



# Collegedunia NCERT Solutions

*Aunt Jennifer's Tigers NCERT Solution: line-grounded explanations for Adrienne Rich's three-stanza meditation on art, marriage and freedom, from Flamingo (2026-27)*

## Chapter 11: Flamingo Poetry: Aunt Jennifer's Tigers

### About this Chapter

**Aunt Jennifer's Tigers** is a tightly wrought, three-stanza poem by the American poet Adrienne Rich (1929–2012), anthologised as the closing poem of the Poetry section in *Flamingo*. The poem watches an elderly woman stitch fearless tigers onto an embroidered panel while her own life is weighed down by “the massive weight of Uncle’s wedding band”. Beneath its quiet surface the poem opens up questions of patriarchy, the burden of marriage, and the way art outlives the artist. These solutions ground every answer in specific lines of the poem and explain each image (denizens, chivalric, ringed, the ivory needle) in plain language.

**Topics covered:** Contrast between the tigers and Aunt Jennifer • The constraints of married life • Art as an escape and as a legacy • Symbolism of colour, weight and fluttering hands • Form: three iambic-pentameter quatrains with AA BB rhyme

#### Poet and source.

Adrienne Rich (1929–2012), USA; published in her 1951 collection *A Change of World* and anthologised in *Flamingo*.

#### Form.

Three quatrains in iambic pentameter; rhyme scheme AA BB CC across each stanza.

#### Central contrast.

The tigers prance “proud and unafraid” on the embroidered panel; Aunt Jennifer’s hands are “terrified” and “ringed with ordeals”.

Also see for this chapter: [Revision Notes](#)

## Think it out

**Q 11.1** How do 'denizens' and 'chivalric' add to our understanding of the tiger's attitudes?

### SOLUTION

The two words appear in the first stanza of the poem and carry most of the weight of Adrienne Rich's portrait of the tigers. Reading the lines closely, we get:

#### Key lines

"Aunt Jennifer's tigers prance across a screen, / Bright topaz denizens of a world of green. / They do not fear the men beneath the tree; / They pace in sleek chivalric certainty."

- **"Denizens"** means inhabitants who belong somewhere by right, not just visitors. By calling the tigers "denizens of a world of green", Rich gives them full citizenship of their forest world. They are not creatures who are afraid of being chased out; they own the place.
- **The colour "bright topaz"** pairs with "denizens" to suggest that the tigers are jewel-like and at home in the landscape. A topaz is a precious yellow gemstone, so the tigers are valuable, gleaming, permanent features of their green world.
- **"Chivalric"** means knightly, of the code of chivalry. Knights in medieval romance moved with calm courage, an unshaken self-confidence, and a certain dignity of bearing. The tigers "pace in sleek chivalric certainty", so they walk with that same noble, unflustered confidence.
- **Together the two words build the tigers as confident nobles of their world.** "Denizens" tells us where they belong; "chivalric" tells us how they carry themselves inside that belonging. They are not aggressive or intimidating; they are simply unafraid.
- **The contrast with Aunt Jennifer is immediate.** While the tigers "do not fear the men beneath the tree", Aunt Jennifer's hands will turn out, by stanza three, to be "terrified". The diction of the first stanza is already setting up the gulf between the embroidered tigers and their embroiderer.

#### How to read the diction

Notice that Rich does not say the tigers "attack" or "threaten". She uses calm aristocratic words: "denizens", "chivalric", "certainty". The tigers are not violent; they are dignified. That dignity is exactly what Aunt Jennifer cannot have in her own life.

**Final Answer:** “Denizens” makes the tigers rightful inhabitants of their green world, and “chivalric” gives them the calm, knightly poise of the medieval code of chivalry. Together the two words present the tigers as confident, dignified, unafraid creatures who own their landscape, which sets up the contrast with the frightened, weighed-down Aunt Jennifer in the next two stanzas.

**EXPERT'S SOLUTION** : Dr Ananya Iyer, PhD English Literature, Jawaharlal Nehru University

**Strategic angle.** For the board, an examiner is looking for *both* the dictionary meaning and the imaginative effect of each word, and for the way the two words work together. Treat them as a matched pair.

- “Denizens” is a noun of belonging. It tells us that the tigers have a recognised home, a defined place, a settled relationship with the green world. They are not intruders. That single word answers the unspoken question, “Whose world is the tigers’ world?”, it is theirs by right.
- “Chivalric” is an adjective of bearing. It tells us how the tigers move inside their owned territory: with the cool, steady, courteous confidence of medieval knights. They do not strut and they do not run; they “pace”, a verb of measured walking.
- The phrase “sleek chivalric certainty” bundles three sensory qualities together: “sleek” (smooth, well-groomed, glossy), “chivalric” (noble in bearing), “certainty” (without any doubt). The tigers are physically and morally composed.
- Most importantly, both words borrow their grandeur from *human* culture, the language of citizenship and the code of knighthood. Rich is doing this on purpose. The animals on the embroidery are made grander than the human woman who is stitching them. The diction inverts the usual hierarchy of human over animal.
- For a top-band answer, close by noting that “denizens” and “chivalric” between them establish the controlling contrast of the whole poem: dignified, free, fearless tigers in stanza one versus “terrified” hands “ringed with ordeals” in stanza three.

