Chapter 4

Responding to a Responsibility: Self Actualization in Nikki Giovanni

“What I am trying to do . . . is live out the full measure of life”– Giovanni, in “The Inaugural Poem”.

With fifteen volumes of poetry and six books specifically for children, to her credit, Giovanni is one of the most popular poets of her times. She grew up having a love of life and for people, with loving parents and grandparents and a happy family to support her. She has received numerous awards including the Langston Hughes award where Giovanni is hailed as “a poet of the people” by the director of the award festival.

Her father, Jones Giovanni often called ‘Gus’ and her mother, Yolande lived a happy life with their two daughters, Gary and Nikki. Nikki was and named Yolande Cornelia Giovanni, Jr. Gary nicknamed her sister “Nikki Rosa” which again was shortened to “Nikki” by a few people as she grew up and that became her popular name. She loved her school and started writing early in her life. Students at her school were encouraged to write stories and poetry which was a joy for young Nikki. She became friends with her teacher, Sister Althea who encouraged her immensely and later on becomes a life long friend.
Judith Pinkerton Josephson, a biographer, comments in her book, *Nikki Giovanni: Poet of the People*:

The Giovanni family was poor, but Gus and Yolande stressed the importance of respect, love, education and independence. From the gospel hymns her family sang at church, Giovanni gained a strong sense of history and her own roots as an African American. (21)

Her famous poem, “Nikki Rosa” describes how happy her childhood was, in spite of their poverty. She strongly believes in the togetherness of families and the importance of the sharing of wealth and prosperity. Nikki imbibes her revolutionary ideals from her activist grandmother, Louvenia Watson, who encouraged her to take part in activities which demands privileges for African Americans. She also learnt from her grandmother the importance of fighting for her rights, of speaking the truth at all times and the importance of recognizing and respecting other people.

Giovanni completed her graduation with honors in 1964, from Fisk University, acquiring a degree in history. She immersed herself wholeheartedly in writing poetry. She also involved in political activities like the Black Arts Movement and took the initiative in organizing the first Black Arts Festival. She wanted to let the youth know and be proud of their African American roots. She always stressed on the strength of African
American pride, dignity and love and she always made it a point to convey these truths to the people.

Giovanni borrowed money from her family and friends and published her first book of poetry on her own, *Black Feeling, Black Talk* (1968). She wrote mainly for an African American audience and her most important themes were about their strength and their identity. She wrote both revolutionary and personal poems in the first volume.

The style of Giovanni’s poetry is different, right from the very beginning. Her poems have no punctuations or capitalizations which also expresses her deviation from the traditional way of writing poems. Her defiance and her own way of thinking are reflected in her poetry, right from the first volume. She published *Black Judgement* (1969) which delegates African American dignity and celebrates some special people.

The year 1969 is important in the life of Giovanni, as she becomes the mother of Thomas who is born on August 31, 1969. She does not reveal who the father is, as she finds this unnecessary and unimportant in her son’s life, defying convention once again in a way that is typical of her. She began to teach in order to support herself and her son. Niktom Ltd., a communications company was formed in 1970 and in the same year, Broadside Press published *Re: Creation*. This volume is different from her earlier volumes as it contains important topics like love, the strength of
women, self confidence and thoughts about children. It is clear that her life, at this point, centered on her son, affectionately called Tommy.

In a book titled *Gemini: An Extended Autobiographical Statement on My First Twenty-Five Years of Being A Black Poet* (1971), Giovanni publishes autobiographical essays. She brings out a book of poetry for children, *Spin a Soft Black Song* (1971), which contains themes that children enjoy. In the same year, the twenty eight year old Giovanni has an opportunity to meet the forty eight year old James Baldwin, one of the most famous African American writers of the 1950s. Both writers share the common platform of writing from personal experiences. When they meet, they talk about African American writings and the importance of inspiring the younger generation with relevant topics through their works.

Meanwhile, there is an emphatic change in the life of the young poet. From an angry, revolutionary poet, Giovanni becomes a wiser poet, who empathizes with other people by reaching out to them and loving them, in her own way. This change is evident in her book of poetry named *My House* (1972). In the same year, Giovanni, along with Paula Giddings, an editor from Howard University Press, has a conversation with Margaret Walker, an older African American poet, teacher and writer. The biographer Josephson comments: “The two writers discussed racial division, unequal opportunities for black and white people, children, discipline and violence” (*Poet* 58). Giovanni is inspired by the older poet,
Margaret Walker and is thrilled when the older poet appreciates her poetry. Giovanni’s popularity as a poet increases on a daily basis. She reads her poetry to audiences, both young and old, and people always cheer their response and applaud her wholeheartedly.

