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Annmarie Faiella
Colby College

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The Female Language Barrier: A Close Reading of the Poetry of Emily Dickinson and Adrienne Rich

Annmarie Faiella
Colby College
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Advisor: Prof. Patricia Onion
I wish to acknowledge Professor Patricia Onion for the time and spirit she dedicated to this project. I would like to dedicate this to women poets everywhere, but especially Emily Dickinson and Adrienne Rich, who continue to inspire me.
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Introduction: The Female Language Barrier

Only thirty years ago the First Amendment right to free speech was limited to certain groups. If one looks back further to the nineteenth century those restrictions grow tighter and tighter. Language, although constitutionally guaranteed since 1776, has not always been a freedom for everyone. Among those at language’s mercy are immigrants, slaves, and women. Women's speech was limited not by a lack of knowledge, but by a societal acceptance of women as inferior. This inferiority limited the range and scope of topic for women in public arenas.

For women language has always been a hand-me-down tradition like so many other American institutions: justice, education, business. To this day women are seen as encroaching on male territory when they demand justice, pursue an education, or attempt to crack the business world. The most upsetting of all of these inequalities, however, must be language. A woman does not have to be educated to survive, nor does she have to be a part of the business world, and with any luck she will never have a run-in with the justice system. A woman cannot, however, survive without the
use of language.

What then do women do to overcome this ever present chasm in their lives? What women did in the nineteenth century, the 1960s, and are still doing today is: write more creatively. The tighter the restraint of language, the more inventive the woman must be to use it successfully. By twisting the limited vocabulary and subject matter available, women can break out of that male-created mold that envelopes their every word.

The master of this continuous word game was Emily Dickinson. Dickinson, as a woman living in America in the 1800s, created some of the most innovative and puzzling poems ever written. Instead of succumbing to the limited range of vocabulary and subject matter available to her, she broke free. In breaking out of the mold Dickinson used metaphor and beautiful, eloquent verse to mask her non-traditional literature. Emily Dickinson began to set a trend.

In the middle of this century another woman began to manipulate language. Adrienne Rich, having read Dickinson’s poetry, saw a subtle genius at work. As a radical feminist at the height of the women’s movement, Rich began to incorporate Dickinson’s subtle yet brilliant techniques and evolved to create her own. Rich views language as a product of the oppressors and the tool of the patriarchy. Rich, writing one hundred years after Dickinson, possesses greater literary freedom. Rich, however, realizes the patriarchal source of language and refuses to bend to the patriarchy. Rich saw her poetry as a tool, not to further the oppressors’ cause, but to fight it, to fight for the oppressed.

Oppression, in every form, lends itself to art. No one with the freedom to say whatever he or she wants will struggle to create complex
and mystical writings. There must be a restraint against which the artist can fight to produce, with beauty and eloquence, that which Dickinson and Rich produced. Not only did they succeed at transcending the language barrier, but they were both very prolific, proving that oppression cannot keep a good woman down. Language was reborn in them and through them. They have expressed their souls, on paper, through their poetry.
In the soul of every person lies a compilation of the people, places and events in that person's life. What we gain from that compilation cannot be measured. In the works of two of America's greatest female poets we see how that soul is transferred to paper. Emily Dickinson and Adrienne Rich, despite living one hundred years apart, live in each others' souls. The purpose of this paper is to present these two poets for comparison. The paper will show how, regardless of the biographical and historical differences in their lives, they are literary sisters.

For Dickinson it was harder; Rich was not even a thought let alone a poet when she wrote. Rich, however, was fueled by a Dickinson legacy. Rich is lucky enough to have Dickinson's poetry at her disposal, and like so
many women Rich has used that poetry to grow. Unlike many women, Rich has, by working through this Dickinson legacy, became a major twentieth century voice, rewriting for her own time Dickinson's audacious overhaul of language. Language was one obsession the two poets shared. Both Dickinson and Rich manipulated a language they saw as confining and succeeded at making that language work for them. These two poets created their own language by using the words of the male-created language and warping them through syntax, capitalization and punctuation, as well as assonance, consonance, metaphor, simile, and a myriad of other literary devices. Both women, then, dared to say the forbidden; they twisted form, logic, and language to subvert the institutional rhetoric.

I plan, after mapping out their differences, to compare Dickinson and Rich on many other fronts as well: style, theme, word choice, punctuation, love, desire, power, and identity. I will conclude with a discussion of language, which was at the heart of each woman's work. They were separated though by time, by culture, education, religion, by radically different private lives. At first glance they seem like complete opposites.

A look at their biographies will help to shed light on the worlds in which they wrote. Few women are so diametrically opposed on the surface as Adrienne Rich and Emily Dickinson. Writing as they did, primarily in the same genre, these two women could not have led more different lives. One lived in the nineteenth century, the other in the twentieth century. One is seen as a spinsterly recluse and the other as an avid political activist. Each, however, individual though she was, was shaped by historical forces.

The nineteenth century produced several examples of literature that questioned human nature. Nathaniel Hawthorne's chilling questioning of
good vs. evil in *The Scarlet Letter* and "Young Goodman Brown,"; Melville's search for an identity in the face of nature in *Moby Dick*; Edgar Allan Poe's obsession with the dark side of human nature in all of his works. The nineteenth century nurtured that idea of free thought among its literary geniuses, but more often than not, those geniuses were male. Emily Dickinson shared this questioning Zeitgeist, and wrote about topics that were previously not discussed by women: desire, death, lust, immortality, power. Perhaps because of this intense questioning, her poetry stands as the earliest and possibly the best poetry by an American woman, two great achievements.

For women the nineteenth century was still rather stifling and stultifying. Women were not allowed to vote, to own property, to initiate divorce, engage in any public or civic activity, nor enter the professions, at least not without great difficulty. The nineteenth century for women fostered the idea of the subservient female. Paula Bennet summarizes the situation well: "As a nineteenth century woman, Emily Dickinson was sexually and politically disempowered by the society in which she lived" (p. 155). Serious matters were dealt with by the men in the community. Emily Dickinson, however, was writing about some of the most serious issues in the world in her little Amherst garret.

That garret provided a haven for the genius of Emily Dickinson, enabling her to live during the nineteenth century but not in the nineteenth century. The distinction is minor, but important. As Maggie Lane writes: "Women were trained to be obedient wives, good housekeepers, and if there was any time over from those duties, to be active in works of church and charity" (p. 151-2). Emily Dickinson did none of these things that women did; she never married, she left most
household tasks to her sister Lavinia, and she was not a devout church
goer, in fact religion did not appeal to her at all. Emily Dickinson, however,
succeeded in constructing herself, in spite of the cultural forces that would
have dominated a lesser woman.

Emily Dickinson managed to write 1,775 poems during this century
of oppression, a century that liked its women silent and at home. Despite
her success, Emily Dickinson was either by choice or the pressure of
nineteenth century life, silent. Her place was in words, but not spoken
words; not published words either. After her death her sister Lavinia
found thousands of poems scribbled on insignificant scraps of paper. Little
useless pieces of paper that Dickinson had collected and written on. There
is a boldness in her words, written on those tiny scraps of paper, a power
that comes from the language she created in an effort to escape the public,
male-dominated world. There was also a price for this boldness. Dickinson
never entered society as we know it. She never lived among the living.
Hers was a silent world.

The transition between Dickinson’s nineteenth century world and the
twentieth century world of today is remarkable. Twentieth century
America is a very different place. The twentieth century has witnessed
enormous technological advances, as well as sociological advances in the
form of our diversity. While there is still a lot of work to do on all fronts it
is interesting to note the changes in the view of women. Throughout the
twentieth century the status of women has seen marked improvement.
Given the right to vote in 1919, women are now elected to offices of high
importance, educated for every profession, active in the public forum,
allowed to buy and sell land, able to take the initiative in divorce
proceedings. In a century’s time, the lot of life for women has radically
changed. One of the best poets writing in the twentieth century is Adrienne Rich. Hers is a body of work that is not only voluminous, but evolved as well. Rich writes as a twentieth century woman about the lot of twentieth century women. She takes up issues that are of the utmost contemporary importance. Claire Keyes, writing of Rich says: "Adrienne Rich is, ..., the most visible and prominent poet in the last half of the twentieth century to take as her primary objective the creation and promotion of a female aesthetic" (p. 76). Rich's is the public voice that Dickinson could not find in the nineteenth century.

Not only are these two women separated by one hundred years, they are separated by other boundaries as well. Emily Dickinson, with very few exceptions, spent her life in the town of Amherst, Massachusetts. As Maggie Lane says: "For Emily it was at once refuge and prison, symbol of both her independent inner life and of self-effacing daughterly duty" (p. 152). Her life in Amherst was not hers alone, for the Dickinson family held a strong place in the community. Dickinson roots were formed in Amherst before Emily Dickinson was born. Because of these roots and because Dickinson never left, Emily Dickinson is almost synonymous with the town of Amherst, even today. That sort of setting can generate both a sense of security and a feeling of suffocation. Those who study Dickinson, including Adrienne Rich herself, cannot help placing her into that society: "For years I have been not so much envisioning Emily Dickinson as trying to visit, to enter her mind, through her poems and letters, and through my own intimations of what it could have meant to be one of the two mid-nineteenth century geniuses, and a woman, living in Amherst, Massachusetts" (p. 100). Rich wrote these words after having traveled to Amherst to see the home of Dickinson. Just as Walden Pond is haunted by
Thoreau, Salem by Hawthorne, so too is Amherst haunted still by the presence of the woman who came to be known as the Belle of Amherst. Not all literary geniuses are so attached to their birthplaces. Rich certainly is not.

Born in Baltimore, Maryland, Rich lived in several states in the Northeast of America. She is most certainly considered to be one of the most famous Baltimorians. Rich's roots, however, are not nearly as cemented to one particular place, as Dickinson's are. One can travel through Baltimore and probably never hear Rich's name. This lack of certain homeland, a stable place to call one's own may have been a blessing or a curse to Rich, but either way it certainly played a part in her writing. This sense of "homelessness" gives Rich's poetry a freedom and flow. In a lot of her poetry there is no sense of stasis, there is a world of escape. An escape perhaps from those that we strive to be around most, our families.

Another tremendously important aspect of these two women's biographies is their family situations. The middle child born to Edward Dickinson and Emily Norcross Dickinson, Emily Dickinson was a member of a high society family. Her older brother Austin and younger sister Lavinia played enormous roles in her life. In fact, if it was not for Lavinia, who found and preserved the poetry stored in scraps in Emily's bureau at her death, the poems of Emily Dickinson may never have been saved. Lavinia said of Emily once:

As for Emily, she was not withdrawn or exclusive really. She was always watching for the rewarding person to come, but she was a very busy person herself. She had to think-- she was the only one of us who had that to do. Father believed; and mother loved; and Austin had Amherst; and I had the family to keep track of. (Lane, p. 159)
Here Lavinia maps out the Dickinson household by function. Dickinson's family then, nurtured her space to think in many ways her world of poetry. By allowing Dickinson to be the one to think, they all inadvertently helped along the greatest female American poet. This is not to say that Dickinson's family life was perfect; home was, for Dickinson, a difficult place to live. Her relationship with her father, as will be shown later on, was a difficult one at best. Like the stability of Amherst, however, the Dickinson family provided Emily with security.

Security was lacking in the family life of Adrienne Rich. Rich's parents were not nearly as supportive as Dickinson's. Rich, granted, was a much more vocal daughter than Dickinson; however, her parents did not coddle her. In fact, by the time Rich gave birth to her first son she had practically severed all ties with her parents, who never recovered from Rich's decision to marry an older, divorced man. This separation from her family combined with her lack of one solid hometown left Rich at a loss for a home base. Where Rich had something Dickinson did not was in a non-familial love. Rich was married in 1953 to Alfred Conrad, a divorced college professor from Brooklyn (Showalter, p. 297). If Rich took one thing from her life at home with her parents it was the notion that as a wife she, like her mother, should put her career on hold to be the proper academic wife and mother. Adrienne Rich had three children before she was thirty years old (Showalter, p. 297). Dickinson never opted for this lifestyle; Rich, too, found that it was not for her. Rich's marriage ended in a divorce, and her husband eventually committed suicide, bringing to an abrupt close Rich's experiment in heterosexual love.
Having looked at the change in society in the lives of these two poets, it is important to look at the way Dickinson and Rich, themselves, viewed women's roles in society. Although Rich had the Women's liberation movement on her side, Dickinson succeeded in breaking down some of those nasty barriers as well. By creating volumes of poetry discussing issues that women should not and did not discuss, Dickinson revolted against a society that liked its women silent. In the end the nineteenth century won out and Dickinson is still today envisioned as an old lonely spinster. Elaine Showalter notes: "Unlike a traditional woman, she [Dickinson] did not marry, bear children, or satisfy affiliative needs in the social world of her community. Unlike a traditional man, she did not seek or achieve power over others in the public world of professional enterprise" (p. 60). Dickinson did not possess a view of women's role in society. She did not fit into a classic mold either for conformity or rebellion. She was not a woman in society's eyes, but she was not trying to be a man either.

