

# **“Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law” by Adrienne Rich**

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<https://www.bachelorandmaster.com/britishandamericanpoetry/snapshots-of-a-daughter-in-law.html#.X5QF0m4zZ0w>

## **Text**

1

You, once a belle in Shreveport,  
with henna-colored hair, skin like a peachbud,  
still have your dresses copied from that time,  
and play a Chopin prelude  
called by Cortot: "Delicious recollections  
float like perfume through the memory."

Your mind now, moldering like wedding-cake,  
heavy with useless experience, rich  
with suspicion, rumor, fantasy,  
crumbling to pieces under the knife-edge  
of mere fact. In the prime of your life.

Nervy, glowering, your daughter  
wipes the teaspoons, grows another way.

2

Banging the coffee-pot into the sink  
she hears the angels chiding, and looks out

past the raked gardens to the sloppy sky.  
Only a week since They said: Have no patience.

The next time it was: Be insatiable.  
Then: Save yourself; others you cannot save.  
Sometimes she's let the tapstream scald her arm,  
a match burn to her thumbnail,

or held her hand above the kettle's snout  
right in the woolly steam. They are probably angels,  
since nothing hurts her anymore, except  
each morning's grit blowing into her eyes.

3

A thinking woman sleeps with monsters.  
The beak that grips her, she becomes. And Nature,  
that sprung-lidded, still commodious  
steamer-trunk of tempora and mores  
gets stuffed with it all: the mildewed orange-flowers,  
the female pills, the terrible breasts  
of Boadicea beneath flat foxes' heads and orchids.  
Two handsome women, gripped in argument,  
each proud, acute, subtle, I hear scream  
across the cut glass and majolica  
like Furies cornered from their prey:  
The argument ad feminam, all the old knives  
that have rusted in my back, I drive in yours,  
ma semblable, ma soeur!

4

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.

5

Dulce ridens, dulce loquens,  
she shaves her legs until they gleam  
like petrified mammoth-tusk.

6

When to her lute Corinna sings  
neither words nor music are her own;  
only the long hair dipping  
over her cheek, only the song  
of silk against her knees  
and these  
adjusted in reflections of an eye.

Poised, trembling and unsatisfied, before  
an unlocked door, that cage of cages,  
tell us, you bird, you tragical machine--  
is this fertillisante douleur? Pinned down  
by love, for you the only natural action,  
are you edged more keen  
to prise the secrets of the vault? has Nature shown  
her household books to you, daughter-in-law,  
that her sons never saw?

7

"To have in this uncertain world some stay  
which cannot be undermined, is  
of the utmost consequence."  
Thus wrote  
a woman, partly brave and partly good,  
who fought with what she partly understood.  
Few men about her would or could do more,  
hence she was labeled harpy, shrew and whore.

8

"You all die at fifteen," said Diderot,  
and turn part legend, part convention.  
Still, eyes inaccurately dream  
behind closed windows blankening with steam.  
Deliciously, all that we might have been,  
all that we were--fire, tears,  
wit, taste, martyred ambition--

stirs like the memory of refused adultery  
the drained and flagging bosom of our middle years.

9

Not that it is done well, but  
that it is done at all? Yes, think  
of the odds! or shrug them off forever.  
This luxury of the precocious child,  
Time's precious chronic invalid,--  
would we, darlings, resign it if we could?  
Our blight has been our sinecure:  
mere talent was enough for us--  
glitter in fragments and rough drafts.

Sigh no more, ladies.  
Time is male  
and in his cups drinks to the fair.  
Bemused by gallantry, we hear  
our mediocrities over-praised,  
indolence read as abnegation,  
slattern thought styled intuition,  
every lapse forgiven, our crime  
only to cast too bold a shadow  
or smash the mold straight off.  
For that, solitary confinement,  
tear gas, attrition shelling.  
Few applicants for that honor.

10

Well,  
she's long about her coming, who must be  
more merciless to herself than history.  
Her mind full to the wind, I see her plunge  
breasted and glancing through the currents,  
taking the light upon her  
at least as beautiful as any boy  
or helicopter.  
poised, still coming,  
her fine blades making the air wince

but her cargo  
no promise then:  
delivered

palpable  
ours.