Giovanni is named “Woman of the Year” by the Ladies Home Journal magazine, at the age of thirty. Another children’s book, Ego Tripping and Other Poems for Young People (1973), is published which encourages young children to be proud of themselves and their unique qualities. The Women and the Men (1975) is another collection of both old and new poems.

Cotton Candy on a Rainy Day (1978) is a collection of poems about the struggles faced by African Americans, especially the women folk. She writes about the homeless people who suffer to live a life. She dedicates this volume to her father, Gus Giovanni who was a survivor and one who had to struggle and work hard to give his family a decent life. The thirty five year old poet and her nine year old son move from New York, back to her parent’s home in Cincinnati, to be with her ailing father. The move takes her away from the publishing world and her writing contacts but her parents offer her support and a secure home to raise her young son. Another volume of poetry for children, Vacation Time (1979) was written as Giovanni believed that the natural abilities of children to express themselves ought to be nurtured. The death of her father soon after is very
painful for the poet but she manages to live through it and continues to live with her mother.

In *Those Who Ride the Night Winds* (1983), Giovanni uses a new poetic form with groups of words linked together, separated by a series of three dots so that each verse looked like paragraphs. In this volume, the poet pays rich tribute to mothers, women, friends and influential African Americans like Lorraine Hansberry and Rosa Parks who created history. The poet imbibes the lives of people around her and notes her pride in the courage of her fellow African Americans. Biographer Josephson comments: “She wants ordinary people to love her poetry. That is why the little things in life – sights, feelings, thoughts, sounds - fall under her writer’s microscope” (*Poet* 74). Her ability to note the insignificant details and making it significant, of relating to people irrespective of their age make her a truly popular voice. Her poetry readings are famous; her voice is unique and is recognized by the people. She is loved for her distinctive voice in the world of poetry.

In 1987, Giovanni becomes a visiting professor at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, popularly known as Virginia Tech. She moves to Virginia while her mother goes to live with the poet’s sister, Gary. In a book titled *Sacred Cows...And Other Edibles* (1988), the poet talks passionately about the rights of women and the continuous struggle of African Americans. She always likes to connect her work to her
readers. She is happy when she succeeds in making the connection between art and people. She comments on her writing, in the book: “I do try to be a good writer. I believe that I bring my best when I try to share … I love it when people say they have read my poetry … just thank them … they took the time to be involved in my effort … to explore with me … to extend themselves to me as I have extended myself to them. It’s lonely. Writing … So is life. We are less lonely when we connect. Art is a connection. I like being a link. I hope the chain will hold” (58). The poet loves her profession and is glad that she is able to make some difference in the life of people around her. She is willing to share her experiences with her readers. She loves her teaching profession and she constantly urges her students to explore and experience their own life, at their own pace and encourages them to share it with her. She dares them to take risks in life. In an interview with the biographer Josephson, she says: “I have learned that I’m a people person – I enjoy the interaction. I don’t need five weeks of silence (to create)” (Poet 82). She encourages students to write about what they feel and to trust their instincts. She instills in them the courage to be truthful.

Josephson quotes the poet’s interview with Virginia Fowler: “You try as a writer to put yourself into the other person’s position …,” says Giovanni. “Experience is important, but empathy is the key” (83).
As a person, Giovanni always valued the opinion of older people. She related well with her own grandparents and with other old people. Through her department at Virginia Tech, Giovanni created the opportunity to teach at a writer’s workshop in a retirement center called “Warm Hearth”. The old people residing there were encouraged to write stories and poems. Giovanni helped them to publish their articles in a book entitled **Appalachian Elders: A Warm Hearth Sampler** (1992). She also published stories written by twenty seven people, stories of their respective grandmothers, in a book entitled **Grandmothers: Poems, Reminiscences and Short Stories About the Keepers of Our Tradition** (1994), a book which includes the story of her own grandmother too. In the same year, Giovanni enjoyed a moment of great personal pride when her son Tommy, graduated with high honors. She brought out a book for grandfathers named **Grandfathers: Reminiscences, Poems, Recipes, and the Photos of the Keepers of our Tradition** (1999).