Rich, on the other hand, tried to find her role as a woman in twentieth century America. Studying Dickinson's way of life, she wrote:
"The methods, the exclusions, of Emily Dickinson's existence could not have been my own; yet more and more as a woman finding my own methods, I have come to understand her necessities, I could have been a witness in her defense" (Martin, p. 170). Rich could not have lived in the silent world that Emily Dickinson chose. Rich, however, can understand, as a woman, the desire to escape from a male-dominated world and retreat to the silence of a garret. This evolving view of women's role in society, is expressed most boldly throughout Rich's poetry. She began by defining her own personal role: "I am a feminist because I feel endangered,
psychically and physically, by this society" (Erkilla, p. 170). Rich continues her thought by enlarging her vision and her definition to include all women:

We can no longer afford to keep the female principle--the mother in all women and the women in many men--straitened within the tight little postindustrial family, or within any male-induced notion where the female principle is valid and where it is not! (Erkilla, p. 170)

Rich believed in a united female population and a doctrine of the female principle. For Rich that doctrine was poetry.

Unlike Dickinson, Rich has explored many avenues of life as a woman in America. She has played the role of wife and mother that Dickinson lived without. Another role that Dickinson did not want to play was political activist. In all of her over 1,700 poems she only mentions America once. Some of her most voluminous spurts of writing were during the time of the Civil War, and while many of her contemporaries skirted the war as a subject, Dickinson never even mentions it, not once in her literature. Maggie Lane speaks of Dickinson: "Emily was no radical: current affairs did not interest her, appearing to her of fleeting importance compared with the big issues of life, death, and immortality; but her mind was ever receptive to new thought and experience..." (p. 150). Dickinson wrote her poetry for no specific audience, she championed no cause.

Rich, conversely, was a political radical. She was a radical feminist, and activist, she opposed the war in Vietnam, and insisted on "the need to transform all relationships in an effort to create an egalitarian and humane society" (Martin, p. 169). Whereas Dickinson did not allow the outside world to interfere with her inner and private world, Rich saw the two as
inseparable. To Rich the personal is political. Betsy Erkilla states: "Rich came to see the breakup in her private life as woman, wife, and mother and the breakup in the political sphere, occasioned by black, feminist, anti-war, and other forms of social protest, as signs of the larger failure of patriarchal values" (p. 167). To Rich politics was a forum in which literature could play a crucial role. Rich saw language as the tool of the oppressors and felt that the only way to fight back was to use that tool against them. Rich manipulated, as did Dickinson, the language that worked to oppress women and forced it to sustain women instead.

This language is at the heart of their poetry. There are differences in theme and tone and style that must be expected from any two different artists. What these two poets share is a knowledge of language and an ability to work with language. Each possesses a great breadth of vocabulary, using at times the fourth definition of a certain word to make an ironic statement work in their thought process. These poets demand careful reading, much more careful than many of their male counterparts, because they write in a female-based code. By examining the poetry carefully, we can see how these women felt about the world around them and how they fought back to create what is today heralded as some of the best poetry in the world.
Emily Dickinson wrote a large number of poems, 1,775. These poems cover a wide variety of themes. Among the most popular of her themes though are: life, death, immortality, and nature. The last one is the simplest to find. Many of her poems are concerned with flowers, birds, sunsets, bees, and other parts of nature that Dickinson so loved. Dickinson often created her own little world in nature, complete with its own religion. A poem such as “I know a place where summer strives,” exemplifies Dickinson’s love of nature and her fascination with it in her own life. The other three major themes are all interwoven. Life, death, and immortality invade just about all of Dickinson's poems in one way or another. Many of Dickinson’s most well-known poems are concerned with death: “Because I could not stop for death,” and “There’s been a death in
the opposite house," are just two examples. These are not light issues or simple poems. Paula Bennet asserts: "At a period when, it seems, virtually every woman poet in the US failed to rise above the limitations imposed on women's poetry by women's complicity in a system that oppressed them, Emily Dickinson sought 'taller feet'" (p. 23). Dickinson did not discuss the frivolous issues that were left for women in the nineteenth century after the men handled all of the serious business. Rich herself writes: "Emily Dickinson's is the only poetry in English by a woman of that century which pierces so far beyond the ideology of the 'feminine' and the convention of womanly feeling" (p. 113). Just looking at her theme we see how Dickinson stepped away from the other poets of her generation and expanded the canon of poetry for women to include such weighted issues as our own death and immortality. Wendy Martin wrote: "In the tradition of protest and reform that is a basic dimension of American culture, Emily Dickinson refused to be diminished by the constraints of feminine virtue and propriety that paralyzed so many Victorian women" (p. 80). This tradition of protest and reform in America reached a new level during the life of Adrienne Rich.

Rich lived through a very transitory part of American history. She witnessed the domestic fifties, the experimental sixties, and the coming out of the seventies and eighties, and kept pace with the Zeitgeist of her times. Her poetry reflects this rapid social transition. Rich's earlier poems, in volumes such as Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law and Necessities of Life, tackle the lives of women in domestic settings. Households in upheaval was a major theme of her early writing. Rich herself was a housewife in the 1950's. She chose the role of wife and mother over that of poet and social activist. This embittered her as Elaine Showalter states: "...in Of
Women Born ('76) Rich would write with eloquence about how the isolation of women and children in the middle-class America of the '50s put an impossible burden on mother and child" (p. 299). Clearly her own life is reflected in her creations such as Aunt Jennifer of "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers."

As Rich's life changed and evolved so too did her themes. Moving into the social turmoil that was the 1960's Rich too turned her attention to more social questions. Never leaving her role as woman, Rich began to write poetry that questioned women's role in this society and lauded courageous women for their strength. In "Phantasia for Elvira Shatayev," Rich praises the Russian mountain climber and her team who died on Lenin's Peak in August of 1974. Rich calls to attention the courage and strength these women possessed right up to the moment of their deaths. In "Power," Rich praises Madame Curie on her devotion to science despite its fatal implications. This poetry and the poetry she writes from this point on is more angry than the domestic poems she began with. Wendy Martin notes the bite of Rich's more political poems:

She [Rich] weaves a tightly woven mesh of lyrical assonance, consonance, slant rhyme, and onomatopoeia with political slogans of the antiwar and women's lib movements of the 60's and 70's, literal quotations from women's diaries, letters, and essays, and startlingly discordant diction from conversations and internal monologue that captures the anger of women whose abilities have been trivialized or denied in a patriarchal society. (p.168-9)

No longer can Rich just discuss the domestic side of women's lives; she has begun to break out of a socially constructed role. To Rich the domestic becomes political. Rich's theme grew as she did.
Essential to the successful execution of any theme is the vocabulary the poet uses. In order to produce a certain feeling about a theme the vocabulary must be suitable. Emily Dickinson was a true innovator of poetic vocabulary. Dickinson possessed a mastery of pronoun usage. Not only did Dickinson use an enormous number of pronouns, she used them to develop theme. By placing a 'he' in the middle of a death poem the reader has to decipher who 'he' is, is it god, is it death personified, is it another human about to die. In “I live with Him--I see His face--” Dickinson uses the unidentified pronoun to describe a mate:

I live with Him--I see His face--
I go no more away
For Visitor--or Sundown--
Death’s single privacy

The Only One--forestalling Mine--
And that--by Right that He
Presents a Claim invisible--
No wedlock--granted Me-- (1-8, #463)

Here Dickinson presents the reader with a capitalized he that could be anyone from a bee to her father, to God. The interpretations are endless.

Dickinson also used pronouns to discuss inanimate objects, making a poem complex or cryptic. In “Funny--to be a Century,” Dickinson presents time as a male with the capitalized he that litters so many of her poems.

Funny--to be a Century--
And see the People--going by--
I--should die of the Oddity--
But then--I’m not so staid--as He--

He keeps His secrets safely--very--
Were He to tell--extremely sorry
This bashful Globe of Ours would be--
So daintiness of Publicity-- (1-8)

Not only do the pronouns stand in place of inanimate objects they often are illogical. Some times the pronouns Dickinson used did not match the gender of the object, thus blurring the lines of gender. A critical examination of Dickinson's poetry cannot overlook the sometimes enigmatic pronoun usage.

Another crucial aspect to Dickinson's poetry is her understanding of the English language. Dickinson did attend college, although she did not finish. She was a very well-read woman; among her favorite authors: Charlotte and Emily Bronté, John Keats, and Shakespeare. Her knowledge of language is evident in her word choice. Often times in her poetry a word appears that does not seem to fit, the definition that is present in most people's minds is not the definition that Dickinson had in mind at the time she wrote the poem. Dickinson used fourth or fifth definitions of words, or the archaic meaning that cannot even be found in contemporary dictionaries. Dickinson wrote almost code-like in an effort to subvert the language that Rich would define later as 'the oppressor's language.'

Rich too has particular vocabulary habits that litter her poetry. Rich has a keen sense of irony. She can take a phrase or stanza and by inserting one word twist the meaning to be ironic or sarcastic. This irony could even be expressed through rhythm. Poetic rhythm can contribute to theme in many ways, in the poem "Boundary" Rich uses a simplistic rhythm pattern to sound sarcastic.

What has happened here will do
To bite the living world in two,
Half for me and half for you.
Here at last I fix a line
Severing the world’s design
Too small to hold both yours and mine.
There’s enormity in a hair
Enough to lead men not to share
Narrow confines of the sphere
But put an ocean or a fence
Between two opposite intents.
A hair would span the difference. (1-12)

Rich uses a sing-song rhythm and an elementary rhyme scheme to create a poem that reads like a nursery rhyme, but discusses the division of people all over the planet. Her irony is biting. Irony is a very powerful tool, and more often than not it is cruel and not humorous. Irony can be laughable, but it is to Rich a bitter reminder of how women are victims of a language created by the patriarchy; how women must fight against, and twist that language to find their voices.

A major part of Rich's irony is her ability, like Dickinson's, to call upon a buried definition. Sarcasm and irony are at their simplest the writer's ability to use a different definition of a word, or a completely different word, to change the meaning of a phrase. Rich was able to do this frequently. Rich called upon Dickinson's genius:

I am thinking of a confined space in which the genius of the nineteenth century female mind in America moved, inventing a language more varied, more compressed, more dense with implications, more complex of syntax, than any American poetic language to date; in the trail of that genius my mind has been moving, and with its language and images my mind still has to reckon, as the mind of a woman poet in America today. (Rich, p.173)
Rich acknowledges Dickinson's creativity with language and asserts her own need for such creativity in the twentieth century.

In the nineteenth century Emily Dickinson did not launch a crusade to forge a new female-created language, she didn't forge any crusades at all. She did, however, discover a means by which women could uncover their own language. Dickinson produced poetry that, while written in English, was nothing like the poetry that men were writing at that time. Hers was different, written in an English that transcended gender through pronoun usage, and usurped standard definition. Dickinson did not doctrinize her language, but she set the standard for women of the twentieth century.

Adrienne Rich did try to doctrinize that language Emily Dickinson experimented with a century earlier. Rich called for a 'common language,' one that would undermine the oppressor's language that was subverting women's verbal freedom. Showalter speaks of Rich's 'common language': "The dream of transcending the cultural determinants of language, of communicating immediately in a commonality of women, is countered by a need for the ordinary, rooted, 'common' language in history, from which action and change can arise" (p. 306). Rich, in her effort to change society through political activism, lacked the 'common' language of history that men possess. It was men with men's language that declared the United States to be a free country in 1776. It was men who wrote with a male-created language our Bill of Rights. Rich sought a common language for women through which women's rights and anti-war reform could be created. Thus, she dreamed of a common language from which her action and change could arise.
Whether or not Dickinson dreamed of a common language is uncertain, but it is definite that her poetry was anything but common. Another way in which Dickinson presented poetry that was uniquely hers was through her punctuation and grammar choices. The most obvious punctuation mark in Dickinson's work is the dash. Her poetry is riddled with dashes, some of which make sense, and some that are very nonsensical. The first explanation of these dashes is simple. When Dickinson's sister Lavinia discovered the thousand plus poems scribbled on old scraps of paper, many of them were difficult to read. The poems were written quickly, or yellowed by age, or torn and unreadable. Editors used dashes in places where the word or words were completely lost. As we have discovered Dickinson's words were very difficult to predict. When one looks at the original copies of her poems, however, there are many instances of dashes that Dickinson herself inserted. At times these dashes are very short and at other times as long as half a line. These dashes are vital to the tone of the poetry. They can stand for a complete break in thought, or a silent gap, that can change the tone of the poem. An example of this dash usage is simple enough to locate:

Through the Dark Sod--as Education--
The Lily passes sure--
Feels her white foot--no trepidation--
Her faith--no fear-- (1-4, #392)

These dashes are not inadvertent marks on the paper; they act as vital a role as the words themselves in producing tone and affect in the poems.

