



# Collegedunia NCERT Notes

Class 12 English Notes Chapter 11 Flamingo Poetry: Aunt Jennifer's Tigers

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

by Adrienne Rich

CBSE Class 12<sup>th</sup> English Core, Flamingo Reader, Poetry Section

Aligned to CBSE syllabus 2026-27

Also see for this chapter: [NCERT Solutions](#)

*This revision guide unpacks Adrienne Rich's tightly wrought three-stanza poem Aunt Jennifer's Tigers for Class 12<sup>th</sup> Flamingo readers. Inside: the full poem text, a stanza-by-stanza explication, the central themes, the dominant literary devices, the key quotations parsed for board examiners, a compact biography of Adrienne Rich, the CBSE exam-pattern question types you should expect, and a quick-revision summary you can read the night before the paper.*

## Contents

<b>1 Introduction to the Poem and Its Poet</b>	<b>3</b>
1.1 Why Class 12 Students Read This Poem . . . . .	4
1.2 Quick Facts You Should Know . . . . .	4
1.3 The Poem at a Glance . . . . .	5
<b>2 The Poem Text and Layout</b>	<b>5</b>
2.1 Full Text . . . . .	5
2.2 How the Text Is Laid Out on the Page . . . . .	5
<b>3 Stanza-by-Stanza Summary and Explication</b>	<b>6</b>
3.1 Stanza 1: The Embroidered Tigers (lines 1-4) . . . . .	6

3.2	Stanza 2: The Fluttering Fingers (lines 5-8)	7
3.3	Stanza 3: The Tigers Outlive the Aunt (lines 9-12)	7
3.4	One-Paragraph Summary for Revision	8
<b>4</b>	<b>Central Themes</b>	<b>8</b>
4.1	Theme 1: Patriarchal Marriage as Confinement	8
4.2	Theme 2: Art as a Form of Escape	9
4.3	Theme 3: The Survival of Art Beyond the Artist	9
4.4	Theme 4: The Power of Quiet Anger	10
4.5	Theme 5: The Contrast Between Maker and Made	10
4.6	Theme 6: The Body as the Record of a Life	10
<b>5</b>	<b>Literary Devices in the Poem</b>	<b>11</b>
5.1	Symbolism	11
5.2	Contrast and Juxtaposition	11
5.3	Imagery	11
5.4	Alliteration	12
5.5	Personification (of the Wedding Band)	12
5.6	Repetition and Framing	12
5.7	Form: Three Iambic-Pentameter Quatrains, AA BB CC	13
5.8	Oxymoron-Adjacent Phrases	13
<b>6</b>	<b>Key Quotations Parsed for Board-Paper Use</b>	<b>13</b>
6.1	Quotation 1: The Opening Image of the Tigers	13
6.2	Quotation 2: The Tigers Fear No Men	14
6.3	Quotation 3: The Fluttering Fingers	14
6.4	Quotation 4: The Wedding Band	14
6.5	Quotation 5: Terrified Hands, Ringed with Ordeals	14
6.6	Quotation 6: The Tigers Outlive the Aunt	15
<b>7</b>	<b>Background and Context: Adrienne Rich</b>	<b>15</b>
7.1	Who Was Adrienne Rich?	15
7.2	Where This Poem Sits in Her Career	16
7.3	Twentieth-Century American Women's Poetry: A Bigger Picture	16
7.4	Why This Particular Poem	17

<b>8</b>	<b>Board-Exam Pattern Points</b>	<b>17</b>
8.1	Where the Poem Appears in the Paper . . . . .	17
8.2	Typical Question Stems . . . . .	17
8.3	Model Answer Skeleton: Short Answer (3 marks) . . . . .	18
8.4	Model Answer Skeleton: Long Answer (5-6 marks) . . . . .	18
8.5	Comparison Questions . . . . .	18
<b>9</b>	<b>Expected Extract-Based Comprehension Questions</b>	<b>19</b>
9.1	Extract 1: The Embroidered Tigers . . . . .	19
9.2	Extract 2: The Fluttering Fingers and the Wedding Band . . . . .	20
9.3	Extract 3: The Aftermath . . . . .	20
<b>10</b>	<b>Common Mistakes and How to Avoid Them</b>	<b>21</b>
10.1	Mistake 1: Reading the Wedding Band Literally . . . . .	21
10.2	Mistake 2: Confusing Aunt Jennifer with the Speaker . . . . .	21
10.3	Mistake 3: Forgetting the Survival of the Tigers . . . . .	21
10.4	Mistake 4: Treating “Uncle” as a Specific Man . . . . .	22
10.5	Mistake 5: Missing the Form (Iambic Pentameter, AA BB CC) . . . . .	22
<b>11</b>	<b>Quick Revision Summary</b>	<b>22</b>
11.1	The Poem in One Line . . . . .	22
11.2	Spinal Facts . . . . .	22
11.3	Themes in One Sentence Each . . . . .	23
11.4	Devices in One Sentence Each . . . . .	23
11.5	Last-Minute Triad to Memorise . . . . .	23

## 1 Introduction to the Poem and Its Poet

*Aunt Jennifer's Tigers* is a short, formally tight poem by the American poet Adrienne Rich, anthologised as the closing poem of the Poetry section of the Class 12 NCERT *Flamingo* textbook. The poem watches an elderly woman embroider fearless tigers onto a wool panel while her own life is weighed down by “the massive weight of Uncle’s wedding band”. In three short quatrains the poem opens up some of the largest questions of modern literature: the burden of patriarchal marriage, the small openings that art gives to a constrained life, and the way an embroidered animal can outlive the woman who stitched it.

