

Adrienne Rich's "Diving into the Wreck"

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <http://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/adrienne-richs-diving-wreck>.

Introduction

Adrienne Rich (1929-2012) was among the most widely acclaimed and prominent American poets of the late twentieth century. Born in Baltimore to a Jewish father and a Protestant mother, her poetry and essays explored the tensions and dualities of Jewish, feminist, lesbian, and political identities in the United States. Rich came to prominence early, winning the Yale Younger Poets Award in 1951. In the 1970s, her poetry and political activism became even more intertwined after she came out; her prose from this period has had an important influence on contemporary queer theory, gender theory, and feminism.

"Diving into the Wreck," one of Rich's most well-known poems, appeared in a National Book Award-winning 1973 volume of the same title, now considered a turning point in her career. The resources in this kit use this poem as a way for students to consider Rich's relationships to Jewish history and identity, feminism, political activism, and the translation of Yiddish writers.

Cover image: American poet, essayist, and feminist Adrienne Rich outside the Warwick Hotel on November 17, 2006, in New York City. (Photograph by David Corio / Michael Ochs Archive via Getty Images.)

Subjects

American South, Feminism, Gender, Poetry, Sexuality, United States, Women Writers

Reading and Background

- The **full text** of "Diving into the Wreck" is available online from the Academy of American Poets, which also offers a **biographical sketch** and **additional poems**. The **Poetry Foundation** offers another informative biography of Rich and selections from her writing. "Diving into the Wreck" is also widely anthologized.
- *Adrienne Rich Poetry and Prose* (Norton Critical Edition, 2018) is an excellent print resource containing an extensive selection of her poetry alongside excerpts from her many essays. This volume also includes selections from contemporary reviews of Rich's writing and academic criticism considering her work.
- The **Adrienne Rich Literary Trust** offers a variety of contextual resources, including a chronology, audio recordings, bibliography, and photographs.
- For scholarship on Rich and "Diving into the Wreck," the University of Illinois's *Modern American Poetry* site is an excellent resource, containing excerpts from academic essays and books organized by their topic. Rich is a central figure in Zohar Weiman-Kelman's recent book, *Queer Expectations: A Genealogy of Jewish Women's Poetry* (SUNY Press, 2018), especially Chapters 1 and 5, which read her in dialogue with the Yiddish poet Kadia Molodowsky (the subject of Resource 4 in this kit).
- For recordings of Rich reading and discussing "Diving into the Wreck" and many other poems, consider visiting the University of Pennsylvania's **PennSound**.

Resources

1: Recording, Adrienne Rich reading "Diving into the Wreck" at Stanford University, 1973.

Reading poetry to ourselves, silently, and out loud can create very different experiences and affect our interpretation of the poem's form and meaning. In this activity, students first decide how they might give voice to the poem and then consider the sound of Adrienne Rich doing so.



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Suggested Activity: Ask students how they would imagine Rich reading “Diving into the Wreck” aloud. Would it be pensive? Uncertain? Frustrated? Proud? Assemble a list of possibilities. Now have students, with a partner, read the poem out loud, choosing one of these possible styles. (Alternative: ask students to change reading style for each stanza.) How is the experience of reading the poem out loud different from reading it silently?

Play the recording of Rich reading the poem for your students. How would they characterize the sound of this recording? (E.g., proud, defiant, determined.) How would they describe its rhythm or pace? Does it meet their expectations? Are they surprised to hear Rich, a Jewish poet, speak with a faint Southern accent? What might that say about our expectations of the sound or voice of a Jewish poem?

Source: Adrienne Rich, “Diving into the Wreck,” Reading at Stanford, 1973, PennSound, https://media.sas.upenn.edu/pennsound/authors/Rich/Stanford-73-B/Rich-Adrienne_07_Diving-Into-The-Wreck_Reading-at-Stanford_Side-B_1973.mp3.

2: Video, Adrienne Rich reading “Prospective Immigrants Please Note,” 1995.