In 1995, Giovanni faced lung cancer and had to undergo surgery. During her convalescence, she wrote poetry which included a wide range of topics. Josephson writes of this time: “Giovanni’s poetry continues to cover a wide range of topics – politics, the environment, current events, and common feelings – mixed with splashes of fantasy, whimsy, and humor” (*Poet* 92). In a personal interview with the biographer, Giovanni
reveals herself to be an environmentalist who cares for nature and is angry at the destroyers of nature:

   Human beings should be better stewards of the earth. If we want to stay alive, we have to learn to live with other living things...Human beings cannot continue to have unlimited access to the wilderness, because we are afraid. Our response to that fear has been to kill the wilderness. Our response should be to wall ourselves in, because we’re the ones who are having the problem (94).

   Along with this responsibility towards nature, Giovanni also revels in her responsibility as a mother. Josephson writes about a historic event in her personal life:

   Thomas had made his mother proud when he attended the Million Man March held in October 1995. Thousands of African American men and boys met in the nation’s capital for a day of speeches about respecting women, taking care of families, and rejecting violence. Nikki Giovanni considers that march ‘one of the outstanding events of our century, one that changed how black men looked at themselves’ (96).

   Giovanni wrote poems for special occasions also. One such poem, “But Since You Finally Asked (A Poem Commemorating the 10th...
Anniversary of the Slave Memorial at Mount Vernon), deserves special mention because here the poet reinstates her belief and pride in her people, the African Americans. She glorifies in the courage, strength, pride and dignity of her ancestors. She applauds the determination and the endurance of her forefathers and renews the faith of her people in God. She writes in a style of her own, placing three dots in between lines as is seen in the following lines:

we’ve given…Our song to God, Our strength to the Earth…Our unfailing belief in forgiveness…I know what I like about us…is that we let no one turn us around…not then…not now…we plant our feet…on higher ground…I like who we were…and who we are…and since someone has asked…let me say: I am proud to be a Black American…I am proud that my people labored honestly with forbearance and dignity…I am proud that we believe…as no other people do…that we are all equal in His sight…We didn’t write a constitution…we live one…We didn’t say “We are the People”…we are one. (15-26)  

These lines clearly indicate her pride and immense faith in the African American community. She feels that her people have achieved equality and freedom in their country because of their determination and quiet strength. Her people are a group of self actualizers, who progress purposefully ahead to achieve their self imposed goal of attaining dignity
and freedom which is their individual right. They are self actualizers as they believe in their own strength as individuals and as a community at large and continue to prove themselves worthy of it. Giovanni revels in her joy of being an African American, being part of a community that, over the years, lives according to its strength and determination.

The legacy of African American pride and dignity is highlighted in another poem named “Stardate Number 18628.190”, which was written for the Twenty Fifth Anniversary Issue of the Essence Magazine in May 1995. The poet celebrates the African American way of life, talks about domestic images like the ‘rocking chair’, the ‘summer quilt’ made to keep them warm and the songs they sing to keep their spirits going. It is these images that keep their community together. She eulogizes the history of the African American people in a lofty manner in the following lines:

This is not a poem . . . No . . . it is a celebration of the road we have traveled . . . It is a prayer . . . for the roads yet to come . . .
This is an explosion . . . The original Big Bang…that makes the world a hopeful…loving place
This is the Black woman . . . in all our trouble and glory . . . in all our past history and future forbearance . . . in all that ever made love a possibility. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
This is about us . . .
. . .
This is about us . . . Celebrating ourselves . . . And a well deserved honor it is . . . Light the candles, Essence . . . This is a rocket . . . Let’s ride. (39-45, 62-64)

Giovanni heads the procession of the celebration of her own people for she believes that this recognition is long due and hence she takes the lead and applauds her people in the present moment.


Love Poems (1997), a book of poems about the different facets of life is dedicated to Tupac Shakur, a young rap artist who was murdered. In the dedication of the book, Tupac Shakur is referred to as one “whose name will echo through all the winds whose spirit will flower and who like Emmett Till and Malcolm X will be remembered by his people for the great man he could have become and most especially for the beautiful boy that he was”(5). To honor his memory, Giovanni has the words ‘thug life’ tattooed on her left hand, the words which Shakur had tattooed on his chest.

