English & Cultural Studies 1G03: Study Notes

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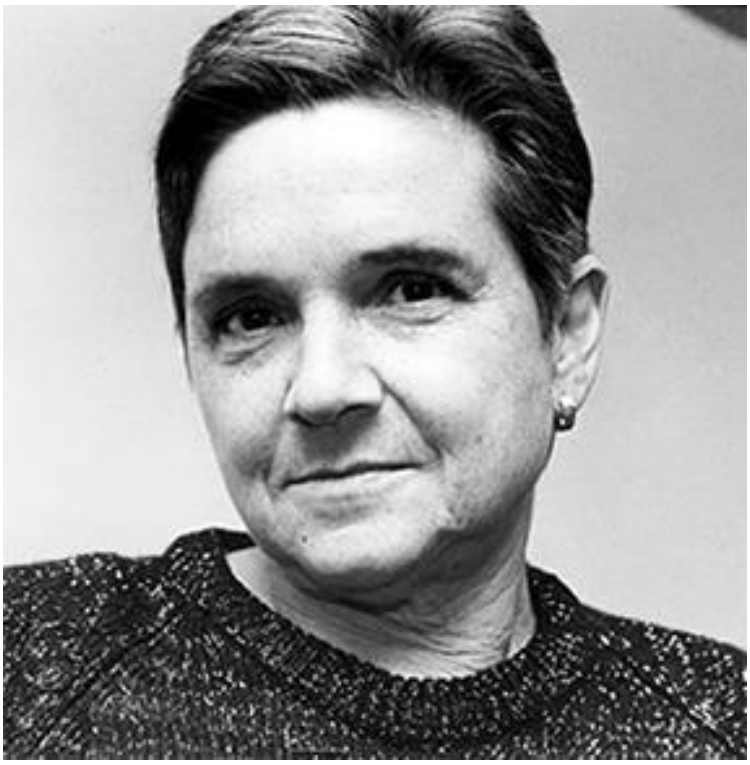


Adrienne Rich, "Diving into the Wreck" (1973)

To hear Rich read her poem, see: https://www.youtube.com./watch?v=c03sWpt62vw

Adrienne Rich (1929-2012) is among the most important poets in English to emerge in the latter half of the 20th century. She was a brilliant writer and feminist activist who influenced generations of thinkers, especially those thinkers who focus on the politics of gender and sexuality. What is "the politics of gender and sexuality"? Rich formed part of a much larger movement—whose origins go back at least as far as the end of the 18th century—that treats gender and sexuality not as an individual or private matter but as public, social, and cultural concern. Our gendered lives and our sexual lives are for Rich the site of enormous and sustained *normative* pressures, i.e., cultural norms or scripts or myths that administer and police our bodies by insisting that there are "healthy," "normal," and "right" ways of being gendered (for example, being a "man" or a "woman") and having a sexuality . . . and "unhealthy," "abnormal," and "wrong" ways. Rich wrote powerfully *against* such norms which for her had no basis in fact. In particular, she was unusually frank about the struggle to reshape and reimagine what it means to be a woman. She became a central figure in the emergence of feminism as a political and ethical force in North America. In her essays, she carefully pointed out the weaknesses of what she famously called