Another of Dickinson's seemingly misplaced punctuation marks is the exclamation point. Often times there will be an exclamation point in the
middle of a sentence that has not come to an end. These exclamation points seem useless and frivolous but they are ultimately very necessary.

And Echoes--Trains away,
Sneer--"Where"!
While the old Couple, just astir,
Fancy the Sunrise--left the door ajar!

These exclamation points place emphasis on parts of the language that Dickinson feels deserve emphasis. The question word "where" does not receive a question mark, but an exclamation point. These punctuation marks seem out of place because in the forum of the male-created language these thoughts are not deserving of additional emphasis. To disregard these exclamation points is to disregard that which Dickinson held crucial.

Dickinson also uses quotation marks as a means of emphasis in her poetry. By highlighting certain words or phrases in quotation marks, she makes sure the reader notices her point.

I’m “wife”--I’ve finished that--
That other state--
I’m Czar--I’m “Woman” now--
It’s safer so-- (1-4, #199)

In this most famous example of quotation mark usage, Dickinson not only wants to point out the words ‘wife’ and ‘woman’ but show the connection between the two of them. There is no real pattern to Dickinson's use of any punctuation mark.

There is also no pattern to Dickinson's use of capitalization. If one visual thing sets Dickinson's poetry apart from all other poetry, it is her
seemingly random use of capitalization. She always begins her lines with capitals, but she often inserts capitalized common nouns or pronouns into the middle of a line. The capitalized pronouns, especially he, often leads the reader to question whether or not Dickinson is discussing God. The capitalized nouns simply confuse the reader. One explanation of Dickinson's capitalization is again added emphasis. The reader notices the capitalized words first and they have a greater significance in the poem.

I heard a Fly buzz--when I died--
The Stillness in the Room
Was like the Stillness in the Air--
Between the Heaves of Storm-- (1-4, #465)

All of the nouns in this stanza are capitalized, yet the verbs are not. Since no one will ever know why Dickinson used capital letters the way she did it is better not to speculate.

Rich has imitated Dickinson's style, experimenting with dashes, quotation marks, exclamation points, and misplaced capital letters. Although not frequently found in Rich's poetry Dickinson's style is evident in some of Rich's writing.

They say the second's getting shorter--
I knew it in my bones--
and pieces of the universe are missing.
I feel the gears of this late afternoon
slip, cog by cog, even as I read.
"I'm old," we both complain,
half-laughing, oftener now. (6-12, "A Marriage in the 'Sixties)

One of Rich's stylistic techniques that is not common to Dickinson is spacing. Rich inserts spaces into lines, and even removes spaces from lines to present the reader with either gaps or flowing thought. The gaps can be silence or just breaks in thought. The flowing of words together can connote either a freedom of language with no boundaries or an overwhelming sense of drowning in words.

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 waking off and on
all night to the pain not simply absence but
the presence of the past destructive (1-5, “Splittings”)

This poem, aptly titled “Splittings,” is not only divided through line breaks that cause a break in thought, but also by a visible chasm through the stanza caused by spacing. With gaps or lack of spaces the poet creates tone through spacing.

Rich, like Dickinson, throws in some random capitalization. Rich also experiments with a lack of capitalization.

devourers of the forest
leaving teeth of metal in every tree
so the tree can neither grow
nor be cut for lumber (5-8, “Meditations for a Savage Child, V)

Here is a stanza devoid of the capital letters that Dickinson used so freely. Again, since it is the artist's choice it is hard to decide what the reasoning is, but lower case letters certainly symbolize a diminutive form of language. Rich acknowledges that language was male created, so women’s
language must be smaller in comparison, another of the ironies that runs throughout Rich's work.

Adrienne Rich read Dickinson's poems often and at several different points in her life. This is evident through the stylistic echo that Rich possesses in the twentieth century. Rich saw Dickinson as a creator, a mad scientist building a new language in the laboratory of her Amherst garret. Rich took advantage of the new found freedoms of the twentieth century to bring that language to life. Through themes of her own devising and a manipulation of Dickinson's earlier style, Rich expanded that language to tackle many broad and difficult subjects. Not surprisingly, as with their style, their subjects often overlapped.
One of the most frequent topics of all poetry is love. There have been love poems since the beginning of time and they will continue on eternally. One of the most intriguing forms of love is familial. Familial love is the most basic and at the same time most complicated. Familial connections are not tied up in sexual mores and the uncomfortable beginnings of a relationship. Your family, especially your immediate family, are with you from the beginning. Often your family members are the first people you ever love. Dickinson and Rich share a very similar love/hate relationship with their fathers.

Emily Dickinson viewed her father as a true patriarch. She was, at times, actually frightened of him as Maggie Lane discovered.
‘I never knew how to tell time by the clock till I was fifteen,’ Emily told a new acquaintance when she was forty. ‘My father taught me but I did not understand and was afraid to ask anyone else lest he should know.’ (p. 153)

Edward certainly held a powerful presence in the Dickinson household. This presence did not go unnoticed by the middle child, Emily. What Dickinson did with her father’s strong presence, not only at home but in the community, was weave a tightly held definition of the male figure. Male came to mean to Dickinson someone who could instill fear while simultaneously earning the family money and handling the family disputes. Because her life was so cloistered Edward became the rule by which men all over the world must abide. Lane wrote: “As the representative and embodiment of male authority, it was her father who established the framework within which a girl’s ideas of herself, her duties and her options were formed” (p.11). Many women of the nineteenth century developed their opinions of men based on their own fathers. This influence on her life was also a great influence on her poetry.

Maggie Lane also notes in Literary Daughters that Edward Dickinson may have had a part in Dickinson’s fear of publishing, if it was fear that kept her from making her poetry public. “So great a proportion of her life was lived under her father’s autocratic rule that her unique contribution to poetry, though not stifled, was very nearly lost” (Lane, p.18). Loss is a topic that comes up repeatedly in Dickinson’s poems and it can be connected to her father in at least one very specific instance. In the poem “I never lost as much but twice,” Dickinson places her father in the same class with burglars and bankers.
I never lost as much but twice,  
And that was in the sod.  
Twice have I stood a beggar  
Before the door of God!

Angels--twice descending  
Reimbursed my store--  
Burglar! Banker--Father!  
I am poor once more! (# 49)

This poem places a father figure in the same light as a burglar, one who has taken something valuable. For Dickinson that loss was true of her own father. If it is true that Edward’s wrath kept her from publishing he stole plenty from his daughter. While Emily was never in fear of being without money she writes here of being a beggar before God, she is depleted, stripped bare by her father’s power. Showalter sees this loss as well: “For Dickinson, love for men, on patriarchal terms, always brought suffering and loss, But it also occasioned her attempts to renegotiate those terms so that she might acquire some of the power, and with it, the love” (p.61). Love for Dickinson was defined through her father as loss, but Dickinson possessed the strength to transform that loss to a power that will be examined later.

Loss was not foreign to Adrienne Rich when she remembered her father as well. Adrienne Rich’s father Arnold was an academic, a college professor, who sought perfection in all the people around him, not the least of which being his daughter. Elaine Showalter states: “...he is the inspired source of her art but also the cruel patriarch who would make the world, including himself, into an ideal image of intellectual perfection” (p.296). Rich took this constant criticism from her father, and like Dickinson, extrapolates it to cover the world of the male patriarchy in general. Rich,
as with many men of her generation, strove to break away from the
traditional values of their fathers. As young people fought, died and
opposed the war in Vietnam so had their fathers embraced patriotism
during World War II. Rich remembers her relationship with her father as
a constant struggle for acceptance:

His investment in my intellect was egotistical, tyrannical,
opinionated and terribly wearing. He taught me, nevertheless,
to believe in hard work, to mistrust easy inspiration, to write
and rewrite; to feel that I was a person of the book, even
though a woman; to take ideas seriously. He made me feel, at a
very young age, the power of language and that I could share
in it. (p.113)

Through all the horrors of her relationship with her father Rich gives him
credit for teaching her some of the most crucial aspects of writing. Rich
used this advice in her creation, but never lost that idea of the autocratic
patriarchy.

Rich displays a bitterness in her earlier, domestic poems that may be
attributed to her tense relationship with her father.

In the deceptive province of my birth
I had seen yes turn to no, the saints descend,
Their sacred faces twisted into smiles
The stars gone leching, the village spring
Gush mud and toads--all miracles
Befitting an incalculable age. (7-12, “The Snow Queen”)

Here Rich presents the world of a child complete with saints, mud and
toads twisted into something converse and ugly. Rich creates a world in
the image of that autocratic patriarchy that denied her a comfortable
relationship with her father. This denunciation of childhood is embittered.
Like Dickinson there is a sense of loss or abandonment in this poem. These feelings were not foreign to Rich who looked at her father as an emotional betrayer who used her to his own benefit.

With Edward as her central male role-model Emily Dickinson constructed her view of male authority. Dickinson referred several times, in letters, to her Master. Although there are several theories about the identity of the Master, what is relevant is the function of male as master. Edward Dickinson had no competition from his wife on the issue of familial control. Dickinson herself often said she had no mother because Emily Norcross Dickinson was such a weak presence, both physically and mentally. Edward certainly molded his daughter with the belief that male is a synonym for strength.

This idea of a master infuses some of Dickinson's poems as well. In one of Emily Dickinson’s most anthologized poems, “Because I could not stop for Death--,” Dickinson presents an unidentified master come to take her away.

Because I could not stop for Death--
He kindly stopped for me--
The Carriage held but just Ourselves--
And Immortality. (1-4)

In the first stanza the speaker is whisked away by a male personified version of death. This male creature is able to do something the speaker cannot and stops for her when she “could not stop for Death--” (1). The poem is set up in this first stanza as an intimate meeting between the speaker and death with only “Immortality” to join them.
We slowly drove--He knew no haste
And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too,
For His Civility-- (5-8)

In stanza two a bit more information is revealed as the male Death is described as Civil. The speaker so trusts this new acquaintance that she “put away/ My labor and my leisure too,” (6-7). In the image of her father, the autocrat who presided over his family while maintaining his position as Civil Servant, this male master has a power over the speaker. The speaker sees this figure as someone who can be trusted but at the same time someone who should be obeyed.

We passed the School, where Children strove
At Recess--in the Ring--
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain--
We passed the Setting Sun-- (9-12)

By stanza three the speaker and her traveling companion are in the presence of society. Passing from a school yard full of children, to the provisional grain field, to the setting sun. Here the two travelers make a quick pass through life, from childhood to death as symbolized by the setting of the sun. This idea of death is extended in stanza four.

Or rather--He passed Us--
The Dews drew quivering and chill--
For only Gossamer, my Gown--
My Tippet--only Tulle-- (13-16)

The setting of the sun, like death itself, is made male by the speaker. Not only is the “Setting Sun” male but it has passed by the carriage holding our
two travelers. These two are now frozen in time as time passes them. It is at this point that the poem becomes one of not only male admiration but of love and sexual desire. Here the speaker quivers like dew at the chill she feels in her gossamer gown. By using the visual and tactile sense of a quivering chill and a gossamer gown the reader is presented with a rather romantic image of the speaker in the presence of death.

We paused before a House that seemed
A Swelling of the Ground--
The Roof was scarcely visible--
The Cornice--in the Ground-- (17-20)

In stanza five the love moves from a quivering sexual desire to the natural metaphor for childhood: "A Swelling of the Ground--" (18). The travelers have now arrived at a house, the symbol for a family. Again with Dickinson’s presupposed definition of male authority through her self-created image of her father their is a confusion here as the "Roof was scarcely visible--" (19). There is a feeling of dissension in the family unit as the house itself is not clear to the speaker.

Since then--'tis Centuries--and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses' Heads
Were toward Eternity-- (21-24)

In the conclusion of this very quizzical poem, the speaker is now aware of the master’s destination. She has determined that the carriage was destined for eternity. By placing her love and trust in the male figure of Death, the speaker has now passed time in eternity with no fear or recollection of the passage of time: “Since then--'tis Centuries--and yet/
Feels shorter than the Day" (21-22). Here the speaker likens the journey towards death as a carriage ride with a very civil male companion for whom she quivers in her gossamer gown.

