Diving into the Wreck

SUMMARY

Before putting on my diving equipment, I read the book of stories about the wreck. I got my camera ready and made sure my knife was sharp. Then I put on my black rubber diving suit, flippers, and the cumbersome mask. I am alone—the complete opposite of Jacques Cousteau, the famous diver who always had a big team around on his boat.

There is ladder leading down to the water, hanging off the side of the boat innocently enough. Those of us who have used the ladder know what it's for, but some just ignore it completely—as though it were some kind of rubbish floating on the water.

I start my descent down the ladder. Even after going down many rungs, I am still surrounded by daylight and the clear air of the world above the surface. My flippers make going down the ladder awkward, and I feel like a bug as I continue to descend. No one is around to tell me when I will make contact with the water.

The air around me changes from shades of blue, to green, and then black. I think for a moment that I'm going to pass out, but my oxygen mask is strong and it fills my blood with its strength. The sea is a kind of story in itself, though, and uncovering its truths has nothing to do with strength. I have to teach myself to move gently under the water.

I have to remind myself why I'm down here. It's easy to get distracted, looking all the creatures swimming around between the reefs. This underwater world moves at a totally different pace.

I'm here to explore the shipwreck. Words have helped show me the way, giving me directions and a sense of purpose. I came to bear witness to both the wreck's damage and to the treasures it still holds. I shine my flashlight on the side of the ship, which will outlive the fish and weeds that surround it.

I came to see the wreck first-hand; I won't be satisfied with the old stories or myths about it. I see a drowned face staring up towards the surface of the water. I look at the damage done to the wreck by the salt and currents, which has given it a strange kind of beauty. I see the beams of sunken ship's frame, which curve upward like a rib cage and defend the wreck from the hesitant creatures that haunt it.

Down here, I become both mermaid and merman—with dark flowing hair and a strong shell. We move around the ship in silence, and then dive inside. I am both the male and female figure whose drowned face stares towards the surface, whose breasts still feel the pressure of the water, whose abandoned treasures lie half-hidden in barrels and left to decay. We are the defunct tools of navigation that once showed the way, the soggy logbook and the ruined compass.

We, I, you—all of us have, whether through shame or bravery, made it back to this place. And we all carry a knife, camera, and the book of myths—which doesn't mention us at all.

THEMES

WOMEN'S OPPRESSION AND ERASURE

The poem can be read as an extended metaphor about the historical oppression and erasure of women. Rich often wrote about such issues, and though a feminist perspective isn't stated explicitly in "Diving into the Wreck," this context certainly enriches the reader's experience of the poem. Specifically, the poem seems to focus on the need for women to examine and learn from the "wreck" of the past, to "see the damage that was done" to them, and, ultimately, to forge ahead with new ways of existing and asserting that existence in an oppressive world.

The speaker has read the "book of myths" that tell tall tales about the wreck, but has found these myths inadequate. Interpreting the poem through a feminist lens, these myths represent the old-fashioned ideas about how women are meant *to* behave. They are the historical narratives that have shaped gender roles, and thus which have pushed women onto the sidelines of society.

The book of myths is a relic of a male-dominated world, however, and the speaker is deeply suspicious of it. This pushes the speaker into the water, metaphorically into an exploration of women's overlooked history. The speaker is alone and the ocean is deep, underscoring the daunting nature of such an undertaking as well as just how deeply entrenched reductive ideas about gender are, how far back into the past they go and thus how deep the speaker must dive in order to go beyond them. The speaker takes a camera on the dive to document things firsthand, plus a knife—suggesting that questioning accepted ideas about men and women is dangerous.

Upon reaching the wreck, the speaker appreciates its "damage," but also its "threadbare beauty," "the ribs of the disaster" as well as the "treasures" contained within. This suggests that there are beautiful stories to be told here, yet they have been "left to rot" at the bottom of the ocean. It is the diver's job to find and document them (hence the camera, and hence this poem).

The speaker then further claims to be both female and female, both a mermaid and merman. This suggests that the speaker can no longer be contained by narrow ideas of femininity or

masculinity, and it also perhaps extends the poem's reach to include queer people—insisting that they too have been erased from and damaged by the patriarchal march of history. Indeed, in the poem's final line, the speaker reveals that "our names" do not appear in the book of myths at all. The poem thus becomes a powerful statement on the erasure of women's voices—and, importantly, a call for those stories that don't normally get heard to be amplified, understood, and valued.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-21
- Lines 29-33
- Lines 37-43
- Lines 52-70
- Lines 71-94

EXPLORATION, VULNERABILITY, AND DISCOVERY

"Diving into the Wreck" follows a diver through the preparation and execution of a dive deep into the ocean in order to see to a shipwreck. It's clear early on, though, that this isn't just a poem about literal diving. The poem can be read as being specifically about diving into the metaphorical "wreck" of the speaker's own life, but it also doesn't need to be taken so narrowly. Indeed, the dive can be thought of as an extended metaphor for exploration in general. The poem examines what it takes to venture into the unknown—whether that unknown be physical, psychological, or both—and suggests the bravery and vulnerability required for meaningful discovery.

The speaker prepares for the dive by putting on "the body-armor of black rubber," "the absurd flippers," and "the grave and awkward mask." The diving uniform at once suggests that this journey is akin to going into battle (hence the need for armor) yet that it's also a little silly. This evokes the simultaneous excitement and fear that comes with exploring the unknown, as well as the need for a mixture of courage and vulnerability when doing so. The speaker has to be willing to adequately prepare for potential danger, and also has to be okay with looking and/or feeling a little ridiculous.

Similarly, the speaker acknowledges before this dive that a difficult task lies ahead, one full of uncertainty and risk. The poem thus isn't about pretending not to be afraid, and instead seems to recognize the fear and unease that accompany diving into the unknown.

Indeed, though the speaker has resolved to explore the wreck, the poem also implies that the speaker doesn't *have* to. The ladder that leads down into the ocean "is always there / hanging innocently," and the speaker suggests ladder is both a gateway into a new world and a kind of meaningless object ("maritime floss") depending on who is looking at it. To potentially discover something meaningful, it's up to the explorer to put themselves out there—to take that first step into the deep.

What's more, no one can help the speaker, who is totally alone on this journey—a fact that again suggests the vulnerability required for meaningful exploration and discovery. Yet even if exploration brings with it all kinds of dangers, the explorer might discover "treasures" and "beauty" too. Exploration brings about first-hand experience and understanding, what the speaker calls "the wreck and not the story of the wreck / the thing itself and not the myth." For the speaker, the willingness to bravely explore this underwater world brings great reward.

Subtly, then, the poem asserts the importance of exploration and discovery, and suggests that embracing the unknown and the difficulties that come with doing so ultimately brings a deeper and richer understanding of whatever is being explored. Part of the poem's power is that this could apply to almost anything. The poem could be read as an extended metaphor for diving into the depths of one's subconscious mind, for example, or for confronting a past trauma. No single interpretation of the poem is definitive, but they all share an emphasis on the value of exploration, the power of discovery, and the bravery of vulnerability.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 4-7
- Lines 8-12
- Lines 13-21
- Lines 22-33
- Lines 44-51
- Lines 52-60
- Lines 61-70
- Lines 71-77
- Lines 87-94

STORYTELLING AND TRUTHS

"Diving into the Wreck" is concerned with storytelling. The poem implicitly asks *who* gets to tell *what* stories and *why*. On the one hand, the poem seems to suggest that myths—epic tales that often shape or define a society—should be deeply investigated rather than taken at face value. This might refer to broad cultural myths (such as those about how men and women are supposed to behave), as well as to personal and familial myths—the stories people insist made them who they are.

The poem also seems to argue that there are many stories that still need telling, that have been left out of this mythology altogether. Overall, then, the poem perhaps suggests that people shouldn't just settle for the usual narratives of the day, and that they should strive to make their own stories heard—and, indeed, listen to those stories and perspectives they have yet to hear.

The speaker prepares for the dive by reading "the book of myths," loading a camera, and sharpening a knife. These, of course, aren't the usual tools used in a dive, but function instead as symbols. A camera is a recording device, suggesting the speaker wants to document the wreck (and thus tell a new story of it), while a knife suggests a willingness to be ruthless in the pursuit of truth. The knife also suggests that pursuing such truth can be dangerous. Maybe this is because that truth would unravel the myths that uphold society itself; maybe it's because that truth would simply be painful to confront.

The "book of myths," meanwhile, seems to be some sort of book filled with tales about the wreck. When the speaker later says that words are "purposes" and "maps," this suggests that stories can provide a sort of guidance and impetus to see something, but it's not the same as actually seeing the thing itself. What's more, this book leaves a lot of people out of its stories. The dive allows the speaker to experience the wreck firsthand, to go beyond the "book of myths" to the truth of things.

The poem isn't *against* myths or storytelling. Indeed, the mention of "the sea" as a "story" marks out stories as something fundamental to the human experience (as constant and powerful as the natural world in which humans live). But it seems to make the point that stories can be used in markedly different ways—they can *reveal* truth, but they can also *distort* truth over time, just as the "salt and sway" have "damage[d]" the literally wreck beneath the sea.