"compulsory heterosexuality," i.e., the scripts that insist that for a man "truly" to be a man he had to desire women, and for a woman "truly" to be a woman she had to desire men. To *resist* that compulsory script risked exclusion, denunciation, violence, and even death. Rich instead saw that there were many more ways of being a human being than "compulsory heterosexuality" permitted or at least endorsed. "Compulsory heterosexuality" was, she argued, a withered "book of myths," and was the central reason why contemporary culture had wrecked itself. Men and women both drowned in the impoverished world of "compulsory heterosexuality," but women in particular suffered the most. So she characterized herself as a "woman in the kingdom of the fathers," i.e. as a woman forced to be answerable to the whims and desires of men. Against that myth, she wrote essays and poems that affirmed women-centred experiences, knowledges, and histories. She sought ways to honour the importance of the myriad relationships and communities that women forge with other women, including the relationships between present-day women and women that history had all but forgotten. Whether women enjoyed the company of other women, learning from them and working with them, or whether women loved other women, forging erotic relationships with them, didn't make much of a difference to Rich. *All* women-centred experiences fell somewhere along what she unabashedly called "the lesbian continuum," the enormously varied lives of the communities of women that deserved to be affirmed, celebrated, honoured, queried, and explored. In the volume of poems in which "Diving into the Wreck" was published, Rich described herself as "white acetylene" that might "burn away" some of the ruinous effects of a culture overwhelmingly dominated by male-centred experience. That powerful metaphor recalls something William Blake once said about his imagination: My work, he said, means "Melting apparent surfaces away, and displaying the infinite which was hid."

"Diving into the Wreck" adapts and unmakes an old tradition of poems about virile and heroic men daring to travel to the underworld. These include: Virgil's long epic poem, the *Aeneid* (c. 19 BCE), whose titular character travels to the underworld to consult with his dead father; and Dante's intricately made poem from the 14th century, *The Divine Comedy*, in which Dante's speaker travels through no less than nine circles of hell but guided by the ghost of Virgil. Rich is unmaking this august and well-respected tradition: in her poem it is a woman who voyages to a kind of underworld, but rather than seeking to leave the world she searches to see the world *as it actually is*. Rather than joining a long line of male travellers, Rich's speaker tells us that she joins others, other women, who have had the courage and the visionary "power" to dare to look at "the wreck," at the ruinousness of a culture that leaves so little room for women. She begins the poem as if alone, but we quickly see that she is not as alone as she understandably feels when she sets out.

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

Let us all embrace the possibility of experiencing a "sea-change" in our lives, indeed, many "sea-changes"! When Coates calls for his son to *struggle* he is, in his own way, inviting him to embrace the power and the possibility, but also the great risk of embracing and enduring sea-changes. "Diving into the Wreck" is a poem about sea-changes, about the difficulties and the possibilities that come with these struggled-for transformations. Remember, diving is not just sinking: it is a deliberate, prepared-for, effortful and intentional immersion in a potentially hostile environment that also promises extraordinary revelations, strange sites, unexpected experiences that leave you changed. But there is always also peril in the work.

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

(Jacques Cousteau was a famous French undersea explorer whose group of super-manly divers was the subject of a popular series of documentaries that aired on television from the 1960s to the 1980s.)

The diver in "Diving into the Wreck" undertakes her voyage *not* in the company of Jacques Cousteau and his "assiduous" men ("assiduous" means those who are dedicated to their task, the ones who persevere).(In this photo from left to right: Bernard Delemotte, Chief Diver; Henri Garcia; Jean-Jérome Carcopin, and Jacques Cousteau. Photo credit: The Cousteau Society (preserved as large format photo at NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center)

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

There is a very long tradition of poems pausing to itemize equipment. In classical antiquity, that is, in ancient Greek and Roman literature, epic poems always included an "arming scene," a section of the poem that pauses to describe the male hero's weapons and his preparations for combat. You still see this sort of scene in action movies: the hero, usually male, ritualistically selecting his weapons, putting on his armour, getting ready to do battle. But in this case, the poem's hero is a woman who seeks to explore a wreckage deep beneath the sea. She does battle, but not against a foe of the sort that you would see in epic poems. Not quite. And so it is important to notice how the speaker of the poem is gently ironic about her equipment, which she finds is ungainly and "absurd." Why?