Adrienne Rich wrote for a time of heterosexual relationships. There are love poems directed towards men in her earlier volumes. Of course it is impossible to say that poetry is autobiographical, but it is evident in the works created after Rich came out as a lesbian that her subjects of love, especially sexual love, were no longer male. Betsy Erkilla in her essay "Adrienne Rich, Emily Dickinson, and the Limits of Sisterhood" notes: "Men are demonized as the bearers of evil, violence and war and women are idealized as superior moral creatures, who are urged 'to take and use' their love" (p. 174). It is important in light of the strained relationship she had with both her father and then her husband to look at the early heterosexual poems. In the short poem “Novella” Rich presents a common view of marriage.

Two people in a room, speaking harshly.
One gets up, goes out for a walk.
(That is the man.)
The other goes into the next room
and washes the dishes, cracking one.
(That is the woman.) (1-6)

In the opening lines Rich presents the reader with a couple obviously losing the bond of communication. When that communication dissolves they each retreat to their socially-constructed role. He as the strong individual type and her as the housewife cleaning up the family dishes. Rich places a very interesting symbol in these opening lines, as the wife cracks one of the dishes, a significant part of the household.
It gets dark outside.
The children quarrel in the attic.
She has no blood left in her heart.
The man comes back to a dark house.
The only light is in the attic. (7-11)

The story or "Novella" as Rich titled it continues. The female has a void in her heart, the center of love. She is no longer able to hold the cracked dishes of her family together. So, when the husband returns home the only light he can see is in the attic. The attic is the place of the children, and although they too quarrel, theirs is an innocent quarrel that remains glowing with the love of siblings. For the man all is dark.

He has forgotten his key.
He rings at his own door
and hears sobbing on the stairs.
The lights go on in the house.
The door closes behind him. (12-16)

As the man realizes he is without his key, the key to his own home, he also hears the sobs of his wife on the stairs. It is at this moment that the lights go on in the house again. It is a moment of recognition for both the man and woman, as she opens the door to let him enter.

Outside, separate as minds,
the stars too come alight. (17-18)

The close of this poem brings the couple full circle as the light imagery gives them a promising sign when the stars come out to light the dark sky. Rich toils with that love/hate relationship she had with the men in her life.
There is the desire to shut them out, but the same desire to keep them close and work through the cracks.
Dickinson was not an admitted lesbian, unlike Rich. The majority of biographers believe that Dickinson's life was devoid of sexual contact of either kind. Dickinson's desires, however, as seen through her poetry can point to a strong sexual attraction towards women. The strong connection between Emily Dickinson and female friends and relatives must, therefore, be pointed out. Dickinson kept in close touch with female cousins. She also had a special bond with her sister-in-law, Susan Gilbert Dickinson. The two were friends before Susan married Dickinson's brother Austin and continued their friendship when the newly married couple moved right next door to Emily's home. Paula Bennet writes: "Dickinson's relationships with women sustained and protected her throughout her life. Equally
important, Dickinson's definition of herself as woman poet was also rooted in her positive feelings for women" (p.14). The presence of female objects of love and desire are not at all odd in the poetry of this woman so attached to her gender.

There are several poems that focus on women in the vast collection of Dickinson's love poems. There are also many female references in her nature poetry. Bennet makes this connection:

"More deeply embedded in women's culture than any other aspect of her work, Dickinson's nature poetry reflects the poets profound need to go outside the masculinist tradition in order to find sources of power that are specifically female and specifically her own." (p. 20)

Using symbols of the female in nature Dickinson makes a connection for all women that is not present in the male-dominated public world. Using small round objects as the symbol of female sexuality in unison with the symbols of volcanoes and earth as representations of the vagina and womb Dickinson creates a nature that is solely female. In "The Day undressed--Herself--,"] Dickinson presents the idea of time in nature as female.

The Day undressed--Herself--
Her Garter--was of Gold--
Her Petticoat--of Purple plain--
Her Dimities--as old

Exactly--as the World--
And yet the newest Star--
Enrolled upon the Hemisphere
Be wrinkled--much as Her

Too near to God--to pray--
Too near to Heaven--to fear--
The Lady of the Occident
Retired without a care--

Her Candle so expire
The flickering be seen
On Ball of Mast in Bosporus--
And Dome--and Window Pane-- (1-16)

This poem is completely engrossed with the female subject. From garter to religious situation, this poem displays the female in a very personal way. It begins with the undressing of the female, but proceeds to not only the undressing of the body, but the soul as well. Stanza three places the female Day at the gates of heaven, her devotion so strong she has no fear of life ever after. Immortality is a recurring theme in Dickinson's work. This woman is so pure she is without fear.

Not only is the female subject of this poem going to the eternal glory of heaven, she is also going on to the eternal glory of immortal life on earth. The light of her candle will glow from the exotic Bosporus right through to the mundane and domestic window pane. A doctrine of female power through purity and everlasting reward.

Rich's female objects of love and desire are less complicated. After the disastrous failure of her marriage, Rich discovered that her role was not as wife but as poet. She became a brilliant poet and activist and declared herself a radical lesbian feminist. Poems full of the love and desire that were missing from earlier bitter poems began to emerge from Rich's writing. Her lesbian declaration was solidified by the publication of The Dream of a Common Language which contains "Twenty-One Love Poems" all directed towards women.

This lesbian influence on her poetry is as crucial to her evolution as the Vietnam War, her father, her children or any other life experience she
drew inspiration from. In the second of her twenty-one love poems, Rich connects her homosexual love to her art.

I wake up in your bed. I know I have been dreaming. Much earlier, the alarm broke us from each other, you've been at your desk for hours. I know what I dreamed: our friend the poet comes into my room where I've been writing for days, drafts, carbons, poems are scattered everywhere, and I want to show her one poem which is the poem of my life. But I hesitate, and wake. You've kissed my hair to wake me. I dreamed you were a poem I say, a poem I wanted to show someone... and I laugh and fall dreaming again of the desire to show you to everyone I love, to move openly together in the pull of gravity, which is not simple, which carries the feathered grass a long way down the up breathing air. (1-16)

This beautifully confessional poem declares not only a strong bond of love between the two women, but also a connection for the poet between love and art. Like Dickinson, Rich received much of her definition of herself as a woman poet, through her strong positive feelings for women. Here the poet likens her lover to a poem that she has created, a poem she wants to share with other poets and her family and everyone but can't. As with the Rich's earlier love poems about heterosexual love this love though much more rewarding, is just as complicated, if not more. This poem is not simply a declaration of love, the last few lines are strikingly sexual. The power of this poem is as meaningful as the beauty. Rich wants to make this lover/poem public to everyone, she wants to “move openly together” (14).
For Rich the personal is public, an issue that she tackles with aplomb in her political poems.

Rich championed the fight for lesbian acceptance. As a political activist she made her own sexuality an issue in the literary world. In a collection of thoughts on women and honor, Rich attacks society for its treatment of lesbians. Not only did Rich feel that society discriminated against lesbians in a public arena, but also in the arena of language. She felt that even in language lesbians are not free, they are trapped in a lie.

Women's love for women has been represented almost entirely through silence and lies. The institution of heterosexuality has forced the lesbian to dissemble, or be labeled a pervert, a criminal, a sick or dangerous woman, etc., etc. The lesbian, then, has often been forced to lie, like the prostitute or married woman. (Rich, p. 6)

Rich knows that language is crucial to all aspects of life and that all human beings, regardless of race, sex, religion or sexual preference, should have equal access to it.
The love that Rich writes of in "Twenty-One Love Poems," and the trust Emily Dickinson writes of in "Because I could not stop for Death--" both stem from desire. Desire differs from love in that it is felt by both the soul and the body. Desire is not always sexual, one can desire any number of things from security to a new car. Desire can consume or it can lie dormant waiting for the right moment to explode.

Emily Dickinson was obviously overwhelmed with desires. Her poems run the gamut from sexual desire to the desire for domesticity, or peace through death. Dickinson's life was lived in her soul yet Dickinson's poetry travels to the most far-reaching expanses of time and space while Emily herself sat in an Amherst garret. In "I started Early--Took my
Dog--,” Dickinson creates a speaker on an early morning walk.

I started Early--Took my Dog--
And visited the Sea--
The Mermaids in the Basement
Came out to look at me-- (1-4)

The opening stanza finds the speaker and her dog on a walk by the ocean. On this walk she is visited by the mythical female inhabitants of the sea, mermaids. This opening places the speaker in the sight of the mermaids, the object of their gaze.

And Frigates--in the Upper Floor
Extended Hempen Hands--
Presuming Me to be a Mouse--
Aground--upon the Sands-- (5-8)

In stanza two the speaker is approached by a large ship, a symbol of strength in the male world. This world reaches out to her, but believing the societal conception of female as weak thinks that the speaker is a mouse. Unaware of the speakers desires the male-created institution of shipping presumes the woman to be a small helpless creature. Mice are just one of the many things that Dickinson used as symbol of the physical smallness of women. From crumbs to bees to birds, women often take the allegorical shape of something tiny. Compared to the Frigate this tiny mouse on the shore is very small.

But no Man moved Me--till the Tide
Went past my simple Shoe--
And past my Apron--and my Belt
And past my Bodice--too-- (9-12)
This stanza contains a confession as the speaker admits that she has not been moved by any man. This virginal confession heightens the desire of the next lines. Desire, as symbolized by the flow of the tide, overtakes the speaker. It starts slowly with her shoe, but quickly flows past the domestic ties of an apron, to the confining items of belt and bodice.

And made as He would eat me up--
   As wholly as a Dew
Upon a Dandelion’s Sleeve--
And then--I started--too-- (13-16)

Dickinson uses the sexual metaphor of dew as moisture in this stanza. Here the speaker goes from the passive speaker of the previous stanza to an active participant in this sexual act.

And He--He followed--close behind--
I felt his Silver Heel
Upon my Ankle--Then my Shoes
Would overflow with Pearl-- (17-20)

Another of Dickinson’s frequently used sexual metaphors is present here. The pearl as a small round object symbolizes the clitoris, the center of female sexuality. Here in this stanza the speaker’s shoes, the original sight of desire in stanza three, overflow with pearl. This gushing, flowing image symbolizes the speaker’s sexual climax.

Until We met the Solid Town--
No One He seemed to know--
And bowing--with a Mighty look--
At me--The Sea withdrew--
As the poem concludes society interrupts the speaker’s desire. Her lover is solely hers until they reached the “Solid Town,” the adjective "solid" in direct contrast to the ebb and flow of the tide. So as quickly as the sea swept her away so too did it withdraw.

The sexual desire and innuendo is masked by word choice and metaphor to create a beautiful poem. The depth of the speaker’s desire is secondary to the imagery and vocabulary. Sexual desire mixes with the desire for a stable relationship in the poem, “I envy Seas, whereon He rides--.” The master of Dickinson’s letters returns as the object of her desire.

I envy Seas, whereon He rides--
I envy Spokes of Wheels
Of Chariots, that Him convey--
I envy Crooked Hills

That gaze upon His journey--
How easy All can see
What is forbidden utterly
As Heaven--unto me! (1-8)

In this poem Dickinson twists desire to one of its many forms, envy. The speaker so desires this man that she is envious of the vehicles that carry him. She envies in fact the stationary hills that are able to watch him go by. Here the speaker confesses that this object of her desire is forbidden her, thus heightening her desire for him.

I envy Nests of Sparrows--
That dot His distant Eaves--
The wealthy Fly, upon His Pane--
The happy--happy Leaves--
That just abroad His Window
Have Summer's leave to play--
The Ear Rings of Pizarro
Could not obtain for me-- (9-16)

Now the speaker is envious of the inanimate, natural objects that surround her love. Dickinson assigns adjectives to these objects, making a fly wealthy, and leaves happy.

I envy Light--that wakes Him--
And Bells--that boldly ring
To tell Him it is Noon, abroad--
Myself--be Noon to Him--

Yet interdict--my Blossom--
And abrogate--my Bee--
Lest Noon in Everlasting Night--
Drop Gabriel--and Me-- (17-24)

The final two stanzas show not only envy for sexual contact, thus allowing the speaker to wake her love as the light does now, but also a desire for stability and everlasting love. The final line alludes to the angel Gabriel as a sign of everlasting love in heaven. There is not the transitory feeling here that existed in “I started Early--Took my Dog--.” The speaker wants a much more permanent relationship.

For Rich desire was a part of her political crusade. While her love poems speak volumes of feeling, it is through her political poems that her passion comes to life. Rich’s ability to take national and world events and write about them as if every action was a part of her own life is
monument to her belief that the public can be personal. In the poem “Implosions,” Rich explores this belief.