That's why the speaker draws a clear distinction between the "story of the wreck" and "the thing itself." Stories are such an important part of human existence, but they don't always represent reality—they are instead a way of describing, considering, and interacting with that reality. (The same can be said for the poem, in fact, which is a story about a dive rather than a dive itself!) What's more, the stories and myths central to human existence change all the time—think about how people used to think the Earth was the center of the universe—and so analyzing stories, questioning accepted wisdom, and delving deeper the search for truth serve an important function for humanity.

In the end, it's revealed that the speaker doesn't actually appear in the "book of myths" at all. The poem thus argues that not only are these "myths" separate from truth, but that they also are incomplete. Many stories have yet to be told. The poem encourages readers to "dive into" these tales, to uncover what the myths that have shaped them are leaving out.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-3
- Lines 37-43
- Lines 52-70
- Lines 72-73
- Lines 78-82
- Lines 87-94

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-7

First having read ...
... and awkward mask.

The poem opens with a list of the speaker's preparations for the dive "into the wreck." In preparation the speaker has "read the book of myths," which immediately signals that the poem is probably not mainly concerned with actual diving.

The word "myths" is important. Myths are stories, often those that explain the origin of something (think of creation myths, for example). To say that something is a myth also means that it's not based in fact, and instead is a false belief. As such, this "book of myths" would be a book of familiar stories about the wreck—but stories that nonetheless aren't necessarily the *truth*.

The "wreck" itself in turn might represent any number of things. Perhaps this "wreck" refers, metaphorically, to some trauma in the speaker's past (on that note, many critics read the poem as having been influenced by the earlier disintegration of Rich's marriage and death of her ex-husband by suicide). Or perhaps the "wreck" is a metaphor for the oppression of women throughout history.

The specifics are deliberately ambiguous and open to interpretation. What's important is that, if the wreck is read as a metaphor for the past (the speaker's, society's, or otherwise), then the poem is already signalling a need to *understand* that past in order to go beyond it. The speaker seems concerned with a kind of truth-telling detective work, absorbing the stories of the past as *part* of the project to better understand the wreck—that is, to better some traumatic incident from the past that has gone on to shape the present.

The speaker has done other things to prepare too, such as loading a camera. This camera perhaps symbolizes an intention to record and catalog the truth the speaker finds, while the knife-blade and "body-armor of black rubber" suggest that there is something inherently dangerous about the journey the speaker is planning to undertake. Maybe these dangers are personal—the speaker will have to grapple with inner demons to face the truth of some traumatic incident—or maybe they're societal; if the poem is taken as a metaphor for women's liberation, then perhaps the weapon here indicates the way that challenging societal norms can be a perilous task.

Lines 4-7 are then a little more conventional in terms of diving equipment—black rubber suits, flippers, and masks are all important tools in actual diving. The anaphora (with the

repetition of "the") shows the methodical way in which the speaker goes through each stage of the preparation, while the enjambment suddenly speeds up the lines:

> I put on
> the body-armor of black rubber
> the absurd flippers
> the grave ...

This speed suggests the speaker's eagerness to get on with these more mundane preparations, which apparently make the speaker feel a bit silly. The speaker says these flippers are "absurd" and the mask is "grave and awkward," reinforcing the difficulty of the task ahead—but also the speaker's discomfort; after all, most people look a bit ridiculous in full scuba gear!

LINES 8-12

I am having ...
... but here alone.

Lines 8-12 contrast the speaker's dive with those of the most famous diver of all time, Frenchman Jacques Cousteau. Cousteau was a 20th-century legend, and a pioneer of deepwater exploration. But whereas Cousteau had an attentive team of experts around him—not to mention the latest equipment—the speaker is making the dive in this poem completely alone (supporting the idea that the poem has little to do with actual diving!).

The Cousteau allusion is a much more idyllic image than the speaker's solitary dive, the "sun-flooded schooner" (boat) suggesting an almost heavenly experience. The allusion might also make the speaker's discomfort in the previous lines make more sense; the speaker isn't an experienced diver with a supportive team, but rather a regular person undertaking this difficult task alone.

It's tempting to read the loneliness of the dive as a metaphor for Rich's ventures into her subconscious mind, explorations intended to retrieve poetic "treasure" that furthers the cause of women's liberation (and tells the story of being a woman better than the "book of myths" ever could).

These lines are also full of /s/ consonance (a.k.a. sibilance):

> I am having to do this
> not like Cousteau with his
> assiduous team
> aboard the sun-flooded schooner

The /s/ sound is suggestive of the poem's watery setting, helping establish the atmosphere prior to the speaker's dive—with waves making sibilant sounds on the water's surface and in their breaking against the boat.

LINES 13-21

There is a ...
... some sundry equipment.

In the poem's second stanza, the focus moves from the speaker's equipment to the ladder on the side of the boat (at the bottom of which the ocean awaits). Such ladders are common, and they're what divers may use to lower themselves into the water.

This is an important moment in the poem, because it reveals that the speaker has a choice—nobody has to make the dive unless they want to. The ladder hangs "innocently" at the side of the boat—but to those who know where it leads, it represents a significant boundary between two worlds (that is, the world of the surface and that of the deep). The diacope of "ladder," which appears twice in two lines, reflects this choice.

There are two ideas implicit in this section that are important to a feminist reading of the poem. First, there are a number of people who don't see "diving into the wreck" as an especially important thing to do—to these people, the ladder is a just "some sundry [insignificant] equipment." ("Sundry" can also be read as a play on words suggesting the way in which the ladder stays dry if it remains unused). But the fact that the speaker *is* planning to make the dive suggests that this kind of exploration is something worth doing.

The speaker also turns to "We" here—implying that the speaker is part of a broader group that understands the significance of descending the ladder. This "we" might mean women, marginalized people in general, or those who have experienced personal trauma, to name just a few potential interpretations.

These lines are again filled with sibilance. This adds a hushed tone to the stanza, perhaps evoking a kind of quiet reverence for the ladder and all that it represents—that is, a bridge between worlds, a chance for those brave enough to dive into the unknown:

> hanging innocently
> close to the side of the schooner.
> ...
> it is a piece of maritime floss
> some sundry equipment.

Also notice how the poem unfolds down the page in short, frequently enjambed lines, the poem revealing itself in a narrow, downward direction that represents the act of diving into the watery depths.

LINES 22-28

I go down. ...
... I go down.

In the poem's third stanza, the speaker starts the descent into the water. Line 22 ("I go down.") is a clear, straightforward

statement punctuated by a period, the strong end-stop suggesting there is no turning back now.

After this, the following lines are all short and enjambed until coming to rest in line 27 ("of our human air."). This creates a sense of forward momentum, reflecting the speaker's intense concentration and making the poem feel as if it, too, is being pulled down into the water.

The diacope of "rung after rung" evokes the way the speaker moves step by tentative step. In this descent towards the sea, the speaker notices "the blue light / the clear atoms / of our human air" all around—that is, the speaker is still above the water, and thus still within the "human" world of sunlight and oxygen. The speaker seems to be savoring the familiar world of the surface, while the repetition of "I go down" reveals that the speaker keep going regardless of what lies ahead.

It's worth thinking, too, about the way ladders are usually associated with travelling *upwards*, rather than down. Indeed, they often function as a religious symbol linking earth with heaven. Here, though, there is a distinct *lack* of such idyllic thinking—the speaker anticipates a tough task ahead, and the difficulty of that task is represented here by the heightened tension that comes in this extended focus on the descent into the ocean. The poem could, for example, transition from "I go down" to the underwater world—but Rich deliberately takes her time with the actual descent.

LINES 29-33

My flippers cripple ...
... will begin.

Though the speaker's flippers will make the dive itself easier, they make the climb down the ladder more cumbersome. The consonance and assonance in the phrase "flippers cripple" has a comedic, almost slapstick tone which hints at a more serious point: that the speaker is not some experienced diver with the latest equipment, but rather someone making do with what they have.

If the poem is taken more widely to be about women striving to make their own stories and perspectives heard, this highlights that there is no easy, established method for them to do so. More broadly, the poem suggests that discovering new truths take effort—people have to go their own way. The speaker states this clearly in line 31-33:

> and there is no one
> to tell me when the ocean
> will begin.

Nobody else, in other words, can guide the speaker to the wreck—the speaker has to explore with bravery, determination, and a willingness to accept the risks of the dive.

Just before this, the poem deploys its one simile:

> I crawl like an insect down the ladder

The mention of an insect indicates the way that the speaker has become a kind of alien creature, made different from the human world by the flippers but *also* different from the world below the water's surface by virtue of being human.

LINES 34-43

First the air ...
... the deep element.

Lines 34-43 mark a shift in the poem's tone. This tonal shift, in turn, marks the speaker's shift from the world above the surface to the one below. That is, the speaker is finally entering the water, and describes the colors of the surrounding world changing—getting steadily darker as the speaker goes deeper, and as sunlight stops filtering through the water.

