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we must expose these cultural myths and work to destroy beliefs so naturalized into society that they are seen as truths. Not until we accomplish this can women truly "be anything that [they] wanna be."

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The Importance and Effects of Childhood Memory and Family Relationships in the Poetry of Adrienne Rich and Sharon Olds

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It is hard to write about my own mother. Whatever I do write, it is my story I am telling, my version of the past. If she were to tell her own story other landscapes would be revealed.

—Adrienne Rich (Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution 22)

I have never left. Your bodies are before me at all times, in the dark I see the stars of your teeth in their fixed patterns wheeling over my bed

You think I left—I was the child who got away, thousands of miles, but not a day goes past that I am not turning someone into you.

—Sharon Olds (" Possessed," The Dead and the Living 19)

In the above passages Adrienne Rich and Sharon Olds write as adult women reflecting upon their childhood lives. Rich writes of a problem associated with personal memory: the child's interpretation may differ drastically from that of the parent. Olds asserts the importance of the parents in a child's life and their lingering influence in adulthood even when they are separated.

These two influential poets have written and spoken much relating to the subject of family, specifically the importance which memories of childhood and family life hold in our lives. Both poets explore questions and themes related to family relationships, the development of children throughout their lives, and the problems of traditional family structure. Rich seems to be focused chiefly on the importance of parent-child connections and the great deal of influence which parents have on their children. Her prose and much of her poetic work deals with motherhood and the sacrifices which women in desperate situations must make for the sake of their children; however, it is her more personal poetry that focuses on her relationship with her father. In her actual life it seems that Rich's father had a very strong influence on her, perhaps because of the way her family was organized with him at its center. This influence is evident in her poetic work on the subject of family.

The majority of Olds' poems deal with one family's life as the child moves from her early life in the family, into marriage and then into her own experiences of motherhood. The family which she describes is also very father-centered in its nature; however, the situation is much more abusive than the families that are discussed in Rich's poems. Olds is also interested in the structured relationships between parent and child but seems not to discuss the importance of these in as much depth as Rich does, preferring to focus on how events occurring as a result of parent-child relationships affect the child in adult life.

Both poets employ memory as a tool for exploring childhood experiences and assert the importance of remembered events in the act of defining an adult person. Many of the poems are written from the adult's point of view as the speaker recalls childhood events and then comments on how these have influenced her as she moves into her life outside of the family. Both Rich and Olds comment on the traditional roles of family, in which the father fills a dominant role and has control over the lives of both his wife and children. Olds' father-figure is clearly abusive, while Rich writes of a man who is dominant mentally rather than physically. The poems by both women with such a focus often seem to call for a change in traditional family structure.

Many of Olds' poems describe specific episodes of child abuse, but perhaps her most powerful description of a father's actions is in "Saturn" (The Gold Cell 24). This poem is one of several in which the speaker calmly observes her father while he is in a pa-
sive state and it is safe for her to do so. Often she appears amazed at the beauty of his physical appearance which contrasts his otherwise overbearing demeanor. She seems to use her observation as a way of searching for good in an otherwise horrible man.

"Saturn" describes this father in both active and passive terms. He lies "lured," "passing out" and "heavily asleep, unconscious" yet some part of him remains active even in this serene state, as he exercises total control over his family. Their lives "slowly / disappeared down the hole of his life." His complete domination of his wife and children is effectively demonstrated here via the imagery of "eating" the speaker's brother. In this figurative act he is totally involved in fulfilling his own goals with no compassion for his family's needs or wants, exactly like in his actual deeds.

Olds continually describes this father as a being whose sole function is to consume, to take, and he derives a great deal of pleasure from this action. His mouth is "open, darkness of the room / filling his mouth" as he sleeps and he is trying to put his family in this dark, empty place. The entire process of "eating" the child is shown in a manner very similar to that of a connoisseur eating a gourmet meal, every bite is savored and the meal is an elaborate and in that silence between gears I would break, weeping and peeing, the fluids of my body bursting out like people from the windows of a burning high-rise. She is completely aware of the perverse pleasure that he gets from her reaction and feels totally powerless in the situation. She knows she cannot take control of the situation but does not believe that her father has total control over himself either. In her book, "Sources," Rich explores much of her early personal life and the events which were instrumental in the creation of her political consciousness. One section specifically addresses her relationship with her father throughout her life ("VII" 15). She reflects upon him as the dominant figure in her family and writes:

For years I struggled with you: your categories, your theories, your will, the cruelty which came inexorably from your love. For years all arguments I carried on in my head were with you.