## 1.1 Why Class 12 Students Read This Poem

The CBSE Class 12 English (Core) syllabus uses the Poetry section of *Flamingo* to introduce students to a spread of international voices, and Adrienne Rich is positioned as the closing poet because her voice introduces students to twentieth-century American feminist writing in a compact, board-friendly form. The poem is short enough to teach in two periods, but it carries enough symbol-density to sustain extract questions, short answers and the longer thematic question. For board exam purposes it appears in the Reading-comprehension extract section, in the Short Answer Type questions, and is a favourite candidate for thematic Long Answer Type questions on gender, art, marriage and freedom.

### Why This Poem Matters in Class 12

- It is a **tightly metred poem**: three quatrains in iambic pentameter, rhymed AA BB CC, in contrast to the free verse of *Keeping Quiet*.
- It introduces students to a **major American feminist poet** (Adrienne Rich) whose later work shaped late-twentieth-century women's writing.
- It carries one of the syllabus's sharpest **contrasts**: fearless prancing tigers versus terrified fluttering hands.
- It opens into **three big board-favourite themes**: patriarchal marriage, art as escape, and the survival of art beyond the artist.

## 1.2 Quick Facts You Should Know

Before reading the poem, lock in these facts. The board paper often opens an extract-based question with one of them.

<p><b>Poet</b> Adrienne Rich (1929-2012)</p>	<p><b>Poem</b> Aunt Jennifer's Tigers</p>	<p><b>Form</b> Three quatrains, iambic pentameter, AA BB CC</p>
<p><b>Source</b> Collection <i>A Change of World</i> (1951)</p>	<p><b>Central image</b> Aunt embroidering fearless tigers</p>	<p><b>Tone</b> Restrained, tender, quietly angry</p>

### Board-Paper Hook

If an extract-based question opens with *Aunt Jennifer's tigers prance across a screen / Bright topaz denizens of a world of green*, identify (a) the poet, (b) the title, (c) the source textbook (*Flamingo*, Poetry section), and (d) the central contrast the poem sets up between the fearless tigers and the timid embroiderer. Most 1-mark openings test exactly these four facts.

### 1.3 The Poem at a Glance

The poem is structured as a three-quatrain meditation. The first quatrain describes the embroidered tigers on the screen; the second quatrain turns to Aunt Jennifer's own hands and the "massive weight" of her wedding band; the third quatrain looks forward to her death and notes that, although she will lie "ringed with ordeals", the tigers she made will go on prancing. The argumentative arc is a simple but very effective: **art (stanza 1) versus artist (stanza 2) versus aftermath (stanza 3)**.

## 2 The Poem Text and Layout

This section reproduces the poem in the line-break sequence used in the NCERT *Flamingo* reader so that you can lift quotations directly into board-paper answers without losing the original cadence. The poem is reproduced for educational purposes; the work is by Adrienne Rich, originally published in her 1951 collection *A Change of World* (the volume that opened with W. H. Auden's foreword introducing Rich to the wider reading public).

### 2.1 Full Text

#### Poem: Aunt Jennifer's Tigers, by Adrienne Rich

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.

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.

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.

### 2.2 How the Text Is Laid Out on the Page

Notice five textual choices that the board paper loves to ask about.

- **Three quatrains in iambic pentameter.** Each stanza is four lines long; each line has ten syllables in a roughly da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM pattern. The metre is steady, almost formal, in contrast to the unsteady life it describes.

- **Rhyme scheme AA BB CC, repeated in each stanza.** Every couplet rhymes: *screen/green, tree/certainty; wool/pull, band/hand; lie/by, made/unafraid*. The neat couplets contain the messy life of the woman inside their tidy frame.
- **Three-time use of “Aunt Jennifer”.** Her name appears in stanza 1 (“Aunt Jennifer’s tigers”), stanza 2 twice (“Aunt Jennifer’s fingers”, “Aunt Jennifer’s hand”), and the shortened “Aunt” in stanza 3 (“When Aunt is dead”). The name is given weight; she is a named individual.
- **One-time use of “Uncle”.** The husband is named only once (“Uncle’s wedding band”), never as a person doing anything. He exists in the poem only as the wearer of the ring.
- **Repetition of “prance” / “prancing” and “ringed” / “ring”.** “Prance” opens the poem on the embroidered tigers and “prancing” closes it on the surviving tigers; “massive weight of Uncle’s wedding band” in stanza 2 is echoed by “ringed with ordeals” in stanza 3. The poem frames its argument by repeating its key images.

### Do Not Mistitle the Poem

The correct title is *Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers* (apostrophe-s on *Jennifer*, capitalised *Tigers*). Some students write “Aunt Jennifers Tigers”, “Aunt Jennifer and Her Tigers” or just “The Tigers”. The board paper marks the apostrophe-s form as canonical.

### The Title’s Possessive Form

The title is in the possessive: the tigers belong to Aunt Jennifer. This is important. Although the tigers behave like wild animals on the screen, they are her creation, her property in the most intimate sense; she has stitched them. The grammatical possessive in the title is the first sign of the poem’s central paradox: *the most free creatures in the poem belong to the least free person in the poem*.

## 3 Stanza-by-Stanza Summary and Explication

The poem moves through three quatrains. Each one carries its own argument and its own dominant image. This section walks each quatrain, explaining what is literally being said, what the speaker is doing rhetorically, and which line-level details carry the meaning.

### 3.1 Stanza 1: The Embroidered Tigers (lines 1-4)

**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 first stanza is a piece of pure visual description: the embroidered tigers

on the screen (a wool panel) are presented as confident inhabitants of a green forest world. “Prance” is a proud, deliberate verb; “topaz” is a gemstone yellow; “denizens” gives them rightful belonging; “chivalric certainty” gives them the knightly bearing of medieval romance. Notice the key line, “They do not fear the men beneath the tree.” That single line plants the seed of the whole poem: the tigers are fearless of *men*, in a poem whose human subject is dominated by one particular man, Uncle.