The world's
not wanton
only wild and wavering

I wanted to choose words that even you would have to be changed by

Take the word
of my pulse, loving and ordinary
Send out your signals, hoist
your dark scribbled flags
but take
my hand

All wars are useless to the dead (1-12)

Here Rich acknowledges the power of words and her desire for them to cause change. She entreats the object to take her hand and to send out signals on flags. At the same time that Rich speaks of the power of words she uses them to express her thoughts and desires by discussing her opinion of war.

My hands are knotted in the rope
and I cannot sound the bell

My hands are frozen to the switch
and I cannot throw it

The foot is in the well

When it’s finished and we’re lying
in a stubble of blistered flowers
eyes gaping, mouths staring
dusted with crushed arterial blues
I’ll have done nothing
even for you? (13-23)

Here the desires of the speaker are at a standstill. She is unable to do anything to halt the continued destruction of the war. At the same time there is a powerful desire to please, as the stanza ends with a desperate question.

Rich writes, with a beautiful artistry, about love and sex and desire. She weaves these three things together to produce poems that sing with emotion. In the sixteenth of her "Twenty-One Love Poems," Rich writes about two lovers separated temporarily.

Across a city from you, I'm with you,
just as an August night
moony, inlet-warm, sea-bathed, I watched you sleep,
the scrubbed, sheenless wood of the dressing-table
cluttered with your brushes, books, vials in the moonlight--(1-5)

As the poem opens a lover discusses the little things that remind her of the woman she loves. The texture of the wood or the feeling of a summer night. Combining intricately the shadows of moonlight with the feeling of warm water and the spatiality of inlets, Rich creates an intense yet subtle sexual metaphor. She also combines the belongings of her lover to include brushes, books, and vials of moonlight, something personal, something of art, and something ethereal and intangible.

This island of Manhattan is wide enough
for both of us, and narrow:
I can hear your breath tonight, I know how your face
lies upturned, the half light tracing
your generous delicate mouth
where grief and laughter sleep together. (10-15)

Here the desire of the speaker is obvious despite whatever keeps the two women apart. No matter what the problem is in this poem; it is clear that the speaker desires that her lover return to their shared living space. Not only does the speaker reminisce about the belongings that remain, but also the way her lover slept. There is a clear desire for a reunion in this poem. Yet nothing that Rich writes is overly blatant. There is an element of the personal in her love poems.

Desire, for all of its wonderful qualities, can lead to immense suffering. Emily Dickinson did not attain any of the things she desired, with the obvious exception of death. At times a loneliness took hold of her poetry. There exists a body of poems that focus on longing and emptiness. Dickinson uses the conceit of a void as longing in these poems. There is a physical and mental emptiness in these poems. One of Dickinson's most touching poems, "I can wade Grief-\--," epitomizes this idea of loneliness and despair.

I can wade Grief--
Whole Pools of it--
I'm used to that--
But the least push of Joy
Breaks up my feet--
And I tip--drunken--
Let no Pebble--smile--
'Twas the New Liquor--
That was all! (1-9)
In the opening the speaker explains that grief is no problem, it is joy that she cannot handle. Even a drop of joy in those pools of grief cause her to stumble, unaware of how to handle it. In this poem the void is the pools of grief that the speaker is able to wade. The endless grief is countered by a pebble that is forbidden to smile. The poem continues:

Power is only Pain--
Stranded, thro' Discipline,
Till Weights--will hang--
Give Balm--to Giants--
And they'll wilt, like Men--
give Himmaleh--
They'll Carry--Him! (10-16)

The speaker now defines power through the pain that she can so aptly deal with. At the same time this weighty pain will cause giants to wilt. In the final line Dickinson alludes to Christ as the emblem of pain. As the one who suffered and died for his people, Dickinson turns to Christ to illustrate her belief that power and pain can stem from the same source. This poem foreshadows Dickinson's ability to descry power through pain in other poems.

For Rich, longing and emptiness were not foreign. She tackled world issues that were beyond her control. There are points in her poetry where the ideas she held so true were bashed by a harsh reality. For many the battle against the war in Vietnam was a war in itself, one that the patriarchal government acknowledged but could not assuage. The poem "Our Whole Life," is an embittered attack at the patriarchal rule.

Our whole life a translation
the permissible fibs
and now a knot of lies
eating at itself gets undone

Words bitten thru words

meanings burnt-off like paint
under the blowtorch

All those dead letters
rendered into the oppressor’s language (1-9)

Here Rich’s despair at the glacially slow progress of social change is pointed in an attack towards the patriarchal establishment, language. The speaker is in awe at how the patriarchy can lie and get away with it. She is bitter at the idea that lies are simply “Words bitten thru words” (5). Since it is the “oppressor’s language” they, the oppressors, are able to manipulate this language to destroy the meanings and make them tools in the continuing destruction that was the Vietnam War.

If desire can produce the cathartic emotions of despair and longing it most certainly can empower. There is a fine line between despair and strength. Emily Dickinson, despite her longing and emptiness, attained a great deal of strength from her desire. This strength is represented in her poetry through the symbol of a volcano. Dickinson envisions her desire as a dormant volcano waiting to erupt. This symbol of enormous natural power is repeated in several of her poems and shows how female desire is not a simple little emotion. Dickinson displays female desire as a force so powerful it can destroy.

The best example of Dickinson’s pent-up desire is in the poem “My Life had stood--a Loaded Gun--.” In this poem desire, in the form of a loaded rifle, lies inoperative in the corner. The desire in this poem is
multi-faceted. There is the desire for sexual contact and pleasure, there is also the desire for everlasting love through death.

My Life had stood--a Loaded Gun--
In Corners--till a Day
The Owner passed--identified--
And carried Me away-- (1-4)

As the poem opens the speaker, as a personified gun, is picked up by her owner. Here again, as has been seen many times, the female is owned and controlled by a male master.

And now We roam in Sovereign Woods--
And now We hunt Doe--
And every time I speak for Him--
The Mountains straight reply-- (5-8)

The speaker and her master now hunt in the woods. The gun’s existence now has a purpose. The desire that lay dormant before is now able to explode in the sport of hunting. It is curious that Dickinson chose the doe as the hunted, the doe being the female deer, and not the much more treasured buck. Here the hunter has killed the female through the image of the doe with his control. He chooses when the gun may explode, he holds the trigger.

And do I smile, such cordial light
Upon the Valley glow--
It is a Vesuvian face
Had let its pleasure through-- (9-12)
Here Dickinson doubles the image of a loaded gun with her volcano metaphor by using an allusion to Mt. Vesuvius, one of the most well-known volcanoes. Taking Dickinson’s use of volcanoes to represent female sexuality we have here a blatant sexual reference to the pleasure that flows through the volcano.

And when at Night--Our good Day done--
I guard My Master's Head--
'Tis better than the Eider-Duck's
Deep Pillow--to have shared-- (13-16)

Here another of Dickinson’s desires find power. The sexual desire of the previous stanza is coupled with the desire for a secure relationship that was seen in “I envy Seas, whereon He rides--.” To be as secure as the pillow he rests his head on is a strong desire for the speaker. As the gun she is able to spend a lot of time with her “Master.”

To foe of His--I'm deadly foe--
None stir the second time--
On whom I lay a Yellow Eye--
Or an emphatic Thumb-- (17-20)

Here the power of the speaker’s love is extrapolated to include the speaker’s jealousy. By making the speaker a gun, Dickinson gives that speaker the power to kill. In this stanza the speaker states her power and her willingness to exploit that power on behalf of her master.

Though I than He--may longer live
He longer must--than I--
For I have but the power to kill,
Without--the power to die-- (21-24)
In this stanza we see the desire for death that is apparent in many of Dickinson’s poems. The speaker realizes that if her master should die before her she will be unable to be with him until such time as God sees fit to take her. The first explanation of the speaker’s despair in this stanza is the Christian belief that suicide is a sin. If her master were to die and she followed him by taking her own life than she would not join him in heaven. Religion has betrayed her and left her alone. The other more interesting interpretation of this last stanza is that without her master this speaker, in the form of a gun, will sit in the corner lacking the power to kill. The gun is only discharged by the man, without him it is impotent.

Adrienne Rich also found a great deal of strength in her own desire. The love of Rich’s subjects in “Twenty-One Love Poems” is not only intense, but powerful. Her power lies in her ability to love unconditionally knowing it is not the accepted social definition of love. Rich exudes strength in these poems while simultaneously exuding love and desire. In the sixth of Rich’s “Twenty-One Love Poems,” the speaker places the strength and power from her desire into the hands of her lover.

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....such hands could turn the unborn child rightways in the birth canal (1-6)

Here the speaker literally places the world into her lover’s hands, giving her the power to handle anything from a power-tool to an unborn child. The speaker sees that their hands are almost exact and from their love and
desire comes the power to handle anything. Using the image of hands as the sexual envoys exploring the most intimate of experiences, Rich creates a visual analogy between desire and power.

or pilot the exploratory rescue-ship through icebergs, or piece together the fine, needle-like shreds of a great krater-cup bearing on its sides figures of ecstatic women striding to the sibyl’s den or the Eleusinian cave--such hands might carry out an unavoidable violence with such restraint, with such a grasp of the range and limits of violence that violence ever after would be obsolete. (7-16)

These hands also possess the strength to charter iceberg ridden seas, and reassemble natural treasures. The poem concludes with a discussion of violence. Rich opposed violence in every form yet she gives her lover the power to carry out one act of violence in the effort to eradicate violence altogether. The speaker's lover is so powerful that she can make violence “obsolete.” The feeling that the speaker has is not so much desire as it is admiration and love for her lover. The desire in this poem is for the absolute end to violence. Ironically it is through the power of love that violence will be eliminated.
Power was a major issue for both of these women. In the nineteenth century power was a precious commodity for women. Emily Dickinson managed, however, to store up her share of it in that little Amherst garret. Adrienne Rich lived at a time when power was being fought for and won by women all over the world. Both women transferred this power to their poetry. Not only was their poetry a source of individual power, but it has been read by millions of people in several foreign languages, as well as the original. Thus, this poetry has brought power to women all over the world.

On the issue of power it is clear that women are at several disadvantages. The first and most obvious disadvantage women must overcome is a physical one. The average woman is smaller and weaker than the average man. Of course there are exceptions to this, but the
standard woman is smaller than a man. To Emily Dickinson size was not an issue. Dickinson often symbolized women as tiny frail creatures: flowers, birds, insects, or mice. To Dickinson size was inconsequential to power. The tiniest of flowers could overpower the fiercest sun. Thomas Johnson, Dickinson biographer, writes: "As artist, Dickinson conceived of brevity, not as a way to sketch in miniature, but as a means of achieving the single moment of intensity" (viii). Dickinson actually used size to her advantage. "Unlike many strong women writers, Dickinson did not despise or 'cast away in wrath,' her femininity (her smallness)" (Bennet, p. 184). Paula Bennet believes that Dickinson used her smallness as a tool: "For she knew that, properly utilized, these limitations were freedom and this littleness was great. And it was this knowledge that allowed her to be the radically independent poet she was" (p. 184). Dickinson writes about this 'littleness' like a giant.

Pink--small--and punctual-  
Aromatic--low--  
Covert--in April--  
Candid--in May--  
Dear to the Moss--  
Known to the Knoll--  
Next to the Robin  
In every human Soul--  
Bold little Beauty  
Bedecked with thee  
Nature forswears  
Antiquity--(1-12)

In this short poem Dickinson hands the strength and power of nature to one, simple, beautiful flower. Although a light color like pink and small and low this flower is aromatic, covert, and candid all at the same time.
This flower is known in nature, it is bold, it is nearly as well known as the bold red-breasted robin.

Both Dickinson and Rich used the female body as metaphor for female power. Each woman wrote with her own slant on the idea of a female-centered universe. Wendy Martin comments: “Linking the female body with the physical landscape to create metaphors of female power, Dickinson and Rich celebrate the female dimension as primary” (p. 171). Inherent in the nature poetry of these two women is the belief that the earth is female centered. Life is created through the medium of women and women control that power. This issue is more pertinent to Rich, as issues of women’s biological rights are surfacing daily. In the eleventh poem of "Twenty-One Love Poems" Rich expresses the powerful nature of the female body.