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

Another context informing this poem is the political scene in America in 1973. It is an age of growing protest against the war in Vietnam. But it is also a period in which the merits of the Equal Rights Amendment are being fiercely debate. The ERA was a relatively simple change proposed to the American Constitution that would guarantee the end of discrimination based on gender in matters having to do with employment, property, divorce, and others facets of everyday life. Both parts of the US Congress passed the Amendment, but it stalled and was finally parked because of growing opposition to it in the State legislatures, the majority of whom had to ratify the Amendment for it to become part of the Constitution. By the time Rich published her poem in 1973, it was clear that the proposed Amendment would fail, and fail because various groups mobilized condemning it. If women were guaranteed equality in employment matters, who would take care of the children, some asked? So Rich writes this poem in the midst of a conservative backlash against legal changes designed to address inequalities for women. The ERA remains unpassed to this day.

And so the diver dives, clambering first over the edge of the "sun-flooded schooner," using a ladder that usually hangs "innocently" over the side. To many, the speaker notes, the ladder is of no consequence. It just blends into the background. But for some it means something else: "We know what it is for, / we who have used it." This is the first suggestion in the poem that the diver may dive alone, but she is not the only person to have undertaken this dangerous voyage. Understanding how to get into the depths, how to take the first steps towards descending to observe the wreckage, is not a mystery. The ladder,

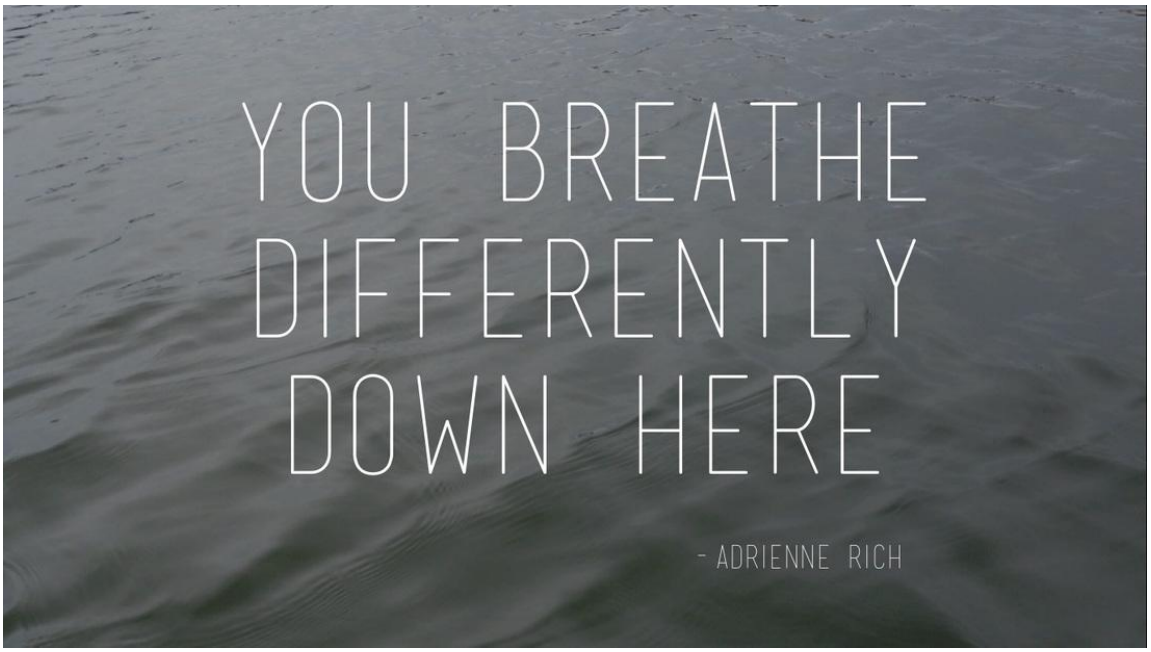
the path into the ocean, is there to be used. *So why don't more people use it?* Many choose not to see the ladder; but a few do, and Rich's speaker is one of those brave and visionary explorers. Many choose instead to loll about on the deck of the "sun-flooded schooner," pretending like the wreck never took place or that they aren't themselves involved in the catastrophe or in fact responsible for it. Others, the ones the speaker knowingly calls "we," choose differently, moving past the surface to immerse themselves in the complexity of the depths. In different ways, every writer on this course makes an analogous decision. Each might have remained oblivious, basking in the sun; and yet each writer decided to see the ladder for what it is, gather the right equipment, and undertake the dangerous voyage to think new thoughts, to contemplate insurgent possibilities, and brave to be different. It helps that others have preceded them. It is strange to think that some will have no idea what it means to undertake this kind of task. But the surface is not all that there is to the world and poems have a unique power to make that fact both felt and known to those who have the eyes to see these things and the ears to hear of them.

