Aunt Jennifer, who is portrayed as being *very* fearful of her own husband. The imagery in the description of Aunt Jennifer affirms this. The visual of her "fingers fluttering" as she works on her needlepoint suggests a nervous, anxious energy. The fact that the weight of her husband's wedding band "sits heavily" upon her hand suggests a weakness, as does the fact that her hands find even a tiny needle "hard to pull" through soft wool. Finally, her hands are described explicitly as "terrified" in line 9.

Additionally, the imagery associated with Aunt Jennifer is completely devoid of color. The only reference to a hue is the "ivory needle," which would presumably be white—plain and lifeless. The tigers meanwhile are described as "bright" and "topaz," like a glittering gem. Even more color is infused into

their description with the mention of the "world of green" of the tapestry screen. While their world is full of color and light, Aunt Jennifer's world is bland, dark, and heavy. This imagery thus works to further emphasize the contrast between the tigers and Aunt Jennifer, and the two very different worlds they inhabit.

**Where Imagery appears in the poem:**

- Lines 1-4
- Lines 5-12

## HYPERBOLE

Lines 7-8 make use of hyperbole with the reference to the "massive weight of Uncle's wedding band," suggesting the small ring is *so* heavy that it "sits heavily" on Aunt Jennifer's hand. In reality, a wedding band is just a small ring, without any heavy gems or stones. However, in Aunt Jennifer's world, the ring is so hefty she finds "even the ivory needle hard to pull."

This exaggerated emphasis on the wedding band's volume suggests that it's not really a *physical* heaviness being referred to but a mental one. It's not an actual *ring* that is weighing Aunt Jennifer down but what that ring represents: her marriage.

The reference to something heavy weighing a person down also calls to mind turns of phrase like "having something weigh on one's mind," which suggests that a person is troubled by something. There is also the idea of "heavy" topic, meaning something serious and burdensome. The hyperbolic description thus aligns the weighty wedding band with emotional difficulty.

This figure of speech ultimately clarifies for the reader just why Aunt Jennifer is so fearful and nervous, and drives home the fact that she is not only in a difficult but an *oppressive* marriage. By referring to the symbolic wedding band, the phrase further hints at just what is so oppressive about this relationship: traditionally, marriage is a relationship that posits women as inferior, an object to be possessed and ruled over by a man—with a ring being a symbol that the woman is "taken" and already under ownership.

**Where Hyperbole appears in the poem:**

- **Line 6:** "Find even the ivory needle hard to pull."
- **Lines 7-8:** "The massive weight of Uncle's wedding band / Sits heavily upon Aunt Jennifer's hand."

## CONSONANCE

"Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" uses consonance consistently throughout, highlighting the constrained mastery of formal poetic elements. In other words, the sound of the poem is deliberate and controlled—much like Aunt Jennifer's needlepoint.

In the first line, for example, the repetition of sounds allows for a cohesive, lyrical reading that unifies almost every word. Consistent /n/ sounds are heard in "Aunt," "Jennifer," "prance," and "screen," while "Jennifer's" and "tigers" are connected by the /z/ sound at each word's conclusion. In the phrase "across a screen," the words "across" and "a" share the assonance of the /ah/ sound while "across" and "screen" share the /s/, /k/, and /r/ sounds. The reader is lulled by this lyrical flow of repeated sounds.

In other instances, consonance highlights key combinations of words. In the second line, the /z/ sounds in the phrase "topaz denizens" verbally present the tigers as a compact unit. By drawing attention to the word "denizen," the phrase asserts the animals' belonging in their "world of green." This adds to their sense of confidence and confirms to the reader that the tigers have nothing to fear.

Meanwhile, in the third stanza, there is an explosion of /d/ and /p/ sounds. The /d/ sounds highlight words that underscore the weighed-down existence of Aunt Jennifer: "dead," "terrified," "hands," "mastered," and "ordeals." Even the word "unafraid" at the end can be tied back to Aunt Jennifer—take off the prefix "un" at the start of the word and you have a description of the woman's everyday state—afraid. Meanwhile, the peppy /p/ sounds serve a contrast as they highlight the sprightly tigers in the "panel" where they go on "prancing, proud."

