Wings Of Fire: **Volume 3 (2025), No. 1**

Husband, Affair, and Wife: Physical and Emotional Variations of Language in Adrienne Rich's Select Poems

KATIE DEMICCO
Muhlenberg College

How does Adrienne Rich use her poetry to describe her romantic relationships throughout her life? In this paper, I will analyze the language Rich uses to describe her physical and emotional relationship with her partners.

DeMicco, Katie. 2025. "Husband, Affair, & Wife: Physical and Emotional Variations of Language in Adrienne Rich's Select Poems," *Wings of Fire*. Issue 3, No. 1.

Adrienne Rich has written many deeply sensual poems on the loves in her life over the course of her career. The extensive collection of her lifelong works begins with some poems about her late husband, Alfred Conrad. Her main themes in these poems revolve around married life and motherhood and the push for her to continue on even when she is unhappy. Later on in her life, her poems shift into being about her lesbian affair with her therapist, Lilly Engler. Rich writes of the passions and sensual elements that were also a part of this problematic and scandalous relationship. Towards the end of her career, Rich directs some of her work towards her final partner, Michelle Cliff. Throughout these poems, there is a visible change in language towards these three different lovers. This is evident through both the words she uses in the poems and in their overall tone and underlying themes.

Rich writes of the physical aspects of love throughout many of the poems about her varying romantic partners. Starting chronologically in Rich's love life, the early poems treat certain subjects such as marriage, motherhood, and her then-husband, Alfred Conrad. The poem titled "The Marriage Portion" reflects on Rich's view of her marriage and how "nights of ungracious darkness / Hang over [her] and [Alfred]" (95) as they are laying in bed together. There is a sense of heaviness and darkness over their bodies as they lay there together at night – which Rich feels on a physical level as she lays sleeplessly next to her husband. Before this line, Rich writes, "love cannot make us free" (95), which alludes to the idea that Rich may feel stuck or trapped in her relationship with Alfred. In a 1977 essay Rich wrote titled, "Husband-Right and Father-Right" (included in her 1979 book *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*), she expresses that men automatically assume that they have rights over a woman, especially husbands having rights over their wives and children. Rich writes that men expect "women's undivided attention in any and all situations…man experiences the violation of some profound 'right' when a woman leaves him" (Rich 1979, 220). A man, in Rich's opinion, believes that he has some type of

physical ownership over a woman and that it is insulting towards the man if the woman were to leave him.

"The Marriage Portion" reflects on Rich and Conrad's physical relationship together and so does another poem in the collection titled "Like This Together." It is significant to point out that Rich writes underneath the title "*for A.H.C."* (Conrad's full name: Alfred Haskell Conrad) so it is clear that this poem is about her husband at the time. Going back into the language regarding the physical aspects of their relationship, Rich writes that "they're tearing down the houses / we met and lived in, / soon our two bodies will be all / left standing from that era" (175). The "they're" in this scenario seems to point toward a city (presumably Cambridge Massachusetts, where Rich and her husband met) and its urban renewal process of tearing down older buildings and putting up new ones. Rich points out the fact that their lives are physically changing around them. It is evident that these lines express Rich's uncertainty about Conrad and her being able to be together with him physically if everything around them is getting torn apart. She seems to start questioning if their two bodies are enough to stay together or keep the love alive. However, Rich ends the poem by writing "only our fierce attention / gets hyacinths out of those / hard cerebral lumps" (176) alluding to Rich's belief that focusing on the small physical details of a person one loves can potentially keep the love alive. Knowing Conrad and all of his quirks so well is what Rich believes will keep her with him. She believes that actions speak louder than words and that if she can physically do things to remind Conrad of her love for him, maybe their relationship will not deteriorate. Rich's overarching tone seems desperate, as if she is trying to grasp at anything to keep the love alive. Rich's early poems reflect her fraying physical relationship with Conrad, and this is even more emphasized when we look at the language she uses regarding her physical connections with her later female partners.