The diver dives, the repeated phrase, "I go down," reminding us of extent of the descent and the importance of pacing or timing it. As she descends, the world takes on different hues. At a certain depth, she feels like she will lose consciousness. "I am blacking out," she says, but in the next breath she revives, and acknowledges that "my mask is powerful / it pumps my blood with power." Yet she no sooner affirms that her preparations enable her to fight back against the sea, and that in this contest, she is the one who "wins," then another and very different thought and feeling overtakes her. The poem quietly and unobtrusively shifts gears (it is interesting to note that poems sometimes do not call attention to these shifts; remember how the rhyme scheme changes in Wall's sonnet, marking a shift of *volta*, after which the poem takes a new direction). There is another way of living in the depths, she confesses, one in which the diver is not at odds with the sea but somehow blended with it: "I have to learn alone / to turn my body without force / in the deep element." --Not to fight the sea, then, but somehow to move with it. What can that mean? At first it seems like she is reporting on a kind of "lesson." She's learned to blend in sometimes, to go with the flow, because there are occasions when infiltration is the key, not open fighting. The world of the catastrophe she is explore demands in any case that she radically change herself, how she moves, how to breathe. Revolutionary acts call for such transformations. But another sense to these verses intrudes, suggesting something quite different: is Rich losing track of her mission, immersing herself into the medium of her exploration, losing herself to it?

But that shift in perspective exposes the diver to a new possibility, one that is very attractive and yet in the end jettisoned because it is *only* attractive. Telling herself to stop resisting the depths is associated with a kind of amnesia: "And now: it is easy to forget / what I came for." Rich's speaker acknowledges the temptation to give up the exploration, its worries, its preparations, its unknowns, and instead to float about admiring the pretty view. She could have become that kind of poet, i.e. a poet luxuriating in the richness that language has to offer, creating poems brimming with gorgeous images and metaphors . . . but little else. Other great American poets, it seemed to her sometimes, had fallen prey to exactly that trap. At the time, American poets, male poets in particular, were writing remarkable poems that were often about self-consciously about poetry, poems that the luxuriated in the pleasures of language.

