



## The Selected Poems of Nikki Giovanni

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### Introduction

The purpose of this reading group guide is to help your group further understand Nikki Giovanni's poetry. It is not intended to direct you toward an opinion of her poetry, but rather to enhance discussions about it by introducing helpful information and suggesting topics that may have not come to mind. Giovanni's poetry encompasses a wide range of emotions, from joy to rage, loneliness to pride, and vulnerability to resolve. Within each collection of poetry one can find numerous and varied moods, ideas, and images. Compare, for instance, the angry "Black Judgments," one of her earliest poems, to the tender "On Hearing 'The Girl with the Flaxen Hair'" from the same collection. Giovanni's poetry offers the honest insights of a writer who lives very much in the moment, as ephemeral as that moment may be. Her poetry is unapologetic and direct, and allows the reader immediate access to her meaning, rather than cloaking her ideas in intellectual abstraction or literary allusion.

Giovanni was earliest identified as a "poet of the people," though to read her work as solely topical is to ignore its emotional resonance. She moves easily from the realm of the political to the personal, and because she has had the opportunity to witness firsthand the events and know the figures that shaped the destiny of three generations of African Americans, she provides a uniquely intimate perspective on contemporary history. The individual is as relevant to Giovanni's poetry as is the community, and she imbues her lovingly detailed portraits of people from her life with as much energy and emotion as her commentary on society as a whole. It is testament to her strength as a poet that she can move her readers with her prescient, witty, and poignant reflections on daily life in one poem, and then offer stirring observations on the broader issues of racial injustice, intolerance, and bigotry in the next. Finally, because music is an essential part of Giovanni's poetry, we encourage you, as a group or individually, to speak and sing and shout these poems. They are as much a celebration of words and rhythm as they are of life, with all its rich and rewarding possibilities -- and they are meant to be shared with the world.

### Questions for Discussion

1. Many of Giovanni's poems, for example, "The Great Pax Whitie," "Ego Tripping," and "Poem of Angela Yvonne Davis," make reference to ancient and American history. What effect does the use of historic facts and figures have on these poems' accessibility and emotional impact?
2. Giovanni considers herself a topical poet. Much of her earlier work deals with the black revolution movement of the late 1960s. Are these poems still relevant today? Why or why not?
3. Can you identify different personas Giovanni uses in her work? Compare, for instance, the narrators of "Legacies," "How Do You Write a Poem?," "Poem for Black Boys," and "Life Cycles." How are the narrative voices different in each? How does Giovanni use persona to enhance each poem's meaning?
4. Giovanni often uses images and remembrances from childhood in her poetry. "Nikki-Rosa," "Poem for Flora," "Adulthood," "Mothers," and others deal with the inner lives of children. How does Giovanni portray the experience of childhood? Of growing up? What does she say about the importance of self-esteem in children, especially in girls?
5. How does Giovanni use slang and vernacular language in her poetry? Compare "Conversation" with "For a Lady of Pleasure Now Retired." Both poems address the dignities and indignities that come with age, yet their moods are quite different. Can you explain the effects of language in both poems?
6. Giovanni often writes about being alone. Compare such poems as "I'm Not Lonely," "Alone," "A Certain Peace," and "Patience." Which are about loneliness, which about solitude? What is the difference, and how do these poems reflect that difference?
7. Giovanni's poems range widely in mood: from the celebratory "Ego Tripping" and "Beautiful Black Men," to the angry "Reflections on April 4, 1968" and "Woman Poem." What impact does mood have on these and other poems? How do these poems make you feel after you read them? Can you identify which words and images bring about these feelings?
8. Giovanni's poetry has been criticized for being too simplistic. How important is accessibility to you as a reader? Do you think some of her simpler, shorter poems, such as "Winter," merit the same attention as her more complex poems, such as "Africa I" and "Africa II"? Why or why not?
9. Most of Giovanni's poems possess a rhythmic quality that lends itself to being read aloud. How does the effect of reading her poems silently differ from that of a spoken reading?
10. Can you identify a development in Giovanni's work from the earlier poems of *Black Feeling Black Talk* to those of *Cotton Candy on a Rainy Day*? How are the poems in these collections different? How are they similar?
11. Do you think Giovanni's poems are best appreciated by black women? How are the issues and moods of her poetry pertinent to a larger audience?
12. What have you learned about the black experience from reading these poems? Do you think Nikki Giovanni is an appropriate spokesperson for African Americans in general? What do you think of poetry's ability to educate and enlighten?

13. Do you consider Nikki Giovanni to be a "political" poet? Why or why not? How do her poems about social issues compare with her love poems or her reflections on childhood?

14. In her poem, "Cotton Candy on a Rainy Day," Giovanni writes: "I share with the painters the desire/To put a three-dimensional picture/On a one-dimensional surface." How are the disciplines of painting and poetry similar? Do you think Giovanni is successful in her attempts at using words to portray life?