Blues: For All the Changes (1999), is Giovanni’s environmental work, about which it is written: “the rhythm of Giovanni’s book is the blues, but her poems are about change – changes in the world and in Nikki Giovanni’s life”. (Poet108). Recovering from lung cancer, she spends her time watching a family of robins which later features in a
Responding to a Responsibility

In 1999, New York City celebrated Giovanni’s thirty years of being a poet. Queen Latifah, actor and rap artist helped in the celebrations and the poetry of Giovanni was appreciated and applauded by the public once again. Music has been an integral part of the poet’s life as is evident in her volumes of poetry and also from the titles of books and poems throughout her poetic career. She has written about African drums, dancing and music and she takes pride in the musical quality of her race. Her poetry is simple and true and she has a universal appeal to all her readers irrespective of class, creed, race, age or gender. Her oral renderings of poetry to the
accompaniment of gospel music, blues, jazz and the rhythms of tap dancing, has made her a popular and unique poet, par excellence.

Quilting the Black-Eyed Pea (2002) continues in highlighting the concerns of the poet and her pride in the strength of her own people. This collection has an unusual mix of highly politic and intensely personal poems about the issues that she personally believes to be true. Her popularity increases as she is truthful to the core of her being and as usual, states boldly what she believes in. She lashes out against the cruelties of terrorism and globalization but at the same time is gentle towards the weak and the oppressed. She succeeds in blending the old and the new. She urges her people to go forward in life, true to their convictions. Her notion of pride in being an African American continues to ring throughout this volume also. She is a true poet who excels in her uniqueness even in her sixties.

The growth of the self actualization of the poet Giovanni can be analyzed through her poems. Her poems are known for their simple language and lofty ideas, taken from ordinary, everyday experiences. She writes mostly from own experiences but she manages to reach out to all her readers, to people regardless of race and gender. A true American to the core, she upholds her African American heritage and strives to revel in its uniqueness. She insists her African American folk to take pride in their unique traits and asks them to celebrate their qualities. She emerges as a
spokesperson of her people and a champion of truth. She is a popular, well-
loved poet whose distinctive voice is known everywhere.

Her early poetry comprises of her activities as a political activist. She feels outraged at the tribulations her people have to face. She fights at the white atrocity against her people. She urges her people to fight for their rights. She insists that the African Americans should take pride in their unique traits as individuals who are courageous and as a people who are united in love and companionship. She upholds the persistence and perseverance of her people and insists that they work hard to remove all racial prejudice and inequality.

**BF BT**, Giovanni’s first volume, brings out the revolutionary in her. She triumphs in the uniqueness of her people and champions their cause. She insists that ‘Blackness’ ought to be celebrated instead of being criticized. She insists that African American women should talk of their rights and not submit to the power of their men. She is seen to be conscious of women rights too. She believes in herself and in her ability to write poems, the evidence of which is the success of the first volume. **BJ** is published with the help of the sales of the first book. These poems search for a female identity as well as an African American one. She is on her journey of being a successful African American poet of the times, of being a self actualized woman poet in her own right. The poems in the first three volumes of her poetry cater to her social needs which are
political and revolutionary as she caters to the needs of her people at the time. She associates with the African American people in their fight for their rights and she vouches for their women too in their struggle against white oppression and male domination. She urges the women to fight against the doubly colonized situation they are in. She is political in her convictions and she revolutionizes her life and the life of those connected to her. She speaks boldly on what she considers right. She is hailed as a truthful person.

Early in her life, Giovanni believes in going against tradition and insisted on living her own life. She urges the African American community to celebrate their unique culture rather than imitate the white people.

Giovanni gives priority to her African American community, to men and women who matter, right from the very first poem of her first volume. In the first poem “Detroit Conference of Unity & Art (for HRB)”, dedicated to Rap Brown, a Black leader, she writes of the importance of revolution and their being together as a strong community:

We talked about
Black leaders
And Black Love

We talked about
Women
And Black men

... But the most

Valid of them

All was that

Rap chose me. (6-11, 16-19)

Love is important to the poet and to the African Americans. Her initial activity in the revolutionary movement is her way of fighting for the rights of her people. She is a champion of the cause for the African Americans. Her friend and critic, Virginia Fowler, in her book on the poet, named Nikki Giovanni (1992) comments on this poem:

Detroit Conference makes an important philosophical statement about the poet’s hierarchy of values. It unhesitatingly asserts the precedence of the individual over ideology, one of the most consistent and important themes throughout Giovanni’s work (28).