**Where Consonance appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "Aunt," "Jennifer's," "tigers," "prance," "across," "screen"
- **Line 2:** "topaz," "denizens," "green"
- **Line 4:** "pace," "sleek," "chivalric," "certainty"
- **Line 5:** "Jennifer's," "fingers," "fluttering"
- **Line 6:** "Find," "even," "ivory," "needle," "hard," "pull"
- **Line 7:** "weight," "wedding," "band"
- **Line 8:** "upon," "Aunt," "Jennifer's," "hand"
- **Line 9:** "dead," "terrified," "hands," "will," "lie"
- **Line 10:** "Still," "ringed," "ordeals," "mastered"
- **Line 11:** "panel," "made"
- **Line 12:** "prancing," "proud," "and," "unafraid"

## ASSONANCE

The poem's use of assonance generally adds to its lyricism and sense of melody. Assonance is often specifically used to complement the end rhymes of each couplet. For example, in the first stanza there is frequent assonance of the long /ee/ sound, which is in turn echoed by the end rhymes that conclude each line. Here's a closer look:

... across a scr**ee**n,
... a world of gr**ee**n.
They do not f**ea**r the men b**ea**neath the tr**ee**;
They pace in sl**ee**k chivalric certainty.

The stanza thus feels cohesive throughout.

Assonance also can link various words together. In the final stanza, for instance, the long /i/ sound ties Aunt Jennifer's "terrified hands" that "lie," still "mastered by" her husband, to the "tigers." The "panel that she made" is then linked via assonance to the fearless ("unafraid") "prancing" of the tigers by various /a/ sounds. This all underscores her role as a creator, and the power and freedom she has found through her needlework.

On a broader level, the consistent use of poetic devices such as assonance and consonance throughout the stanzas presents the poem as a measured, orderly unit—a poem that is "following the rules." The use of assonance and consonance adds to the impression that the poem is presenting a "proper" facade stylistically, allowing it to unveil shocking content (especially for the historical moment in which the poem was produced). Form and content thus work together to produce a subtly subversive artwork, much like Aunt Jennifer's tapestry.

**Where Assonance appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "screen"
- **Line 2:** "green"
- **Line 3:** "fear," "beneath," "tree"
- **Line 4:** "sleek," "certainty"
- **Line 5:** "wool"
- **Line 6:** "even," "needle," "pull"
- **Line 7:** "band"
- **Line 8:** "hand"
- **Line 9:** "terrified," "lie"
- **Line 10:** "by"
- **Line 11:** "tigers," "panel," "made"
- **Line 12:** "prancing," "unafraid"

## ALLITERATION

Alliteration functions in "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" in four distinct instances, always serving to bind together two to three words. Put together, these clusters of words actually offer a succinct summary of the entire poem.

In line 5, the /f/ sounds highlight Aunt Jennifer's "fingers fluttering"; the reader is introduced to the nervous woman. In line 7, alliteration of /w/ sounds emphasizes just *why* Aunt Jennifer is nervous—the "weight of Uncle's wedding band" is to blame. The alliteration in line 8 conveys how this weight sits "heavily" on Aunt Jennifer's "hand."

These pairings of words offer a skeletal means of setting the scene, summarizing the situation being described. The /h/ and /w/ sounds in particular have a sort of slowing effect, mirroring the burdensome nature of Aunt Jennifer's marriage. Reading lines 7 and 8 aloud, the reader is forced to slow down, as if they themselves were weighed down.

This is contrasted sharply by the alliteration in lines 11 and 12, which makes use of repetitive /p/ sounds. These short, staccato consonant sounds read much more quickly than a /w/ or /h/ sound. They are also easier to "spit out." Making a /p/ sound requires little more than a brief, explosive pursing of the lips; you barely have to open your mouth.

However, a /w/ sound requires you to stretch your mouth wider and takes longer to sound out, while the /h/ sounds of line 8 requires you to engage not only your lips, but the back of your throat to create the breath-like effect of a word like "heavily" or "hand." The alliteration of "prancing, proud" thus serves to support the portrayal of the tigers as light and unconcerned, not weighed down in the way Aunt Jennifer is.

