

Notes on Power by Adrienne Rich

'Power' by Adrienne Rich is a memorable poem that focuses on the power of Marie Curie and the impact she made on her field. Curie was a famous figure in the field of science. She devoted her life along with her loving husband Pierre Curie to the research of radioactivity. The radiation of those radioactive elements started to damage her body. But she denied her physical ailments and continued with her research until she wasn't able to do that. The poetess seeks the source of that mighty force living inside Marie Curie.

'Power' here is about the mental "power" of the scientist Marie Curie, famous for her contribution in the field radioactivity and radioactive elements. At the beginning of 'Power', Adrienne Rich refers to human history as it is the source of inspiration to

her. She uses the imagery of a backhoe excavating a bottle of amber in the upcoming section of the poem. In folk medicine, there are various uses of amber in health-related problems. There is a belief that it has some medicinal properties. Here Adrienne uses “amber” as a symbol. The next section of the poem makes it clear.

Summary of Power

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In the next section of the poem, the poetess reveals for whom she is writing this poem. The person is none other than the well-known scientist, Marie Curie. Rich was reading about her before penning down her thoughts regarding her mental power. At first, she points out the decaying physique of Curie caused by extensive experimentation with radioactive elements. The description is no doubt pathetic and heart-wrenching. In the penultimate section of the poem, Rich

presents her resolution in the manner of a sonnet. In her words, Curie died like a soul constantly denying her mortal “wounds”. At last, the poetess says that Curie got her power from the “same source” from which a man also gets his power.

Meaning of Power

The title of the poem is short but suggestive. The word “power” is a reference to the will force of Marie Curie. It also suggests Curie’s mental capacity to continue her research, denying her “radiation sickness”. The significance of the title becomes clear to the readers at the end of the poem.

Structure of Power

‘Power’ by Adrienne Rich consists of four stanzas. Like other poems of Rich, it has

an unconventional structure. The first stanza has only one line while the third and the longest stanza of the poem has eight lines. The last stanza has an uncommon formation. The second and the third line of this stanza have two and one words respectively. Such a form of the last line is for the sake of emphasizing her idea regarding Curie's mental strength.

There is no specific rhyme scheme in the poem. If readers scan the poem metrically, they can find that there is also not any regularity in the meter. The majority of the feet are in iambic meter with some trochaic variations here and there. Being a poem of modern literature it has such an unconventional structure.

Major Themes-

1. The reversal between Power and Denial

That which has debilitated her physically has made her powerful enough to write her own history, to create her place in the scientific community and the advancement of knowledge of mankind. She defied death, society, norms and restrictions in her pursuit of love for science by denying her physical health conditions and that is the subject of the poem.

Rich says that Marie Curie denied “her wounds”. Actually Curie denied the fact that the bodily wounds would inflict her mental strength. She accepted the reality at the same time she denied the beliefs. She knew that the power inside her soul was much stronger than the radiation.

2. History

History is a chronological story of events that happened in the past. Man is trapped

in the historical forces. But Rich in the poem divides history in two categories - ordinary history or the history of common people and extraordinary history of some genius who had always taken mankind to newer heights. Curie by not caring for her health even at the final stages of her life, actively researching on radioactive elements chose to write her own history. She refused to be ordinary like all and hence defied the power of history to make everything ordinary and insignificant.

Possible Questions

1. What is meant by the word 'power' in the poem "Power" by Adrienne Rich? (10 marks)
2. What is 'denial' and how does Curie use it in her life? (10)
3. How does Rich talk about history, power and the role of individual in creating history in her poem Power? Discuss (10)