The use of repetition here lends the poem an intensity, suggesting, perhaps, a brief moment of panic as the speaker comes to grips with these new, unfamiliar surroundings. Notice how Rich uses polyptoton when "blue" becomes "bluer" (and as "black" becomes "blacking out"), and then repeats the phrase "and then" three times in quick succession (diacope). This repetition indicates the speaker's heightened sensory awareness:

> First the air is blue and then
> it is bluer and then green and then
> black I am blacking out and yet

The poem borrows from the genuine dangers involved in deep diving to suggest that the speaker's metaphorical task—perhaps going deeper into history, or into the speaker's own subconscious—is a treacherous undertaking. It's worth noting, too, that this entire stanza is enjambed, again contributing to its forward momentum. This lends the poem a kind of breathlessness that contributes to this momentary sense of dread and danger.

The speaker also asserts a kind of personal power and bravery in this stanza. Though the speaker momentarily fears fainting from lack of air, the speaker doesn't black out because the speaker's "mask is powerful" and "it pumps [the speaker's] blood with power." Think about how masks often hide identity—but here, the mask gives the speaker *strength*.

Framing this moment within a feminist reading, the "mask" could represent female identity, which is frequently objectified by men, masking the individuality beneath surface appearance. Here, though, it becomes a source of power. Or perhaps it simply represents how the speaker has prepared for the danger here—the speaker is well-equipped to handle this journey, even if the scuba gear felt a bit silly at first.

Lines 39 and 40 then describe the sea as "another story,"

something that "is not a question of power." That is, the techniques that might have worked on the surface for survival and exploration don't necessarily work down here, under the water. The speaker must transform and adapt to this new and unfamiliar situation in order to reach the wreck. The speaker must "learn alone / to turn my body without force"—that is, the speaker cannot simply "force" a way into the truth of the wreck, but must rather approach it through the sea's own terms.

In a metaphorical reading, this suggests that new and different intellectual tools and ways of thinking might be required to address women's inequality (perhaps here the poem suggests that masculine ideas of "power" do not apply). Physical force, which has been so key to male dominance throughout history, doesn't help in this new underwater world.

LINES 44-51

And now: it ...
... differently down here.

By line 44, the speaker is finally deep in the ocean. Acknowledging the distractions under the water, though, the speaker tries to stay focused on the purpose of the dive: "it is easy to forget / what I came for." Apparently, it is easy to get lost down here, where "you breathe differently."

This underwater world is occupied by "many who have always / lived here / swaying their crenellated fans." "Crenellated" refers to a pattern of notches and indentations, and is usually used in relation to battlements or fortresses; think of the rectangular notches you might see on a tower or ancient city wall. These gaps were traditionally used to launch projectiles like arrows. That it's being used here to describe the life "between the reefs"—perhaps exotic fish fins, maybe strange underwater plant life—suggests that there is a kind of fortress around the wreck, that it is still heavily guarded. It also suggests a generally alien world—a place totally different from the world above the surface. That "so many ... have always lived here" then imbues the scene with a sense of rich history,

Lines 49-51 also use clear alliteration:

> between the reefs
> and besides
> you breathe ...

This alliteration, combined with the poem's continued enjambment, conjures the rhythms of breathing, signalling that the speaker is starting to feel comfortable in these new surroundings—again, to the point of distraction.

LINES 52-60

I came to ...
... fish or weed

The speaker says that the purpose of the dive is to seek the truth about the wreck—what it really is, what really happened to it—rather than to rely on stories or myths about it. Lines 53-54 ("The words are purposes. / The words are maps.") recalls that "book of myths" from the first stanza—which gave the speaker a desire and a sort of guide.

Now, the speaker wants to actually witness the wreck first-hand—to see the "damage" that was "done" to it. The alliteration in "damage" and "done" has a brutal sound to it, suggesting violence and vandalism. It's worth remembering that a shipwreck was not always a static object, but was once an active boat that then encountered disaster. The speaker also seeks "the treasures that prevail," however, the precious things that have been left behind.

Then, in lines 57-60, the speaker portrays a patient and methodical approach to the observation of the wreck. Bit by bit, the speaker reveals the exterior of the wreck using "the beam of my lamp." The wreck is described as "more permanent / than fish or weed," suggesting there is something lasting about the damage described above, as well as about the "treasures" that still exist.

Again, the poem doesn't fit neatly into one metaphorical reading, but allows for a range of interpretations. The "damage" to the wreck might represent any number of things. To continue with a possible feminist reading of the poem, though, when the speaker states "I came to see the damage that was done," this might be a reference to all the ways that women have been oppressed throughout history. Yet, "treasures" still "prevail"—and the speaker seeks these too. In essence, this suggests salvaging those aspects of womanhood that have been lost or made silent.

It also seems fair to say that the poem—which is made up of "words"—is drawing attention to its own role in the exploration of the wreck here too. If the wreck relates to feminism and women's liberation, the poem here draws attention to the role of language (and poetry) in that struggle.

LINES 61-63

the thing I ...
... not the myth

Lines 61 to 63 offer the reader the clearest explanation and motivation behind the speaker's dive "into the wreck." The speaker draws a distinction between "the wreck" and "the story of the wreck / the thing itself and not the myth."

This moment is fundamental to understanding the whole poem, spelling out that the speaker is unhappy to know about the wreck solely though the "book of myths" (that is, the traditional stories that have been passed down, or what other people say about it). Instead, the speaker values the *direct experience* of the wreck, making the dive a kind of search for truth.

The diacope of "wreck" here underscores there are in fact two different versions of it (the truth vs. the accepted story). The same can be said for the parallelism of lines 62 and 63, with the

repeated grammatical structure of these lines emphasizing the contrast between "the thing itself" and what is said about that thing:

> the wreck and not the story of the wreck
> the thing itself and not the myth

That isn't to say that stories and myths aren't important, but that the speaker questions whether those stories and myths that already exist give the full picture of the wreck. Perhaps the wreck has changed since the last divers visited it, or maybe previous divers missed important details of the wreck too. Indeed, if Rich's writing represents a key development in feminist literature (and, of course, literature in general), then perhaps that is in part *because* of her determination to go beyond the established stories, myths, and ideas of the 20th century and earlier.

LINES 64-70

the drowned face ...
... the tentative haunters.

Lines 64-70 describe "the thing itself" (that is, the wreck). The "drowned face always staring" in line 64 is a creepy image indeed, and might refer to an actual skull of someone who died in the wreck, or to the ship's figurehead.

A figurehead is a wooden decoration placed on the bow (the front) of the ship that acts as a kind of guardian angel for the sailors on their journey. More often than not, these figureheads are female. If that's what's being referred to here, the figurehead is no longer a symbol of hope, determination, and divine favor, but rather of disaster and tragedy. Either way—whether an actual ghostly skull or a wooden statue—this "drowned face" stares perpetually towards the sun—towards the surface world where it belongs. (In a feminist reading, perhaps this face stands in for the pain suffered by women throughout history.)

Lines 67 to 70 discuss the damage caused by time and the ocean's waters, the way in which the ship is slowly but surely being eroded by salt and currents. Subtle consonance (and alliteration in "salt and sway") gives these lines their own "threadbare beauty," gesturing towards the former glory and majesty of the ship before it was wrecked:

> worn by salt and sway into this threadbare beauty
> the ribs of the disaster
> curving their assertion
> among the tentative haunters.

The "ribs" here refers to the curved beams that make up the frame of the ship, which the speaker is metaphorically comparing to a rib cage. This, along with the reference to the "drowned face," emphasizes the human tragedy of this "disaster," instilling the scene with an undertone of death and ghostliness. This is further picked up by the phrase "tentative haunters," which compares the ocean dwellers that hesitantly explore the wreck to ghosts. Alternatively, perhaps this even refers to the ghosts of those who died in the disaster, and whose spirits the speaker can sense.

LINES 71-76

This is the ...
... into the hold.

Line 71 states boldly that "This is the place. / And I am here," suggesting that, perhaps, the speaker feels at home around and within the wreck. This is what the speaker has been looking for.

Things then get a bit confusing. The speaker is both a mermaid, a figure from folklore with the body of a woman and the tail of a fish, and a merman, the male version of this same figure. The speaker has thus transformed, merging human identity with a creature from the ocean's depths. The speaker transforms in another way too.

The speaker has long, flowing hair, suggestive of beauty and stereotypical femininity, and an "armored body," suggestive of strength and stereotypical masculinity. The reference to armor also recalls the speaker's description of scuba gear in the first stanza, the "body-armor of black rubber." The speaker is thus someone with both male and female characteristics.