This individual preference of the poet makes her a poet of the people, right from the start of her career till her recent poetry. She prefers to be personal to the core. She abandons the norms of the society which focuses on political issues only, for though she has revolutionary and social concerns about her people, she is individualistic at first and she genuinely cares for her fellow people.
Giovanni highlights her happy childhood in spite of segregation and poverty. She writes that the white folk would never understand the happiness shared by her people despite the hardships and man-made restrictions which hinder them in their daily life. She insists that white folk misunderstood the Black folk and they would never realize the togetherness and happiness of the Black families. In a famous poem entitled “Nikki Rosa”, she focuses on the love and happiness of growing up in the joy of a family, a typical African American home, in spite of the poverty and unhappy instances of segregation and personal issues faced by them. She writes:

And though you are poor it isn’t poverty that concerns you
and though they fought a lot
it isn’t your father’s drinking that makes any difference
but only that everybody is together and you
and your sister have happy birthdays and very good Christmasses
and I really hope no white person ever has cause
to write about my hard childhood
and never understand that
all the while I was quite happy. (20-33)
The poet insists that prevailing poverty does not diminish the love and togetherness of the African American people. The warmth of community and the joy of relationships within the family and the community at large make their society rich in their uniqueness, despite the hardships and cruelty of the outside world. Instead of harboring hate, it is this love that is their wealth and the poet urges her people to use it. The words, “Black love is Black wealth” in this poem, is one of the most quoted lines of the poet. Right from the start of her career and as a woman poet, Giovanni believed in the strength of this wealth and relies on it profusely. She upholds the notion that it is this wealth of love that showers the necessary courage and determination that her people need to move forward in life. She is fierce in her love and pride of her community of African Americans.

Giovanni fights for her people and for the cause of the women folk. She finds it unbearable to comprehend the position of black women who have to succumb to the men in their race. The woman speaker in the poem, “Woman Poem” converses about her life: “i wish i knew how it would feel / to be free” (10, 11). To be free is what she longs for, but she is tied down by her numerous duties. The poet insists that African American men know only how to evaluate the duties of their women folk rather than recognizing them as whole individuals, capable of loving and caring for others. The poet is outraged by this attitude of the men folk. Happiness is unattainable for the women folk at this stage of life and the
poet is determined to find it for them. She refuses to be controlled by the men of her race. Ultimately, Giovanni’s refusal to be controlled by African American men and the leaders of the revolution bring to light her pride in her self and in her identity as a ‘Black’, female poet. She insists in living her life as she chooses and firmly denies going according to the rules laid down by the revolutionaries.

In “My Poem”, Giovanni declares her identity as a woman poet. She states:

i am 25 years old
black female poet
wrote a poem asking
nigger can you kill
if they kill me
it won’t stop
the revolution. (1-7)

This poem asserts her female identity and her freedom of choice. She says that the revolution will go on with or without her participation. But she has other works to do. She chooses to work for the rights of women. So she pursues her career and writes about what she wants. She fiercely attacks the African American men who have subordinated their women folk. She prefers the term ‘Black’ to refer to her people. She hates the subordination of her people and lashes out against it. She writes in
**Gemini:** “They have made Black women the new Jew while they remain the same old niggers” (111). The poet insists that she will never submit to such atrocities nor will she allow other women to be so too. She affirms that she will not be ‘the new Jew’, thus firmly asserting her women rights, adhering to speak the absolute truth always. This also stands with her bold decision later on in her life, of being a single mother to her son, Tommy and not naming the father.