### Stanza 1 Explication: The Embroidered Tigers

**What is happening:** Aunt Jennifer’s embroidered tigers move across a wool panel as confident, fearless creatures.

**Key word:** “denizens” (rightful inhabitants) gives them ownership of their world.

**Key word:** “chivalric” (knightly) gives them dignified bearing.

**Key line:** *They do not fear the men beneath the tree*, plants the contrast the rest of the poem will exploit.

## 3.2 Stanza 2: The Fluttering Fingers (lines 5-8)

**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.*

The second stanza switches the camera from the embroidery to the embroiderer. Aunt Jennifer’s fingers “flutter” (a small, nervous, frightened verb) through her wool; even the smooth ivory needle is “hard to pull”. The third and fourth lines name the reason: “the massive weight of Uncle’s wedding band / Sits heavily upon Aunt Jennifer’s hand”. The wedding ring is materially small but symbolically immense; in Rich’s reading, the institution of patriarchal marriage has settled itself onto the woman’s hand and made her smallest action difficult.

### The Verb “Flutter”

“Flutter” is a verb of weak, agitated motion. The same verb 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, half-captive things. The fluttering is not picturesque; it is the trembling of a body under sustained pressure.

## 3.3 Stanza 3: The Tigers Outlive the Aunt (lines 9-12)

**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 third stanza looks forward to Aunt Jennifer’s death. Her hands will lie “terrified” and “ringed with ordeals she was mastered by” (note the passive: the ordeals

mastered her). The final two lines reverse the trajectory: the tigers in the panel will *go on*. Aunt Jennifer dies; the tigers do not. The very last words of the poem are “proud and unafraid”, the qualities the artist herself never had in life but managed to stitch into her work, where they will survive her.

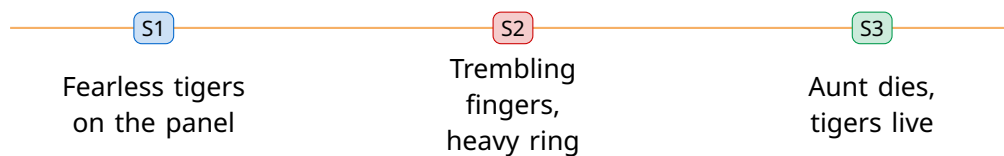
### Stanza 3 Explication: After Aunt's Death

**Aunt's hands:** “terrified”, “ringed with ordeals”, “mastered”, three words of confinement and defeat.

**Tigers in the panel:** “go on prancing”, “proud and unafraid”, three words of survival, dignity and fearlessness.

**The contrast:** the artist dies inside the symbols of confinement; the art lives on inside the symbols of freedom.

### Argumentative Arc of the Poem



## 3.4 One-Paragraph Summary for Revision

An elderly woman, Aunt Jennifer, stitches tigers onto a wool panel. The embroidered tigers move with proud, knightly, fearless confidence in their green world. The artist herself has the opposite kind of life: her fingers flutter, the ivory needle is hard to pull, and “the massive weight of Uncle’s wedding band sits heavily upon her hand”. The speaker imagines her death: her terrified hands will lie “still ringed with ordeals she was mastered by”. And yet the tigers she has made will go on prancing in the panel, “proud and unafraid”. The poem holds together a quiet anger at the institution of marriage, a tender care for the woman trapped inside it, and a steady belief in the power of art to outlive the artist.

## 4 Central Themes

This section unpacks the six major themes the CBSE board paper most often tests on *Aunt Jennifer's Tigers*. For Long Answer questions, your introduction should name the theme and your body paragraphs should anchor it to specific lines.

### 4.1 Theme 1: Patriarchal Marriage as Confinement

The first and most direct theme is the burden of patriarchal marriage. “The massive weight of Uncle’s wedding band / Sits heavily upon Aunt Jennifer’s hand” is the poem’s most explicit political line. The wedding band is not Aunt Jennifer’s; it is *Uncle’s*, the language of ownership. The ring is small gold but enormous in its symbolic weight. In stanza three the ring widens into a circle of “ordeals” that has

“mastered” her.

### Theme 1: Patriarchal Marriage

**Where it appears:** Stanza 2 (the wedding band), stanza 3 (“ringed with ordeals she was mastered by”).

**Key insight:** Marriage in the poem is shown as a system of ownership in which the wife wears the husband’s ring, carries his weight, and is mastered by the trials his world produces. The critique is structural, not personal.

## 4.2 Theme 2: Art as a Form of Escape

A theme closely tied to Theme 1: art lets Aunt Jennifer express what her life does not allow. The fearless, dignified, free tigers she stitches are the opposite of her own existence. Embroidery is, in 1951, a permitted “womanly” activity; inside that permission, Aunt Jennifer makes images of strength and freedom. The art is a small, quiet act of resistance.

### Art Is Not Escapism

The poem distinguishes between escape and escapism. Aunt Jennifer does not escape her marriage; she does not run away or refuse to embroider what her household expects. What she does is more subtle: she puts free creatures into the embroidery itself, so that the panel carries her un-lived self. Writing that “she escapes her marriage through art” overstates it. She does not escape; she *records*.

## 4.3 Theme 3: The Survival of Art Beyond the Artist

The closing two lines, “The tigers in the panel that she made / Will go on prancing, proud and unafraid”, carry an entirely separate theme. Art outlasts its maker. Aunt Jennifer’s body, her hands, her fear all end; the embroidered tigers do not. This is one of the oldest claims of literature (Shakespeare, Sonnet 18: “So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see, / So long lives this”), and Rich plants it firmly in the small, domestic medium of needlework.

### Theme 3: Art Outlives the Artist

**Where it appears:** Stanza 3, lines 3-4 (“The tigers in the panel that she made / Will go on prancing, proud and unafraid”).

**Key insight:** The free self that Aunt Jennifer could not be in life is preserved in the embroidery she made. The art holds the part of her that was never allowed to live.