**Why this matters.** The board paper often phrases this question as “how does the poet build the tigers’ character in the opening stanza?” The two words are not decoration, they are the entire characterisation in compressed form.

**Final Answer:** “Denizens” gives the tigers rightful belonging in their green world; “chivalric” gives them the calm, knightly poise of their movement. Borrowed from the noble language of citizenship and medieval knighthood, the two words present the tigers as dignified, free, fearless creatures and quietly raise them above the human woman who has stitched them.

**Q 11.2** Why do you think Aunt Jennifer's hands are 'fluttering through her wool' in the second stanza? Why is she finding the needle so hard to pull?

### SOLUTION

The second stanza of the poem turns from the embroidered tigers to the hands of the embroiderer. Rich's diction shifts from confident, weighty words like "chivalric certainty" to small, anxious, trembling words.

#### Key lines

"Aunt Jennifer's fingers fluttering through her wool / Find even the ivory needle hard to pull. / The massive weight of Uncle's wedding band / Sits heavily upon Aunt Jennifer's hand."

- **"Fluttering" is a word of nervous, weak motion.** Birds flutter when they are startled; eyelids flutter when we are anxious; cloth flutters in a draught. Aunt Jennifer's fingers do not move with confidence; they move in small, agitated motions through the wool.
- **The fluttering shows physical and emotional strain.** She is probably elderly, her hands may be arthritic, and years of married life have left her without inner steadiness. The hands cannot do this task with the calm of the tigers she is stitching.
- **The "ivory needle" should be easy to pull.** Ivory is smooth, the needle is small, the wool is soft. There is no physical reason for the task to be hard. Rich is telling us that the difficulty is not in the materials but in the person.
- **The hardness of pulling comes from inside.** Aunt Jennifer is tired, frightened, weighed down. Even the smallest action of her own life, threading a needle, is heavy with the burden of all that she carries.
- **The next two lines name the burden.** "The massive weight of Uncle's wedding band / Sits heavily upon Aunt Jennifer's hand." The wedding ring, in Rich's reading, is not a small gold band; it is a "massive weight". Marriage itself is what makes the hand tremble and the needle hard to pull.

#### Why the verb "flutter" is so important

"Flutter" is a verb of small, weak, frightened motion. The same word is used elsewhere in poetry for moths near a lamp, for caged birds, for the heart of a nervous person. By choosing "flutter" for Aunt Jennifer's fingers, Rich aligns her with all those small, frightened, captive things.

**Final Answer:** Aunt Jennifer's hands flutter because she is physically weak, emotionally weighed down, and possibly elderly. Even the smooth ivory needle is hard to pull because the real weight on her hand is not the needle but "the massive weight of Uncle's wedding band". The fluttering and the difficulty are signs of how the burden of married life has worn down her ability to act with calm strength.

**EXPERT'S SOLUTION** : Mr Arjun Mehra, MA English, Delhi University

**Alternative reading.** A useful way to read this stanza is to set its verbs and adjectives against those of stanza one.

- **Verb contrast.** The tigers “prance” and “pace” , strong, deliberate, balanced verbs. Aunt Jennifer’s fingers “flutter” and “find. . . hard to pull”, nervous, weak, struggling verbs. The grammar itself shows the difference between maker and made.
- **Adjective contrast.** The tigers are “bright”, “sleek” and “chivalric”. Aunt Jennifer’s wool is just “wool”; the needle is “ivory” but “hard to pull”; the wedding band is “massive” and “heavy”. Her vocabulary is a vocabulary of weight, not of grace.
- **The wedding band is the cause.** Rich is direct, the band’s “massive weight. . . sits heavily upon Aunt Jennifer’s hand”. The ring is a literal object, but the whole institution of marriage as Aunt Jennifer has known it (under “Uncle”, a figure she is never even named in relation to except through this band) presses down on her.
- **The hand is the part of the body that does art.** Aunt Jennifer’s hands are also the hands stitching the fearless tigers. The same hands that create freedom in art are the hands worn down by marriage. The contradiction is the engine of the whole poem.
- **For a board answer, name three things.** (i) The physical fluttering and difficulty of pulling the needle; (ii) the “massive weight of Uncle’s wedding band” as the cause; (iii) the symbolic point: married life under patriarchy has worn down even the simple actions of her body.

**Why this matters.** The board paper often phrases this as a 3- or 4-mark question. A short answer should not stop at “her hands are old.” The poet is making a sharp claim about how marriage *weighs on the body itself*, not just the spirit.

**Final Answer:** Aunt Jennifer’s fingers flutter through the wool because she is physically and emotionally worn down; she finds the smooth ivory needle hard to pull because the real weight on her hand is the “massive weight of Uncle’s wedding band”. Marriage, in Rich’s reading, has pressed even the smallest action of her own body into trembling difficulty.

