

- This poem was written when Rich was still a young student. The formal structure of the poem and the distance she keeps from its subject are marks of her early work.
- She deals with the issue of female subjugation, but instead of commenting directly on marriage and the male/ female divide, Rich uses symbolism to get her message across.
- The tigers represent all that Aunt Jennifer is not. They are strong, free and in control of their own destiny, while she is a victim of an unhappy marriage – her only small act of rebellion being the creation of this image of power.

Stanza One

The poet describes the imaginary world created by Aunt Jennifer as she embroiders tigers on a fire screen. The tigers "prance" across the screen, implying that they are full of energy, strong, proud, carefree and unafraid. They are bright and golden –standing out against the green background. They are not full afraid and their brightness is not hidden. This is in contrast to the men "beneath the tree". This is the tigers' world and they "pace" through it in a confident, powerful manner. They are linked to the old system of knighthood by the word "chivalric", thus reminding us again of their power and strength. Yet there is a gallantry and dignity associated with the word "chivalric" which makes us wonder if the tigers are symbols of a positive sort of male power, compared to the men who are lurking in the shadows "beneath the tree".

Stanza Two

The poem now shifts away from the tigers and towards Aunt Jennifer. The power and energy of the first stanza vanishes as Aunt Jennifer is described. She is nothing like the strong, bright, confident creatures she has created. She does not move with strength and confidence. As she embroiders, her fingers are "fluttering through her wool". This suggests that she is weak and nervous. Even the act of creating this tapestry is difficult for her. She finds the "ivory needle hard to pull." The whiteness of the needle is in contrast to the bright golds and greens in the world she is creating on the screen. The colours associated with Aunt Jennifer are pale, almost lifeless. We imagine bloodless, white fingers and a white, ivory needle. It is worth noting that ivory is taken from the tusks of elephants – linking this stanza back to the jungle where the tigers live. Men hunted elephants for their ivory – dominating the natural world and taking what they wanted. They also rode elephants when hunting tigers, again conjuring up the image of men as destructive and dominant. This idea of male dominance is picked up in the next lines when we read that Aunt Jennifer is weighed down by her wedding ring. The hyperbole in the description of the ring as being a "massive weight" emphasizes how powerless and weak Aunt Jennifer is and how oppressed and controlled she is in her marriage. The wedding ring is more like a shackle than a piece of jewellery.

Stanza Three

In the final stanza, Rich imagines how Aunt Jennifer will be after death. She will, even in death, be "terrified" and the painful "ordeals" of her life will have marked her forever. She was "mastered" or conquered by these trials and will never be truly free. She is a victim, whether dead or alive. This is a negative view of marriage and there is no hint of love or equality in it. Instead, it has utterly crushed and defeated Aunt Jennifer. Life, for her, was something to be endured. The tigers, on the other hand, will carry on "prancing, proud and unafraid" in the screen that she created. The tragedy is that Aunt Jennifer never got to live life to the full and could only

hint at her unhappiness by depicting the strength and freedom of the tigers in her tapestry. But of course they are not alive and are only symbols of her longing.