#### 4.4 Theme 4: The Power of Quiet Anger

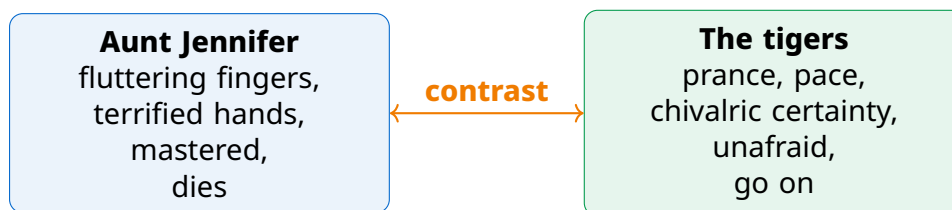
The poem is angry but the anger is not shouted. There are no exclamation marks, no accusations, no direct attacks on “Uncle”. The anger shows itself in the careful adjectives: *massive, terrified, ringed, mastered*. The poem is one of the syllabus’s best examples of how restrained tone can carry sharp critique.

##### Adrienne Rich’s Long Anger

This poem was written when Rich was only twenty-one, and the quiet, well-mannered anger here is the early version of what would become, in her later poetry and prose, one of the strongest feminist voices in English. Rich went on to write books such as *Diving into the Wreck* (1973) and the prose work *Of Woman Born* (1976), in which the anger is much more direct. The 1951 voice in this poem is restrained because the social conditions that needed protest had not yet been put into words. The restraint is itself an early form of the protest that came later.

#### 4.5 Theme 5: The Contrast Between Maker and Made

A theme that runs as a structural device through the entire poem is the contrast between Aunt Jennifer and the tigers. She is timid, they are confident; she flutters, they pace; she is mastered, they are free; she dies, they live. The contrast is the engine of every stanza.



#### 4.6 Theme 6: The Body as the Record of a Life

A subtle final theme: in the poem, Aunt Jennifer’s experience is not described in speeches or memories. It is recorded on her body, the fluttering fingers, the terrified hands, the weight of the ring on the hand. Her body becomes the readable text of her life under marriage. This is one of Adrienne Rich’s signature moves: the woman’s body itself carries the politics of her situation.

##### Theme-Marking on the Board Paper

Many board questions ask “what is the central theme.” For *Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers*, lead with **patriarchal marriage and the contrast between artist and art** (Themes 1 and 5). Use art as escape, the survival of art, quiet anger, and the body as record as supporting body paragraphs.

## 5 Literary Devices in the Poem

The CBSE Class 12 paper repeatedly asks students to identify and explain literary devices. *Aunt Jennifer's Tigers* packs a remarkable range of devices into a poem of only twelve lines.

### 5.1 Symbolism

A symbol is an image that stands in for an idea larger than itself. The poem is dense with symbols.

#### Six Symbols in the Poem

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.
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.

### 5.2 Contrast and Juxtaposition

Contrast is the explicit setting of opposites side by side; juxtaposition is the placing of two images together so each makes the other more vivid. *Aunt Jennifer's Tigers* is built on contrast, the central contrast between maker and made.

#### Three Strong Contrasts

- **Confidence vs fear:** the tigers *do not fear* the men beneath the tree; Aunt Jennifer's hands are *terrified*.
- **Bright colour vs pale tone:** "topaz" and "green" versus "wool" and "ivory".
- **Continuation vs ending:** the tigers "will go on prancing"; Aunt Jennifer's hands "will lie".

### 5.3 Imagery

Imagery is the poem's use of sense-based detail, things the reader can see, hear, or feel.

- **Visual imagery (tigers):** "Bright topaz denizens of a world of green"; "sleek

chivalric certainty”.

- **Tactile imagery (hands):** “fingers fluttering through her wool”; “ivory needle hard to pull”.
- **Symbolic weight imagery:** “massive weight.../ Sits heavily upon Aunt Jennifer’s hand”.
- **Death imagery:** “her terrified hands will lie / Still ringed with ordeals”.

## 5.4 Alliteration

Alliteration is the repetition of the same consonant sound at the beginning of two or more nearby words. *Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers* uses alliteration generously inside its tight iambic lines.

### Alliteration Examples

**Stanza 1:** *prance... denizens* (the soft p and d sounds give the tigers a smooth motion).

**Stanza 2:** *fingers fluttering* (the soft f sound enacts the small nervous motion).

**Stanza 3:** *prancing, proud* (the steady p sound at the close emphasises the tigers’ continued confident motion).

## 5.5 Personification (of the Wedding Band)

Personification is the attribution of human or animate qualities to a non-human, non-animate thing. The wedding band in stanza 2 “sits heavily” on Aunt Jennifer’s hand, the verb “sit” is the kind of verb a heavy human visitor might do on a chair, not the kind of verb a piece of jewellery does. The ring is, briefly, treated as a creature that has settled down on her finger.

## 5.6 Repetition and Framing

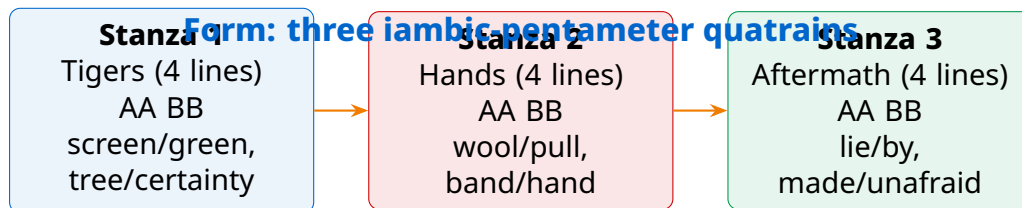
The word *prance* (and its participle *prancing*) opens and closes the poem: the tigers “prance” in line 1 and “will go on prancing” in line 12. The framing repetition makes the tigers the first and last image of the poem. The aunt is in the middle; the tigers surround her, in the poem’s structure, the way her own work surrounds her hands.