Every peak is a crater. This is the law of volcanoes, making them eternally and visibly female.
No height without depth, without a burning core, though our straw souls shred on the hardened lava. (1-4)

The poem begins with a comparison to the volcano that Dickinson also used as symbol of the female body. Here the emphasis is on the loss that must accompany power. Everything that is strong must be weak. From the height of a peak to the depths of craters and from the hard lava encrusted nature of the outside and the "straw souls" that get hurt by that harder edge. Rich connects that volcano, that continuous dichotomy of hard and soft, with the female.

never failing to note the jewel-like flower unfamiliar to us, nameless till we name her, that clings to the slowly altering rock--
that detail outside ourselves that brings us to ourselves, was here before us, knew we would come, and sees beyond us. (9-13)

Here at the conclusion of the poem the symbol of the natural female is switched to that of a small flower. Like Dickinson, Rich is able to find power in the physical smallness of the female. This flower is unnamed, it is symbol of the female muted by the oppressor's language. She is clinging to the "slowly altering rock" trying to stand her ground. It is this little flower that brings the women climbing the path to see their own historical plight.

Adrienne Rich also used the female body as a source of political power. In her political poems the body is used to connect the personal with the political. Rich saw women's bodies as amazing pieces of machinery that were capable of enormous power. This power would be used in the political forum to help Rich on her crusade as radical activist.

The will to change begins in the body not in the mind
My politics is in my body, accruing and expanding with every act of resistance and each of my failures
Locked in the closet at 4 years old I beat with my body that act is in me still (41-45)

These lines from the long poem "Tear Gas" not only illustrate but dictate Rich's fundamental belief that the body, her female body, is capable of causing radical change. Whether it is getting out of a metaphorical closet or growing from failure Rich begins every journey within her own body. In an effort to communilize language she believes we all must begin by looking within ourselves.
For Emily Dickinson it was easier to overcome the oppressor's language; she was not writing for an audience, her poetry was private. Dickinson had no fear of annoying the patriarchy with her subversion of their language. She did, however, manipulate the language with such ease that it is a shame the establishment was not able to see how she scoffed at them and their mores. Rich herself saw Dickinson's ability to use the language: "What this one [Dickinson] had to do was retranslate her own unorthodox, subversive, sometimes volcanic propensities into a dialectic called metaphor: her native language" (Wolff, p. 168). Metaphor was just one of the many literary devices that Dickinson used with power. In "She dealt her pretty words like Blades--" Dickinson combines metaphor with paradox and irony to produce a rather intense and biting poem.

She dealt her pretty words like Blades--
How glittering they shone--
And every One unbared a Nerve
Or wantoned with a Bone--(1-4)

In this opening stanza Dickinson presents a female character with a sharp tongue. Her words are described as both "pretty" and "like Blades" in the same line. There is an essence of the covert nature of female language, these words glittered but cut deeply at the same time, making them paradoxical.

She never deemed--she hurt--
That--is not Steel's Affair--
A vulgar grimace in the Flesh--
How ill the Creatures bear-- (5-8)
The tone of this stanza and the poem is one of pain. There is a bitter agony in the lines not only for the victim but for the aggressor as well. Words such as "hurt, vulgar, grimace" resonate throughout the stanza to produce a grim image.

To Ache is human--not polite--
The Film upon the eye
Mortality's old Custom--
Just locking up--to Die. (9-12)

In the final stanza that idea of pain is coupled with the institution of customs. Like the old history of male language pain and aching are a custom that lasts until death. Although a short poem it is riddled with the metaphor of language and suffering.

Adrienne Rich actually had the patriarchy to deal with and it was an interesting battle. In her poem "The Burning of Paper Instead of Children," Rich forges her best attack on language and to the extent of this paper wins. A strikingly powerful poem, it is divided into five parts, some prose and some verse combined with great artistry. Section one begins:

My neighbor, a scientist and art-collector, telephones me in a state of violent emotion. He tells me that my son and his, aged eleven and twelve, have on the last day of school burned a mathematics textbook in the backyard. He has forbidden my son to come to his house for a week, and has forbidden his own son to leave the house during that time. "The burning of a book," he says, "arouses terrible sensations in me, memories of Hitler; there are few things that upset me so much as the idea of burning a book." (1-8)

In this opening paragraph the narrator relates a story about burning math books. Although not great pieces of literary genius these math books do represent a piece of writing, the destruction of which obviously upsets this
man. This man who is both a scientist and an art collector a part of the rational established world and the spiritual art world can only liken this event to Hitler and punishes his son for his role in it. The mother of the other boy, our speaker, reflects through verse on this scene.

Back there: the library, walled
with green Britannicas
Looking again
in Durer's Complete Works
for MELANCHOLIA, the baffled woman (9-13)

The speaker goes from her sons ruined math book to an entire library. The line break at the end of line nine is interesting as the word "walled" is first connected to the library in a negative connotation, a prison metaphor. The speaker looks up the word "melancholia" and defines it as a baffled woman. This is a reference to the picture by Durer which depicts a baffled woman. Walled up in a world of books the mother begins to wonder if burning a book is such a bad idea. The speaker begins to realize that language surrounds and language as it exists stifles and begins to oppress us.

love and fear in a house
knowledge of the oppressor
I know it hurts to burn (12-14)

knowledge of the oppressor's language
this is the oppressor's language

yet I need it talk to you (30-32)

In these two simple pieces the speaker identifies language as one created by the oppressor and belonging to him. The speaker here identifies with
the math book, she says she knows that it "hurts to burn" because she is burning, suffering under this oppression. She admits that the language is oppressive and still she cries: "Yet I need it to talk to you." The turmoil this language causes is clear by the speaker's tension.

Part three of the poem begins to delve into suffering and the role of those who suffer in society.

People suffer highly in poverty and it takes dignity and intelligence to overcome this suffering. Some of the suffering are: a child did not have dinner last night; a child steal because he did not have money to buy it; to hear a mother say she do not have money to buy food for her children and to see a child without cloth it will make tears in your eyes.

In another prose written section the speaker begins to warp and twist language to suit the subject matter. By playing with verb tense Rich uses an unconventional language to describe those who are suffering at the hands of the patriarchy. Those who are suffering are mothers and children, not men, the patriarchy that possesses a law full of their language to guard them from pain. The section ends with the parenthetical phrase: "(the fracture of order/ the repair of speech/ to overcome this suffering)."

The speaker comes right out and explains her less than standard grammatical choices in the face of pain and oppression.

The final section, section five, is another prose piece that sums up the entire thought process.

I am composing on the typewriter late at night, thinking of today. How well we all spoke. A language is a map of our failures. Frederick Douglass wrote an English purer than Milton’s. People suffer highly in poverty. There are methods but we do not use them,
As section five begins the reader is aware that the speaker is writing, using the language that burns her. She is amazed by how well everyone spoke despite having to use that language of the evil oppressor. She also notes that a language is a map of our failures, important in that our failures are described through the patriarchy's words. She concludes the poem:

...The burning of a book arouses no sensation in me. I know it hurts to burn. There are flames of napalm in Catonsville, Maryland. I know it hurts to burn. The typewriter is overheated, my mouth is burning, I cannot touch you and this is the oppressor's language.

The speaker cannot be moved by the burning of a book the way her male neighbor was. She understands the pain of burning but cannot find fault with the destruction of some of the oppressor's language. She burns everywhere and constantly. Her mouth is burning from speaking the language, her typewriter is overheated from writing the language. There is a burning of napalm because of the language and the patriarchy that produces war. The speaker understands the pain, but also understands the frustration of trying to express herself through this language. She concedes that even this poem is the oppressor's language.
With language as such a power in her life, Emily Dickinson also made use of the antithesis of language, silence. Dickinson saw in silence an escape, a safety blanket. Dickinson had so much to say and at times not the means to say it. She would rather leave gaps of silence then use the incorrect word, she did what she could to subvert the oppressor's language. With her dashes and her line breaks Dickinson interjects silence into written thought. With the amazing foresight to do such a thing there must be some enormous power in those gaps. In one of Dickinson's most beautiful poems there is an ever present silence that is interrupted only in the final stanza.
There's a certain Slant of light,
Winter Afternoons--
That oppresses, like the Heft
Of Cathedral Tunes-- (1-4)

The focus of this poem is immediately on light and dark. There is a feeling of shadow that is very present in the winter. So prevalent is this light that it has weight and body and it oppresses.

Heavenly Hurt, it gives us--
We can find no scar,
But internal difference,
Where the Meanings, are-- (5-8)

Even pain and suffering are not verbalized; they are contained on the inside, they are internal. The focus is not shifted to sound. Even in stanza three the tone is still ethereal.

None may teach it--Any--
'Tis the Seal Despair--
An imperial affliction
Sent us of the Air-- (9-12)

There is a religious feel to this stanza as despair is something sent from above. Pain and suffering are imperially designated and drift down from above without warning. It is in the final stanza that the silence is broken, if only for a moment.

When it comes, the Landscape listens--
Shadows--hold their breath--
When it goes, 'tis like the Distance
On the look of Death-- (13-16)
Now silence is broken, briefly, and everyone takes notice. Language has that power that makes even shadows uneasy. The shadows that ran the poem in stanza one are now as silent as silence itself. Language has interjected here and forced the landscapes to listen.

Adrienne Rich, living in the twentieth century, had a problem with the idea of silence. Women in the twentieth century were not as willing to accept their station, and Adrienne Rich certainly fell in this group. Her gaps and line breaks are not symbolic of silence so much as they are symbolic of the void in women's lives at the hands of the male-dominated patriarchy. In "Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying" Rich states: "Patriarchal lying has manipulated women both through falsehood and silence. Facts we needed have been withheld from us. False witness has been borne against us" (p.5). Rich sees English as the oppressor's language, so as the oppressed, like Dickinson, there are times when she could not possibly use that language. These gaps are her attempt to point out how the language does not work for women. There is a comfort and a fear in silence that is best explained with the ninth of her "Twenty-One Love Poems."

Your silence today is a pond where drowned things live I want to see raised dripping and brought into the sun. It's not my own face I see there, but other faces, even your face at another age. (1-4)

Silence becomes almost haven-like in the opening of this stanza. It is an impossible place where dead things live. What is fearful is that the speaker's face is in that pond, living but dead. Silence works that way to bury your thought yet keep it safe at the same time. By stifling the
speaker and the other faces she sees reflected there, silence keeps them alive.

...I fear this silence,  
this inarticulate life. I'm waiting  
for a wind that will gently open the sheeted water  
for once, and show me what I can do  
for you, who have often made the unnamable  
namable for others, even for me. (8-13)

The speaker verbalizes her own fear of silence, of living in a world where she cannot speak. This is a true fear to Rich as a woman in a world where silence prevails, forced to speak a language that will never truly belong to women. The speaker lauds her lover for being able to do that, to speak through the oppressor's words, naming what was before silent.

If silence was a source of power for Dickinson, what could be more powerful than death, the ultimate silencer. Many people believe that Dickinson was obsessed with death. It was not obsession so much as curiosity that prodded Dickinson' poetry. Dickinson wrote many poems exploring the idea of death. While experimenting with the concept of death Dickinson attempted to explain what one would feel like, sound like, and look like at the moment of death. In one poem "A Clock stopped--" Dickinson compares death to the break down of a fine Swiss clock.

A Clock stopped-  
Not the Mantel's--  
Geneva's farthest skill  
Can't put the puppet bowing--  
That just now dangled still-- (1-5)
The metaphor of clock as death is not a new one. It has always been legend that a clock stops when its owner dies. Dickinson, however, does not discuss the death of the human. She decides instead to explore the death of the clock.

An awe came on the trinket!
The Figures hunched, with pain--
Then quivered out of Decimals--
Into Degreeless Noon--

Dickinson describes the moment of death as if it were happening to a real person. There is pain involved and awe at the idea of passing on. There is very little fear, though, because it is simply a mantel clock.

It will not stir for Doctors--
This Pendulum of snow--
The Shopman importunes it--
With cool--concernless No--

The standard methods of fixing are attempted. For humans there are doctors and for clocks there are shopmen, but nothing helps. The clock is gone from both worlds.

Nods from the Gilded pointers--
Nods from the Seconds slim--
Decades of Arrogance between
The Dial of life--
And Him--

As the poem concludes the clock has received permission in the form of a nod to move on from this world. By leaving, the clock places decades
between himself and the living. The passing from life to death is a simple and easy one when viewed through Dickinson's eyes.

Many of Dickinson's poems tackle the existential conundrum of all human beings, death. Albert Camus said that the only real question humans must answer is the question of whether or not to kill oneself. While Dickinson was not heavily bound up in suicide as a theme, she did write a lot about death intervening in her life and taking her away. As was already seen in "Because I could not stop for Death--" death is a force that Dickinson believes in. In "Tie the Strings to my Life, My Lord," Dickinson prepares for death to once again take her from this world.

Tie the Strings to My Life, My Lord,
Then, I am ready to go!
Just a look at the Horses--
Rapid! That will do! (1-4)

In the opening stanza the speaker implores her Lord to take her. She needs very little time to tie up her life and then she will be prepared to pass on.