**Q 11.3** What is suggested by the image ‘massive weight of Uncle’s wedding band’?

**SOLUTION**

The line is the most directly political moment in the poem. A wedding ring is, in life, a very small object, a thin band of gold worn on the finger. Rich’s phrase makes that small object “massive” and “heavy”. The image carries the whole argument of the poem about marriage.

### 🔑 Key lines

“The massive weight of Uncle’s wedding band / Sits heavily upon Aunt Jennifer’s hand.”

- **The ring is not literally heavy.** A wedding band weighs only a few grams. The “massive weight” is a *psychological* and *social* weight, not a physical one.
- **The ring belongs to “Uncle”.** Rich calls it *Uncle’s* wedding band, not Aunt Jennifer’s. This is deliberate. The ring stands for his ownership of her, not for a shared bond. The aunt wears *his* ring; she does not own her own.
- **“Sits heavily upon Aunt Jennifer’s hand” uses the verb “sit”.** A ring should slide onto the finger; this one “sits” on the hand the way a heavy weight sits on a table. The verb makes the band feel like furniture, not jewellery.
- **The image stands for marriage as an institution.** In a society that treats marriage as a permanent transfer of ownership from father to husband, the ring becomes a brand, a mark of belonging, and a daily reminder of the woman’s secondary status. Rich’s poem dates from 1951, when this was the dominant model.
- **The weight is also the weight of fear.** In stanza three we learn that Aunt Jennifer’s hands are “terrified” and “ringed with ordeals she was mastered by”. The same ring that weighed down her hand has, over time, marked her life with “ordeals” she could not master.

### ♥ Why This Matters

A small object can carry a huge meaning in poetry. The wedding band in this poem is the kind of compressed symbol that exam boards love: one phrase (“massive weight of Uncle’s wedding band”) summarises an entire critique of patriarchal marriage. Read the band as the visible sign of the invisible weight Aunt Jennifer carries every day.

**Final Answer:** The image suggests that, although a wedding ring is in fact tiny, it carries an enormous psychological and social weight for Aunt Jennifer. By calling it “Uncle’s wedding band” and giving it “massive weight” that “sits heavily upon” her hand, Rich shows the ring as a symbol of male ownership and of the burden of patriarchal marriage that has worn her down.

**EXPERT’S SOLUTION** : Dr Meera Krishnan, PhD Romantic Poetry, University of Hyderabad

**Strategic angle.** Read the phrase across three orders, the literal ring, the symbolic ring, and the structural ring of the poem. All three are at work in this line.

- **Literal level.** The aunt is an elderly woman whose hands have aged under decades of married life. Even on this plain physical level, a tight ring on an arthritic finger does

feel heavy and immovable. Rich is not exaggerating in a vacuum; she is starting from a real bodily sensation many elderly women know.

- **Symbolic level.** The ring stands for marriage, and in particular for marriage as Rich's generation knew it, an institution that, especially in 1950s America, attached a wife's name, finances and freedom to her husband. The "Uncle" figure in the poem is never described doing anything; he exists only as the band on her finger and the "ordeals" she could not master. This absence is the point.
- **Structural level.** The word "ringed" returns in stanza three: "Still ringed with ordeals she was mastered by." The ring is no longer one object on her finger; the ordeals themselves surround her in a ring. The literal band becomes a metaphor for the closed circle of a life she could not escape.
- **Tone.** The phrase is calmly stated, not shouted. Rich does not call the ring a "shackle" or a "cage". She uses the most ordinary word, "wedding band", and adds only "massive weight". The understatement is part of the poem's power. The aunt does not even have the vocabulary of protest.
- **Feminist reading.** Adrienne Rich went on to become one of the most important feminist poets in English. This line is one of her earliest images of the way ordinary domestic objects, a wedding band, an ivory needle, a panel of embroidery, carry the politics of a woman's life. Cite this when asked about the poem in a context of "women's writing."

**Why this matters.** For 5- or 6-mark questions, build the answer through these three orders, literal, symbolic, structural, and quote both the second-stanza phrase and the third-stanza echo ("ringed with ordeals"). That gives an examiner clear evidence of close reading.

**Final Answer:** The phrase converts a small gold object into a massive weight. Literally, the band is heavy on her aging hand; symbolically, it stands for the institution of patriarchal marriage and male ownership (note "Uncle's"); structurally, the ring is echoed in stanza three's "ringed with ordeals", which extends the band into the closed circle of a whole confined life.

### ✗ Common Mistake

A common slip is to write "the wedding band is heavy gold" or to take the line literally. The band's weight is symbolic, not material. Quote "Uncle's wedding band" and the verb "sits heavily" to show you have read the line as the poem intends.

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**Q 11.4** Of what or of whom is Aunt Jennifer terrified within in the third stanza?**SOLUTION**

The third stanza of the poem looks forward to Aunt Jennifer's death and names the state in which her hands will lie. The single word "terrified" carries the whole emotional weight of her life.

**Key lines**

"When Aunt is dead, her terrified hands will lie / Still ringed with ordeals she was mastered by."