### Why the Framing Repetition Matters

- The first *prance* is in the present tense, the tigers move now.
- The closing *prancing* is in the future tense (“will go on”), the tigers will continue moving after Aunt Jennifer’s death.
- Together, the two uses of the same verb compress the poem’s argument into a single repeated word: the tigers prance, and they keep prancing.

## 5.7 Form: Three Iambic-Pentameter Quatrains, AA BB CC

The poem is in formal traditional metre. Each line has ten syllables in roughly da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM (iambic pentameter). Each stanza is four lines long, rhyming in couplets (AA BB). This is one of the most traditional forms in English poetry, and its formality is meaningful: *the poem about a confined life is written in a confined form*. The neat couplets contain Aunt Jennifer the way her marriage contains her.



## 5.8 Oxymoron-Adjacent Phrases

Several phrases in the poem put together two words that seem to pull in opposite directions, producing a small shock that draws the reader's attention.

- **"Massive weight...wedding band"** – a wedding band is small, but called massive.
- **"Ivory needle hard to pull"** – ivory is smooth, but the needle is hard to pull.
- **"Terrified hands...ringed with ordeals"** – the hands are no longer alive, but they are still surrounded by trials.

### Naming Devices in the Board Paper

When a 1- or 2-mark question asks you to identify a device, give the **name** of the device, the **exact words** that contain it, and the **effect**. A three-step answer wins full marks even in 1-mark questions: *Device + Quote + Effect*.

## 6 Key Quotations Parsed for Board-Paper Use

This section gives you a working bank of quotations from the poem, each one paired with the question it can answer, the device it illustrates, and a one-line gloss. Treat this as your last-minute revision toolkit.

### 6.1 Quotation 1: The Opening Image of the Tigers

**Quotation:** "Aunt Jennifer's tigers prance across a screen, / Bright topaz denizens of a world of green."

**Use it to answer:** opening questions, "what do the tigers look like?" prompts, questions on colour and on the word "denizens".

**Device:** visual imagery; colour symbolism (topaz, green); "denizens" as a noun of

belonging.

**Gloss:** The embroidered tigers are confident, jewel-bright inhabitants of their green forest world.

## 6.2 Quotation 2: The Tigers Fear No Men

**Quotation:** “They do not fear the men beneath the tree; / They pace in sleek chivalric certainty.”

**Use it to answer:** questions on “chivalric”, on the tigers’ attitude, on the contrast with Aunt Jennifer.

**Device:** the noun *certainty*; the adjective *chivalric* (knightly); diction borrowed from medieval romance.

**Gloss:** The tigers feel no fear of human figures (the very category of being that has mastered Aunt Jennifer); they walk with calm knightly confidence.

## 6.3 Quotation 3: The Fluttering Fingers

**Quotation:** “Aunt Jennifer’s fingers fluttering through her wool / Find even the ivory needle hard to pull.”

**Use it to answer:** questions on Aunt Jennifer’s physical state, questions on the verb “flutter”, questions on the contrast between maker and made.

**Device:** alliteration (*fingers fluttering*); visual imagery; symbolic difficulty.

**Gloss:** Her hands tremble; the smooth needle is hard to pull; her own action is difficult.

## 6.4 Quotation 4: The Wedding Band

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

**Use it to answer:** marriage-theme questions, symbolism questions on the wedding band, “why does the poet call the ring massive?” prompts.

**Device:** symbol (the band); personification (“sits”); the possessive “Uncle’s”.

**Gloss:** A small ring is given enormous weight as the symbol of the institution of patriarchal marriage.

## 6.5 Quotation 5: Terrified Hands, Ringed with Ordeals

**Quotation:** “When Aunt is dead, her terrified hands will lie / Still ringed with ordeals she was mastered by.”

**Use it to answer:** questions on the third stanza, questions on “ringed”, “ordeals” and “mastered”.

**Device:** the triple-meaning “ringed”; the passive “mastered by”; death imagery.

**Gloss:** Even in death, Aunt Jennifer remains surrounded by the trials of her life, the ring she wore has become the ring that surrounds her.

## 6.6 Quotation 6: The Tigers Outlive the Aunt

**Quotation:** “The tigers in the panel that she made / Will go on prancing, proud and unafraid.”

**Use it to answer:** closing-line questions, theme questions on art and survival, “why does the poem end this way?” prompts.

**Device:** framing repetition of *prance*; the future-tense “will go on”; the closing adjectives *proud* and *unafraid*.

**Gloss:** The tigers she stitched will continue to move after she dies, carrying the free self she could never be in life.

### Quotation Memorisation Trick

Memorise these six quotations in order. They map exactly onto the six main reference points of any well-structured Long Answer essay on this poem.

#### Cheat-sheet of devices in this poem

Device	Quotation	Effect
Symbol (tigers)	<i>prance...proud and unafraid</i>	art / freedom
Symbol (band)	<i>Uncle's wedding band</i>	marriage / ownership
Symbol (ringed)	<i>ringed with ordeals</i>	circle of trials
Personification	<i>Sits heavily upon</i>	ring as creature
Alliteration	<i>fingers fluttering</i>	nervous trembling
Contrast	tigers vs Aunt Jennifer	maker vs made
Imagery (colour)	<i>Bright topaz...green</i>	vividness
Repetition	<i>prance / prancing</i>	framing
Metre	iambic pentameter	confined form
Rhyme	AA BB CC	couplet containment

## 7 Background and Context: Adrienne Rich

A board-paper question on the poem will often ask about Adrienne Rich or about the literary tradition she belongs to. This section gives you the biographical and literary background.

