Selection Review #1

Nikki Giovanni, *Ego-tripping and Other Poems for Young People*

“a poem (for langston hughes)”

1. **To what three types of things does Giovanni compare poetry in the first three stanzas? How is poetry both similar to, and different from, these three categories?** In stanza 1, Giovanni compares poetry to riches found in the earth, such as oil, gold, and diamonds. People dig these up with great effort. People’s thoughts are another type of riches that often lie hidden. Poetry is a way of uncovering these hidden thoughts.

   In the second analogy, the poet compares poetry to beautiful cloth. In order to make cloth, raw materials (like wool and silk) must first be prepared. Then they must be woven together. This is a lot of work, but the end result is worth the trouble. Similarly, when you write a poem, you first have to find the right words. You also have to put them together. This is a lot of work, but it is a lot of fun, and the end result is beautiful.

   In the third stanza, the poet compares poetry to different kinds of routes. These include highways, bridges, and country roads. Roads like these link people in different places together. In the same way, poetry also links people of different places and backgrounds. However, it takes time to travel on an ordinary road. The “rainbow ride” of poetry can bring people together in the blink of an eye.

2. **Explain why stanzas 4 and 8 sound different from the other stanzas of the poem. To whom might these stanzas be addressed? How does the rhythm back up this stanza’s claims about the way poetry works?**

   Stanzas 4 and 8 have a different rhythm from the other stanzas. Stanzas 4 and 8 have a strong, forceful rhythm. This is created by switching between stressed and unstressed syllables. Stanzas 4 and 8 also do not contain any pauses, as the other stanzas do. The poet says “you” in these stanzas. She might be speaking to a special friend or loved one. She might be speaking to Langston Hughes, the famous African-American poet. In any case, she says that poetry bridges the gap between herself and this person. She believes poetry brings people together faster than ordinary roads can. In fact, poetry works almost instantly, like magic. The strong, fast rhythm of these lines backs this idea up.

continued...
3. **In stanzas 5 and 6, we find words like “metaphor,” “allusion,” meter,” and “verse.” What do these words have in common? Why are they listed in the poem at this point?** These words are all technical terms related to poetry. They are listed here because these are the “building blocks” of which poetry is made.

4. **What does the line “poems are what you do to me” mean? Think about this line, along with those found in stanzas 4 and 8: “when i take my rainbow ride/ you’ll be right there by my side.” What is the real value of poetry, according to this poem?** The line “poems are what you do to me” shows that in Giovanni’s view, poetry is all about connections between people. Stanzas 4 and 8 make the same point. When you write or read a poem, you are reaching out to touch someone who may be far away or totally different from you. Even though the reader and writer may be far away, the poem brings them close together in spirit.
Selection Review #2

Nikki Giovanni, *Ego-tripping and Other Poems for Young People*

“for the masai warriors (of don miller)”

[Note: You may refer back to the poem while doing this Selection Review.]

1. **What images does Giovanni use to stand for her African heritage? How does she feel about this heritage?** The images of a “father’s drum,” a “leopard’s screech,” “weaving an ancient rope,” and running “across a grassy plain” are used to refer to the African heritage. The poem suggests that Giovanni feels proud of these things, and the tradition that they stand for. She even sees herself as the leopard. She imagines tying herself to history with the rope. Then she would spring like a leopard and run across the plain.

2. **How does the poet see the future? How does she relate the past and the future?** The poet thinks of a future in which she and other people of color would have dignity and power. She believes that respect for the past is part of building a strong future. You need a strong respect for African traditions and history in order to build this kind of future.

3. **This poem uses a lot of images. List some different categories of images used. How do these images relate to one another?** This poem uses images that relate to the senses of sight, hearing, and touch. Some of these are: “my father’s drum,” “the leopard’s screech,” “an ancient rope,” “into daylight out of night,” and “the grassy plain.” There are also images linked to the sense of movement. “if i could weave... and tie myself... i’d spring... and sprint...” Finally, some images are linked to ideas. These include being tied to history, springing into the future, and building “a nation for the gods.” Many of these images are closely linked. For example, the “ancient rope” is used to tie the speaker to history. The speaker mentions springing up and sprinting across the grassy plain. This idea reminds us of the leopard who screeched. At the same time, the link between the images doesn’t always seem to make sense logically.