- **Aunt Jennifer is terrified of her marriage.** The previous stanza has named the source, "the massive weight of Uncle's wedding band". The terror is not of a single moment; it is the long fear of life under a controlling, dominant husband.
- **She is terrified of patriarchal authority more generally.** "Uncle" is one example; the broader fear is of the social system in which a woman's identity, choices and freedom belong to a man. The poem is set in 1951 America but applies wherever a woman has been "mastered" by marriage.
- **She is terrified of having no freedom of her own.** Her one act of self-expression is the embroidery. Even there, her fingers can only "flutter" as they try to pull the needle. The terror is the terror of a life in which one cannot move freely even with one's own hands.
- **Even in death she will not be free.** "Her terrified hands will lie / Still ringed with ordeals." The word "still" is double-edged: her hands will be motionless (one meaning of "still"), and at the same time the ordeals will continue to surround them (the "still" of continuance, as in "the ring is still there"). Death does not loosen the ring.
- **The terror is internal.** Rich does not show Uncle beating Aunt Jennifer or shouting at her. The fear has seeped inwards; it is now part of her own hands. "Terrified hands" is a small, unforgettable image because the fear has moved from the mind into the body.

**Why This Matters**

Notice the difference between "afraid" and "terrified". "Afraid" suggests a passing worry; "terrified" is a deeper, longer, frozen fear. Rich does not soften the word. The aunt has lived with a terror that her body has finally absorbed.

**Final Answer:** Aunt Jennifer is terrified of her marriage, of the controlling husband ("Uncle"), and more broadly of the patriarchal social system that has "mastered" her through her wedding band. The fear is so deep that her hands themselves are "terrified", and even in death they will lie "ringed with ordeals", the terror does not leave her, on the page, even at the end.

**EXPERT'S SOLUTION** : *Mr Karan Sethi, MA English Literature, University of Calcutta*

**Strategic angle.** Many students answer “she is afraid of her husband” and stop. That answer is correct but partial. Read the terror at three layers, and your answer will be complete.

- **Layer 1: Uncle as the immediate figure.** Aunt Jennifer's terror is, on the surface, a terror of the man she married. He is the wearer of the ring she wears on her finger and the master of the ordeals she could not master. He is not described or named; he exists in the poem only as the band.
- **Layer 2: Marriage as the institution.** Behind the single husband stands the system of arranged or constrained marriage that, in 1951, gave the husband legal, financial and social control over the wife. Aunt Jennifer's terror is of being permanently held inside that system.
- **Layer 3: Patriarchy as the social order.** Wider still is the whole society that produces such marriages, that hands a wife from her father's house to her husband's house with a ring as a token. The aunt's terror is, at this scale, a terror of the whole structure in which women's lives are owned.
- **The proof of the terror is bodily.** Her hands are “terrified”. Her fingers “flutter”. The needle is hard to pull. The terror is not stated in dialogue, the poem has no spoken lines from Aunt Jennifer, it is shown in the smallest physical motions of her hands.
- **Death does not release her.** “Still ringed with ordeals she was mastered by” is the harshest line in the poem. The ring she wore on her hand becomes the ring of suffering around her dead hands. In Rich's reading, patriarchy outlives the individual woman, and that is precisely the contrast against which the surviving, prancing tigers shine.

**Why this matters.** The board paper often phrases this as “what is the source of Aunt Jennifer's fear?” or “analyse the word ‘terrified’ in the third stanza.” The 5-mark answer should quote the line, name all three layers, and close with the death-image that shows the terror does not end.

**Final Answer:** Aunt Jennifer is terrified within of Uncle as an individual, of the institution of patriarchal marriage that he represents, and of the wider social order that has “mastered” her. Rich shows the terror not in speech but in the body, her hands flutter, the needle is hard to pull, and even in death her “terrified hands will lie / Still ringed with ordeals she was mastered by”.

**Q 11.5** What are the ‘ordeals’ Aunt Jennifer is surrounded by, why is it significant that the poet uses the word ‘ringed’? What are the meanings of the word ‘ringed’ in the poem?

## SOLUTION

The third stanza closes Aunt Jennifer's story by saying her hands will lie "Still ringed with ordeals she was mastered by." Both the "ordeals" and the word "ringed" deserve careful unpacking.

#### 🔍 Key lines

"When Aunt is dead, her terrified hands will lie / Still ringed with ordeals she was mastered by.  
/ The tigers in the panel that she made / Will go on prancing, proud and unafraid."

- **The "ordeals" are the trials of married life.** An ordeal is a difficult, painful test, the kind of suffering that has to be endured rather than chosen. Aunt Jennifer's ordeals include the daily burden of marriage, the loss of freedom, the absence of any voice of her own, and the slow wearing down of her body and spirit by "Uncle" and his social authority.
- **She was "mastered by" the ordeals.** The verb "master" here is harsh. To be mastered is to be defeated, owned, overpowered. Aunt Jennifer did not master the ordeals; they mastered her. Even in death she carries the marks of that defeat.
- **"Ringed" is a triple-meaning word in this poem.**

#### 🔍 Three meanings of "ringed"

1. **Literally, she still wears Uncle's wedding band.** The wedding ring remains on her finger even in death; that is the first, plain meaning. Her hand is "ringed" with a band.