Put me in on the firmest side--
So I shall never fall--
For we must ride to the Judgment--
And it's partly, down Hill-- (5-8)

Her lord, like the master in "Because I could not stop for Death--," will be transporting the speaker to the immortal world of eternity, but they must stop first for the process of judgment. Religion is a very tricky issue in Dickinson's poems. She was not a devout religious person by any means, but there are instances in her poems where religion is pertinent.
The speaker has no fears as she travels on to death. She has no problem with the steep hills or the vast seas, because she has made the choice to travel towards death. When the speaker entreats God, in the opening stanza, to take her away, she forfeits her fear. Now, through her own choice and the help of God, she is on her way to her desired location.

In the concluding stanza the speaker requests a chance to say good-bye. She wants God to kiss the hills for her in the moment before her departure, but wasting no time they should be kissed, "just once." Emily Dickinson’s desire for death is illustrated here through a very brave speaker who has no problems with the transfer from one world to another. Death was the one desire that was fulfilled for Emily Dickinson.

Adrienne Rich had a different view of death. Living, as she did, at the time of the Vietnam War, Rich saw death on her television every night. Death at that point in American history was a reality and fear for every family with a man over eighteen. Rich explores death in many poems, but she does not have as easy a time accepting it as did Dickinson. Rich has trepidation about the justice of death in its haphazard reality. In a poem written in 1950, before the United States involvement in Vietnam, Rich
wrote a poem about war that would set the tone for her anti-war poems of the future. The poem "The Prisoners" is a look at the injustice of war and death.

Enclosed in this disturbing mutual wood,
Wounded alike by thorns of the same tree,
We seek in hopeless war each others' blood
Though suffering in one identity.
Each to the other prey and huntsman known,
Still driven together, lonelier than alone. (1-6)

The poem itself describes a parasitic relationship in which two people share one identity and prey off of one another. By using war as the metaphor, however, Rich expresses her belief in the futility of war to solve problems. War in this stanza only sheds blood and cause further anguish as they cling to one another "lonelier than alone."

Strange mating of the loser and the lost!
With faces stiff as mourners', we intrude
Forever on the one each turns from most,
Each wandering in a double solitude.
The unpurged ghosts of passion bound by pride
Who wake in isolation, side by side. (7-12)

The metaphor is revealed clearly in this stanza to be a romantic relationship that has fallen apart and resulted in war games. The idea of a war being so necessary that it feeds off itself is part of the patriarchy that Rich sees but cannot come to terms with. She gives her lovers the faces of mourners, looking at death from the other side. They intrude, thereby realizing their place is among the dead and not the living who are
mourning. Using war as a metaphor forces the author to look at death and examine it in a social context.

In another poem about death Rich looks at injustice in a different light. The poem "Power" is dedicated to Madame Marie Curie for her hard work and brilliant scientific mind. At the same time there is a tone of disgruntled apprehension about death and the logic that governs it.

Today I was reading about Marie Curie:
she must have known she suffered from radiation sickness
her body bombarded for years by the element
she had purified
It seems she denied to the end
the source of the cataracts on her eyes
the cracked and suppurating skin of her finger-ends
till she could no longer hold a test-tube or a pencil

Here is an incredible woman, intelligent, ingenious, ambitious, who knows her work is killing her. She is a devout scientist yet it is that science that will cause her to die a painful death. Rich cannot see anything but a sick irony here and the break in her lines connotes a break in her own train of thought. Rich sees a chasm in the justice of a world that will kill someone for hard work and ingenuity.

She died a famous woman denying
her wounds denying
her wounds came from the same source as her power

The poem concludes with the speaker's realization of that which Marie Curie herself never understood, power for women is dangerous in this patriarchal world. Just as Elvira Shatayev and her band of mountain
climbers were killed and eulogized by Rich in "Phantasia for Elvira Shatayev" Marie Curie tread too heavily on male soil. Not only did she die, but she was killed by the one thing she had perfected, purified.
As a young woman and later as a young poet Rich read the poetry of Emily Dickinson. Rich saw in it something, a strength, a charisma that made her go back to it again and again. Rich has written several essays and criticisms of Dickinson’s work. One of these essays, “Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson,” was written after Rich visited Dickinson’s home in Amherst.

Rich possessed a great admiration for Dickinson and her writing, but even more than that there is a connectedness between the two women that Rich discovered. Rich learned to understand Dickinson in a way few others had at that point in 1979. Rich saw a fire in Dickinson, a volcano, that
others overlooked. Rich could sense Dickinson's presence, and it is certain that Dickinson's presence can be felt in Rich's poetry.

While Rich has connected with Dickinson on one level there still exists a chasm between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that Rich cannot surmount. Rich has problems with the idea of silent women, of impotent women, who despite great efforts were silenced in their own communities. There is also something about Emily Dickinson that is unreachable for all of us. There is something within her that keeps us from understanding all of her poetry; she is an enigma. Thanks to her letters it is possible to read personal accounts of her life, but these letters are just as puzzling as the poems. Dickinson's letters have a very verse-like quality to them that make them as beautiful but simultaneously as perplexing as her poems.

Rich was so intrigued by Dickinson's poetry that she herself wrote poems to Dickinson. In one of Rich's most famous poems "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law" Rich begins an evolution of thought on the life of Emily Dickinson. In two other poems this evolution continues and although some of the references smack of scornful misunderstanding it is obvious that there is a connection between these two poets that Rich cannot avoid. At the same time critic Cynthia Griffin Wolff believes that Dickinson worked to inspire future generations of female poets with her idiosyncratic style: "And ultimately, she went her way alone, scrupulously fashioning a voice to address a future that she could see only in her superb imagination" (p. 259). Rich's ten-part poem "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law" covers the lives of many women. In section four, Rich makes reference to Dickinson and the supposed domestic life she led.
Knowing themselves too well in one another:
their gifts no pure fruition, but a thorn,
the prick filed sharp against a hint of scorn...

Reading while waiting
for the iron to heat,
writing, My Life had stood--a Loaded Gun--
in that Amherst pantry while the jellies boil and scum,
or, more often,
iron-eyed and beaked and purposed as a bird,
dusting everything on the whatnot every day of life.

Rich places a Dickinson figure in her Amherst home, a woman confused of purpose. In just one stanza Dickinson reads, waits, writes and dusts, an array of unattached activities that result from her household confinement. Rich does give Dickinson a certain amount of power. Instead of waiting for something on the stove to simmer, Dickinson is waiting for jellies to "boil and scum," words that conjure up violent, hot, sticky images of thick fruited syrup bubbling and boiling. Rich presents Dickinson writing her must powerful poem, "My Life had stood--a Loaded Gun--" an act of admiration for a woman who could write so powerful a piece of literature. At the same time this little woman in her Amherst pantry spends every day dusting the "whatnot" an interesting term for a non-descript piece of furniture.

Rich returns to Emily Dickinson in another volume. In Necessities of Life Rich wrote a poem entitled "I Am in Danger--Sir--" a line directly quoted from a letter Dickinson wrote to publisher Thomas Wentworth Higginson. This poem evolves from "Snapshots" in that admiration and discontent arising from Dickinson's domesticity becomes an attempt at understanding the life she chose to lead.

"Half-cracked" to Higginson, living.
afterward famous in garbled versions,  
your hoard of dazzling scraps a battlefield,  
now your old snood (1-4)

The poem begins by discussing the poems Dickinson created and the haphazard way she recorded her thoughts. With all of the scraps of paper that had to be sorted through, the original volumes of her poetry were poorly edited. What were "dazzling scraps" are now a battlefield for the academics.

mothballed at Harvard  
and you in your variorum monument  
equivocal to the end--  
who are you? (5-8)

The speaker concedes that the scraps are now "mothballed at Harvard" where the public can admire them, but more importantly the speaker wants to know who Dickinson is.

Gardening the day-lily,  
wiping the wine glass stems,  
your thought pulsed on behind  
a forehead battered paper-thin, (9-12)

Rich presents Dickinson in the domestic role again, as in "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law," but this time she explores even farther.

you, woman, masculine  
in single-mindedness,  
for whom the word was more  
than a symptom-- (13-16)
Rich acknowledges the male foothold in language again as she pronounces Dickinson to be masculine because she took charge of words. Dickinson did not allow words to be a symptom for weak women. She was as set on using language as any man. Rich imitates Dickinson dash usage in that last line which is continued.

a condition of being.
Till the air buzzing with spoiled language
sang in your ears
of Perjury (17-20)

The word for Dickinson meant more than a way to speak it was a form of expression vital to her existence. Without this strength of language Dickinson would have perjured herself thus eliminating her existence.

and in your half-cracked way you chose
silence for entertainment,
chose to have it out at last
on your premises. (21-24)

The poem concludes with Rich's understanding of Dickinson coming through. Rich views Dickinson as a pioneer who discovered the territory of written life for women. Rich announces that Dickinson chose the life she led and was not forced into it. Dickinson becomes autonomous in this poem and not the domestic waif writing in her pantry in "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law." Rich sees Dickinson's domesticity as her "premises" and feels that at that time in that place Dickinson was as empowered as she could be. Writing as she did, Dickinson took more power than anyone ever attributed to her before Rich wrote this poem in 1964.
Like all great writers, Dickinson and Rich used their art to explore their own identity. In the beginning both women looked towards men. Often times this led to confusion or failure. Dickinson's master poems are at one time great literature and at another time a failed attempt at self identification. By trying to identify herself through men she discarded her female essence. Dickinson placed the idea of male superiority in the forefront in some of her poems and lost herself and her identification with women at the same time. In "I got so I could take his name--" Dickinson relates a very problematic male/female relationship.

I got so I could take his name--
Without--Tremendous gain--
That Stop-sensation--on my Soul--
And Thunder--in the Room-- (1-4)

Here the female speaker is relating the uncomfortable nature of her relationship with a man. This poem could be read as a disgusted woman who learns to deal with a man or a woman, passionately in love, who learns to handle a man. In either case there is a suction effect resulting in turmoil for the woman.

I got so I could walk across
That Angle in the floor,
Where he turned so, and I turned--how--
And all our Sinews tore-- (5-8)

The focus moves away from the emotional turmoil of stanza one to a physical apprehension in stanza two. The female now attempts to walk where her man walked and approach the area where they moved together. Whatever they did on that "Angle in the floor," was obviously painful as sinews tore.

I got so I could stir the Box--
In which his letters grew
Without that forcing, in my breath--
As Staples--driven through-- (9-12)

A clear separation is indicated in this stanza as the woman is able to look at his letters again. Before this moment it took such force of will to open the box that it pierced her soul like a staple. This poem begins to explore a very unhealthy heterosexual relationship. As Dickinson's plots are often blurred in her effort to subvert cultural norms, it is difficult to identify the
context of this woman's pain, but it most certainly is connected to a man through whom she has been living her life.

Adrienne Rich also began her career as a poet with analysis of the male-domominated world. She tried to define women through men and came to realize that it was not possible. Rich's female characters are not fulfilled when examined solely through the eyes of men. In the very domestic poem "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" a speaker notices the difficulty of Aunt Jennifer's life due to her weighty attachment to her husband.

Aunt Jennifer's tigers prance across the screen,
Bright topaz denizens of a world of green.
They do not fear the men beneath the tree;
They pace in sleek chivalric certainty. (1-4)

Aunt Jennifer, through her art, experiences a bright world of green that is missing from her existence. This product of her talent is male, however, and Aunt Jennifer cannot control her tigers. They prance around, unafraid and certain in their masculine nature.

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. (5-8)

While the tigers prance Aunt Jennifer suffers under the weight of her wedding band, a continuous circle that symbolizes her lifelong commitment.

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. (9-12)

The observer knows that when Aunt Jennifer, and all the wives like her, have passed on the male world will continue to take their position proudly. Aunt Jennifer's weary weighted hands will be impotent but the creatures she created will go on prancing as if she had never lived. A woman living through and for a man like Aunt Jennifer is fated to obscurity in death and suffering in life. Aunt Jennifer's identity is her tigers, not herself.

Dickinson achieved greater success at self identification when she focused her poems on women. At least through women Dickinson could begin to find her place. She had a commonalty with women that was lacking in her relationship with men. With her understanding of the female experience, Dickinson wrote beautiful exploratory poems.

In “She sweeps with many-colored Brooms--” Dickinson takes the societal caste of woman as homemaker and adds a dash of color. Dickinson compares the life-giving sun to a housewife through the metaphor of a broom. This poem takes the mundane chore of sweeping and gives it new life. Dickinson’s use of color imagery transforms this simple task into a symphony of sparkling light.