To reflect this transformation, the poem deliberately mixes up pronouns in this section of the poem (and throughout to the end), shifting seamlessly between "I," "we," and then "she" and "he." There is a sense that in the dark yet majestically beautiful world of the wreck that the differences between the surface and the depths, between male and female, have been temporarily erased or, perhaps, drifted into insignificance. The speaker, now a "we," "circle[s] silently" (the sibilance here creates a hushed underwater atmosphere) and then "dive[s] into the hold." The speaker, then, delves deeper into the mysteries of the wreck, continuing the mission to know the "wreck" and not the "myth" of the wreck.

LINES 77-82

I am she: ...
... left to rot

Line 77 picks up on the androgynous figure described earlier in the stanza, with the speaker identifying as both "she" and "he." The caesura (the colon) divides those line exactly into two equal halves, creating in turn an implied equality between these two genders.

It's worth noting that the androgyne figure (a figure combining male and female characteristics) appears elsewhere in Rich's work, and that this figure, like the mermaid, makes an appearance in literature as far back as ancient Greece. According to Plato's *Symposium*, man and woman were

originally fused in one divine body—and then separated by Zeus, fated to try to find completion through finding their other half. The androgyne figure alluded to here might thus be thought of as one that predates conflict and inequality between men and women, perhaps explaining why Rich uses it here.

At the same time, the speaker also identifies with the wreck itself, blurring the lines between concrete detail and metaphor. The "drowned face" of line 78 refers back to the figurehead and/or skull first mentioned two stanzas earlier. This face "sleeps with open eyes," forever bearing witness to the disaster that wrecked the ship. The speaker then states that their "breasts still bear the stress," meaning they carry the weight or pressure of something—perhaps of the cargo carried by the ship, perhaps of the water pressing down on the wreck, or perhaps the weighty knowledge of the disaster. The speaker's body still must carry the burden of this disaster—taken metaphorically, of whatever trauma destroyed the ship in the first place. The anaphora of the repeated "whose" in lines 78-80 emphasizes the heaviness of this load, as do the assonance, alliteration, and consonance in "breasts still bear the stress."

Lines 80-82 then set out the way that the wreck still contains some of its precious cargo. This cargo has been "left to rot" and is "half-wedged" inside "barrels." It has been forgotten, abandoned, left behind.

LINES 83-86

we are the ...
... the fouled compass

In line 83, the speaker again shifts pronouns, the poem deliberately resisting the need to explain these shifts or make them seem logical. Indeed, the whole point seems to be the undermining of "she" and "he" as mutually exclusive categories.

The speaker says "we are the half-destroyed instruments / that once held to a course," referring to the tools of navigation—specifically, a compass and a logbook (in which a ship's captain makes daily records). Both of these would once have been important parts of the ship, helping the sailors to navigate their journey. These are no longer working, however, the compass "fouled" and the log "water-eaten."

Perhaps the speaker is saying that her/his/they're past self had things under control, had a clear sense of direction and purpose, but some trauma utterly destroyed that clarity. Now, the speaker must find a new way to move forward.

Taking a feminist interpretation of these lines, perhaps the "we" here refers to women in general (this reading is supported by other examples in the same collection of poems). The speaker characterizes these "half-destroyed instruments" (destroyed by their oppression and mistreatment by society) as having once "held to a course," perhaps suggesting that they used to do as they were told/as society expected—yet that didn't protect them from sinking, from this destruction.

LINES 87-94

We are, I ...
... do not appear.

The final stanza begins by again mixing together different pronouns: "we are, I am, you are." The caesurae here creates a balance between these pronouns, making them all seem important to the poem, as though the "we," "I," and "you" are all in positions of responsibility with regard to the wreck and how its story is told. If the wreck relates to womanhood—not necessarily as a direct metaphor for womanhood, but for some aspect of women's experience through history—then *everybody*, including the reader, has a role to play in the future.

In this stanza, the poem comes full circle. "We," "I," and "you" all return to "this scene" (the wreck), carrying the same implements that the speaker first listed way back in the poem's opening lines. Interestingly, this return is return to the wreck—to the source of some trauma, to the "thing" rather than the myth it spawned—might be an act of "cowardice or courage." The hard alliteration here draws a connection between these two opposite words, and implies that *both* fear and bravery can push someone to return to the source of some pain.

The poem adds one crucial detail to the conclusion that makes it differ from the opening the lines: the book of myths is a book "in which / our names do not appear." The "book of myths," then, fails to tell a complete story of the wreck, and leaves many people out.

Reading the poem as an extended metaphor, perhaps this relates to the way that women have been frequently written out of history, or thoroughly mischaracterized. The ending, then, represents a kind of challenge to the reader, imploring them to help stories and perspectives that are normally hidden find their way to the surface. That is, the poem suggests that "diving" into this travesty, facing the traumas of the past head on, might be a way to right them.

SYMBOLS

THE WRECK

The wreck itself is obviously symbolic in the poem, though what, exactly, it represents is open to interpretation. A wreck is, of course, a remnant of a disaster. To dive into it thus implies facing a disaster head on, exploring something traumatic and horrific in order to better understand it.

In a feminist reading of the poem, the wreck reflects women's history. It's beauty has been eroded, its treasures "left to rot" at the bottom of the ocean. The speaker dives "into the wreck" in order to bear witness to this destruction, to understand the

pain and suffering to which women have been subjected for so long, and to tell those stories have been lost.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 52:** "I came to explore the wreck."
- **Lines 55-56:** "I came to see the damage that was done / and the treasures that prevail."
- **Lines 57-60:** "I stroke the beam of my lamp / slowly along the flank / of something more permanent / than fish or weed"
- **Lines 62-63:** "the wreck and not the story of the wreck / the thing itself and not the myth"
- **Lines 74-76:** "We circle silently / about the wreck / we dive into the hold."
- **Lines 79-86:** "whose breasts still bear the stress / whose silver, copper, vermeil cargo lies / obscurely inside barrels / half-wedged and left to rot / we are the half-destroyed instruments / that once held to a course / the water-eaten log / the fouled compass"
- **Line 90:** "back to this scene"

THE DROWNED FACE

In lines 64-65 and 78 the speaker refers to a "drowned face." This might refer to an actual skull of a victim of the shipwreck, or, perhaps more likely, to the ship's figurehead. A figurehead was small carving placed on the prow (the front) of a ship, generally intended to bring the vessel good luck and ward off evil spirits.

Either way, this "drowned face" comes to symbolize all the victims of the wreck. If the wreck is interpreted as a narrow metaphor about some personal trauma in the speaker's past, then this drowned face can be thought of as representing the consequences of that trauma. The wreck can also be taken to metaphorically represent the broad historical oppression of women, though, which allows this face to represent all those women "drowned" by history—those women whose lives and stories have been erased by a patriarchal society. The fact that throughout history ships' figureheads have frequently been made to look like a woman supports this reading.

Contextually, then, the figurehead here relates to the poem's implicit focus on women's rights. This figurehead, though "drowned," "sleeps with open eyes"—that is, it *never* sleeps, but rather is "always staring / toward the sun"—towards the surface. This face stares at the surface as though it has something to tell—but, of course, it is stuck at the bottom of the ocean. The face thus represents those stories, ideas, and perceptions left untold—those people who get written out of history by those in power.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 64-65:** "the drowned face always staring / toward the sun"
- **Line 78:** "whose drowned face sleeps with open eyes"

THE BOOK OF MYTHS

Before diving into the water, the speaker has "read the book of myths." This isn't a real book, but rather a symbol for the narratives that have shaped the speaker's life—and perhaps all of society.

Myths are cultural stories that often aim to explain something about the world. Think of creation myths, or Greek myths that explain why there are seasons and how the sun rises each day. Myths are thus related to origins, and can both reflect and shape cultural values. In the poem, the "book of myths" in part symbolizes broad historical narratives about men and women—the stories that have shaped gender roles and led to women's subservience in society. Similarly, these myths can also be taken as generally representing the stories people tell themselves about their origins and why things are the way they are.

But myths are not the truth. Some myths may be *based* in a truth, but they are still *stories*. The poem insists on a division between myths and reality—between the "story of the wreck" and "the thing itself." The speaker wants to go beyond this book of myths to understand the truth—about the speaker's own past, about women's history in general, and so forth.

When the speaker says in lines 53-54 that "words are purposes" and "maps," this suggests that stories can still be valuable to society, offering a sense of purpose and general guidance. Ultimately, though, words are secondary to "the thing itself"—secondary to experience. The poem itself reflects this idea; this is a story about a dive, but reading it is not the same thing as diving into the ocean.

Importantly, the speaker says in the end of the poem that "our names do not appear" in this book of myths. This makes sense when the poem as an extended metaphor for the oppression of women and erasure of women's voices throughout history. The narratives that have shaped society have been written by those with power, and, as such, have left out the "names" of and stories of women and other marginalized people.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "First having read the book of myths"
- **Lines 53-54:** "The words are purposes. / The words are maps."
- **Lines 61-63:** "the thing I came for: / the wreck and not the story of the wreck / the thing itself and not the myth"
- **Lines 92-94:** "a book of myths / in which / our names do not appear."

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration is used throughout "Diving into the Wreck." This can draw connections between words, focus readers' attention on certain phrases, and evoke a line's content through sound.