We see Rich transitioning into a relationship with romantic partner, Lilly Engler, in Rich's collection *Twenty-One Love Poems*. This collection of poems seems to include the most language regarding her physical intimacy with Engler. However, this does not mean that this relationship was perfect or ideal for Rich. In one of the first poems, Rich writes, "I wake up in your bed. I know I have been dreaming" (465) so there is a scene here painted where Rich is physically in Engler's bed. This line contrasts with Rich's early writings about Alfred where she describes them laying together in heavy darkness. This scene is more bright and colorful, highlighting how light and happy Rich supposedly feels with Engler. In the next few lines, Rich writes "you've kissed my hair to wake me. *I dreamed you were a poem,* / I say, *a poem I wanted to show someone*" (465) which expresses her deep love and admiration for Engler. The small, intimate moments such as a kiss in her hair makes her feel so strongly for Engler. Rich is dreaming and speaking of a life with Engler; a life where both of them are happy and proud to be with each other. In a later poem, Rich writes of letting herself into Engler's apartment, unloading the groceries, and dancing to a song. She writes "my body still both light and heavy with you" (467), emphasizing her physical bodily reactions to Engler. Rich expresses Engler's ability to make her feel both lighter and heavier, maybe in the sense that she always feels Engler's presence around her even when Engler is not there. Rich is able to find romantic joy in the small things, and it seems that this scene portrays something of a "puppy love" relationship where everything feels new, exciting, and rebellious.

Rich continues this section on Engler by writing "they will control the world, and you are not in my arms" (467) which is a reflection from Rich on how men control society and women and Rich just wishes that Engler was physically there with her in the moment. Rich continues on by writing:

> Your small hands, precisely equal to my own—
> only the thumb is larger, longer—in these hands
> I could trust the world, or in many hands like these,
> handling power-tools or steering wheel
> or touching a human face… (468)

Rich is portraying the physical compatibility that she has with Engler and the soothing effect that Engler's body has on Rich. She is fully trusting of Engler, and claims that she would trust Engler's hands with anything and everything. She does not need a man to do things for her, only Engler. Rich also writes that their "bodies, so alike, are yet so different" (470) but these differences do not take away from their physical compatibility. Before this line, Rich also expresses that "creatures must find each other for bodily comfort" (470) further emphasizing her prioritization of bodily compatibility. She ends this chapter on a more sexual note, where she writes lines such as "your traveled, generous thighs / between which my whole face has come and come" and "your touch on me, firm, protective, searching / me out" and "reaching where I had been waiting years for you / in my rose-wet cave" (472-473). Rich's relationship with Engler is one that Rich expresses as deeply intimate and physical; however, a friend of Rich's would later describe Engler as "not this wild erotic creature that Adrienne had immediately cast her as" (Holladay 264). This alludes to the idea that Rich's "puppy-love" poetry glorifies her intimate relationship with Engler, as love is known to make one blind to their partner's flaws. Rich's biography also describes Engler as an ideal lover who was practically the female version of Rich's father, but in a "soft, welcoming, maternal body" (Holladay 262).

Now we move into Rich's final, rest-of-her-life, partner, Michelle Cliff. In another essay titled "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Experience," Rich writes that society (especially men) "treats lesbian experience as a marginal or less 'natural' phenomenon, as mere 'sexual preference,'" (Rich 1980, 200). Rich is aware of how society views lesbian relationships, so her poems about Cliff emphasize Rich's ability to put heteronormative expectations aside and focus on her passionate love and energy towards Cliff. A long poem titled "Transcendental Etude" is *"for Michelle Cliff,"* which Rich writes underneath it. Rich writes "the homesickness for a woman, for ourselves, / for that acute joy at the shadow her head and arms / cast on a wall, her heavy or slender / thighs on which we lay, flesh against flesh" (514). This can be interpreted as a symbol for mothers and their babies, to the extent all people long to return to the physical love of their mothers, but also for Rich and Cliff specifically. Just like with Engler, Rich finds comfort in her physical relationship with Cliff because she wants to be cared for and nurtured physically. Rich continues by writing "only with the musing of a mind / one with her body, experienced fingers quietly pushing / dark against bright, silk against roughness, / pulling the tenets of life together" (515). Rich highlights the contrasts of touch (dark against bright, silk against roughness) and how this works for her and feels physically perfect to her. There is this sense that there is a deep connection here of the body and soul. Rich's language here in this poem and towards Cliff in general seems to be the most poetic and sensual language regarding the physical elements of their relationship.

Now that the physical aspects of Rich's relationships have been discussed, I'd like to segue into analyzing the emotional and mental aspects of each of these three relationships, again starting with the poem titled "Like This Together" about Conrad. The beginning of this poem describes the two of them sitting in a car together silently. Rich writes "another time / I'd have said 'Canada geese,' / knowing you love them" (174) highlighting the growing mental distance between the two. Rich wants to mention something that she knows Conrad enjoys, but she doesn't feel the need to because of their emotional distance. She is honest in her head, but not to him directly. She knows him, but she doesn't feel the need to express this or validate this to him in this awkward moment of silence. Rich writes about a similar thing in the same poem when she says "the way / water tastes from our tap, / which you marvel at, letting / it splash into the glass. / Because of you I notice / the taste of water" (175) which brings back this idea of knowing someone so well and feeling so emotionally connected to them that you notice even the smallest things because of this. Even if there is emotional distance between her and Conrad, Rich's writing emphasizes that she still knows him so well, and because of this, she loves him. This makes me think of a quote that says "to know someone is to love them."