The connection to the /p/ of "panel" in the preceding line, however, serves to remind the reader that these sprightly tigers are still part of a tapestry. Free as they may appear, they are inextricably part of this artwork—an artwork that Aunt Jennifer created. This combination of words, brought together through alliteration, is thus the final piece in the narrative that the alliterative terms weave. The "fingers fluttering," "weight"/"wedding," and "heavily"/"hand" set the scene, encapsulating Aunt Jennifer's fearful, burdened by marriage. The "panel"/"prancing"/"proud" then highlights her one means of escape, the creative outlet of tapestry where she crafts with confidence.

**Where Alliteration appears in the poem:**

- **Line 5:** "fingers," "fluttering"
- **Line 7:** "weight," "wedding"
- **Line 8:** "heavily," "hand"
- **Line 11:** "panel"
- **Line 12:** "prancing," "proud"

## ENJAMBMENT

In stanza 1, each line ends with some sort of punctuation; the whole stanza is very clearly end-stopped. This orderly format is thrown off in stanza 2 thanks to the use of enjambment. There is no punctuation at the end of line 5 and the reader immediately continues, without pause, to the next line:

> Aunt Jennifer's fingers fluttering through her wool
> Find even the ivory needle hard to pull.

In this instance, the enjambment works to push the reader forwards, quickening the pace of reading. The feeling is a mirror of Aunt Jennifer's own nervous energy, as seen in her "fingers fluttering."

In lines 7 and 8, enjambment serves to emphasize the weightiness of Uncle's wedding band. Line 7 concludes with the "band" but doesn't assign a verb to it, leaving it hovering at the end of the line:

The massive weight of Uncle's wedding band
Sits heavily upon Aunt Jennifer's hand.

The reader is thus spurred on to the next line, in which the ring comes clunking down (metaphorically speaking, that is) with the verb/adverb combination "sits heavily." The poetic technique thus again enhances the mood of the poem, giving the reader a feel for the burdensome weight of the ring and the marriage it represents.

In lines 9 and 10, enjambment allows for a word-play with the division of "lie" and "Still" across the two lines. Aunt's hands finally "lie / Still" and seem to be at rest. However, her hands are "Still ringed with ordeals." The double use of the single word "Still" in these two distinctive phrases—made possible with the use of enjambment—effectively serves to first build up and then dash the reader's hopes. For a brief moment, you might think that Aunt's hands are lying still, meaning she's at rest and at peace. Read on and you quickly learn this isn't the case, however.

In lines 11 and 12, enjambment again serves to quicken the pace and drive the reader energetically towards the poem's final conclusion. The somber world of Aunt Jennifer is left behind in the last two lines and the focus is brought back to the tigers and their sprightly, fast-moving world. However, these last lines also use enjambment in order to remind the reader that Aunt Jennifer, although she might not come across as such, does have a power—the power of creation. The words "she made" at the end of line 11 are the final mention of Aunt Jennifer herself, a reminder that *she made* the tigers and their "world of green." It's thanks to Aunt Jennifer that they "will go on."

**Where Enjambment appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 5-6:** "wool / Find"
- **Lines 7-8:** "band / Sits"
- **Lines 9-10:** "lie / Still"
- **Lines 11-12:** "made / Will"

## CAESURA

In the first stanza of "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers," the end of each line is perfectly punctuated. This formal rigidity starts to unravel in stanza 2, thanks to the use of enjambment at the ends of lines 5 and 7. Stanza 3 continues this use of enjambment and takes it a step further, adding two notable instances of caesura, further interrupting the poem's previous adherence to a smooth rhythm.

In line 9, a comma is set between the words "dead" and "her." This leaves the reader stuck, momentarily, on the word "dead." The caesura thus adds to the shocking twist introduced by the final quatrain—the idea that Aunt Jennifer will *never* escape her marriage and ultimately die just as she lived, burdened by a patriarchal system. The surprising shift in terms of the poem's content is emphasized by the caesura; it's as if the comma gives the reader a chance to gasp in surprise.