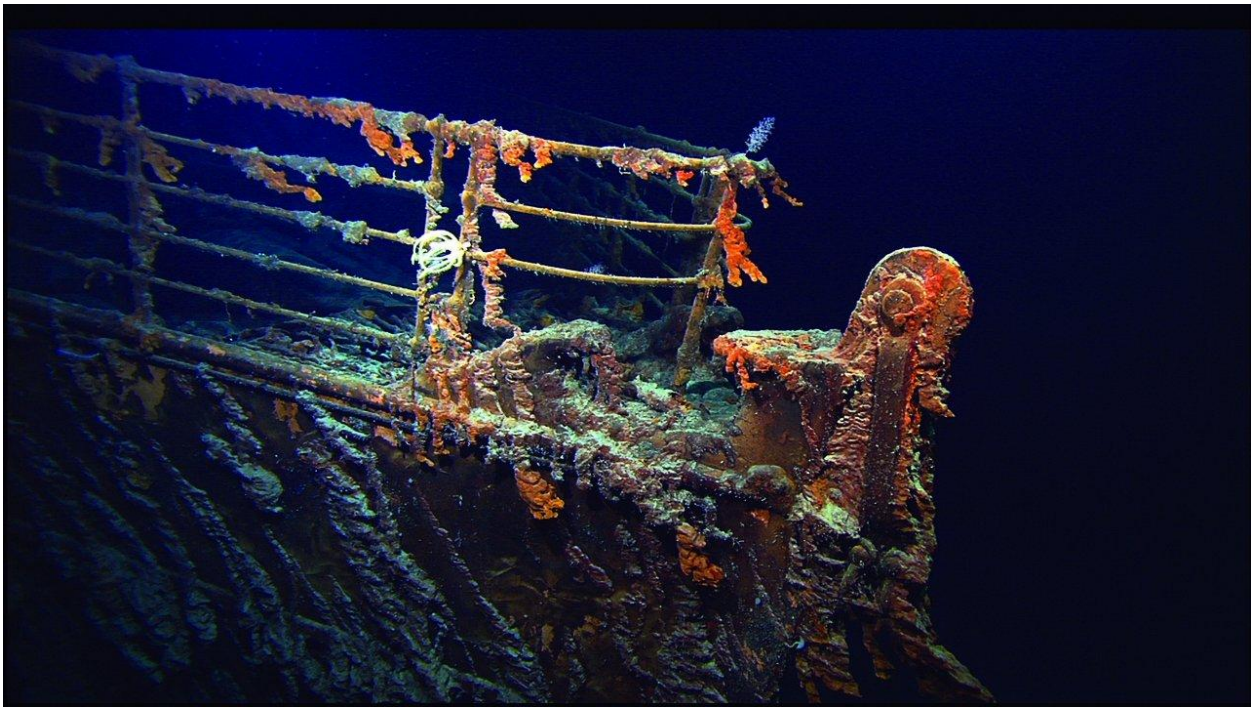
Rich wanted poetry to be about justice, but she was always frank about how, by virtue of perfecting her craft as a poet, by working so closely with the vast resources of the English language, she could feel the pull of that other kind of poetry, a poetry that was about poetry, about the imagination that creates it, about the language that makes it possible.

And isn't it easier to be a spectator of life rather than an explorer of its darknesses? And if you are superbly gifted with words, isn't it more lovely to create gorgeous worlds of words than immerse yourself in difficult truths, even ugly truths? This is a temptation, after all, that we also see Keats exploring. As we will see in this course, in Keats, the "marble men" and the "Queen Moon" are glorious to observe and to create as a poet . . . but they aren't real, finally. They are only steps towards the kind of poetry that Keats really wants and needs to write. The imagination can sometimes produce self-indulgently beautiful objects to enjoy and so, in effect, anaesthetize the artist. But this is to reduce the undersea world into which the diver has plunged to a scene in which what is most interesting are creatures "swaying their crenelated fans / between the reefs." No one can blame the visionary for momentarily feeling attracted to such a scene, especially if you are exhausted by all the thinking and all the risks that come with wrestling rigorously with the book of myths. Rich is doing something very interesting here, turning our eyes to a danger that comes with writing poems or indeed writing literature: poems and literature can activate critical imaginations, to be sure, but these beautiful objects can also prettify the world, rendering problems and difficulties inert. Is art just a lovely object that you hang on a wall and admire for its beauty, or is art a living thing, designed to trouble you and electrify your critical imaginations? Great artists know that even they can feel the pull in the first direction. Keats feels it, and honours that potential distraction by holding a place open in his own poems for it. In the end, his poems, like Rich's "Diving into the Wreck," aren't simply decorative, aren't simply "crenellated fans" swaying beautifully and dancing elegantly in the currents; but it takes courage to acknowledge that the temptation to succumb to those beauties is always there for someone who, like a poet, works with beauty and creates beautiful things. Professors in the Humanities must wrestle with an analogous problem: do we teach our students to admire the pleasing objects of our study for their own sake or do we invite our students to let their critical imaginations be activated by these objects? Poetry "means nothing if it simply decorates the dinner table of power which holds it hostage," Rich once wrote. (She wrote that in a 1997 letter addressed to President Clinton, turning down the National Medal for the Arts, the U.S.'s highest award for artistic achievement.)