The first clear example is in line 5 in the /b/ sound of "body-armour" and "black." These are strong, plosive sounds that momentarily stop the airflow if read aloud. These gives them a kind of slapping quality, like a wetsuit being pulled on tight and pinging into place. The sounds draw attention to the words, which make it seem like preparing to dive is akin to preparing for battle.

Later in the first stanza, the /s/ alliteration (a.k.a. sibilance) of "sun-flooded schooner" gently evokes the sounds of the ocean's surface. Think about the noise of waves, and the soft splash of water breaking against a boat. This is picked up in the second stanza as well, while the speaker is still preparing for the dive and mentions "some sundry equipment" in line 21.

When the speaker begins to make the descent down the ladder into the ocean, line 23 use alliteration in the phrase "rung after rung" (also an example of diacope). This gives the impression of a step-by-step action, evoking the careful but purposeful way that the speaker begins the dive. The harsh alliteration of "cripple" and "crawl" in lines 29 and 30 then draw attention to the difficulty the speaker faces while moving down the ladder in flippers.

In the following stanza, a quick burst of alliteration gives the poem an anxiously excited sound as the speaker heads into the water:

> First the air is blue and then
> it is bluer and then green and then
> black I am blacking out and yet
> my mask is powerful
> it pumps my blood with power
> the sea is another story

The alliteration above suddenly quickens the pace of the poem, giving it a breathlessness that fits with the somewhat frightening transition from surface world to ocean depths.

Another striking example is in line 55, when the speaker clearly states the purpose of the dive:

> I came to see the damage that was done

These two /d/ sounds have a heavy effect, subtly evoking violence and destruction. Then, in the following stanza, sibilance again evokes the watery underworld explored by the speaker in "staring," "sun," "salt and sway."

Looking at the ship, towards the end of the poem, the speaker identifies with its abandoned treasures:

> whose breast still bear the stress
> whose silver, copper, vermeil cargo lies

The alliteration here perhaps pushes readers to linger on these lines, to better appreciate the abandoned bounty before the speaker. Finally, the final stanza features another striking moment of alliteration with the hard initial sounds of "courage" and "cowardice." Alliteration binds these opposite words together, revealing that both bravery and fear can push someone down towards the wreck.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "body," "black"
- **Line 11:** "sun," " schooner"
- **Line 16:** "side," "schooner"
- **Line 17:** "We," "what"
- **Line 18:** "we"
- **Line 21:** "some sundry"
- **Line 23:** "Rung," "rung"
- **Line 29:** "cripple"
- **Line 30:** "crawl"
- **Line 34:** "blue"
- **Line 35:** "bluer"
- **Line 36:** "black," "blacking"
- **Line 37:** "my mask," "powerful"
- **Line 38:** "pumps," "my," "power"
- **Line 39:** "sea," "story"
- **Line 40:** "sea," "power"
- **Line 42:** "to turn"
- **Line 49:** "between"
- **Line 50:** "besides"
- **Line 51:** " breathe," "differently down"
- **Line 55:** "damage," "done"
- **Line 57:** "stroke"
- **Line 58:** "slowly"
- **Line 59:** "something"
- **Line 64:** "staring"
- **Line 65:** "sun"
- **Line 67:** "salt," "sway"
- **Line 73:** " black," "body"
- **Line 74:** "circle silently"
- **Line 79:** "breasts," "still," "bear," "stress"
- **Line 80:** "silver," "copper," "cargo"
- **Line 84:** "course"
- **Line 86:** "compass"
- **Line 88:** "cowardice," "courage"
- **Line 91:** "carrying," "camera"

ALLUSION

There are a few allusions in the poem. The clearest appears in

the first stanza, when the speaker makes it clear that this dive is a solitary one—completely different from those made by the famous French explorer Jacques Cousteau. Cousteau's dives captured the world's imagination throughout the 20th century. But whereas Cousteau had an "assiduous," or diligent, "team" surrounding him and plenty of professional experience, the speaker is a novice and totally alone. The allusion here emphasizes the speaker's loneliness, as well as the subsequent danger of the task ahead.

The allusion also seems to suggest that the speaker feels a bit silly, given that the speaker is *not* a professional like Cousteau and, as such, perhaps doesn't entirely know what to do. The fact that the speaker dives in anyway reflects the poem's broader thematic ideas about the importance of vulnerability when it comes to exploration and discovery.

In the second stanza, the speaker describes the "ladder" on the side of the boat, at the bottom of which the (metaphorical) ocean awaits. This might be a (very subtle) allusion to Jacob's ladder, which in Christian mythology leads from earth to heaven. Ladders in poems usually go up, and they usually lead to the divine world—here, the ladder goes *down*, and leads to the murky unknown world of the deep ocean. This helps mark out the speaker's task as something fundamentally unique and precarious.

Towards the end of the poem, the speaker refers to a well-known creature from folklore: the mermaid/merman (creatures that are half fish and half human). That the speaker is now one such creature implies a merging of two worlds—that of the surface and that of the wreck. It also implies the merging of genders, and that the speaker cannot be hemmed in by narrow ideas of what it means to be a woman or a man. The allusion might speak to a certain kind of freedom that the speaker feels around the wreck, away from the rules that structure life above the surface.

If the wreck is related to the historical oppression of women—and contains all those stories left out of the book of myths—perhaps this signals that the speaker feels an intuitive solidarity under the water, even while contemplating the ways in which women have suffered throughout history.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-11:** "not like Cousteau with his / assiduous team / aboard the sun-flooded schooner"
- **Lines 13-18:** "There is a ladder. / The ladder is always there / hanging innocently / close to the side of the schooner. / We know what it is for, / we who have used it."

ASSONANCE

Assonance appears subtly throughout "Diving into the Wreck." Like alliteration, assonance draws readers' attention to certain words and phrases and at times evokes lines' content.

For example, note the assonance in the first stanza as the speaker describes the preparations made in advance of the dive—including "check[ing] the edge" of a knife (the /eh/ assonance suggesting the speaker's methodical attention to the blade). The speaker then dons:

> the body-armor of black rubber
> the absurd flippers
> the grave and awkward mask.

This section, then, packs a lot of assonance into its three lines, which is especially clear when combined with the strong consonance of /r/ and /b/ sounds. Perhaps this suggests the way that the speaker, too, is being packed into the diving equipment required to visit the wreck. Everything is tight-fitting and a little uncomfortable—which is exactly how these words feel to say out loud.

Later in the stanza, the schooner belonging to Jacques Cousteau (the famous 20th-century underwater explorer) is described as "sun-flooded," the open vowel sounds lending the image a springy brightness. This notably contrasts with the lonely apprehension that characterizes the speaker's own dive preparations.

The next key example is also related to the speaker's equipment. In line 29, the speaker states that "my flippers cripple me." The closeness of the sound between "flippers" and "cripple" (in terms of both assonance and consonance) suggests the clumsiness of the speaker's flippered feet (indeed, the two words make a pair like the feet themselves).

In the following stanza, the speaker describes what it's like to descend into the ocean. The language increases in intensity through various devices, including assonance (also enjambment, consonance, repetition, and alliteration). The speed and frequency of assonant vowels makes this section feel frenetic and anxious, conveying the element of fear that comes with travelling from the surface to depths (lines 36-40):

> black I am blacking out and yet
> my mask is powerful
> it pumps my blood with power
> the sea is another story
> the sea is not a question of power

Later, clear assonance of the /e/ sounds in "between the reefs" are echoed by "besides" and "breathe differently," reflecting the fact that the speaker's breathing has taken on new qualities under water. It's as though the sounds of "between the reefs imbue the speaker's breath itself.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** “checked,” “edge”
- **Line 4:** “on”
- **Line 5:** “body,” “armor,” “rubber”
- **Line 6:** “absurd flippers”
- **Line 7:** “awkward”
- **Line 9:** “his”
- **Line 10:** “assiduous”
- **Line 11:** “sun-flooded”
- **Line 21:** “some sundry”
- **Line 29:** “flippers cripple”
- **Line 34:** “blue”
- **Line 35:** “bluer”
- **Line 36:** “black,” “blacking”
- **Line 37:** “mask,” “powerful”
- **Line 38:** “pumps,” “blood,” “power”
- **Line 39:** “the sea,” “story”
- **Line 40:** “the sea,” “power”
- **Line 49:** “between,” “reefs”
- **Line 50:** “besides”
- **Line 51:** “breathe,” “differently”
- **Line 52:** “explore”
- **Line 53:** “words”
- **Line 54:** “words”
- **Line 57:** “stroke”
- **Line 58:** “slowly”
- **Line 69:** “curving,” “assertion”
- **Line 71:** “This is”
- **Line 73:** “armored body”
- **Line 74:** “We,” “circle,” “silently”
- **Line 77:** “she,” “he”
- **Line 78:** “sleeps,” “eyes”
- **Line 79:** “breasts,” “stress”
- **Line 80:** “silver, copper, vermeil,” “lies”
- **Line 81:** “inside”
- **Line 82:** “wedged,” “left”
- **Line 85:** “water,” “log”

CAESURA

Most of the poem's lines are quite short, meaning there is little time for pauses within them. The poem moves swiftly down the page for the most part, with a clear caesura not popping up until line 44 (roughly halfway through the poem). In line 44, a colon is used to signal a transition in the poem:

> And now: it is easy to forget
> what I came for

This caesura snaps the poem into focus, with the speaker concentrating on the purpose of the dive and avoiding distraction. The next caesurae come in a pair in lines 72-73:

> And I am here, the mermaid whose dark hair
> streams black, the merman in his armored body.