Rich's father made sure that she received more intellectual training than most girls her age during the 1930s in which she grew up and he closely supervised her studies, so it is not surprising that she views him as responsible for her in many ways. But when she reviews her childhood from the vantage point of adulthood, she becomes aware that she was "the eldest daughter raised as a son, taught to study but / not to pray." She is realizing how tightly controlled her education was. Later in the poem, she recognizes in her father the elements of "patriarchy / ... the kingdom of the fathers" and sees in him the "power and arrogance" which she most likely paid little attention to as a child. Beneath it was hidden "the suffering of the Jew, the alien stamp [he] bore, / because [he] had deliberately arranged that it should / be invisible to me." This denial of his (and her) Jewish heritage has not only caused her suffering, but it has taken some part of his identity as well. She realizes that if this part of him had been acknowledged, he would have lost some of that patriarchal power and she would be much different as well.

Like Olds in "Saturn" and several other poems, Rich's speaker in "After Dark" (Collected Early Poems 227) observes her father while he is in a passive state, nearing death. Again, she remembers his negative behavior toward her as a child, which stemmed from his dominating control of her. She imagines a phonograph needle on a record, whose sound is now faint as his life fades, playing the phrase she heard over and over during her childhood: "I know you better / than you know yourself." This seems to evoke the claustrophobic feeling of that child, who then leaves her family and experiences a sort of rebirth as she moves into adulthood, but without some damage to herself. "Self-maimed," she "limp[s] off, torn at the roots," breaking ties with her family and then claiming a new life for herself:

[1] stopped singing for a whole year, got a new body, new breath, got children, crooked for words, forgot to listen

This breaking off from the family almost seems violent in its nature, but this seems necessary in order for the speaker to escape the influence of that family, primarily her father. In this way she truly learns to possess herself. She seeks a "new breath" to rid herself of the suffocation she felt in childhood. However, she still seems to place importance on her childhood and expresses the negativity of ignoring such an importance. When she "forgets to listen" it seems she forgot some part of her make up as well.

However, just as Olds sees reminders of her father in her own body and mind later in life, Rich also realizes she can never totally sever all connections with her own father. In "After Dark," she realizes that she will always have some part of him when she "wake up one morning / and knew myself your daughter. / Blood is a sacred poison." The word "sacred" is used to demonstrate the undeniable importance of family relationships, while in the same line the word "poison" suggests that these relationships can also have damaging or negative effects on those involved. These poems about abuse and domination view the father in similar ways: he is powerful in appearance and attitude towards his children and imposes many punishments or restrictions on them. While these parental actions range from physical child abuse to overly cautious control of a child's intellectual development, they all have specific effects on the children involved. All of the adult persons looking back on their experiences seem to feel as if they were being stifled or restricted in some way, but they have varying opinions on how they have been affected by these situations. It is obvious that a child who is physically abused will have a much different reaction toward the parent responsible than a child who is controlled emotionally. It is also clear, that these have been events that have had a lasting impact on the individuals involved because of the long-lasting importance which the individuals have at some point assigned to such memories.

The concepts of traditional family structure and prescribed family roles are deeply connected to these episodes of child abuse and control which Olds and Rich describe. Each person in a family has a certain role or capacity to fill, and often these become stereotyped according to gender or the family member's status of parent or child. These roles do seem to be important to the survival of the idea of family in general or to the protection of its individual members, although they are often described as harmful as well.

A poem which seems to point out the strength of the relationship between Olds' speaker and her mother is "Parents' Day" (The Woundgirl 17) in which she describes the way in which her mother's appearance does not seem to fit any stereotype:

I remember her being much bigger than I, her smile of the highest wattage, a little stiff, sparkling with consciousness of her prettiness—I pitied the other girls for having mothers who looked like mothers, who did not blush.

Sometimes she would have braids around her head like a goddess or an advertisement for California raisins—

While in many other poems by Olds about childhood, the mother appears as a broken down woman, the event in this poem occurs before the "long souring of her life." She herself still appears childlike because of her blushing innocence, and this may indicate her status as the typical young wife who has not yet fully accepted her mother role in the way that society generally expects.

Unlike some of Olds' other poems which demonstrate a bond between the persona and her mother because of their common status as victims within their abusive family, "Parents' Day" seems to take place before most of the horrible events they would encounter. Here, instead of calling herself the possession of her mother, the speaker claims her for her own: "my heart would bang / and my lungs swell /... / to see that woman arriving / and to know she was mine." There is a certain pride in being associated with her
mother which seems to disappear as she grows older, similar to the shame many adolescents feel about their parents.

In "A Woman Mourned By Daughters," (Collected Early Poems 198-190) Rich shows her readers how women can become defined not just solely as wives and mothers, but also in terms of the domestic tasks associated with these roles within traditional family organization. The mother in this poem is not really grieved for, no real sadness for the loss of her as a loved person seems to be expressed. Instead, we are shown what she has left behind: physical objects which seem to suggest her own existence as a mere object. These are described as "solid assertions of [her]self" and seem to inspire some sort of feeling of dread or awe in her daughters, rather than the respect, love or affection which would be expected to stem from the memory of the deceased in such a situation.