So the diver catches herself, snaps to. "I came to explore the wreck," she says, straightforwardly, reminding herself to get back on track. The words she uses as a poet could be used to create gorgeous things but inert things, a poem about the fascinating "fish" and "weeds." But the diver knows better, knows what work her most important equipment, *language*, is there to do: "The words are purposes. / The words are maps." She will use the extraordinary resources of language to explore the wreck, *not* make something lovely to look at that happens to be about the wreck. "I came to see the damage that was done," she says, and then adds "and the treasures that prevail," suggesting that amid the damage, possibilities do remain. And it is at that precise moment that the light from her head-lamp illuminates something enormous in the depths, "something more permanent that fish or weed." The wreck is enormous, and the light of her imagination can only illuminate a part of it. But it does reveal something.

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



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

Readers have often puzzled over this transformation of the diver in the poem. Rich appears to appeal to the ancient myth of the androgyne, a creature whose gender combines masculinity and femininity, male and female. When Rich wrote this poem in the 1970s, there was a renewed fascination with this story; some believed that the way to "solve" the problem of the pervasive inequalities characterizing a patriarchal society, a land of fathers that consistently treated women unequally, was to imagine a world that had in effect "abolished" or "neutralized" the differences between the sexes: the androgyne. But among the many problems with the myth of the androgyne is that dissolving the important differences characterizing human life into a fantasized "whole" *reduces* and *simplifies* that life. It is a myth that amounts to a dream of the complete cessation of political struggle and dialogue about sex and gender—a dream that suits those in power rather those without power. Rather than inviting us to imagine entirely *new* ways for a body to be sexed or gendered, the androgyne flirts with the idea that sexes and genders could be fused into a homogeneous whole. Now the myth isn't doomed to this possibility; there are instances in which androgyny has been a useful way to imagine an escape from normative understandings of gender. Was this the sort of gender and sexuality disruption that David Bowie was experimenting with at a certain moment in his career? But the myth can also be used as an alibi for the fusion or neutralization of gender. In other words, the myth of the androgyne can be deployed to foreclose the extraordinarily different ways human beings can and do live their embodied lives, lives that hardly fit into conventional understandings of "male" and "female," "masculine" or "feminine." If there is a future for human life, it doesn't lie in making us the same and dissolving our differences, but, quite to the contrary, finding ways to affirm what makes us irreducibly different. (Another difficulty with the androgyne: What colour is an androgyne likely to be? Probably assumed to be white. So that's going to be a big problem if you identify as a person of colour.) Only a few years after the publication of "Diving into the Wreck," Rich herself said that she had no interest in androgyny because the idea had "no shame" in it, meaning the concept was too easily marshalled to a "leap across the tasks and struggles of the here and now." Androgyny simply wished away what was most important to Rich, namely the struggle to affirm the distinctness of *women's* experiences, histories, writings, work, losses and hopes. Rich after all spent her life as a thinker, activist, and feminist emphasizing the importance of honouring a woman-centred life, a life dedicated to women loving women, women working with women, and recovering the often long-forgotten histories of women thinkers and writers. So the suggestion that the diver becomes both a man and a woman in the depths surprised readers. But a close reading of the poem shows that Rich evokes this combination not in a simply idealistic way. The "we" made up of "I am she: I am he" is, after all, ruined: "we are the half-destroyed instruments," a mixture of "cowardice or courage." Whatever Rich imagines when her speaker says "I am she: I am he," the diver is now part of the wreck, no longer simply an explorer of the wreck. "We are, I am, you are," as she points out in the concluding stanza, all caught up in the wreck—again reminding us that it was never something to gawk at from a distance, as the speaker earlier suggested might be the case.