### **Analysis:**

Snapshots of a Daughter-in-law by Adrienne Rich is a pungent feminist poem in which Rich explores multiple facets of a woman's life, inflicted with sorrows and male exploitation. The title itself hints at discontinued, disorderly photographs of a woman, daughter-in-law, the relation dominantly linked with son. Rich has deliberately selected daughter-in-law not sister or daughter in order to disclose a position of a woman who has hardly lived as an independent daughter but a dependent daughter-in-law. It is mainly about anxiety of a modern woman.

The poem creeps from experiences of a woman at her house working continuously throughout the days, serving her husband with her body at night, continuing a routine, monotonous life by sacrificing her wishes, ambitions and cheers – then it moves towards a revolutionary tone and encourages woman to be bold and to demand her rights, declare independence from family fetters. Towards the end, the poem explodes into a devastating weapon for the might and right of woman.

Rich hopes that a community of women will not only resist crippling effects of patriarchy but will also create an atmosphere in which women have economic, political and social equality as men enjoy. She laments for the waste of energy in a society that values women not for experience but for beauty. Though the daughter-in-law's mind is fertile she has not yet been able to utilize it. Her frustration is revealed in snapshots of her "banging the coffee pots in sink."

The overall structure of the poem depicts photographs attached together displaying several images of a daughter-in-law. The speaker in the outset of the poem addresses mother-in-law. The speaker in the outset of the poem addresses mother-in-laws reminding her of the latter's youth desires, fancies. The second stanza unearths the present behavior of the mother-in-law, when she is rich in experiences of conjugal life which shattered her premarital fantasies and wishes yet she is inconsiderate about the rotating sorrowful life of the woman being experienced by her daughter-in-law who sinks into the life of hardships.

The poem assumes a momentum towards aggressiveness in the second part. Supernatural elements have been brought in order to provoke a psychological strain of the woman, daughter-in-law. Here 'angels' represents her "conscience" that warns her that she must not delay to stake her concern and snatch right and freedom. Third part of the poem pictures daughter-in-law in her bed where she is an object to satisfy her husband's physical hunger. She is surrounded by so-called social customs and superstitions. She struggles to avoid imposed pain but fails. From line 33 to 39, Rich thrusts ironical arrows against an experienced woman who has undergone severe sufferings yet attempts to inflict those troubles upon the junior ones. After all they are same - "masemblable, ma soeur!" Both mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, despite knowing each other closely fail to respect each other, rather plunge in conflict bent to injure each other. Both of them are "iron eyed and beaked and purposed as a bird" (this line compares woman with a delicate caged bird" (which has nothing of its own nor can it keep anything secret since it has to dust everything on the what not every day of life').

Adrienne Rich becomes critical also about the treatment of one woman towards another.

Part five criticizes a surrounding in which a woman is obsessed to beauty and modesty. Woman's life is limited within the world where she can be a show piece, an object of beauty. The woman is so much stripped off rights that she has to borrow even words and music from men while singing her own song. Rich laments on the loss of woman's authority and language, woman's existence lies merely in physique not in spirit.

Woman, a frail bird lives in a cage and fertilizes sorrows and is eventually buried under them. Rich impatiently asks the daughter-in-law to be active, conscious and revolutionary. Love is a chain that keeps her at home and she spends her whole efforts to carry out assigned household works. The last question of this stanza is rhetorical as the speaker asks the daughter-in-law if only she not her husband has been shown household books by the Nature. This question asserts on the equal responsibility of man and woman.

The pictures from the life of this daughter-in-law make up for the kind of life that many women were at the time living. They show the situation in which women are bound by expectation that make her not only the passively wounded, but also the active wounder of the self. The focus of consciousness in the poem is the young woman who is aware

of the forces that limit her and other women; and there is a gradual progression from her feeling of restriction, helplessness, and subdued range towards a hop for change.

Citations:

Sharma, Kedar N. "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-law by Adrienne Rich: Critical Analysis" BachelorandMaster, 19 Oct. 2013, [bachelorandmaster.com/britishandamericanpoetry/snapshots-of-a-daughter-in-law.html](http://bachelorandmaster.com/britishandamericanpoetry/snapshots-of-a-daughter-in-law.html).

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