4. **Why do you think the speaker thinks of herself acting as a leopard does? What does she mean by “and i could be the man”?** The speaker thinks of herself as the leopard because the leopard is quick, strong, graceful, and fearless. It can take care of itself. The line “i could be the man” implies that the speaker is not “the man” at the time the poem is written. In other words, she does not think she and other black people are in charge of their own lives. Her dream for the future is that she and other black people could live in dignity and have control of their lives. In her view, in order to do this, they must draw strength from the heritage and culture of Africa.
Selection Review #3

Nikki Giovanni, *Ego-tripping and Other Poems for Young People*

“the funeral of martin luther king, jr.”

[Note: You may refer back to the poem while doing this Selection Review.]

1. Where do the words “Free at last, free at last” come from? Why were these words written on the headstone of Dr. King’s grave? These words come from an old spiritual. Dr. King quoted these words in his famous “I Have a Dream” speech. After that, they became a motto for the civil rights movement. These words were written on the headstone of Dr. King’s grave because death was the final freedom for him. He could not suffer any more injustice after death. Dr. King believed that death would take him to God and heaven. There he would find perfect freedom.

2. Dr. King worked for the goal of freedom during his life. What kind of freedom was he looking for? What kind of freedom did he get, according to his headstone? Why is this ironic? Dr. King worked for freedom for people of all races to get along together. He wanted everyone to work together to make the world a better place. However, the freedom proclaimed on his headstone was the freedom of death. This death was caused by violence and hatred. This is ironic because what really happened was the opposite of what was expected. The freedom Dr. King found was the opposite of the freedom he was working for.

3. What is the poet’s opinion about the freedom found in death? What kind of freedom does she want to achieve? The poet writes, “death is a slave’s freedom.” She does not think this kind of freedom is worth much. She wants to build a better world. In that world, black people will be free to live without fear.

4. What was Dr. King’s plan for African Americans to fight racism in America? What is ironic about the way he died? Dr. King wanted African Americans to fight racism by using non-violence. He wanted them to resist unfair laws without hurting anyone. It is ironic that someone who preached non-violence was killed in a very violent way.
Selection Review #4

Nikki Giovanni, *Ego-tripping and Other Poems for Young People*

“a poem for carol (may she always wear red ribbons)”

[Note: You may refer back to the poem while doing this Selection Review.]

1. **Tell about the setting and the characters in this narrative poem.** This poem is set in Lincoln Heights. This is the suburb of Cincinnati, Ohio, where Nikki Giovanni grew up. It describes a situation from her childhood in the late 1940s or early 1950s. The characters are Nikki herself, her sister Gary, her father, and a small kitten. The kitten came up out of the sewer beside their home. It was blind in one eye.

2. **How do Nikki, Gary, and their father each respond to the kitten? How can we explain these different responses?** Gary, Nikki’s sister, feels sorry for the kitten. She begins to take milk to it. The girls’ father doesn’t want to have anything to do with the kitten. He just tells the girls not to bring it home. He does not want to be bothered by the trouble of caring for a kitten, especially one that is hurt. Nikki also feels sorry for the kitten, and she thinks it is beautiful. However, she cannot bring herself to go near it. Perhaps she thinks it is kind of creepy with one eye missing. Perhaps she feels badly about the fact that she cannot do anything to heal it. Whatever her reasons are, she does not actually do anything at all for the kitten.