This poem also shows how these domestic roles are passed on from mother to daughter. The daughters seem to feel a great deal of guilt for the lack of respect with which they may have treated their mother while she was alive. Now it seems as if "nothing could be enough." They are given the household tasks which were formerly hers alone, including the care of their father, who is described as "an old man in an adjoining / room to be touched and fed.

Through this inheritance of tasks reserved only for female family members, the daughters are forced into the exact place or role in which their mother existed.

The mother is portrayed as constantly concerned with the tidiness of the household and the appropriateness of the actions of her daughters. This is indicative of the stereotype of the domineering, overly concerned mother and the feeling this imposes on her daughters is clear in the following passage:

And all this universe
dares us to lay a finger
anywhere, save exactly
as you would wish it done.

These lines imply that the daughters are still under some sort of unspoken control exercised by their mother, possibly more so after her death than while she was alive. They now also seem to possess a new respect for the wishes and opinions of their mother, which appears to be something they did not have while she was alive. They may be realizing for the first time what kind of restricted life their mother actually led, as they are now forced into a very similar one.

While they were young, Olds and Rich (and their poetic personas) no doubt realized that their fathers were the more powerful parents, but they did not yet have an understanding of what this meant. These small bits of memory evident in these poems seem to be important to naming the father's power and determining its importance. Very minute details contained in these remembered events seem to point out the problems which result from the prescribed roles that each family member fills almost instinctively.

While fathers are clearly dominant in the families discussed by Rich and Olds, they do not completely overshadow the importance of the mother. In fact, in many of the recounted memories the mother is looked upon much more fondly due to the attitude held toward the father, sometimes even as the more important or more loving parent. Many of the poems which have already been discussed here have pointed out the close bond which exists between mother and child, especially when that child is very young. The close relationship seems to wane around the time the child leaves the home, but resurfaces again in adulthood. In any case, the mother-child bond, or more specifically, the mother-daughter bond, seems very influential to both poets.

In "The Forms" (The Dead and the Living 35) Olds examines this relationship with the mother, once again as she functions in an abusive family. The persona defends the mother's actions during the time of her marriage by showing all the ways she would have protected her children, had the situation been different.

In disaster, an animal
mother, she would have died for us,
but in life as it was
she had to put herself
first.
She had to do whatever he
told her to do to the children, she had to
protect herself.

It seems as if the mother is still making some sort of sacrifice for her children by staying with them in this situation. She is a fellow victim here and is doing all that is currently within her power in order to protect them.

The last lines compare the atrocities of war to "all the forms / in which I have experienced her love." These lines demonstrate the acts of violence that the mother has been forced to perform upon her children which she would never have done otherwise because she does truly love them and is not motivated in the ways

her husband is.

Later on in the speaker's life, the mother attempts to make amends with her daughter concerning her behavior and her inability to leave her husband sooner in "Aftet 37 Years My Mother Apologies for My Childhood" (The Gold Cell 43). This situation causes many conflicts within issues that the speaker had already dealt with and is now forced to revisit. It seems that the speaker interprets this apology almost as an admission of her mother's guilt. The mother does indeed speak with "true regret" which may be some acknowledgment of her responsibility for these previous actions. She is also extremely distraught over the events and this seems to further compound her feelings of guilt.

The speaker wishes that her mother had not brought the subject up again, as she has made her judgments already; her mother, in her apology, forces her to rethink her conclusions, leaving her confused. This revivification of the past is destroying her sense of identity and leaving her with a great deal of confusion about her sense of self:

I could not see what my
days would be with you sorry, with
you wishing you had not done it, the
sky falling around me, its shards
shining in my eyes, your old soft
body fallen against me in horror I
took you in my arms.

Since the daughter had already come to terms with her childhood and accepted the ways in which she was defined by it, her mother’s apology seems to have disrupted her life and sense of self. She cannot envision who she will be from now on. Since the mother is now accepting responsibility for her actions she is taking on some part of the identity of the abuser. She existed on both sides of the situation but now seems to be removing herself from the victims somewhat and placing herself on the side of the criminal. This may be the majority of the daughter cannot bring herself to accept and why she says, "I hardly knew what I said / or who I would be now that I had forgiven you."

Rich’s explorations of the mother-daughter connection have the privilege of existing outside such an abusive atmosphere, but the effects of patriarchy in general can still be observed, especially those which pigeonhole women into being defined solely by motherhood.