### 7.1 Who Was Adrienne Rich?

Adrienne Rich (1929-2012) was an American poet, essayist and one of the most influential feminist writers of the twentieth century. She was born in Baltimore, Maryland, USA, and educated at Radcliffe College. *A Change of World* (1951), the volume in which *Aunt Jennifer's Tigers* appears, was selected by W. H. Auden for the Yale Series of Younger Poets when Rich was twenty-one. Over the next six decades she published more than twenty volumes of poetry and prose. She was a strong, sustained voice on the constraints of married life, on motherhood, on racism, on militarism, and on the place of women in literature.

### Quick Bio: Adrienne Rich

- **Born:** 16 May 1929, Baltimore, Maryland, USA.
- **Died:** 27 March 2012, Santa Cruz, California.
- **Education:** Radcliffe College (the women's college associated with Harvard).
- **Major works:** *A Change of World* (1951, the volume that contains this poem), *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* (1963), *Diving into the Wreck* (1973), *The Dream of a Common Language* (1978), *Of Woman Born* (prose, 1976).
- **Honours:** National Book Award for Poetry (1974, for *Diving into the Wreck*, which she famously accepted jointly on behalf of all women); Bollingen Prize (2003); among many others.
- **Best-known for:** writing the contemporary women's movement into poetry in English; a sustained critique of patriarchy, militarism and racism.

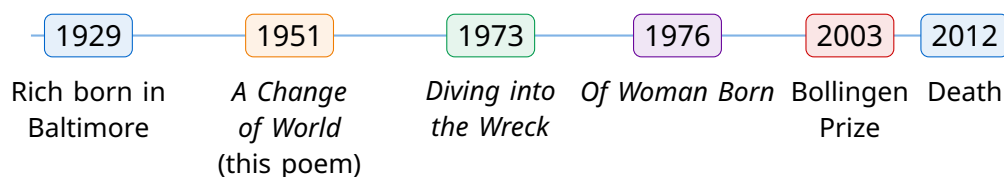
## 7.2 Where This Poem Sits in Her Career

*Aunt Jennifer's Tigers* is an early poem. Rich was twenty-one or twenty-two when she wrote it; she had not yet developed the more direct, free-verse feminist voice of her 1970s work. The restrained, traditional, AA-BB-rhymed quatrains of this poem are the voice of a careful young poet inside an inherited form. Yet the politics is already there in the diction ("massive weight", "mastered by") and in the choice of subject (a woman's life under marriage). Rich herself later remarked that her early poems "allowed me to attempt difficult subjects with the kind of metrical control that I felt obliged to demonstrate", in *Aunt Jennifer's Tigers*, the tight form is exactly what lets her speak about a difficult subject.

## 7.3 Twentieth-Century American Women's Poetry: A Bigger Picture

Mid-twentieth-century American women's poetry includes a remarkable generation of writers: Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Gwendolyn Brooks, Elizabeth Bishop, and Adrienne Rich among them. These poets, often grouped under the loose heading of "confessional" or "women's writing", share an attention to the small, domestic detail (the kitchen, the bedroom, the embroidery panel) as the ground on which large political questions are fought. *Aunt Jennifer's Tigers*, with its needle, wool and wedding band, belongs squarely to this tradition: the politics of a woman's life is read off the objects she handles.

### Adrienne Rich: a brief timeline



## 7.4 Why This Particular Poem

Rich's most famous later poems are her long meditations on women's identity. *Aunt Jennifer's Tigers* is unusual within her work because it is short, traditionally rhymed, and addressed through a single domestic image (an embroidery panel). Yet it carries the seed of all her later work: the attention to a woman's small daily actions, the suspicion of marriage as an institution, the use of art as a quiet record of the un-lived self. This is why CBSE chose it for Class 12: short enough to teach in two periods, formally regular enough to test for metre and rhyme, politically rich enough to test for theme, and representative of a major twentieth-century American feminist voice.

## 8 Board-Exam Pattern Points

This section maps the poem onto the actual structure of the CBSE Class 12 English (Core) board paper so that you know exactly what to expect and how to answer.

### 8.1 Where the Poem Appears in the Paper

The poem can be tested in any of three sections.

- **Section B (Reading, Literature):** extract-based questions of 1 mark each, drawn from any short cluster of lines. Typical ask: identify poet, identify device, gloss a word, explain a line.
- **Short Answer Type questions (3-4 marks):** 40-50 word responses on a single aspect, a single device, a single image, the speaker's purpose at a particular moment.
- **Long Answer Type questions (5-6 marks):** 120-150 word responses on a theme, comparison with another poem, or the overall argument of the poem.

### 8.2 Typical Question Stems

The board paper recycles a small set of question patterns. Memorise these stems and you will recognise the question type instantly.

#### Recurring Question Stems for This Poem

- "How do 'denizens' and 'chivalric' add to our understanding of the tigers?"
- "Why are Aunt Jennifer's fingers 'fluttering through her wool'?"
- "What is suggested by 'the massive weight of Uncle's wedding band'?"
- "What are the meanings of the word 'ringed' in the poem?"
- "Why are the animals so different from Aunt Jennifer's own character?"
- "Interpret the symbols found in the poem."
- "Bring out the contrast between the tigers and Aunt Jennifer."

- “Do you sympathise with Aunt Jennifer? What is the attitude of the speaker towards her?”

### 8.3 Model Answer Skeleton: Short Answer (3 marks)

*Question:* Why is Aunt Jennifer finding the ivory needle hard to pull?

*Model answer (40-50 words):* The ivory needle is small and smooth; the difficulty is not physical but symbolic. “The massive weight of Uncle’s wedding band / Sits heavily upon Aunt Jennifer’s hand.” The burden of patriarchal marriage has worn down her ability to act with calm strength, so even her smallest action trembles.

### 8.4 Model Answer Skeleton: Long Answer (5-6 marks)

*Question:* “*Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers* is a quiet but sharp critique of patriarchal marriage.” Discuss with reference to the text.