In line 12, a comma is set between the words "prancing" and "proud." Here, the reader pauses on another unexpected thought: the idea that the tigers will continue, sprightly as ever, after Aunt Jennifer's death. The alliteration here, however, keeps the reader from hovering too long on the word "prancing" and drives the reader onwards, energetically, to the end of the line.

When seen in parallel, these moments of caesura also offer a very brief overview of the poem's two main "characters," Aunt Jennifer and the tigers. In line 9, the reader's attention is called to the concept of dead Aunt Jennifer. In line 12, the reader's attention is called to the tigers that go on prancing (technically forever, since they are inanimate and can't die, making them immortal in a way). The caesura thus functions as a sort of conclusive note, underscoring the ultimate fate of Aunt Jennifer and her tigers.

**Where Caesura appears in the poem:**

- **Line 9:** "dead, her"
- **Line 12:** "prancing, proud"

## ALLUSION

One reading of "the men beneath the tree" could see this as referring to hunters in a forest. The reader already knows that the tigers inhabit a "world of green," suggesting a natural setting like a forest. The mention of the tree affirms this assumption, and would thus suggest to the reader that the men under are the tree are hunters, positioning them in opposition to the tigers.

Another reading of "the tree" suggests a biblical allusion. The words specify *the* tree, implying a very particular one—specifically, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. In the biblical Book of Genesis, Eve is tempted by a serpent to eat from this tree, resulting in the Fall of Man; human beings are cast out of the paradise of Eden, and sin is introduced to the world.

This biblical incident can be seen as woman's first subordination, a moment in which Eve was relegated as being "less than" a man (since she is the one who gives in to temptation in the story). In this case, the tigers might be viewed not necessarily as being in opposition to "the men" but living with them in harmony. They represent the natural world before the Fall, a time of harmony and peace in the Garden of Eden—when there would have been no reason for creatures to fear one another. Only after Eve takes the apple does this harmony come crashing down.

Alternatively, by placing the men "beneath the tree," perhaps

this allusion is suggesting that the tigers created by Aunt Jennifer are more powerful than, or dominant over, these men. Since the tigers are Aunt Jennifer's creation, perhaps this suggests the way that she asserts power within this created world, becoming God, in a way through her stereotypically "feminine" craft. The men, meanwhile, remain subordinate—to Aunt Jennifer's creation, and to the "tree" itself, perhaps suggesting their lack of knowledge and free will.

**Where Allusion appears in the poem:**

- **Line 3:** "They do not fear the men beneath the tree;"

## METAPHOR

The metaphor "ringed with ordeals" in line 10 serves as a reminder of the fact that Aunt Jennifer is trapped in her burdensome marriage. The "ordeals" point to the bitter experiences of marriage to a domineering man. The word "ringed" can mean encircled, suggesting that Aunt Jennifer was surrounded by these ordeals in a way that left her unable to escape, even in death.

The word "ringed" also brings the reader back to the idea of an actual ring—namely Uncle's wedding band, previously referred to in line 7. The ring itself is a representation of marriage and the burdens that this patriarchal arrangement has subjected Aunt Jennifer to. The fact that Aunt Jennifer's hands are still "ringed" when she is dead drives home the fact that the unequal power dynamic of a traditional marriage can't be avoided, even after death. Take, for instance, the fact that some people are buried in their wedding rings—which may well have been true in Aunt Jennifer's case—or the fact that married couples will often have burial plots alongside one another. Even a woman's tombstone might traditionally include an inscription that defines her in relationship to the man in her life, including a line such as "wife of X" and "mother of Y."

**Where Metaphor appears in the poem:**

- **Line 10:** "ringed with ordeals"

## VOCABULARY

**Prance/Prancing** (Line 1, Line 12) - A verb indicating a springing, bounding movement. When an animal prances, it leaps off of its hind legs. Prancing can also be equated with strutting or walking in a confident, joyous, spirited manner.