While a lot of "Twenty-One Love Poems" is about Rich's physicality with Engler, we also get a sense of their emotional connection. It is important to point out that Rich writes that "no one has imagined [them]" (465), the "them" being women in love with each other. The city is full of excitement and passion, but it still fails to recognize lesbian relationships. However, this does not take away from how Rich feels towards Engler, as she describes them as an "us," alluding to the idea that everything is okay because they are doing it together. Rich writes "as I listen here with nerves tuned for your ring" (466) which reminds me again of "puppy love" and how the way Rich feels towards Engler is comparable to young love and how teenagers act towards each other. This makes me think that their emotional connection has elements of immaturity involved in it. She also writes that "weeks have to do time / for years of missing each other" (466) again referring to the fact that they met later in life as middle-aged adults who can't act foolishly in love like they might want to. In Rich's biography, Holladay writes that Rich "found in Engler the deeply attentive partner she had craved for so long" (Holladay 262) and that she was "passionately in love, she swelled with emotion unknown to her since her earliest days of dating Conrad" (Holladay 263). Rich craves this emotional connection and it reminds her of younger days and a younger, more innocent love.

Rich continues to describe Engler and says "show me what I can do / for you, who have often made the unnamable / nameable for others, even for me" (470). Rich has always tried to put into her words how she feels, and Engler is able to do that for her finally. Engler is able to dig into the deepest depths of Rich and bring out the heaviest emotions in her. Rich acknowledges in this poem that "two women together is a work / nothing in civilization has made simple" (475) which she also touches on in her "Compulsory Heterosexuality" essay where she writes: "women's choice of women as passionate comrades, life partners, co-workers, lovers, tribe, [has] been crushed, invalidated, forced into hiding and disguise" (Rich 1980, 200). Putting these two quotes together overall emphasizes the idea that two women together are viewed a certain way by others and that there is a lot of extra mental labor that comes with that. This seems to weigh heavily on Rich, but again she is confident in facing it because she is there with Engler.

Back in "Transcendental Etude," which was written for Cliff, Rich expresses that "no one ever told us we had to study our lives, / make of our lives a study" (511) perhaps alluding to how Rich cannot keep track of all of the changes and events in her life. There is also no rulebook for how she is

supposed to act in her sexuality and how these relationships work, but she continues with them anyways. In this poem about Cliff, Rich seems to reach more for the soul connection that she feels towards both the universe and her partner. This is evident in the lines "she herself and all creation / seem equally dispersed, weightless" and Rich writes before this of "the Great Nebula" (513). This seems like a description of the universe as god-like and Rich seems to believe that she has the ability to remove herself from the harsh expectations of reality. Rich writes "two women, eye to eye / measuring each other's spirit, each other's / limitless desire / a whole new poetry beginning here" (514), which describes the deep soul connection that she feels towards Cliff. She feels even more powerful and divine in this eye-to-eye connection that she has with Cliff.

Overall, I argue that readers can visibly notice the different tones and feelings Rich uses towards these three lovers throughout her life. This is examined by looking closely at Rich's descriptions of the physical and emotional elements of these relationships. Rich's tone towards Conrad is one that seems fatigued: she knows that she is unhappy but she has been with him for a while and finds comfort in this and the fact that she knows him so well. There is a huge shift in language when Rich begins writing of her affair with Engler: there are more physical and sexual elements and a sense that this love was more immature, excitable, and infatuated despite both of them being middle-aged women. Finally, Rich's descriptions of her final partner, Cliff, are both physical and emotional, emphasizing the soul connection they shared. Adrienne Rich connects her love for Cliff to the energy and ability of the universe. Her language in Cliff's poems is more metaphorical and sublime, while her language with the other two is more direct.

References

Holladay, H. 2020. *The Power of Adrienne Rich: A Biography*. Nan A. Talese.

Rich, Adrienne. 2016. *Collected Poems: 1950-2012*. WW Norton & Company.

Rich, Adrienne. 1980. "Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence." In Parker, Richard G., and Peter Aggleton, eds. 1999. *Culture, Society and Sexuality : A Reader*. London: UCL Press.199-225.

Rich, Adrienne. 1979. "Husband-Right and Father-Right." *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966-1978*. New York: Norton.