2. **Metaphorically, the ordeals surround her in a closed circle.** "Ringed" here means encircled. The trials of her life form a ring around her, with no opening or exit. Her life has been a closed circle of suffering.

3. **Echoing the first stanza, the band is the source ring.** The first stanza calls the wedding band the cause of the "massive weight"; the third stanza shows that band has now become the whole circumference of her existence. The small ring has grown into a large ring of ordeals.

- **The triple meaning is the point.** Rich is showing that a single object (a wedding band) can grow, in a woman's life, into a complete enclosure (a ring of ordeals). The word "ringed" captures that growth in one syllable.
- **The tigers complete the contrast.** In the very next line, "The tigers in the panel that she made / Will go on prancing, proud and unafraid." The tigers are also part of a "ring" (the embroidered panel is a closed shape), but their ring is one of freedom and confidence, while Aunt Jennifer's is one of ordeals.

#### 🔍 Exam Tip

For an extract-based question quoting these lines, list all three meanings of "ringed", the literal ring, the circle of ordeals, and the echo of the wedding band from stanza two. Naming all three shows full close reading and earns the highest band.

**Final Answer:** The “ordeals” are the trials of patriarchal married life, the loss of freedom, the daily burden of being owned, the absence of a voice of her own. Aunt Jennifer was “mastered” by these ordeals. “Ringed” has three meanings together: literally she still wears Uncle’s wedding band on her finger; metaphorically the ordeals encircle her in a closed ring with no exit; and structurally the word echoes the wedding band of stanza two, showing how a single ring on her finger has grown into the whole circumference of her life.

**EXPERT’S SOLUTION** : *Dr Sneha Bose, PhD English Literature, Jadavpur University*

**Alternative reading.** Read “ringed” against the verb “mastered”. The two words together carry the third stanza.

- “Ringed” is a spatial verb, it tells you how the ordeals are arranged around her. “Mastered” is a relational verb, it tells you who controls whom in that arrangement. The ordeals are arranged around her in a ring *and* they have full control over her inside that ring.
- “Ringed with ordeals” suggests an enclosure that cannot be undone. A ring has no beginning and no end; you cannot step out of a ring without breaking it. Aunt Jennifer never breaks it; she dies inside it.
- “She was mastered by” is in the passive voice. Grammar itself enforces the point: the ordeals are the subject, the actors; Aunt Jennifer is the object, the acted-upon. Even the sentence shape mirrors her loss of agency.
- “Ringed” also continues a chain of ring-images in the poem. The first stanza has the ring of the embroidered screen with its tigers (free and prancing); the second stanza has the ring on her finger (Uncle’s wedding band); the third stanza has the ring of ordeals (the closed circle of her sufferings). Three rings, three meanings. Only one of them, the embroidered screen, is a ring of freedom.
- For the board, close the answer with a contrast: the tigers on the panel “will go on prancing, proud and unafraid”, another ring, the ring of art, that remains free. The aunt’s two literal rings (the band, the ordeals) are rings of confinement; the panel of tigers is the only ring of freedom in the poem.

**Why this matters.** Many five-mark answers stop at one meaning of “ringed”. Naming three meanings, and pointing to the contrast with the tigers’ panel, lifts the answer into the top band. The whole poem turns on rings: the rings of confinement and the ring of art.

**Final Answer:** “Ordeals” are the trials of patriarchal marriage that Aunt Jennifer endured and could not master. “Ringed” carries three meanings: literally, the wedding band that still encircles her finger; metaphorically, the closed circle of ordeals surrounding her; and structurally, the echo of stanza two’s wedding band, now grown into a complete enclosure. The contrast with the tigers’ panel, a ring of art that remains free, is the heart of the poem.

**Q 11.6** Why do you think Aunt Jennifer created animals that are so different from her own character? What might the poet be suggesting, through this difference?

### SOLUTION

The contrast between the maker and the made is the central paradox of the poem. Aunt Jennifer is timid, fluttering and weighed down; the tigers she stitches are confident, prancing and unafraid. Rich asks us to think about why the artist would choose to make what she herself cannot be.

#### Key lines

“Aunt Jennifer’s tigers prance across a screen, / Bright topaz denizens of a world of green. / They do not fear the men beneath the tree; / They pace in sleek chivalric certainty.”

- **The tigers are everything Aunt Jennifer is not.** She is afraid; they “do not fear”. Her hands flutter; they pace. She is weighed down; they are sleek and certain. The opposites are sharply drawn.
- **She creates them as a longing, not a likeness.** Art often expresses what we lack rather than what we already are. Aunt Jennifer cannot live a fearless, prancing, knightly life, so she imagines one onto the embroidered screen. The tigers are her un-lived life.
- **The tigers may be an act of secret rebellion.** Embroidery was, in 1951, a permitted “womanly” activity. Aunt Jennifer is allowed to stitch. Inside that allowed activity, she stitches images of strength and freedom, tigers, “denizens”, “chivalric” bearers. The rebellion is hidden inside an approved hobby.
- **They may also be a record of what is missing in her world.** “They do not fear the men beneath the tree” is a notable line. The men in her life, “Uncle” chief among them, are figures of fear. The tigers are constructed precisely to be the creatures who feel no fear of such men. Aunt Jennifer is putting fearlessness onto the screen because she cannot find it in her own house.
- **Rich is suggesting that art lets the suppressed self speak.** Aunt Jennifer’s voice has been mastered; her body flutters; her hands are terrified. But on the embroidered

panel, a different voice gets through. The tigers are her free voice. Through them, Rich is showing that a confined woman finds, in art, a small but real opening for self-expression that the rest of her life denies her.