**Screen** (Line 1) - In this context, the "screen" being referred to is a tapestry screen or canvas that Aunt Jennifer is using to create her needlepoint or embroidery. Tapestry more generally is a style of textile art, usually woven by hand. It consists of a heavy cloth, usually rectangular, embroidered with colorful designs or scenes. These are often hung on walls for decoration. The "screen" the tigers prance across is this rectangular cloth or canvas.

**Topaz** (Line 2) - A gem, usually translucent yellow or blue in color. A topaz might more specifically refer to a yellow sapphire or yellow quartz.

**Denizens** (Line 2) - Inhabitants. The tigers are residents of the "world of green."

**The tree** (Line 3) - In the context of the poem, "the tree" might simply refer to a depiction of an actual tree in Aunt Jennifer's tapestry. This confirms the image of the tigers being in some sort of forest-like natural setting in their "world of green."An alternative reading might see "the tree"—because the poem specifies *the* tree, implying a specific tree—as a biblical allusion to the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil from the tale of Adam and Eve.

**Chivalric** (Line 4) - A term often used to describe the moral code of medieval knights. Today, a man who is honorable and courteous, especially when it comes to his treatment of women, might be described as chivalrous.

**Ivory** (Line 6) - A hard white substance found in the tusks of elephants, rhinos, and other animals. It was once commonly used to make ornaments, jewelry, and other objects (like needles). Today, the ivory trade is largely banned in the interests of animal preservation. The term "ivory" can also serve as an adjective, referring to an ivory (white) color.

**Wedding band** (Line 7) - A ring exchanged during the traditional American wedding ceremony. Historically, a man would propose to a woman with an engagement ring. When the two were subsequently married, they would exchange rings—the wedding bands—in the wedding ceremony. These bands are usually plain silver or gold, without any gems or other adornments. They represent the bond of marriage. Both a husband and wife generally wear a wedding band (unlike an engagement ring, which is normally only worn by the wife-to-be).

**Ringed** (Line 10) - An adjective indicating that something is encircled, marked, or surrounded, as if with a ring. A small town encircled by mountains could be described as ringed by mountains.

**Ordeals** (Line 10) - Extremely tough experiences, tests, or trials. Running a marathon on two hours of sleep would be an ordeal, for example. Historically, an "ordeal" referred to a primitive means of justice in which a person's guilt or innocence was determined by subjecting them to painful tests, for instance in the form of fire, poison, or similar danger. The result of the test was seen to be a sort of divine or supernatural judgement.

**Panel** (Line 11) - The "panel" here refers to the tapestry/canvas/cloth that Aunt Jennifer is creating through her needlework or embroidery. A tapestry panel would refer to a

single "screen," which would depict one scene or image—such as prancing tigers. Historically, multiple tapestry panels might be displayed together to tell a longer story, each panel depicting a single scene of the narrative. So-called "narrative embroidery" is also seen in traditional quilts, for example, where each square tells one part of the story.

## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

"Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" does not adhere to any set poetic form (such as a sonnet). However, it does have a distinct order and regularity to it. The poem consists of three quatrains (four-line stanzas). The lines are similar in length with no abrupt endings or transitions.

Additionally, each quatrain consists of two rhyming couplets. What's more, the second rhyming couplet of the first and final quatrain is written using iambic pentameter (more on this in "Meter"). The orderly form is thus complemented by regularity in terms of rhyme and rhythm. This makes for a seemingly restrained and ordered poem, reflecting the constraints of Aunt Jennifer's marriage within a rigid patriarchal system. While the form, rhyme, and rhythm may seem to conform to some standard rules of poetry, however, the poem's content strikes a subversive note.

The stanzas or organized in a way that highlights the contrast between the bold, brave tigers and fear-filled Aunt Jennifer. The first stanza is devoted solely to a description of the tigers. They are "bright" and "chivalric," and full of action as they "prance" and "pace." They "do not fear the men beneath the tree." The second stanza focuses on Aunt Jennifer herself, painting a bleak and colorless picture of a nervous woman with "fluttering" fingers that are so weak, they find "even the ivory needle hard to pull." This contrast is then brought to a head in the third and final stanza, which devotes the first two lines to "terrified" Aunt Jennifer and the last two lines to the "prancing" tigers.