Adrienne Rich’s writing is concerned with two kinds of myths: stories that are told or written and passed down, like legends and fables, and myths in the sense of fantasies or untruths that shape society. In “Diving into the Wreck,” she announces that her goal is to find and describe “the thing itself and not the myth.” In this activity, students will explore the meaning of the “book of myths” that recurs throughout “Diving into the Wreck” by examining an earlier Rich poem, “Prospective Immigrants Please Note.”

Suggested Activity: Prepare your students to listen to and read “Prospective Immigrants Please Note” by describing the two ideas of “myth” Rich’s poetry engages with (legends and societal fallacies). Ask them to write down a list of myths about immigrants and immigration to the United States—both contemporary and from the past, positive and negative. Ask them to mark whether they are legends (e.g., the story of the Pilgrims arriving at Plymouth Rock) or societal fallacies (e.g., the misconception that immigrants are crime-prone).

Share the text of “Prospective Immigrants Please Note” with your students and play the video of Rich reading the poem for the class. Pose some of the following questions to your students for discussion: what immigration myths does Rich challenge or address in this poem? In what way is the door, the poem’s central image, a myth? What change in perspective does Rich ask potential immigrants to take when viewing this door?

If your students have already read “Diving into the Wreck,” ask them to think about the two poems together. How does “Prospective Immigrants Please Note” relate to Rich’s ideas about myth in “Diving into the Wreck”? What legends or fictions might the “book of myths” in this poem contain?

Source: Adrienne Rich, “Prospective Immigrants Please Note,” recorded July 28, 1995, BillMoyers.com, April 6, 2017.

3: Essay excerpts, Adrienne Rich, “Split at the Root,” 1982.

Rich observed that, as the daughter of a Jewish father and a Southern, Episcopalian mother, she was not Jewish according to either traditional Jewish law or feminist and lesbian theory, all of which grant the mother primacy when inheriting identity. Yet Rich could never separate herself from either her paternal Jewish identity or her maternal Southern identity. Before coming out as a lesbian in the early 1970s, she was married to a Jewish man for seventeen years and raised their children with an awareness of their Jewish connections. In an early poem, Rich describes herself as “Split at the root, neither Gentile nor Jew, / Yankee nor Rebel.” She later re-uses the first phrase, “Split at the Root,” as the title of a 1982 essay about her difficult, ambivalent relationship to Jewish identity. In this activity, students will consider the nature of competing identities and what it means to have (or look for) “roots.”

Suggested Activity: Begin by reminding students of the different definitions of “roots”: for plants, the portion which attaches it to the ground or another support; more abstractly, an origin, source, or cause. Ask students to write down a list of their “roots” (These might include family members, hometowns, religions, racial, sexual, or cultural identities, or many other things—let it be completely open to students’ interpretations.) They should come up with as many as they can, but should aim for at least five to six. Now ask them to draw these roots as if they are literal roots, connected to a tree trunk (the individual). To do this, they will need to consider the relationship among the roots they’ve listed: which would be near the surface, and which deeper? Which roots are closely connected, which branch out of each other, and which feel separate?

Now ask students to read the first selection from “Split at the Root.” They should then look back at their diagrams. What would it mean to be “split at the root”?

Next ask students to read the second and third selections from “Split at the Root.” In many ways, the image or metaphor of “roots” as a way of conceptualizing identity troubles Rich. Based on what they have read, ask students to discuss, in partners or groups, why this might be so. Is Rich saying that the idea of roots stands in the way of wholeness—or that the quest to “bring them whole” is part of the problem with roots?

In “Diving into the Wreck,” Rich offers a different way of thinking about identity, origins, and inheritance. Instead of the metaphor of roots, she offers the metaphor of a shipwreck. Ask students to briefly imagine what their roots diagrams would look like if drawn as the exploration of an undersea wreck. What changes when the individual is imagined as a diver rather than a tree trunk? What does this new metaphor say about our relationships to origins, identity, and the past? Does it resolve any of the difficulties Rich found with “roots”?