Here, the speaker claims a kind of mythological androgyny—being both male *and* female, mermaid and merman. The two caesurae give this section a slow but gentle flow, evoking the ease with which mermaids/men pass through the water (being, of course, half fish!). The caesurae also create a sense of balance between mermaid and merman—between the sound and rhythm of each line—which suggests a balance between the speaker's masculine and feminine qualities. The caesura later in the same stanza achieves a similar effect:

> I am she: I am he

At this point in the poem, the speaker deliberately uses both male and female pronouns. The caesura highlighted above creates an equality and balance between "she" and "he," subtly reinforcing the poem's argument that inequalities between the sexes need to be addressed. A similar effect is achieved in line 87 ("We are, I am, you are").

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 44:** “now: it”
- **Line 72:** “here, the”
- **Line 73:** “black, the”
- **Line 77:** “she: I”
- **Line 87:** “are, I am, you”
- **Line 91:** “knife, a”

CONSONANCE

Consonance is used throughout "Diving into the Wreck." As with alliteration and assonance, the poem's consonance helps to emphasize certain words and phrases. For example, note the many /r/, /b/, /k/, and /d/ sounds in the description of the speaker's diving outfit in the first stanza:

> the body-armor of black rubber
> the absurd flippers
> the grave and awkward mask.

The way that consonances are packed together here suggests the way that the speaker methodically pulls on each item of equipment. The /r/ sound is made at the back of the throat, and its prevalence here further suggests the tightness of all this gear on the speaker's body.

Later in the same stanza, the poem makes use of /s/ consonance (sibilance) to suggests a sense of gentle calm (and perhaps of the sounds of waves breaking against the boat):

> not like Cousteau with his
> assiduous team
> aboard the sun-flooded schooner

This suggests the ease and confidence of Cousteau's dives—which contrasts sharply with the speaker's own apprehension.

Another important example of consonance appears when the speaker says:

> My flippers cripple me,
> I crawl like an insect down the ladder

The intense consonance here makes the lines feel almost like a tongue twister, emphasizing the speaker's awkward clumsiness while attempting to descend the ladder while dressed in full scuba gear.

Consonance similarly brings the content of lines to life elsewhere in the poem. For example, the light tap of the /t/ sounds in "tentative haunters" reflects the hesitant, timid nature of these "haunters" that surround the wreck—be they creatures on the ocean floor, or spirits of those who went down with the ship.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "book"
- **Line 2:** "and loaded," "camera"
- **Line 3:** "checked," "blade"
- **Line 5:** "body-armor," "black rubber"
- **Line 6:** "absurd flippers"
- **Line 7:** "grave," "and," "awkward mask"
- **Line 9:** "like," "Cousteau," "his"
- **Line 10:** "assiduous," "team"
- **Line 11:** "aboard," "sun-flooded schooner"
- **Line 12:** "alone"
- **Line 13:** "ladder"
- **Line 14:** "ladder," "is always"
- **Line 15:** "hanging innocently"
- **Line 16:** "close," "side," "schooner"
- **Line 20:** "piece," "maritime," "floss"
- **Line 21:** "some sundry"
- **Line 23:** "Rung," "rung"
- **Line 24:** "immerses me"
- **Line 25:** "blue light"
- **Line 26:** "clear," "atoms"
- **Line 27:** "human"
- **Line 29:** "flippers cripple"
- **Line 30:** "crawl," "like," "an insect," "down," "ladder"
- **Line 32:** "when," "ocean"
- **Line 33:** "will," " begin"
- **Line 34:** "blue"
- **Line 35:** "bluer," "and then green and then"
- **Line 36:** "black," "blacking"
- **Line 37:** "my mask," "powerful"
- **Line 38:** "pumps," "my," "power"
- **Line 39:** "sea is," "story"
- **Line 40:** "sea is," "question," "power"
- **Line 41:** "learn alone"
- **Line 42:** "to turn"
- **Line 48:** "swaying," "fans"
- **Line 49:** "between," "reefs"
- **Line 50:** "besides"
- **Line 51:** "breathe," "differently down"
- **Line 52:** "explore," "wreck"
- **Line 53:** "words," "purposes"
- **Line 54:** "words," "maps"
- **Line 55:** "damage," "done"
- **Line 57:** "beam ," "my lamp"
- **Line 58:** "slowly ," "along," "flank"
- **Line 59:** "something more permanent"
- **Line 61:** "the thing"
- **Line 63:** "the thing," "the myth"
- **Line 64:** "face always staring"
- **Line 65:** "sun"
- **Line 66:** "evidence"
- **Line 67:** "salt," "sway," "this threadbare," "beauty"
- **Line 68:** "ribs," "disaster"
- **Line 69:** "curving," "assertion"
- **Line 70:** "among," "tentative haunters"
- **Line 72:** "mermaid"
- **Line 73:** "streams black," "merman," "armored body"
- **Line 74:** "circle silently"
- **Line 78:** "face sleeps," "open"
- **Line 79:** "breasts still bear," "stress"
- **Line 80:** "silver," "copper," "vermeil," "cargo," "lies"
- **Line 81:** "obscurely inside barrels"
- **Line 82:** "half," "left," "rot"
- **Line 83:** "half-destroyed instruments"
- **Line 84:** "once," "held," "course"
- **Line 85:** "water-eaten," "log"
- **Line 86:** "fouled," "compass"
- **Line 88:** "cowardice," "courage"
- **Line 89:** "one," "find"
- **Line 90:** "this scene"
- **Line 91:** "carrying," "camera"
- **Line 92:** "book"
- **Line 94:** "names," "not"

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment is a consistent feature of "Diving into the Wreck," which is composed mostly of short lines that spill down the page quickly and fluidly—perhaps like a diver cutting through the water. Indeed, the poem seems to unfold in a kind of vertical dive down the page. To see how important enjambment is to the overall feel of the poem, take a look at what the first stanza would look like with some of this enjambment taken out:

> First having read the book of myths, and loaded the

> camera, and checked the edge of the knife-blade, I
> put on the body-armor of black rubber [,] the absurd
> flippers[, and] the grave and awkward mask.
> I am having to do this not like Cousteau with his
> assiduous team aboard the sun-flooded schooner
> but here alone.

Clearly, the enjambment makes the poem so much more dive-like, as though each line signals a further stage in the descent into the ocean.

The fifth stanza ("And now ... here.") is completely enjambed. This comes at a time when the speaker states how "easy" it is to "forget" the purpose of the dive. The flowing enjambed lines thus function as a signal of distraction, as though the speaker's attention has been diverted with the new-found freedom of swimming underwater.

Enjambment also occasionally takes place between stanzas. This seems particularly important between the eight and ninth stanzas:

> I am she: I am he
> whose drowned face sleeps with open eyes
> whose breasts still bear the stress

This enjambment adds more emphasis to line 77 (the first line quoted), giving the reader a brief moment in which to contemplate the meaning of this bold statement of androgyny (being both female and male). It also suggests that the speaker's identity is too broad to be contained by a single gender nor by a single line.

