A Look Into Pain

CATHERINE MAGUIRE
Muhlenberg College

Adrienne Rich's poem "Splittings" explores the connections between separation, pain, and memories in relationships, sharing universal experiences with the audience.

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Adrienne Rich's poem "Splittings" explores the themes of pain, love, and self identity. Through imagery and a reflective tone, Rich demonstrates how pain can be shown in a physical or psychological manner. Rich writes about her personal romantic relationships and her relationship with the art of poetry. Specifically, this poem is about her same-sex love affair with Lily Engler. Lily Engler was her first lesbian relationship after Rich's husband passed, but the relationship was hidden for the most part. Engler was Rich's therapist, so this was a forbidden love that clearly disobeyed ethics. This relationship had a serious effect on Rich because she blurred the lines of therapist and lover. "Splittings" appears in Rich's book *The Dream of A Common Language* (1978) before the work "Twenty-One Love Poems," which tells the story of their romantic relationship. Most of the time, Rich was in a state of limerence and not knowing how Engler truly felt. But at the end of the relationship, Rich realizes that she has rediscovered and fallen in love with herself because of whom she became through this relationship. This poem dives into that conflict of absence and presence. Rich learned so much about herself in that relationship and it only made her poetry stronger.

"Splittings" defines the hardship of existing between past and present. Throughout this poem, there are big spaces in between the lines, creating an actual divide in the poem. By actually splitting the text, Rich is showing the physical representation of the themes of this poem. The split in the poem also interrupts the reading flow, which forces the reader to slow down and question this structure. The literal splitting of the text echoes the theme of pain being a physical and emotional effect on a human. Rich writes:

> My body opens over San Francisco like the day-
> light raining down each pore crying the change of light
> I am not with her I have been walking off and on
> all night to that pain not simply absence but
> the presence of the past destructive (449)

The poem starts off by setting the scene in San Francisco where the weather is always the same with slight fog and light rain. She immediately puts the reader in the position of a body awakening, and there is a transformation with light representing clarity and revelation. Additionally, "each pore crying" is put in on the other side, adding a reflection and embracing what needs to be left behind. We then learn the source of Rich's pain: she is illustrating the pain that is caused by a lover leaving. She explains that it's not the absence that makes her struggle, but the past memories that follow her. "The presence of the past" is such a powerful phrase because there comes a time after a breakup when you do not miss the person, but you are hurt by the memories of your time together. She builds upon this emotion of state by adding "destructive" to the end, alluding to the relationship no longer existing. It can't be repaired. This first half of the stanza is already gut-wrenching but so relatable for the readers. Not only is Rich writing about her relationship with Engler, but she wrote this because of the universal feeling. She already wrote about the conflict of absence and presence, forcing the reader to think about and feel nostalgia. After that, she writes:

to living here and now Yet if I could instruct
myself, if we could learn to learn from pain
even as it grasps us if the mind, the mind that lives
in this body could refuse to let itself be crushed
in that grasp it would loosen Pain would have to stand
off from me and listen its dark breath still on me
but the mind could begin to speak to pain
and pain would have to answer: (449)

The second half of the stanza begins to indicate that pain caused from emotional times can produce a physical reaction. She adds certain words and phrases that our bodies can recognize as readers, such as, "grasps us," "crushed," and "stand off from me." These words are used to express the emotional toll the relationship has on the body besides the common sadness. Rich is illustrating a literal heartbreak and the parts attached to it. Also, it sounds like Rich is having a conversation with herself and pain. Adrienne Rich had also suffered from rheumatoid arthritis her whole life, so this feeling holds a lot of weight for her. Additionally, stress and anxiety can increase a person's levels of inflammation and pain. I think there is a connection between these two sources of pain, and Rich is talking about both of them in this poem. Pain will be amplified if Rich is stressed out: her muscles tense, her heart rate increases, and her breath quickens. The phrase "its dark breath" means that pain has its own source of breath. Rich also exclaims in the poem that her pain and her mind talk to each other. I think Rich is saying that pain is its own force and being.