#### How to phrase the suggestion for the board

For a 5-mark answer, name three things the difference suggests: (1) art expresses longing, not likeness; (2) embroidery is the one permitted form of self-expression open to Aunt Jennifer; (3) the tigers are her hidden voice, the part of her that is not afraid.

**Final Answer:** Aunt Jennifer created tigers so unlike herself because art often expresses what we long to be, not what we are. The fearless, prancing tigers are her un-lived life: the freedom and dignity her own marriage has denied her. Rich is suggesting that art lets the suppressed self speak, that embroidery is the one permitted form of self-expression in which a constrained woman can stitch a fearless, free voice into existence.

#### EXPERT'S SOLUTION : Dr Priya Ranganathan, PhD English Literature, University of Madras

**Alternative reading.** The difference can also be read as a strategy of compensation, and as a hint of Adrienne Rich's later feminist programme.

- **Art as compensation.** Aunt Jennifer cannot prance through her own life, so she lets the tigers prance for her. This is psychological compensation: the artist makes in the work what she cannot make in her life. The poem is, among other things, a small case study of this well-known artistic move.
- **Choice of subject is itself a statement.** Aunt Jennifer did not embroider tame house-pets, flowers or children. She chose *tigers*, predators, the most confident animals in the forest. The choice is not accidental; it tells us what she most lacks and most admires.
- **Colour and setting also matter.** "Bright topaz" tigers in "a world of green", two strong, vivid colours. Aunt Jennifer's own world has only "wool", "ivory" and the "wedding band". She paints the embroidered world in colours her real world does not have.
- **The men beneath the tree.** "They do not fear the men beneath the tree." Rich notes that the tigers' fearlessness is specifically aimed at men, the very figures who, in the form of "Uncle", have mastered Aunt Jennifer. The aunt is sketching tigers who would not have been frightened of her own husband.
- **The wider feminist suggestion.** Rich, who became a major feminist poet, is laying down an early thesis here: women under patriarchy often have only one outlet for self-expression, and that outlet is the "womanly art" such as embroidery. The poem honours that outlet, notice that the tigers survive after Aunt Jennifer dies, while also

marking, with great sadness, the cost of having had to compress an entire self into a needle and wool.

**Why this matters.** For a 5- or 6-mark answer, treat the question as asking about *art under constraint*. The tigers are not just the opposite of Aunt Jennifer; they are her one permitted opening into a freer self, and they outlast her.

**Final Answer:** The animals are so different because Aunt Jennifer made them as her unlived self. Art under patriarchy compensates for what life denies. The tigers' fearlessness towards "the men beneath the tree" is no accident: they are the kind of creatures who would not have been mastered as she was. Rich is suggesting that embroidery, the one permitted form of self-expression in such a woman's life, becomes the place where the free, confident self can exist, and through the panel, outlast the artist herself.

### Q 11.7 Interpret the symbols found in this poem.

#### SOLUTION

The poem is short but densely symbolic. Each of its three stanzas contributes its own symbol, and the symbols are linked into a single argument. The clearest way to answer is to take them in order.

##### 🔍 Key lines

"Bright topaz denizens of a world of green. . . The massive weight of Uncle's wedding band. . . Still ringed with ordeals she was mastered by. / The tigers in the panel that she made / Will go on prancing, proud and unafraid."

##### 🔍 Six symbols at a glance

- 1. The tigers** = freedom, fearlessness, dignity, the unlived self that Aunt Jennifer puts into art.
- 2. Topaz and green colours** = vivid, jewel-like life, contrasted with the colourless wool and ivory of Aunt Jennifer's own world.
- 3. The men beneath the tree** = the male authority figures the tigers refuse to fear, the very figures ("Uncle") who have mastered Aunt Jennifer.
- 4. The ivory needle and the wool** = the small permitted tools of a "womanly" art, the only freedom Aunt Jennifer has.
- 5. Uncle's wedding band** = patriarchal marriage as a massive, daily, owned weight on the woman's hand.
- 6. The embroidered panel** = art that outlives the artist; the small, permanent record of the free self that Aunt Jennifer could not be in life.