She sweeps with many-colored Brooms--
And leaves the Shreds behind--
Oh Housewife in the Evening West--
Come back, and dust the Pond! (1-4)

Dickinson’s housewife has been transported with her broom to the horizon as the sun sets. The speaker calls to this woman to return and dust the reflective pond.
You dropped a Purple Ravelling in--
You dropped and Amber thread--
And now you’ve littered all the East
With Duds of Emerald! (5-8)

Dickinson ends yet another stanza with the imperative exclamation point. Here the colors of purple and amber combine in the east for a glorious sunrise. The rays of this sunrise shine on everything making it glitter with emerald.

And still, she plies her spotted Brooms,
And still the Aprons fly,
Till Brooms fade softly into stars--
And then I come away-- (9-12)

Continuing the housewife metaphor, Dickinson here refers to both the broom and an apron, both of which fade giving way to night, where the speaker is truly free. Away from the domesticity of daytime the speaker is boundless.

Dickinson had an intense love and appreciation for nature. By combining the glory of nature with the humdrum life of a nineteenth century woman Dickinson tries to connect the ethereal with the corporeal. Dickinson often found her own society in nature and in striving to discover her own identity saw it necessary to connect nature with the female.

Adrienne Rich really began to come into her own understanding of personal identity when she focused not only her writing but her life on women. Rich’s female based poems are deep and searching, always looking for a new aspect to life. In the volume, *Diving Into the Wreck*, Rich wrote a poem about two women called "After Twenty Years" and it expresses great personal growth through female based relations.
Two women sit at a table by a window. Light breaks unevenly on both of them. Their talk is a striking of sparks which passers-by in the street observe as a glitter in the glass of that window. Two women in the prime of life. (1-6)

Here with the absence of men these women are themselves, whole and complete. Unadulterated by the sacrifice of a male/female relationship these two women are experiencing the glittering that was attributed to the male tigers of Aunt Jennifer's life. Instead of female creations of joy through the male, Rich creates female power and female strength through women.

It is strange to be so many women, eating and drinking at the same table, those who bathed their children in the same basin who kept their secrets from each other walked the floors of their lives in separate rooms and flow into history now as the woman of their time living in the prime of life as in a city where nothing is forbidden and nothing permanent.

Female unity is the theme of the end of the poem. Women all over the world have experienced the same joy the same pain and the same oppression. Their histories are varied yet strikingly the same. Now at the prime of life they go where nothing is forbidden them. Living through women there are no restrictions. Women understand the needs of other women in a way men never could historically and never will in the future.
Men will never understand the trauma they inflict in women's lives as well. In the poem simply titled "Rape" Rich explores another of the ways that women can live more thoroughly through women.

There is a cop who is both prowler and father: he comes from your block, grew up with your brothers, had certain ideals. You hardly know him in his boots and silver badge, on horseback, one hand touching his gun.

You hardly know him but you have to get to know him: He has access to machinery that could kill you. He and his stallion clop like warlords among trash, his ideals stand in the air, a frozen cloud from between his unsmilng lips. (1-10)

This poem begins with the male symbol of law and order: the traditional male police officer. For a woman, however, despite this officer's long time connection to her family, he is just as frightening as a prowler. The officer is always ready for violence, his hand on his gun. The speaker does not find comfort in his presence. Instead of a law enforcer he is seen as a "warlord." Unfortunately he is crucial to the justice process.

And so, when the time comes, you have to turn to him, the maniac's sperm still greasing your thighs, your mind whirling like crazy. You have to confess to him, you are guilty of the crime of having been forced. (11-15)

Women are so misrepresented through men that reality becomes confused. The victim becomes the perpetrator in a male world. Rape is not a male crime, but a female one with the woman at fault.
You hardly know him but now he thinks he knows you:
he has taken down your worst moment
on a machine and filed it in a file.
He knows, or thinks he knows, how much you imagined;
he knows, or thinks he knows, what you secretly wanted. (21-25)

The male authority now no longer simply blames you but accuses you of
making it up. Rape is a reality to many women and the patriarchy makes
it into an excuse after a bad experience. Men cannot help in a female's
search for identity, as they mar the process with their institutionalized
beliefs in the patriarchy. In a search to cleanse oneself after assault, being
blamed in Rich's eyes, will not aid in any way.

He has access to machinery that could get you put away;
and if, in the sickening light of the precinct,
and if, in the sickening light of the precinct,
your details sound like a portrait of your confessor,
will you swallow, will you deny them, will you lie your way
home? (26-30)

In the conclusion of this poem Rich hits upon one of her many political
causes: the patriarchy's ability to make women lie. The woman of this
poem would rather lie, concede to the male-dominated justice system, than
get at the truth. By lying the woman can free herself from its awful grasp.
In her essay “Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying” Rich states that
telling the truth is not always the woman’s job: “I come back to the
question of woman’s honor. Truthfulness has not been considered
important for women, as long as we have remained physically faithful to a
man, or chaste” (p. 4). Rich sees, through other women, the role the
patriarchy plays in shaping identity and self.
For both Dickinson and Rich their true identities were not found until they discovered the power of language that had been there all along. While both women were using language from the start it is through language that their identities were not only discovered but maintained. For Dickinson this unique and baffling poetic style has immortalized her. Considering the review her first volume of poems received: “I fail to detect in her work any of that profound thought which her editor professes to discover in it. The phenomenal insight, I am inclined to believe, exists only in his partiality” (Aldrich, p. 143). With reviews like that, Dickinson’s poetry was doomed to the dusty annals of libraries and museums. Instead new editions of the poetry brought to life the power of Dickinson’s language, making these poems spring back to the forefront of literature where they belong. Dickinson broke free from all things binding and discovered her true self in her poetry. In “I’m ceded--I’ve stopped being Theirs--” Dickinson denounces all of the societal labels she had been assigned.

I’m ceded--I’ve stopped being Theirs--
The name They dropped upon my face
With water, in the country church
Is finished using, now,
And They can put it with my Dolls,
My childhood, and the string of spools,
I’ve finished threading --too-- (1-7)

In the opening stanza the speaker sheds her name, given at baptism. Baptism, being one’s birth into the church, is nothing more than a hold, by the patriarchy, on the speaker. By repeatedly speaking of “They” the speaker distances herself from the institutionalized church and society in general. The speaker considers her God-given name as useless as her dolls
from childhood and the spools of thread she owns. Both the dolls and the thread are societally construed as female. All of these belongings are shunned by the speaker.

Baptized, before, without the choice,
But this time, consciously, of Grace--
Unto supremest name--
Called to my Full--The Crescent dropped--
Existence's whole Arc, filled up,
With one small Diadem. (8-13)

Here the speaker takes the position of namer. Instead of being named without a say, she wants to be a part of the process. The speaker begins to take responsibility for herself. She does not want to be constructed by anyone else. She takes the role of church and society.

My second Rank--too small the first--
Crowned--Crowing--on my Father's breast--
A half unconscious Queen--
But this time--Adequate--Erect,
With Will to choose, or to reject,
And I choose, just a Crown-- (14-19)

The ambiguity in the first line of this final stanza is amusing. The speaker has assigned herself a new rank, making her second rank better than her first. At the same time her first rank was that of a woman surrounded by dolls and spools of thread, thus making women the second rank of society. Now the speaker has all of the qualities of a good man, she has stature and will to choose. Dickinson uses the language of men to cast off her smallness and make her own place in society.
In "No Rack can torture me--" Dickinson finds freedom in her own writing.

No Rack can torture me--
My Soul--at Liberty--
Behind this mortal Bone
There knits a bolder One-- (1-4)

The speaker decrees that despite the torture, whatever the patriarchy may throw at her, they cannot silence her. Her soul is free and once she has passed on from this world her soul's freedom will continue to reign.

You cannot prick with saw--
Nor pierce with Scimitar--
Two Bodies--therefore be--
Bind One--The Other fly-- (5-8)

The speaker begins to imagine all of the pain that could be inflicted on her. This torture is irrelevant, however, because, no matter what, her soul will fly. It is as if there are two of her, the body and the spirit.

The Eagle of his Nest
No easier divest--
And gain the Sky
Than mayest Thou--

Except Thyself may be
Thine Enemy--
Captivity is Consciousness--
So's Liberty. (9-16)

As the poem concludes Dickinson adds to her image of flight with the majestic eagle. Most important in the closing is the idea of a fine line
between captivity and liberty. If a person can realize they are being held prisoner it becomes the key to their freedom. That is how Dickinson lived, knowing her captivity was actually her freedom. By remaining in her home she maintained the freedom of language that ultimately was her identity. Dickinson was who she was because of her consciousness and the language she adapted to express that consciousness.

For Rich language was her greatest tool as well. Despite her love and passion, Rich made the biggest difference through language. She took the horrors of twentieth century life in America and created beautiful moving poetry. Rich not only identified language as the oppressor’s greatest weapon, she worked to subvert that language through her writing. Rich used this language to connect herself to other women. In the poem “Heroines” Rich reflects on the lives of nineteenth century women. Through this poem Rich admires and commends the bravery of those women, like Dickinson, living before her. She lauds them with a language so haunting and beautiful that it seems to belong to women only.

*Exceptional*

*even deviant*
you draw your long skirts
across the nineteenth century
Your mind
burns long after death
not like the harbor beacon
but like a pire of driftwood
on the beach
You are spared
illiteracy
death by pneumonia
teeth which leave the gums
the seamstress’ clouded eyes
the mill-girl’s shortening breath
by a collection
The manipulation of form and style in this poem represent the female inability to express clearly their thoughts. Rich took her own ideas and feelings about the nineteenth century, but instead of writing a standard stanza poem she created art through spacing and line breaks. Her choices represent the disjointed nature of life for a woman, both in the nineteenth century and still now. The imagery of fire and burning is also a non-traditional female image. Rich goes on to highlight some of her many opinions on the female experience.

The laws says you can possess nothing
where property is everything
You belong first to your father
then to him who
chooses you
if you fail to marry
you are without recourse
unable to earn
a workingman's salary
forbidden to vote
forbidden to speak
in public

Here Rich illustrates the many inequities of life for a woman. These are things that have progressed during her life, but are still not wholly female. Although these rights are legally guaranteed to women in the twentieth century they are not owned by women. Rich herself still needs to subvert the patriarchy to speak freely in public. The poem progresses through other trials and tribulations and concludes with these lines:
You draw your long skirts
    deviant
across the nineteenth century
registering injustice
    failing to make it whole
How can I fail to love
    your clarity and fury
how can I give you
    all your due
    take courage from your courage
honor your exact
    legacy as it is
recognizing
    as well
    that it is not enough?  (92-106)

Adrienne Rich discovers, through her own artistry, the plight of women of every generation. Not only does she document their battles and injustices, she also sees the role of women, like herself, in trying to overcome this inequality. Rich realizes in the final question of this poem that admiration is not enough, but that she too must fight. That is exactly what Adrienne Rich did and is still doing today. By using the language that she has mastered she takes the lessons learned from the nineteenth century and is fighting for the honor of women everywhere. What began in the garret of Emily Dickinson is still being forged today, and for many generations of readers to come.
Conclusion: The Power of Words

Words are an intense source of power. The power of language is a force we take for granted today. Power, like language, was not a guaranteed right for women and may not be even today. The role of power in the lives of woman has, however, altered between the lives of Emily Dickinson and Adrienne Rich. The caste of women changed so greatly that power is no longer an illusory manifestation conjured up in the mind and garret of Emily Dickinson. Power took real shape in the twentieth century. Both of these women overcame the confines of society to produce poetry that transcended the norm for women. Language served as the building blocks of all of this poetry, and even though the language was male-created and male-dominated Dickinson and Rich possessed the
power to overcome that disadvantage. Rich was insightful enough to draw some of her weapons in this battle from Dickinson.

There are many great female writers today, poets, novelists, dramatists and critics, but few have shared such a tumultuous journey with a dead woman. Adrienne Rich found a piece of her art in the soul of Emily Dickinson and through that soul forged ahead with the ideals Dickinson began in her Amherst garret. An energy, passed like a torch, lit the fire inside Adrienne Rich and showed her there was an answer to the seemingly unfair lot that women were assigned to. In the dashes and gaps of Emily Dickinson’s poems there is hope and cunning and ingenuity and Adrienne Rich had the foresight to use this information in her own battle with language.

Dickinson’s poetry has been reborn through different editions over the century since her death. Never has her poetry been so well framed, however, as when compared with Adrienne Rich’s. These two women share a vision, a feeling of how life could be. More importantly they did something about that vision. In their own way each was an activist. Dickinson made her battle a covert one, but she fought hard and it seems clear to scholars now that she won. Rich forged her battle on the page and carried it to the political and social arenas. Rich used her poetry to defy the industrial-military complex, to confront homophobia, and to subvert the patriarchy. They never met, they never walked this earth at the same time, but Emily Dickinson and Adrienne Rich live in each other’s souls.
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