The concluding movement from "I" to "we" marks the moment when the diver's personal experience is firmly located in a wider political world, a world characterized by both the oppression of women and a long history of dissent against that oppression. The poem can sometimes feel inward and private, as if the wreck is a wreck inside the poet; but by the end there are all sorts of ways that the poem signals its public concerns, and helps us think too about how the private is in fact the political. But it is important to pause as the poem concludes to think about who are the "we" to whom the speaker speaks. In some sense it is an invitation to everyone, man or woman or whatever way you identify and are identified to join in the hard and perilous work of understanding the wreck. But first and foremost "we" unabashedly means those who identify as women, which, of course, is not one thing but many, many different things. It's important to hang on to the ways in which the poem dares to speak not only <u>of</u> women but <u>to</u> women. Why is that a dare? What makes that fact feel scandalous to some? In a way that the poem

does nothing to avoid, women are the addressees of this poem. Those of us who don't identify as a woman are asked to listen in and listen in closely, openly. And learn.

Note that as the poem ends, we don't get a sense of what precisely sank this ship. And there is no real indication of what the world might look like once free from the wreck. Indeed, Rich appears here to enmesh herself *in* the wreck, as if acknowledging that a woman-centred form of resistance can only take place amid the ruins of a patriarchal culture, not from some imagined "safe" vantage point. There is no separate world, an Amazonian world (in ancient Greek mythology, the Amazons were a community made up entirely of women), that isn't caught up in the damage of the "kingdom of the fathers." What we do see at the poem's conclusion is that, for now, she and we are both called upon to descend to the wreckage, again and again. That's one reason why the end of the poem returns us to the start of the poem. In the poem's last verses, we are brought back to the equipment that was so carefully enumerated as the poem began: knife, camera, and "a book of myths." When a poem returns to itself in this way, linking the beginning and the ending using the same words or images, that is called a *rondo*. But the *rondo* returns us to the beginning of the poem with a difference. Now we understand that the book of myths is hollowed out, lacking something centrally important: it is a book "in which / our names do not appear." Rich's "Diving into the Wreck" is a step towards ensuring that those names are never lost again. Think here of how important names and naming are in this course, names that might never otherwise appear: the names of the chimney sweepers in Blake's poem, the names of the enslaved persons in Prince's narrative whose lives were extinguished under the brutal conditions of chattel slavery, the names of the black men and women killed at the hands of the police. Names matter. Names never recorded matter.

Every text has a context, many contexts. Here's another one to consider. Several years before Rich published her poem, a leading German-American public intellectual, Hannah Arendt, had praised a friend of hers, Walter Benjamin, by characterizing him as a "pearl diver." Benjamin, born a German Jew, like Arendt, was an important philosopher, among the most important of the 20th century, who killed himself in 1940 rather than be captured by the Gestapo, the Nazi security police. Benjamin wrote wonderfully illuminating but very difficult essays that probed the depths of modern European culture, always sensitive to the ways in which horrific violence lurked just beneath the surface of the most supposedly "cultured" societies. Benjamin taught Arendt to be deeply suspicious of the stories that societies tell about themselves, particularly stories that said everything was progressing fine, stories that deliberately forgot about the individuals and communities that a damaged and marginalized along the way. When Arendt said that Benjamin was a "pearl diver," she did not mean that he simply nostalgically retrieved the past. As Seyla Benhabib argues, pearl diving "involves moving along the jagged ocean floor and upsetting its natural sedimentation in order to recover . . . hidden treasures. To reach them, the diver must often mess up the layers at the bottom of the ocean . . . by testing the broken edges, ruptures, and discontinuities of the past instead of treating them as elements in a smooth and continuous path" (*New York Review of Books* 24 February 2022, p. 28). Rich would have read Arendt's remarks about Benjamin. She too was a pearl diver, undertaking a risky voyage one of whose objectives is to tell the story of those who had been forgotten or drowned, namely the lives of women. Are you willing to test the broken edges? Are you in a position to mess up the layers at the bottom of the ocean?