It's worth discussing the poem's few moments of end-stop since they stand out so sharply against the frequent enjambment. These lines are quite often clear, concise statements of purpose or fact: "There is a ladder."; "I go down."; "I came to explore the wreck."; "This is the place."; and so forth. These lines act as grounding moments in the poem, preventing the speaker from getting too swept up in the underwater world and pushing the speaker, and the reader, to remember the purpose of the dive.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-5:** "on / the"
- **Lines 5-6:** "rubber / the"
- **Lines 6-7:** "flippers / the"
- **Lines 8-9:** "this / not"
- **Lines 9-10:** "his / assiduous"
- **Lines 10-11:** "team / aboard"
- **Lines 11-12:** "schooner / but"
- **Lines 14-15:** "there / hanging"
- **Lines 15-16:** "innocently / close"
- **Lines 19-20:** "Otherwise / it"
- **Lines 20-21:** "floss / some"
- **Lines 23-24:** "still / the"
- **Lines 24-25:** "me / the"
- **Lines 25-26:** " light / the"
- **Lines 26-27:** "atoms / of"
- **Lines 30-31:** "ladder / and"
- **Lines 31-32:** " one / to"
- **Lines 32-33:** "ocean / will"
- **Lines 34-35:** "then / it"
- **Lines 35-36:** "then / black"
- **Lines 36-37:** "yet / my"
- **Lines 37-38:** "powerful / it"
- **Lines 38-39:** "power / the"
- **Lines 39-40:** "story / the"
- **Lines 40-41:** "power / I"
- **Lines 41-42:** "alone / to"
- **Lines 42-43:** "force / in"
- **Lines 44-45:** "forget / what"
- **Lines 45-46:** "for / among"
- **Lines 46-47:** "always / lived"
- **Lines 47-48:** "here / swaying"
- **Lines 48-49:** "fans / between"
- **Lines 49-50:** "reefs / and"
- **Lines 50-51:** "besides / you"
- **Lines 55-56:** "done / and"
- **Lines 57-58:** "lamp / slowly"
- **Lines 58-59:** "flank / of"
- **Lines 59-60:** "permanent / than"
- **Lines 60-61:** "weed / the"
- **Lines 62-63:** "wreck / the"
- **Lines 63-64:** "myth / the"
- **Lines 64-65:** "staring / toward"
- **Lines 65-66:** "sun / the"
- **Lines 66-67:** "damage / worn"
- **Lines 67-68:** "beauty / the"
- **Lines 68-69:** "disaster / curving"
- **Lines 69-70:** "assertion / among"
- **Lines 72-73:** "hair / streams"
- **Lines 74-75:** "silently / about"
- **Lines 75-76:** "wreck / we"
- **Lines 77-78:** "he / whose"
- **Lines 78-79:** "eyes / whose"
- **Lines 79-80:** "stress / whose"
- **Lines 80-81:** "lies / obscurely"
- **Lines 81-82:** " barrels / half-wedged"
- **Lines 82-83:** "rot / we"
- **Lines 83-84:** "instruments / that"
- **Lines 84-85:** "course / the"
- **Lines 85-86:** "log / the"
- **Lines 87-88:** "are / by"
- **Lines 88-89:** "courage / the"
- **Lines 89-90:** "way / back"
- **Lines 90-91:** "scene / carrying"

- **Lines 91-92:** "camera / a"
- **Lines 92-93:** "myths / in"
- **Lines 93-94:** "which / our"

EXTENDED METAPHOR

It's fair to interpret the entirety of "Diving into the Wreck" as an extended metaphor. Indeed, from the very first line, which describes the speaker as "having read the book of myths," it's clear that this probably isn't a poem about real-life deep-sea diving. This poem is drawn from a collection of the same name in which numerous poems use metaphor to open up a discussion about issues of sex, gender, and women's rights. Accordingly, a number of critical interpretations of this poem view the wreck as a metaphor that fits into the book's overall themes, though the wreck itself resists fitting too neatly into one metaphorical idea.

The wreck, for example, could be a metaphor for the entirety of human history. Perhaps the speaker is unhappy to get information only from the "book of myths," and so making the dive allows for a deeper and richer understanding of the past. In this idea, diving into the past helps to better understand the present—and to separate myths from truths.

Simultaneously, the wreck could represent the treatment of women throughout human history—specifically, the violence, oppression, and erasure of women. Perhaps the speaker is seeking to reclaim that which has been hidden and suppressed about women over the centuries. The penultimate stanza seems to support this interpretation, describing the wreck *and* the speaker as having "breasts [that] still bear the stress"—the stress, perhaps, of under-representation and unequal treatment. The mention of breasts, too, perhaps relates to motherhood.

Another possible reading is that the wreck stands in for the inner life or subconscious, which the speaker feels they must access in order to gain a better understanding about themselves (and their place in the world). Viewed this way, the poem could be a metaphor for women needing to make their stories heard—for their voices to rise above the "myths" about the sexes that have become so well-established. Finally, the "wreck" might refer to some personal trauma that the speaker needs to face head on in order to move forward.

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-94

REPETITION

The poem uses various forms of repetition throughout. On a broad level, this repetition reflects the poem's idea that things aren't always what they seem—more specifically, that the stories or myths that shape the world aren't always synonymous with the truth.

First, notice how the poem starts and ends almost identically. In both the first and last stanzas, the speaker catalogs different pieces of equipment used in the dive: "the book of myths," a camera, and a knife. The poem seems to come full circle in the end—except, of course, for the additional information that the speaker's name doesn't show up in that book of myths. This adds new resonance to the entire poem; the speaker hasn't been searching for the truth behind a story from the book of myths, but rather for a story that hasn't been told yet at all. The speaker is thus truly diving into uncharted waters, without clear guidance on where to go or what to do.

Anaphora appears throughout the poem as well,. Lines 5-7 repeat "the," forming a methodical list of the speaker's diving equipment, and thus give the reader a sense of the step-by-step preparation process:

> **the** body-armor of black rubber
> **the** absurd flippers
> **the** grave and awkward mask.

In lines 24-26, anaphora similarly evokes the increasing depth of the speaker's descent into the water (first through "our human air"):

> **the** oxygen immerses me
> **the** blue light
> **the** clear atoms

This helps the reader experience the dive almost in real-time as the speaker goes down the ladder "**rung** after **rung**" (itself an example of diacope that makes this descent feel relentless). Later, the speaker uses anaphora again in lines 78-80:

> **whose** drowned face sleeps with open eyes
> **whose** breasts still bear the stress
> **whose** silver, copper, vermeil cargo lies

The repetition of "whose" repeatedly connects the speaker to different aspects of the wreck, underscoring their close relationship. The speaker identifies with all the parts of the wreck, making the fact that is has been so damaged imply that the speaker, too, has been damaged.

Diacope (such as that of "rung" mentioned above) plays an important role in the poem as well. Take the repetition of "power" in lines 38 and 40 (which sandwiches another moment of alliteration):

> it pumps my blood with **power**
> the sea is another story
> the sea is not a question of **power**

The power the speaker mentions in line 38 is negated by the fact that the sea doesn't care about power in line 40. The word's repetition emphasizes that the strength the speaker uses on land has no sway beneath the sea. Later, note the diacope of "the wreck" in line 62:

> the wreck and not the story of the wreck

This repetition emphasizes that these two versions of "the wreck" are in fact entirely different things—one is the truth, "the thing itself," while the other is simply "the myth."

Another important repetition device is polyptoton, used in lines 34-36 during the description of the speaker's descent into the ocean:

> First the air is blue and then
> it is bluer and then green and then
> black I am blacking out and yet

Here, the near-repetition of words creates a disorientating and anxious tone, establishing the difficulty of the dive. Shades of color fluctuate in quick succession, showing the change in light/dark as the speaker goes further down into the water.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-3:** "First having read the book of myths, / and loaded the camera, / and checked the edge of the knife-blade,"
- **Line 5:** "the"
- **Line 6:** "the"
- **Line 7:** "the"
- **Line 11:** "schooner"
- **Line 13:** "ladder"
- **Line 14:** "ladder"
- **Line 16:** "schooner"
- **Line 23:** "Rung," "rung"
- **Line 24:** "the"
- **Line 25:** "the"
- **Line 26:** "the"
- **Line 30:** "ladder"
- **Line 34:** "blue," "and then"
- **Line 35:** "bluer and then green and then"
- **Line 36:** "black," "blacking"
- **Line 38:** "power"
- **Line 39:** "the sea is"
- **Line 40:** "the sea is," "power"
- **Line 53:** "The words are"
- **Line 54:** "The words are"
- **Line 61:** "the thing"
- **Line 62:** "the wreck," "the wreck"
- **Line 63:** "the thing"
- **Line 77:** "I am she: I am he"
- **Line 78:** "whose"
- **Line 79:** "whose"
- **Line 80:** "whose"
- **Line 82:** "half-wedged"
- **Line 83:** "half-destroyed"
- **Line 85:** "the"
- **Line 86:** "the"
- **Line 87:** "We are, I am, you are"
- **Lines 91-92:** "carrying a knife, a camera / a book of myths"

SIMILE

Simile is used just once in "Diving into the Wreck"—in line 30. Given that the poem is arguably one long extended metaphor, perhaps it makes sense that in turn it isn't overloaded with other figurative language. The one example comes when the speaker describes what it's like to wear the diving equipment and walk down the ladder into the ocean:

> I crawl like an insect down the ladder

The insect simile achieves two main things. The first of these is visual. Think of the bizarre appearance of a deep-sea diver when compared to how people normally look. Wetsuits are often black, perhaps giving the speaker the appearance of something beetle-like. The speaker feels strange and out of place, which makes sense given that the speaker is about to dive into the unknown.

The insect simile also speaks to something called *othering*—the process by which a person or group of people is made to feel like they somehow abnormal, different, and separate from what *is* normal. Rich's poetry and essays often focus on the way in which woman was made the *other* in relation to men—and turning the speaker into an insect-like figure makes the speaker seem more alien and other too. In a way, the speaker has to embrace their *otherness* in order to dive deep and explore the wreck of the past.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 30:** "I crawl like an insect down the ladder"

VOCABULARY

Cousteau (Line 9) - Jacques Cousteau was a French marine explorer in the 20th century. His deep-sea dives caught the world's imagination and, as the speaker suggests, were aided by the latest equipment and a team of assistants.