3. **Why did Nikki probably not want to name the kitten? How do we know that she cared more about the kitten than she wanted to admit?** Nikki probably did not want to name the kitten because naming it would suggest that it was special to her. Giving someone a name means that you recognize him or her as an individual. Nikki did not want to get too close to the kitten, either physically or emotionally. Still, she really did care about the kitten, since she actually did pick out a name for it. In addition, she wished it might always wear red ribbons. This also shows that she cared about it.

4. **What do you think the kitten might symbolize for Nikki? Why?** The kitten in this story might be a symbol of people who have suffered a lot. Sometimes other people feel awkward around someone who has suffered. Even though they feel sorry for the person, they do not want to get too close. This keeps them from being able to help the person effectively. The kitten also might be a symbol for African Americans or members of other minorities that have suffered. This comes to mind because the civil rights movement was very important to Nikki Giovanni. Some white people helped the civil rights movement in some small way, just as Gary helped the kitten in a small way. Others didn’t want anything to do with it, because they didn’t want to be bothered. Many other white people felt sympathy for the goals of the civil rights move-

continued...
ment. However, they were nervous or uncomfortable about getting too close to black people. Maybe they also felt guilty because they could not make things right. These feelings kept them from being of any real use. Nikki felt sorry for the kitten but did not want to go near it. In the same way, these people felt sorry for African Americans. However, they did not want to take any real risks in order to help.
Selection Review #5

Nikki Giovanni, *Ego-tripping and Other Poems for Young People*

“kidnap poem”

[Note: You may refer back to the poem while doing this Selection Review.]

1. **Who is the speaker in this poem, and who is being spoken to? Why does the speaker say, “if I were a poet”?** The speaker in this poem is probably the poet herself, although this is not certain. The poem may simply be addressed to the reader, but it is probably addressed to a special friend of the speaker, or to someone she would like to get to know better. Perhaps she says “if I were a poet” out of modesty. She also might not be sure that she is a good enough poet to capture her friend with words, or to express her feelings for this person.

2. **List some of the places the speaker says she would like to take her friend, and the things she would like to do. What does this suggest about their friendship?** The speaker would like to take her friend to a fun place like Coney Island or Jones Beach. She would also like to take this person home with her. She would like to play songs for her friend, and take her friend to meet her mother. These suggestions tell us that she would like to have both fun times and quiet times with this person. She would like to have a very special friendship with this person.

3. **What does the “red Black green” symbolize? Why is the word “Black” capitalized? What does this tell us about the speaker?** Red, black, and green symbolize black pride. Giovanni capitalizes the word *Black* to show her pride in her racial identity. This line suggests that even in a friendly, playful moment, the poet is still very much committed to the goals of black political action.

4. **What are some of the unusual ways Giovanni uses words in this poem? How does this affect the mood or feeling the poem creates?** In this poem, Giovanni uses many words in unusual ways. She uses nouns that are literary terms, such as *meter, lyric,* and *ode,* as if they were verbs. She suggests that poetry has a magical power to take people to different places and give them different experiences. She also uses words with double meanings, and plays with the words *see* and *sea.* Clearly, she is having a lot of fun playing with these words. This creates a playful, joyful mood.
Selection Review #6

Nikki Giovanni, Ego-tripping and Other Poems for Young People

“nikki-rosa”

[Note: You may refer back to the poem while doing this Selection Review.]

1. **What is the speaker talking about? How does she use the pronouns “you” and “they” in this poem?** The speaker is talking about the childhood of African Americans. She uses “you” to speak of herself, her readers, and other African Americans who have had similar experiences. She uses “they” to refer to writers and reporters who only see the bad side of growing up poor.

2. **List some good and bad childhood memories described in this poem. Which does the speaker think were more important?** The speaker describes several bad childhood memories. These include having no inside toilet and watching her father sell his stock and give up on his dreams. Her parents fought a lot and her father drank. However, she also describes the joy of being close to her mother. She remembers the pleasure of a warm bath and the togetherness of community meetings. Her family was together, and she and her sister had “happy birthdays and very good Christmases.” The speaker thinks these good memories were more important than the bad ones. She says that she was “quite happy” despite her hard childhood.