*Model answer outline:*

1. **Opening (2 sentences):** Name the poem, the poet, the central image (an embroidered panel of tigers stitched by Aunt Jennifer). State that the poem is a critique of patriarchal marriage delivered through images, not slogans.
2. **The wedding band (stanza 2):** “the massive weight of Uncle’s wedding band / Sits heavily upon Aunt Jennifer’s hand”. The ring is small but symbolically massive; the possessive “Uncle’s” shows it is owned by the husband, not by her.
3. **The fluttering hands (stanza 2):** her own action trembles; the body itself records the strain.
4. **The ring of ordeals (stanza 3):** “ringed with ordeals she was mastered by”. The single ring on the finger has grown into the closed circle of a whole life.
5. **The art that survives (stanza 3):** “The tigers in the panel that she made / Will go on prancing, proud and unafraid”. The free self she could not be in life is preserved in her work.
6. **Closing (2 sentences):** The critique is restrained, not shouted. Rich’s anger sits inside the careful adjectives, “massive”, “terrified”, “mastered”, and inside the tight couplets that contain the woman the way her marriage contains her.

### 8.5 Comparison Questions

The paper sometimes asks students to compare *Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers* with another poem on women, art, or freedom. Plausible comparison anchors: *My Mother at Sixty-Six* (Kamala Das) for the way both poems treat the small ageing female body as the site of feeling, or *Keeping Quiet* (Pablo Neruda) for the way both poems use restrained tone to carry strong political critique. For comparison answers, do not just describe both poems separately; pick one shared theme or one shared device, and write paragraph-by-paragraph in parallel.

### Marking-Scheme Notes That Past Years Reveal

CBSE marking schemes for this poem have consistently rewarded students for: (i) quoting at least one short phrase from the poem, (ii) naming the device by its correct technical name, (iii) explicitly noting the contrast between the tigers and Aunt Jennifer, (iv) using the present tense for analysis (“the poet shows”, not “the poet showed”), and (v) attributing the critique to the institution of marriage rather than to “Uncle” as an individual person.

### Word-Limit Discipline

3-mark answers: aim for 40-50 words.

5-mark answers: aim for 120-150 words.

Going over the word limit costs marks because the answer becomes narration rather than analysis.

### The Tigers Outside the Poem

Adrienne Rich’s poem was written in 1951, the same year as her first book, *A Change of World*. The book was published when Rich was twenty-one and still a Radcliffe undergraduate; W. H. Auden wrote the foreword. Half a century later, in 1995, Rich revisited *Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers* in her essay “When We Dead Awaken” and read it as her earliest expression of the woman-poet’s struggle to imagine free movement in a world that expects female stillness. The tigers, she said, were the first free thing her own poetry had managed to draw. For a Class 12 student this is gold: the poem is not only a tight twelve lines on the page but a piece of evidence about the long career of an important American poet. Quoting Rich’s own retrospective reading inside a board answer is the kind of detail that lifts a 5-mark answer into the top band.

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## 9 Expected Extract-Based Comprehension Questions

The board paper’s extract-based section quotes 4 to 6 lines and asks 1-mark sub-questions. This section gives you three sample extracts likely to appear in your paper, each with model 1-mark answers.

### 9.1 Extract 1: The Embroidered Tigers

*Extract:* “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."

- **Q: Name the poet and the poem.** *Adrienne Rich; Aunt Jennifer's Tigers.*
- **Q: What does "denizens" mean?** *Inhabitants who belong somewhere by right; rightful occupants of a place.*
- **Q: Why does the poet say "chivalric"?** *To give the tigers the calm, knightly bearing of the medieval code of chivalry; they walk with dignified confidence.*
- **Q: What do the tigers not fear?** *The men beneath the tree; they show no fear of the human figures in the embroidered scene.*

## 9.2 Extract 2: The Fluttering Fingers and the Wedding Band

*Extract: "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."*

- **Q: Why do her fingers "flutter"?** *Because she is weak, frightened and worn down by the burden of married life; the body itself trembles.*
- **Q: Why is the ivory needle hard to pull?** *The difficulty is symbolic, not physical; the weight of the wedding band, that is, of marriage, makes even small actions difficult.*
- **Q: What does "massive weight...Uncle's wedding band" suggest?** *That marriage in Rich's reading is a heavy, owned burden on the wife; the band is small but symbolically immense.*
- **Q: Identify a device in "Sits heavily upon".** *Personification: the ring is given the human action of sitting heavily on the hand.*

## 9.3 Extract 3: The Aftermath

*Extract: "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."*

- **Q: What does the word "ringed" mean here?** *Literally encircled by the wedding band; metaphorically surrounded by the trials of her life; structurally, an echo of the wedding band of stanza 2.*
- **Q: What does "mastered by" suggest?** *That the ordeals defeated her; she could not master them. The passive voice emphasises her loss of agency.*
- **Q: Why will the tigers "go on prancing"?** *Because they are embroidered onto the panel; the artwork survives the artist.*
- **Q: What is the effect of ending the poem on "proud and unafraid"?** *It closes the poem on the tigers' freedom, not on Aunt Jennifer's death; the very last words of the poem are the qualities her un-lived self has finally achieved through art.*

**Three-Step Answer for Extract Questions**

For every extract-based 1-mark question, give a three-step answer if the word limit allows: *name the device + quote a few words from the extract + state the effect*. Examiners reward all three.

## 10 Common Mistakes and How to Avoid Them

A short section that names the errors examiners flag most often when they mark answers on this poem.

### 10.1 Mistake 1: Reading the Wedding Band Literally

The single most common mistake is to read “massive weight of Uncle’s wedding band” as a literal heavy gold ring. The weight is symbolic. A board answer that misses the symbolic reading and treats the line as physical jewellery loses marks.