### METER

"Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" does not adhere 100% to a specific meter but does make notable use of iambic pentameter, a rhythm consisting of five poetic feet in a da-DUM rhythm. The final two lines of the first stanza offer one instance of almost perfect, rhyming iambic pentameter (making these lines something called a heroic couplet):

> They do | not fear | the men | beneath | the tree;
> They pace | in sleek | chival- | ric cer- | tainty.

There are variations here—the third foot of the second line is a trochee (stressed-unstressed), and the final syllable might be marked as unstressed, depending on the reader (as in, "certainty"). Overall, though, the rhythm is very regular compared to the free verse that begins the poem. but it This precise pattern is again seen in the final two lines of the final stanza:

> The ti- | gers in | the pan- | el that | she made
> Will go | on pran- | cing, proud | and un- | afraid.

Not all of the poem's lines offer such a clipped, clear, rhythm, however. This suggests a subversive note that reflects the subversive message of the poem. Just as the poem criticizes the traditional patriarchal structure of marriage, the poem casts doubt on traditional poetic structures with its inconsistent use if iambic pentameter. Alternatively, the fact that the four lines talking about the tigers' fearless motion fall into such precise rhythm might reflect the confidence of their movement and Aunt Jennifer's control over her creation.

### RHYME SCHEME

Each of the four-line stanzas is comprised of two rhyming couplets. The overall rhyme scheme is therefore: AABBCCDDEEFF.

This rhyme scheme might seem simplistic, as it's the type of easily identifiable structure that readers would see in a nursery rhyme. Take "Humpty Dumpty," for example: "Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall, / Humpty Dumpty had a great fall."

However, Rich subverts the expectation that such a "neat" and "easy" rhyme scheme will be accompanied by equally simplistic content. Far from superficial, "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" highlights the problematic elements of traditional marriage and the unequal power dynamics it promotes. The rhyme scheme might lull readers into a false sense of familiarity and security that makes the revelation of Aunt Jennifer's oppression all the more powerful.

## SPEAKER

The speaker in "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" is anonymous. It can be assumed that the speaker is a niece or nephew of Aunt Jennifer's. However, this is not actually suggested in any way other than the fact that Jennifer is referred to as "Aunt Jennifer." The speaker's actual relationship to Aunt Jennifer—as well as any defining details like gender or age—is ultimately unknown.

The speaker casts a critical eye at Aunt Jennifer's marriage and the institution of marriage in general. The speaker paints a picture of Aunt Jennifer as being afraid and oppressed in her marriage. The speaker highlights Aunt Jennifer's creative outlet as her only freedom from a marriage she can't seem to escape. While Aunt Jennifer's craftwork may offer her some solace and a sense of escapism, in the speaker's view Aunt

Jennifer remains permanently weighed down by her marriage, even after death.

Although there is no suggestion that the speaker represents Adrienne Rich herself, parallels can be seen between Rich's views on marriage and those of the speaker. In *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-1985*, Rich wrote, "No woman is really an insider in the institutions fathered by masculine consciousness." Commenting on marriage more explicitly in a private letter penned in 1970, Rich wrote, "Think of all that any bright, attractive, vital women invests in bourgeois marriage, in her husband and family. Her independence and autonomy are postponed or resigned altogether; her own spirit is almost continually being asked to take second place to the needs, the will, even the passing moods, of her man."

Rich may also identify on some level with Aunt Jennifer herself. Like Aunt Jennifer, Rich was a creative woman—she just created poems instead of tapestries. Rich was also married for nearly two decades before her husband died by suicide.

## SETTING

There is no setting specified in "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" and the poem does not offer any hints as to where it might be contextualized. The most the reader can surmise is that Aunt Jennifer is living in a society where a traditional heterosexual concept of marriage (one man and one woman) dominates. Given that the poem's author, Adrienne Rich, was living in the United States at the time of the poem's publication in 1951, the reader can infer the setting to be 1950s America. This contextualization would fit the speaker's depiction of marriage and affirm the portrayal of Aunt Jennifer as being "trapped" in her marriage, since opportunities for a woman to gain self-sufficiency outside of her marriage would have been limited at this time.