Assiduous (Line 10) - Methodical and attentive.

Schooner (Line 11, Line 16) - A sailboat with two or more

masts.

Maritime floss (Line 20) - Rubbish/detritus floating on the surface of the water.

Sundry (Line 21) - Common and unremarkable.

Crenellated (Line 48) - This word usually relates to the shape of the top of a fortress or castle wall, with regular notches/rectangular indentations through which arrows and other projectiles could be shot.

Prevail (Line 56) - To survive and/or be victorious.

Flank (Line 58) - Side.

Salt and sway (Line 67) - Eroded by the currents and salt of the seawater.

Assertion (Line 69) - Here this means something like defense; the framework of the ship curves upward like a rib cage, in "defense" of the creaurees on the ocean floor.

Tentative (Line 70) - Hesitant, timid.

Haunters (Line 70) - Could refer to sea creatures living/swimming in and around the wreck, the dead who perished with the ship, or perhaps to those who dive down to see it.

Mermaid/Merman (Line 72, Line 73) - A mythological creature that is half-human and half-fish.

Vermeil (Line 80) - Silver that has been thinly plated with gold.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Diving into the Wreck" is a free verse poem, made up of 94 lines broken into 10 stanzas of varying lengths. For the most part, the lines are quite short, making the poem appear long and narrow on the page. The poem's form thus looks like a dive, with the text going deeper and deeper down into the white space of the page. For a striking example, take the third stanza:

> I go down.
> Rung after rung and still
> the oxygen immerses me
> the blue light
> the clear atoms
> of our human air.
> I go down.
> My flippers cripple me,
> I crawl like an insect down the ladder
> and there is no one
> to tell me when the ocean
> will begin.

Notice how the poem's form draws the reader's eye downwards, mimicking the diver's transition into the depths of the ocean.

The fact that the poem is written without a regular rhyme scheme or meter also makes it feel unpredictable. This adds a sense of tension to this "dive," and reflects the fact that the speaker also cannot know exactly what to expect in the unfamiliar ocean depths.

METER

"Diving into the Wreck" is written in free verse, which means that it doesn't have a regular meter. Generally speaking, this gives the poem an unpredictable sense of movement—allowing it to feel like it flows easily or is constrained depending on what's being discussed. The lack of meter also helps the poem feel conversational, like the speaker is simply telling a story—which, indeed, the speaker is.

Though there is no meter, most of the lines are deliberately kept quite short and most of its phrases and sentences sprawl across lines breaks. This short line length combined with enjambment makes the poem look long and thin on the page. As noted in our Form discussion, this makes the poem itself resemble the act of diving.

RHYME SCHEME

"Diving into the Wreck" is written in free verse and doesn't have a rhyme scheme. Overall, a regular, predictable rhyme scheme would probably feel somewhat at odds with the kind of exploration into the unknown described by the poem.

In a few instances, though, the poem does use rhyme. Lines 8 and 9 contain a slant rhyme, for example, drawing out the contrast between the speaker's diving method and Cousteau's:

> I am having to do **this**
> not like Cousteau with **his**

Lines 31-33 also use slant rhyme:

> and there is no **one**
> to tell me when the **ocean**

The inexactness of the rhymes here helps the poem build tension in anticipation of the moment when the speaker makes it into the ocean depths.

Finally, lines 78-81 feature both perfect and imperfect end and internal rhymes:

> whose drowned face sleeps with open **eyes**
> whose **breasts** still bear the **stress**
> whose silver, copper, vermeil cargo **lies**
> obscurely **inside** barrels

This is a distinctly assonant and melodious part of the poem. It is also a moment when the speaker directly identifies with the

wreck—with its "drowned" figurehead and abandoned treasures. The rhyme sounds draw emphasis to these descriptions, helping them ring out more clearly to the reader.

SPEAKER

The identity of the speaker in "Diving into the Wreck" is one of the most intentionally ambiguous elements of the poem. Initially, the speaker is cast in the first-person. This builds a sense of the speaker/diver as a solitary figure, diving alone into the depths because of desire to see the wreck first hand (to go beyond "the book of myths"). The speaker's solitariness is emphasized by the comparison to Jacques Cousteau—a world-famous deep-sea explorer—in lines 9 and 10. Initially, then, the speaker is a determined figure willing to brave the unknown. The speaker has a clear purpose: to explore the wreck.

But the speaker becomes more complicated as the poem goes on. In lines 72 and 73, the speaker is both "mermaid" and "merman," part human and part fish, both female and male. This is then restated boldly in line 77's "I am she: I am he." The poem intentionally destabilizes the speaker's identity in order to draw attention to gender—specifically to bring maleness and femaleness together in a way that makes the distinction between the categories seem less significant and more fluid than perhaps the "book of myths" has made them out to be.

To further destabilize the speaker's identity, the speaker also uses "we" (shifting from the first-person "I"). But perhaps destabilize is the wrong word—maybe the poem is *widening* the scope of the speaker's identity. Indeed, based on the evidence of the other poems in the same collection, this collective "we" might well apply to all of womankind—and perhaps even to the men who understand and support the struggle for women's liberation. In line 87, the speaker also places some of the responsibility of this struggle on the reader themselves ("you are").

SETTING

The poem takes place in two locations: on a boat above the ocean, and then beneath the water. At first, the speaker is preparing for a deep sea dive, donning all the proper gear—the "black rubber" suit, the "absurd flippers," the "grave and awkward" scuba mask. The speaker then climbs down a ladder on the side of the boat and into the water, crossing a boundary of sorts between the world of the surface and that which lies beneath. Metaphorically, this suggests the speaker moving from a superficial level of understanding (beyond the world that exists in "the book of myths") towards the deeper truth of things.

The world below is very different from that above, and the speaker feels anxious upon first entering the water. Though the scuba mask pumps the speaker with oxygen, the speaker must ultimately adapt to the water's own rules—must "learn alone / to turn my body without force / in the deep element." The speaker then reaches "the wreck," the remains of a sunken ship that the speaker has been searching for. The frame of the boat curves upward like a rib cage, and all the tools and treasures that sunk with the boat have been abandoned, "left to rot" beneath the water.

This, of course, is a fairly literal way of looking at the poem. But the poem hints that the dive is a metaphor for something else right from the beginning. It becomes up to the reader to interpret the meaning of the wreck, to decide what the wreck stands for. To the speaker, it represents the opportunity to find out some kind of truth that contrasts with the tired wisdom of the "book of myths."

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"Diving into the Wreck" was published in an impassioned collection of the same title, which won the 1974 National Book Award for Poetry. Rich accepted the award alongside Audre Lorde and Alice Walker, on behalf of all women "whose voices have gone and still go unheard in a patriarchal world."

Early in her career, Rich often wrote using traditional poetic structures like meter and rhyme. With its intimate language and lack of a clear poetic form, "Diving into the Wreck" reflects Rich's later adoption of free verse, which she found less "distancing" and restrictive than meter.

Along with friends such as Lorde and June Jordan, Rich helped lead a generation of female and LGBTQ poets whose work challenged patriarchal, racist, and homophobic power structures in America and beyond. Rich's commitments to feminism and left-wing politics grew over the course of the 1960s, in parallel with the growing women's liberation movement and other social movements of the era. Her collections from the late '60s (including *Leaflets*) and early '70s (including *The Will to Change* and *Diving into the Wreck*) are considered landmarks of feminist and LGBTQ literature.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

As both a writer and activist, Adrienne Rich was a leading voice in what is now known as second-wave feminism (or "women's liberation," the term she preferred). After leaving an unhappy marriage and coming out as a lesbian, Rich also became a leader in the modern LGBTQ rights movement.

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. Betty Friedan's bestseller *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), which directly challenged the notion that women should be content with this "housewife-mother" role, is often credited with launching second-wave feminism.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- In the Poet's Own Voice — Adrienne Rich reads "Diving into the Wreck." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c03sWpt62vw)
- Rich in the New Yorker — An insightful analysis of Rich's poetic work from the New Yorker. (https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/06/20/adrienne-richs-art-and-activism)
- Rich's Life and Work — A valuable resource from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/adrienne-rich)
- Plato and the Androgyne — An excerpt from Plato's discussion of the androgyne figure, which appears recurrently in Rich's poetry from around this time. (https://www.john-uebersax.com/plato/myths/androgyne.htm)
- Feminism and Poetry — A wonderful selection of poems organized by their relationship to the different stages of the feminist movement. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/146073/poetry-and-feminism)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER ADRIENNE RICH POEMS

- Amends
- Aunt Jennifer's Tigers
- Living in Sin

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Howard, James. "*Diving into the Wreck*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 7 Jan 2020. Web. 29 Nov 2022.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Howard, James. "*Diving into the Wreck*." LitCharts LLC, January 7, 2020. Retrieved November 29, 2022. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/adrienne-rich/diving-into-the-wreck.