**Symbolic, Not Literal**

The wedding band is not literally heavy. The “massive weight” is the weight of marriage as an institution: of ownership, of fear, of the loss of one’s own voice. Always read the line at the symbolic level for the higher-mark questions.

### 10.2 Mistake 2: Confusing Aunt Jennifer with the Speaker

The speaker of the poem is not Aunt Jennifer. The speaker is an observer, younger, alert, sympathetic, who watches Aunt Jennifer embroider. Writing answers in Aunt Jennifer’s own voice (“I feel terrified”) is a common slip. Use the speaker’s distance: “the speaker shows Aunt Jennifer’s hands fluttering.”

### 10.3 Mistake 3: Forgetting the Survival of the Tigers

Students often write strongly about stanzas 1 and 2 and then trail off at stanza 3. The third stanza is the philosophical resting point of the poem; without it, the poem is only sad. The last two lines turn the poem upwards: the tigers *will go on prancing*. Always include the survival of the tigers in a 5-mark thematic answer.

**Quote the Closing Line**

When writing about art, freedom or hope in this poem, always quote “Will go on prancing, proud and unafraid.” This single phrase is the poem’s strongest defence of art and is often the key to the highest-band 5-mark answers.

## 10.4 Mistake 4: Treating “Uncle” as a Specific Man

“Uncle” in the poem is not a particular man with a personality; he is a category, a figure of patriarchal authority. The poem never describes anything he does, only the band he has placed on Aunt Jennifer’s finger. Do not invent a personality for Uncle (“Uncle is harsh,” “Uncle shouts at her”). The poem gives us exactly nothing about him beyond the ring, and the absence of description is part of the point.

## 10.5 Mistake 5: Missing the Form (Iambic Pentameter, AA BB CC)

The poem is in tight traditional metre and rhyme. Many students write about its themes without ever noting its form. For 5-mark questions on style or form, name the metre (iambic pentameter) and the rhyme scheme (AA BB CC, repeated in each stanza), and note that the tight form is meaningful: the poem about a confined life is written in a confined form.

### Geometry of the Poem

The poem has **three quatrains**, twelve lines in total, in iambic pentameter rhymed AA BB CC. Stanza 1 is the tigers; stanza 2 is Aunt Jennifer’s hands and the ring; stanza 3 is the aftermath of her death and the survival of the tigers.

## 11 Quick Revision Summary

The final section is a compact, single-shot recap you can read the night before the paper. Everything here links back to a longer discussion earlier in the document.

### 11.1 The Poem in One Line

An elderly woman, Aunt Jennifer, embroiders fearless, prancing tigers onto a panel while her own life is weighed down by the “massive weight of Uncle’s wedding band”, and when she dies, the tigers will go on prancing, proud and unafraid.

### 11.2 Spinal Facts

- **Poet:** Adrienne Rich (1929-2012), American.
- **Title:** Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers.
- **Source:** the 1951 collection *A Change of World*; Rich’s first published book, foreworded by W. H. Auden.
- **Form:** three quatrains in iambic pentameter, rhyme scheme AA BB CC.
- **Central image:** embroidered tigers on a wool panel versus the fluttering, weighed-down hands of the embroiderer.
- **Closing image:** the tigers “will go on prancing, proud and unafraid” after Aunt

Jennifer is dead.

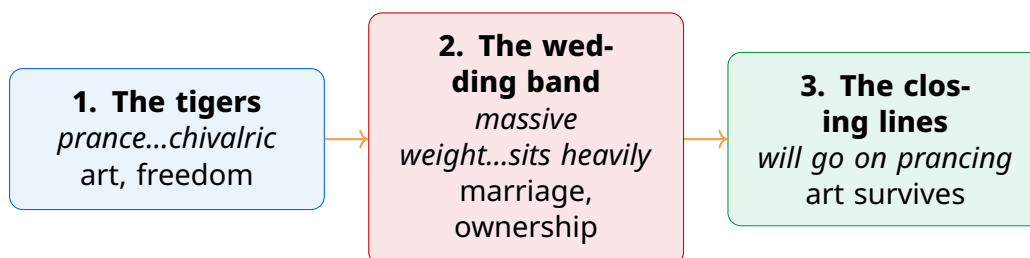
### 11.3 Themes in One Sentence Each

- **Patriarchal marriage:** “the massive weight of Uncle’s wedding band” shows marriage as an owned, daily burden.
- **Art as escape:** the prancing tigers express the free self Aunt Jennifer’s life does not allow.
- **Art outlives the artist:** the tigers “will go on prancing” after Aunt Jennifer is dead.
- **Quiet anger:** the critique is delivered in tight couplets and careful adjectives, not in slogans.
- **Maker vs made:** timid embroiderer, fearless embroidery.
- **The body as record:** fluttering fingers, terrified hands, the woman’s body itself carries the politics of her marriage.

### 11.4 Devices in One Sentence Each

- **Symbol:** tigers (freedom), wedding band (marriage), embroidered panel (surviving art).
- **Contrast:** maker vs made, fear vs fearlessness, fluttering vs prancing.
- **Personification:** the wedding band “sits heavily” on her hand.
- **Alliteration:** *fingers fluttering, prancing proud.*
- **Imagery (colour):** “bright topaz...a world of green” contrasted with wool and ivory.
- **Framing repetition:** *prance / prancing* opens and closes the poem.
- **Metre:** iambic pentameter, ten syllables per line.
- **Rhyme:** AA BB CC across each stanza, tight couplets.

### 11.5 Last-Minute Triad to Memorise



Three images = whole poem

**A Final Memory Aid**

**TBP** = Tigers, Band, Prancing.

**T**igers (stanza 1, art) → **B**and (stanza 2, marriage as weight) → **P**rancing (stanza 3, art outlives the artist).

Three words, in order, and the whole poem unfolds from them.

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