Source: Adrienne Rich, “Split at the Root,” *Adrienne Rich’s Poetry and Prose: A Norton Critical Edition* (Norton, 1993), 224–239.

4: Poem, Kadia Molodowsky's “Women Songs – 1” (“Froyen lider - 1”), translation by Adrienne Rich, 1969.

In the 1960s, Rich was one of many prominent Jewish American writers to participate in preparing the anthology *A Treasury of Yiddish Poetry*, for which she translated poems by Anna Margolin, Celia Dropkin, Dvoyre Fogel, and Kadia Molodowsky. In this activity, students will look at one of the Yiddish poems Rich translated and consider how it speaks to Rich’s relationship to Judaism, history, feminism, and Yiddish.

Kadia Molodowsky, the author of the Yiddish poem included in this activity, was a poet, novelist, and educator. Born in contemporary Belarus in 1894, she began her literary career in Kiev and Warsaw before immigrating to the United States in 1935. Her best-known works, including the poem “*El khanun*” (“God of Mercy”), respond to the Holocaust; many also examine the lives of women in Jewish communities. In Israel, she is primarily known today as the author of children’s verse.

Suggested Activity: Distribute an unattributed copy of “Women’s Songs – 1” and ask students to read it aloud in pairs. Ask them to discuss the relationships the poem’s speaker describes: to the past, to family, to Jewish history and identity, and to being a woman.

Next, describe the work to students as “an Adrienne Rich poem.” How does this information affect their understanding of the subjects they just discussed? Specifically, what kind of relationship to the past, to Jewishness, and to a feminist heritage do they see? (If you have previously discussed the other resources in this kit, suggest that students may wish to reflect on those documents.)

Remind students that this poem, like many of Rich’s works, is about exploring history, both public and private. The same is true of “Diving into the Wreck.” How does each poem explore or excavate the past? What is the difference between encountering ghosts (“Women’s Songs”) and examining a shipwreck (“Diving into the Wreck”)?

Now inform students that while Adrienne Rich did write these English words, they are a translation from the Yiddish poet Kadia Molodowsky. How does this affect their opinions about the meaning(s) of the poem? Beyond “translator” and “translation,” how might students describe the relationship between Rich’s poetry and Molodowsky’s?

Source: Kadia Molodowsky, “Women Songs,” trans. Adrienne Rich, in *A Treasury of Yiddish Poetry*, eds. Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg (Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1969).

5: Letter, Adrienne Rich to Jane Alexander, July 3, 1997.

In 1997, Adrienne Rich was to receive the National Medal for the Arts, an award created by Congress whose recipients are nominated by the National Endowment for the Arts and selected by the President. Her decision to decline the award became national news and a source of controversy which Rich ultimately addressed in an essay in the *Los Angeles Times* in which she included a copy of her initial letter refusing to accept the honor. Rich’s decision was grounded in her beliefs about the proper relationship between art and political power. This resource allows students to consider the roles of political conscience and

activism in Rich's work.

Suggested Activity: Explain the background of this event, then distribute copies of the resource. Ask students to focus on the middle two paragraphs (individually, in pairs, or together as a class). What does it mean for art to "simply decorate the dinner table of power which holds it hostage"? Why does Rich mention that "The radical disparities of wealth and power in America are widening at a devastating rate"?

Rich writes that there "is no simple formula for the relationship of art to justice." Ask students to write for three to four minutes about the relationship between art and justice. How else, beyond breaking silences and giving voice to the disregarded, can art work toward justice? In what ways can art perpetuate injustice? Do they accept the premise that art *should* work toward justice? What other goals or priorities might an artist have?

Additional activity: In this letter, Rich describes what art should *not* do. Based on what students have learned about her life and work from other resources and additional poems, what do they think Rich believes politically-conscious art *should* do? Ask them to discuss and write down the characteristics that come to mind. Can they think of contemporary artists, in any medium, whose work largely fulfills these goals? What dilemmas or controversies do (or might) these artists face?

Source: Adrienne Rich, "Why I Refused the National Medal for the Arts," *Los Angeles Times*, August 3, 1997.