- **The tigers (freedom).** “Prance”; “do not fear”; “sleek chivalric certainty”. These are confident verbs and adjectives. The tigers stand for the part of Aunt Jennifer that is unafraid, the self she keeps alive only on the embroidered panel.
- **Colour (vividness).** “Bright topaz” on a background of green. The aunt’s own world has only the pale-yellow wool and the white “ivory” needle. The embroidery’s bright colours symbolise the imagined life that the artist gives her tigers but cannot give herself.
- **Men beneath the tree (patriarchal authority).** Specifically chosen as the figures the tigers do not fear. They symbolise the very category of men, husbands, uncles, masters, under whom Aunt Jennifer has lived.
- **Ivory needle and wool (permitted self-expression).** Smooth, small, domestic tools. They symbolise the narrow opening for self-expression that Aunt Jennifer is allowed: no shouting, no painting, no writing, only needlework. Yet through that narrow opening, the tigers escape onto the panel.
- **Uncle’s wedding band (patriarchal marriage).** “Massive weight”; “sits heavily”. The wedding band becomes the most concrete symbol of marriage as ownership. Note that the ring is “Uncle’s”, not theirs, it belongs to him.
- **The embroidered panel (art’s permanence).** “Will go on prancing, proud and unafraid.” Aunt Jennifer dies; the tigers do not. The panel symbolises the way art survives the artist. The free self she could not live, she leaves behind in needlework that outlasts her body.

#### ♥ Why This Matters

Notice how the symbols cluster into two columns. **Symbols of freedom:** the tigers, the colours, the embroidered panel. **Symbols of confinement:** Uncle’s wedding band, “the men beneath the tree”, the ordeals of stanza three. The poem’s argument is the line that crosses between the two columns: art lets something free travel out of a confined life.

**Final Answer:** Six symbols carry the poem. The tigers symbolise freedom, fearlessness, and the artist’s un-lived self. The bright topaz-and-green colours symbolise the vividness of imagined life, contrasted with the pale wool and ivory of Aunt Jennifer’s real world. The “men beneath the tree” symbolise patriarchal authority. The ivory needle and wool symbolise the narrow opening of “permitted” self-expression. Uncle’s wedding band symbolises marriage as owned, daily, massive weight. The embroidered panel symbolises art that outlives its artist, the free self left behind in needlework when the body that could not be free has died.

**EXPERT'S SOLUTION** : Mr Rohan Acharya, MA English, University of Calcutta

**Strategic angle.** Rather than naming six symbols in isolation, link them into one diagonal argument: art versus ownership. Two clusters of symbols, one diagonal line of meaning.

- **Cluster of art / freedom.** Tigers, topaz, green, embroidered panel. All of these are made by Aunt Jennifer's hands. The cluster says: the artist can imagine freedom even when she cannot live it.
- **Cluster of ownership / confinement.** Uncle's wedding band, "the men beneath the tree", the ring of ordeals, the verb "mastered". None of these are made by Aunt Jennifer; they are imposed on her. The cluster says: the social world has wrapped her hand and her life in symbols of confinement.
- **The diagonal line.** The needle and the wool sit between the two clusters. The needle is small, "ivory", "hard to pull", a domestic object. But the same needle pulls thread that becomes the tigers. The needle is the bridge from confinement (a permitted hobby) to freedom (the prancing tigers on the panel). Read this way, the needle is the most important symbol in the poem.
- **Two endings.** The aunt's life ends "ringed with ordeals"; the tigers "go on prancing, proud and unafraid". The diagonal of meaning closes here. The artist dies inside the symbols of confinement; the art survives inside the symbols of freedom. Both can be true at once, and Rich's quiet anger comes precisely from the fact that both have to be true at once.
- **For the board.** Treat the symbols as a network, not a list. Pair each symbol with its opposite (tigers vs Uncle's band; bright colour vs wool; prancing panel vs ringed hands). The contrast is the meaning.

**Why this matters.** Most 6-mark answers list symbols mechanically. Reading them as two clusters with the needle as the bridge gives an examiner a clear, argued interpretation rather than a list of glosses.

**Final Answer:** The poem's symbols cluster into two opposing groups. The tigers, the topaz and green colours, and the embroidered panel are symbols of art and freedom, made by Aunt Jennifer's hands. Uncle's wedding band, "the men beneath the tree" and the "ring of ordeals" are symbols of patriarchal ownership, imposed on her. The ivory needle and wool sit between the two clusters as the bridge: the small, permitted domestic tool through which the free self escapes onto the panel. The aunt dies inside the symbols of confinement; the tigers go on prancing in the symbols of freedom.

**Q 11.8** Do you sympathise with Aunt Jennifer? What is the attitude of the speaker

## towards Aunt Jennifer?

## SOLUTION

The poem's emotional register is sympathetic, but the sympathy is quietly stated, not loudly proclaimed. The speaker watches Aunt Jennifer rather than rescuing her, and that watchful sympathy is what gives the poem its lasting force.

 **Key lines**

“The massive weight of Uncle’s wedding band / Sits heavily upon Aunt Jennifer’s hand. . . her terrified hands will lie / Still ringed with ordeals she was mastered by.”

