



Aesthetics of Power: The Poetry of Adrienne Rich

Claire Keyes

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When still a senior at Radcliffe, Adrienne Rich was selected as a Yale Younger Poet. The judge, W.H. Auden, wrote the introduction to her first book of poems. Thus Rich's career was launched by one of the most distinguished poets of the twentieth century, someone Rich herself admired and emulated. Adrienne Rich's early mentors were men, and her early poetry consequently adopted a strong male persona. In her development as artist, woman, and activist, however, Rich emerged as a leading voice of modern feminism—a voice which rejects a male-dominated world, forcing new definitions of power, new possibilities for women, and profound repercussions for society.

In *The Aesthetics of Power*, Claire Keyes examines the shape and scope of Rich's poetry as it applies to Rich's female aesthetic. Keyes uncovers the process by which Rich embraces, then rejects, accepted uses of power, achieving a vision of beneficent female power. In her early poems, Adrienne Rich accepts certain traditions associated with the divisions of power according to sex. Later, Rich continually defines and redefines power until she can reject power-as-force (patriarchal power) for the power-to-transform, which, for her, is the truly significant and essential power.

Surveying Rich's poetry and prose from 1951 to the present, this book traces the development of Adrienne Rich's new understanding of the power of the poet and the power of woman. Sharing Rich's feminist sensibilities, yet at times critical of her more radical positions, Claire Keyes draws a portrait of an artist who was molded by the complex political and social climate of post-World War II America. It is a portrait that reveals the creative growth of an artist, and the personal growth of a powerful and controversial woman.

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