Rich explores the mother-child bond as it is inherently related to the female body and the condition of women in a patriarchal world. In "Sibling Mysteries" (The Dreams of a Common Language 47-52) she writes:

Remind me how we loved our mother’s body
our mouths drawing the first
thin sweetness from her nipples
our facesdreaming hour on hour
in the salt smell of her lap Remind me
how her touch melted childgrief
how she floated great and tender in our dark
or stood guard over us
against our willing.

This earliest bond between mother and child creates something between which lasts forever and this sort of intimacy can only be found again in having children of one’s own. Bearing children renews the bond with one’s own mother through a shared experience.

The mother also seems to be more protective of her daughter. She will most likely encounter experiences much like the ones which the mother has, and so she not only stands guard over them, but again shares her experiences with her daughters. They are bound together as women surviving within a male dominated world. It seems that men would destroy these female bonds, but women strive to keep themselves connected in many different ways.

And we are and drank
their tearings, how we served them
in silence, how we told
among ourselves our secrets, wept and laughed
passed bark and root and berry
from hand to hand, whispering each one’s power
This suggests that their are certain feminine secrets, "mother-secrets," or a female knowledge which are shared by mothers, daughters and all women alike, passed from generation to generation, but which would be misunderstood or threatened by men.

The daughters never were
true brides of the father
the daughters were to begin with
brides of the mother
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The title of the poem demonstrates another important aspect of the parents’ effect on their daughter. It seems that she will always belong to them in some sense; she will always be their daughter. This obviously shows the extreme importance of them in her life and how they do much to define who she is as well. Yet she herself will never be able to possess them in the same manner, so she tries to hold onto these small remembered details of them, writing: “Never having had you, I cannot let you go.”

Rich’s poems dealing with memory are also written from the safe vantage point of adulthood. In “For Memory,” (A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far 21-22) the speaker is speaking to her lover about the importance of talking about and remembering childhood events:

I fell through a basement railing
the first day of school and cut my forehead open—
did I ever tell you? More than forty years
and I still remember smelling my own blood
like the smell of a new schoolbook

And did you ever tell me
how your mother called you in from play
and whom? To what? These atoms filmed by
that common life we each and all bent out of orbit from
to which we must return simply to say
this is where I came from
this is what I knew

The association of the smell of blood and the smell of schoolbooks is but one example of a detail of memory which can persist throughout our life. Without the memory of the surrounding event, the speaker would be confused regarding the source of this combination of seemingly unrelated smells. The “atoms” seem to indicate the importance of the origins of individuals and their growth.

“Sibling Mysteries,” contains themes related to mother-daughter associations as discussed before and is also filled with references to memory. Each section begins with a phrase such as “Remind me,” “I know, I remember” or “Tell me” which demonstrate an underlying theme pertaining to remembered knowledge. This conversation between sisters is filled with references to previous events and the importance of reminding each other of them: “I know by hear, and still / I need to have you tell me, / hold me, remind me.”

The poems discussed here only scratch the surface in demonstrating the countless subtle comparisons that can be made between Rich and Olds in both their subject matter and writing styles. One can begin to draw conclusions as to the messages which these poets seek to deliver. Many questions pertaining to the motivations and final effects upon the poets and their speakers also emerge in the poetry as a close reading is undertaken.

In the vast majority of the poems discussed in this paper, it seems that the childhood events and experiences that the speakers recall have very negative connotations. It seems unlikely that these are the only events which they are able to remember from this period of their lives, but it may be important to note that these types of occurrences definitely leave a indelible impression which lasts into adulthood. These negative events comprised of abuse or punishment may actually be more important in shaping the perceptions and attitudes of the child than positive experiences, since they serve to more forcefully define fears and outline the appropriate boundaries for behavior.

Evidence supporting the significance of these events is clearly demonstrated in the way the speakers treat their own children and the connections these actions have with those of their own parents. Many times the speaker consciously acts in direct opposition to the way in which her parents would have acted in the same situation. Again, it is interesting to note that this is a negative response to childhood memory; it is less often that we witness the speaker acting in a manner similar to that of her parents.

In studying the works of these two important poets of the twentieth century, we can clearly see precise comments on the structure of our society as it relates to family structure, within the stories of how these poets and their speakers have been affected on an individual basis. The careful reading and interpretation of these effects could do much to impart a societal change in addition to a change in family structure which Sharon Olds and Adrienne Rich so clearly call for.

It seems that in many ways, the incredibly powerful effects of the poetry written by these women have yet to be fully realized. Their comments on the far-reaching effects of childhood memories in adult romantic relationships, parenting styles and political beliefs can be incredibly valuable in helping us to realize what large portions of our beliefs and personalities are comprised of the experiences of youth.
The Importance and effects...


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