## CONTEXT

### LITERARY CONTEXT

"Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" was part of Adrienne Rich's first book of poems, *A Change of World*. Published in 1951, the collection was selected by W. H. Auden for the Yale Series of Younger Poets prize that same year. The volume was precise and restrained, both in terms of form and content. Her later work was more radical in both respects. A critic for the *New York Times Book Review* described Rich in her early career as a "polite copyist of Yeats and Auden" and describes her transition in the 1970s and '80s to a "newly-defined female literature"

Rich's early works were influenced largely by English romantic poets like John Keats. Rich's work became less formal over time and her later works were almost exclusively written in free verse. In terms of content, the poem's exploration of power dynamics in male/female relationships hints at Rich's later turn towards more overtly political poetry. Along with friends such as Audre Lorde and June Jordan, Rich eventually helped lead a generation of female and LGBTQ poets whose work challenged patriarchal, racist, and homophobic power structures in America and beyond. Rich won the National Book Award for Poetry in 1974 for her collection *Diving into the Wreck*, whose title poem explores women's erasure from cultural narratives. Rich accepted the award alongside Lorde and Alice Walker, on behalf of all women "whose voices have gone and still go unheard in a patriarchal world."

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

At the time that "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" was written, in 1951, it would have been unusual and unlikely for a woman to seek a divorce. Women were still relegated primarily to the role of "homemaker" and had fewer opportunities available to them in terms of education and profession than they do today. The concept of a woman being trapped in a marriage, reliant on a husband who would provide for her financially, was thus not far-fetched at this time.

Rich—who was married for almost two decades until her husband died by suicide in 1970—came to be a vocal critic of the institution of marriage. She herself ended up finding a longtime partner in Michelle Cliff, a Jamaican-American writer. In the 1980 essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," Rich wrote:

> Women have married because it was necessary, in order to survive economically, in order to have children who would not suffer economic deprivation or social ostracism, in order to remain respectable, in order to do what was expected of women because coming out of 'abnormal' childhoods they wanted to feel 'normal,' and because heterosexual romance has been represented as the great female adventure, duty, and fulfillment.

As both a writer and activist, Adrienne Rich eventually became a leading voice in what is now known as second-wave feminism (or "women's liberation," the term she preferred). Second-wave feminism extended from the 1960s through the 1980s and sought to redress a wide range of social injustices. Where first-wave feminism had largely focused on women's suffrage, the second wave centered on issues such as reproductive freedom, workplace opportunity and equality, and legal protections against sexual harassment and domestic violence. Its advocates opposed the belief (widespread in post-World War II America) that a woman's proper place was in the home, keeping house, raising children, and supporting men's ambitions.

## MORE RESOURCES

### EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Biography of Adrienne Rich — Learn more about the poem's author. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/adrienne-rich)
- The National Book Award Ceremony — Read the speech given by Adrienne Rich upon her acceptance of the 1974 National Book Award for Poetry. She wrote it with Alice Walker and Audre Lorde, the other two feminist poets nominated that year. The three women wrote had agreed to accept the prize together if any one of them won. (https://wordsofwomen.com/audre-lorde-adrienne-rich-and-alice-walkers-speech-at-the-national-book-award-ceremony-will-make-you-cry/)
- A History of Marriage — Learn about the history of marriage as traditionally configured in societies in which women are dependent on men in the family hierarchy. (https://www.britannica.com/topic/family-law/Marriage#ref794353)
- A "Feminist Awakening" — Learn about Adrienne Rich's "feminist awakening," as seen through previously unpublished letters. (https://newrepublic.com/article/132117/adrienne-richs-feminist-awakening)
- Adrienne Rich's Obituary — Adrienne Rich died in 2012 at age 82. Read her obituary, including career highlights. (https://www.latimes.com/local/obituaries/la-me-adrienne-rich-20120329-story.html)

### LITCHARTS ON OTHER ADRIENNE RICH POEMS

- Amends
- Diving into the Wreck
- Living in Sin

## HOW TO CITE

### MLA

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