3. **How do the speaker’s ideas change from the beginning to the end of the poem? Why does she complain about white people who write about African Americans?** At the beginning of the poem, the speaker says, “childhood remembrances are always a drag/ if you’re Black.” However, she goes on to mention a number of good childhood memories. She concludes, “all the while I was quite happy.” She thinks that white writers do not understand African Americans and their feelings. They write about how poor someone was in material things. However, they do not see the wealth of love found in the African-American community. This gives the African-American family a bad image. It encourages people to think in stereotyped ways.

4. **State the theme of this poem. Explain it in your own words.** The theme of the poem is, “Black love is Black wealth.” This means that even when African Americans are poor in material things, the love of family members and the community makes them strong. This love makes children feel secure and happy. It is a resource that prepares them to live successfully.
1. In stanzas 1-3, poetry is compared with three other types of things. List two of them. Explain why poetry is similar to each of the categories you list.

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

2. In your opinion, what does the poet want to make us think of when she calls poetry a “rainbow ride”? Why is the “rainbow ride” of poetry better than an ordinary road?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

continued...
3. The rhythm of stanzas 4 and 8 (“if i take a rainbow ride,” etc.) makes these stanzas stand out. Tell at least one way that these stanzas are different in rhythm from the others.

4. What is the main value of poetry that is brought out in this poem? (Think especially about the repetition of stanzas 4 and 8, and the line, “poems are what you do to me.”)
Literature Test #2  (open book)

ego-tripping

“for the masai warriors (of don miller),” page 9

1. List three images in this poem that make us think of Africa. Tell how the speaker in the poem feels about this tradition.

2. What does the poet want the future to be like? What part does the tradition of the past have to play in building this future?

continued...
3. List two of the images in this poem that give us a sense of movement. Explain how these images relate to the rest of the poem.

________________________________________

________________________________________

________________________________________

________________________________________

4. Do you think Giovanni’s dream of “a nation... where i could be the man” has been fulfilled? Why or why not?

________________________________________

________________________________________

________________________________________

________________________________________
1. Explain why the words “Free at last, free at last” were written on Dr. Martin Luther King’s headstone.

2. Why are these words on Dr. King’s headstone ironic?
3. What was Dr. King’s idea about how to fight racism called? How did it work? What is *ironic* about the way he died?

4. How did Nikki Giovanni feel about the idea of freedom in death? What kind of freedom was she aiming for?
Literature Test #4 (open book)

go-tripping

“a poem for carol (may she always wear red ribbons),” page 37

1. Identify this narrative poem’s setting and characters.

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

2. The three human characters in the poem have very different reactions to the kitten. Describe and explain these three different reactions.

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

continued...
3. Explain why Nikki probably did not want to name the kitten. What is ironic about what actually happened? (In other words, what difference do you notice between what Nikki says and what she does?)


4. Tell what the kitten in this poem might symbolize. Explain this symbolism.
Literature Test #5 (open book)

ego-tripping

“kidnap poem,” page 42

1. How does the speaker in this poem feel about the person she is addressing?

2. What is the mood of this poem? What are some of the things the speaker would like to do with her friend? List at least two possibilities.
3. The poet uses several nouns as verbs in this poem. What do most of these nouns have in common? What is the poet saying here about the power of poetry?

4. Explain the symbolism of “the red Black green,” and tell why the word Black is capitalized.
Literature Test #6 (open book)

ego-tripping

“nikki-rosa,” page 46

1. The speaker’s feelings about her childhood memories seem to change between the beginning and the end of this poem. Describe this change.

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

2. List at least two serious problems the speaker’s family faced. Also list at least two happy memories. Which were more important to her as she was growing up, the good experiences or the bad?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

continued...
3. The speaker uses the pronoun “they” to refer to people who write about the lives of famous African Americans. Why does she criticize these writers and reporters?

4. What is the theme of this poem? How is this theme demonstrated in the poem?