- **Yes, the reader does sympathise with Aunt Jennifer.** We are shown an elderly woman whose hands flutter, whose wedding band weighs heavily, whose “terrified hands” are “ringed with ordeals”. The detailing of her suffering is precise and tender; it is hard to read the poem without being moved.
- **The speaker shows compassion, not pity.** “Pity” would be condescending; “compassion” is a fellow-feeling. The speaker watches Aunt Jennifer closely, her hands, her needle, her ring, without ever judging her for not rebelling. The closeness of the attention is a sign of care.
- **The speaker also admires her.** Aunt Jennifer is not only weighed down; she is the creator of the prancing, fearless tigers. The speaker notes, with respect, that “The tigers in the panel that she made / Will go on prancing, proud and unafraid.” The compassion sits beside an admiration for what she has made despite her ordeals.
- **The speaker is critical of the cause, not of Aunt Jennifer.** The hard words in the poem, “massive weight”, “mastered by”, “Uncle’s wedding band”, are aimed at the institution of marriage and the figure of Uncle, not at the aunt. The speaker holds the system responsible, not the woman trapped inside it.
- **The tone is restrained.** There are no exclamation marks, no direct speeches, no protest slogans. The sympathy is shown by the careful selection of words, “fluttering”, “terrified”, “mastered”, and by the steady, patient gaze. The poem trusts the reader to feel what the speaker has noticed.

 **Exam Tip**

For 5-mark answers on the speaker’s attitude, name three components: (1) compassion for Aunt Jennifer’s suffering; (2) admiration for the art she creates despite that suffering; (3) anger or sharp critique directed at the cause, the institution of marriage and the figure of Uncle. Quote one phrase per component.

**Final Answer:** Yes, we sympathise with Aunt Jennifer because the poem shows her with precise, tender detail, her fluttering fingers, her “terrified hands”, the “massive weight” she carries. The speaker’s attitude is one of compassion (close, careful watching), admiration (for the prancing tigers Aunt Jennifer has stitched despite her ordeals), and quiet anger (directed at “Uncle’s wedding band” and the patriarchal “ordeals she was mastered by”). The aunt herself is treated with respect; the social system that mastered her is the target of the critique.

**EXPERT’S SOLUTION** : Ms Tara Bhattacharya, MA English Literature, Presidency University Kolkata

**Strategic angle.** The speaker’s attitude has three layers, and the strongest answers walk through them in order.

- **Layer 1: Compassion.** The speaker looks at Aunt Jennifer with steady, unflinching attention. Notice that we are shown her hands four times in the poem (“fingers fluttering”, “Aunt Jennifer’s hand”, “terrified hands”, and the “panel that she made”). Each appearance is a small act of caring observation.
- **Layer 2: Admiration.** The third stanza closes not with the aunt’s death but with the survival of her art: “The tigers in the panel that she made / Will go on prancing.” The speaker honours her as a maker. The last line of the poem is about her creation, not her suffering. That ordering matters, it is how the speaker chooses to leave her.
- **Layer 3: Critique.** The speaker is sharply critical of the cause of her suffering, named precisely as “Uncle’s wedding band” and the “ordeals she was mastered by”. The critique is aimed at the institution, not at the woman, and is one of the earliest pieces of Adrienne Rich’s long career of feminist writing.
- **What the speaker is not.** The speaker is not sentimental. The poem does not weep over the aunt or call her “poor Aunt Jennifer”. The compassion is shown by precision, not by hand-wringing.
- **What the speaker is not, part two.** The speaker is not detached either. Many board-paper students confuse “no exclamation marks” with “no feeling”. There is deep feeling here; it shows itself in the choice of every adjective.
- **Final note on identification.** The unnamed “Uncle” (singular figure of authority) and the named “Aunt Jennifer” (woman with an individual name) is itself a clue to the speaker’s sympathies. The named woman is the subject; the unnamed man is just a category.

**Why this matters.** A board answer that names compassion, admiration and critique together earns full marks. A simpler “the poet feels sad for her” answers a 1-mark question, not a 5-mark one.

**Final Answer:** Yes, the reader sympathises with Aunt Jennifer because the poem watches her with such careful, tender attention. The speaker's attitude has three layers: compassion (the close observation of her hands, her needle and her fear), admiration (the deliberate closing on the prancing tigers "she made"), and quiet but pointed critique of the cause (Uncle's wedding band, the "ordeals" of patriarchal marriage that "mastered" her). Aunt Jennifer is named and respected; the system that confined her is named and condemned.

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### Key Takeaways

- *Aunt Jennifer's Tigers* is a three-stanza poem by the American poet Adrienne Rich (1929–2012), published in her 1951 collection *A Change of World* and anthologised as the closing Poetry chapter of Flamingo (Class 12).
- Form: three quatrains in iambic pentameter; rhyme scheme AA BB CC across each stanza.
- The central contrast is between the prancing, fearless "topaz" tigers and the fluttering, "terrified" hands of Aunt Jennifer.
- "Uncle's wedding band" carries a "massive weight" that "sits heavily" on her hand, the chief symbol of patriarchal marriage in the poem.
- In death, Aunt Jennifer's hands lie "Still ringed with ordeals she was mastered by", the word "ringed" has a literal, a metaphorical and a structural sense in the poem.
- The tigers "will go on prancing, proud and unafraid" even after Aunt Jennifer is dead, art outlives the artist.
- Rich's attitude towards Aunt Jennifer is compassionate and admiring; her critique is aimed at the institution of marriage ("Uncle") and the social order that has "mastered" the woman, not at the woman herself.

End of Think it out