Confronting these feelings, Rich writes:

We are older now
we have met before these are my hands before your eyes
my figure blotting out all that is not mine
I am the pain of division creator of divisions
it is I who blot your lover from you
and not the time-zones nor the miles
It is not separation calls me forth but I
who am separation And remember
I have no existence apart from you (450)

This stanza from "Splittings" is a moment of self awareness and confrontation of the present. The repeating "I" in this stanza is Rich acknowledging her role in the end of her relationship and the separation that follows. Rich is taking ownership of the pain caused not only by her, but by the separation. Again, Rich is talking about the conflict of presence and absence. Rich mentions that separation can only exist because there was once closeness. She's recognizing that separation is connected to love and desire because it is breaking that bond that was once there. The trouble with their relationship is not caused by distance but exists due to the actual ties of their relationship. This stanza was also italicized, making it seem like a poem inside of a poem. I think Rich does this to show that separation is not a passive state but an active state. Separation leaves a feeling of haunting, continuing, and influencing both people. The last line of this stanza is repeating in my head because it's so compelling. Sadly, it's such a common feeling after a separation that you feel like you lost yourself too. People have to "find themselves" after being with a person for so long. Rich's italicized stanza reflects the self awareness of the haunting nature of separation and how it shapes the individuals involved.

The second part of the poem changes gears a little bit:

I believe I am choosing something new
not to suffer uselessly yet still to feel
Does the infant memorize the body of the mother
and create her in absence? or simply cry

primordial loneliness? does the bed of the stream
once diverted mourning remember wetness?
But we, we live so much in these
configurations of the past I choose
to separate her from my past we have not shared
I choose not to suffer uselessly
to detect primordial pain as it stalks toward me
flashing its bleak torch in my eyes blotting out
her particular being the details of her love
I will not be divided from her or from myself
by myths of separation
while her mind and body in Manhattan are more with me
than the smell of eucalyptus coolly burning on these hills (450)

Rich is choosing to feel all of the emotions that come with the relationship ending. She is accepting the pain, both from the heartbreak and from her illness and other daily struggles. She doesn't want to be consumed by this pain, but she wants to be open to the presence of it because it means she is feeling. Then, when Rich writes the third and fourth line, she questions when we first feel emotions and if we get them from our mothers. When babies are no longer in their mothers, that is the first time they experience absence. So, this longing for connection is a deep rooted feeling in humans. It feels like she is finding justification for having these feelings of longing for a loved one, and discovers that those feelings don't exist solely because of the partner, but are deep rooted. Rich repeats "I choose" numerous times during this poem, and I think this is a conscious choice to feel upset about a breakup. She then evokes the loved one by bringing up details about Engler being in Manhattan, but Rich's memories are still with herself in California. The ending of this stanza emphasizes that separation isn't only about distance but the emotional longing.

Rich wraps up this poem by mentioning societal expectations and the toll they had on her.

The world tells me I am its creature
I am raked by eyes brushed by hands
I want to crawl into her for refuge lay my head
in the space between her breast and shoulder
abnegating power for love
as women have done or hiding
from power in her love like a man
I refuse these givens the splitting
between love and action I am choosing
not to suffer uselessly and not to use her
I choose to love this time for once
with all my intelligence (451)

The first two lines describe how society sees women as objects. More specifically, women are to be looked at and touched. Then Rich gets intimate, explaining that she wants to be comforted but doesn't have access to that comfort anymore. In contrast, the last line of the poem discusses the intelligent side of women in relationships. Love can come from good intentions rather than the red flags that intrigue us.

Adrienne Rich's "Splittings" navigates the complex ground of love, loss, and self-discovery. Through her imagery, tone, and use of form, she explores the human feelings of connection and separation. This poem connects her personal experience to a universal feeling for people who go through some type of heartbreak. Rich makes the decision in this poem to confront the pain and choose not to suffer. "Splittings" explores the transformative power of relationships and how we understand ourselves. The reader gets to experience and reflect on the emotional and physical reaction to love and loss.

References

Rich, Adrienne. 2016. *Collected Poems: 1950–2012*. W.W. Norton & Company.