In the foreword to the volume, *My House*, the critic, Ida Lewis, writes of Giovanni’s poems and themes: “A most interesting aspect of her work is the poet’s belief in individualism at a time when the trend in the Black community is away from the individual and toward the mass. She has been reproached for her individualistic attitudes by her critics, who have attempted to use this attribute to stamp her as irrelevant. But Nikki Giovanni’s greatness is not derived from following leaders, nor has she ever accepted the burden of carrying the revolution. Her struggle is a personal search for individual values in the Black community (xiii). Giovanni believes and applauds herself in being an African American woman and a poet. In *My House*, she clearly indicates that this is her life, her house and that she would do whatever she chooses to do with it, according to her own rules. She is bold in her convictions and her worth as an individual woman, African American poet and single mother is constantly on the rise and she is loved all the more because of it.
The title poem, “My House”, is Giovanni’s declaration of her rights as the owner of her own house and life. Here she depicts the picture of an ordinary, domestic woman busy with her household chores. But the difference comes in when the poet speaker declares that the house is her own and whatever she does there or talks about will be according to her own wish. This is clear in the lines:

i mean it’s my house
and i want to fry pork chops
and bake sweet potatoes
and call them yams
cause i run the kitchen
and i can stand the heat. (12-17)

Thus Giovanni, expresses her right to do everything according to her own desire.

The idea of the rooms inside and the rooms outside into which the volume, My House is divided is used as a metaphor in this title poem:

and my windows might be dirty
but it’s my house
and if i can’t see out sometimes
they can’t see in either. (26-29)

This means that if the outside world views the poet in a different manner, that is, if they do not understand the poet and her convictions,
neither can she understand the diverse ways of the outside world. The emphasis lies in the conviction that the poet’s life is her own; therefore, she need not bother about any criticism. This is a supreme call to her fellow female African Americans to ignore the white world and the men who oppress them and live a life of their own. She takes charge of her own self and her actions defy conventions and submit only to her own will.

As Virginia Fowler correctly puts it:

> On one level a love poem, “My House” is also a personal and artistic declaration or credo, which brings together many of the important themes and images we have seen throughout the volume, the difficulty of communication, the importance of old people, the idea that human connection and human love constitute the “real revolution”, the poet’s insistence on her right to see things from her own perspective, and, perhaps most important, her right to name and to define her world through her language (NG 77).

Thus My House is a declaration by the poet that she will live a life of her own, following her own dictates and neither gender nor race nor rules can suppress her any longer. A truly feminist perspective is found in this poem that echoes in the mind of the poet. Fowler contends that Giovanni “insists that gender cannot be used as a tool of oppression or trivialization once she decides to define the world as “my house”. In her
house, moreover human connection is absolutely central, whether it takes the form of making a quilt to keep the other person warm, or of reaching out with a smile to another person, human connection is love, is the revolution. In My House, Giovanni also asserts her freedom and authority as rights to be claimed, not privileges to be granted. As a black woman in a white world and as a black woman poet in a male world, she transforms race and gender into her own sources of power; by embracing them, she converts them from tools of oppression in the hands of others into instruments of liberation in her own”(NG 77-78). Her strength as a woman is her power and she dwells on it, in all circumstances of her life.

Giovanni’s search for her identity in a community of African American women is pursued relentlessly in WM. She uses the medium of poetry to give voice to her innermost feelings. She strives to secure a foothold in the poetic world by truthfully admitting her desire to be individualistic and to be her own self. She gives the message of complete freedom from bondage to enjoy the precious life that she has. She brings in the metaphor of a spider spinning a web from its own body as parallel to a poet spinning a poem around the reader. This is seen in the poem, “Africa”:

i am a teller of tales

a dream of dreams

shall i spin a poem around you. (1-3)
She goes on to invoke in her readers the freedom attained when every individual accepts her own inner potential. She says:

we must believe in each other’s dreams
i’m told and i dream
of me accepting you and you accepting yourself

and i dream of black men and women walking together side by side into a new world described by love and bounded by difference for nothing is the same except oppression and shame may i spin a poem around you come let’s step into my web and dream of freedom together. (34-36, 41-47)

Giovanni believes that when every woman decides to accept her own self and tries to create her own individuality, the long awaited personal freedom will be attained. She also communicates to her readers to make full use of one’s capabilities. She finds happiness in doing the ordinary things of life. She is proud to be a natural woman doing things that all women do. In this ordinariness, she finds her strength. She writes in “Revolutionary Dreams”: that if i dreamed natural dreams of being a natural
woman doing what a woman
does when she’s natural

i would have a revolution. (12-16)

She believes that being a revolutionary means being natural, being able to make full use of one’s own potential. Her shift from being a mere revolutionary to a personal poet is clearly highlighted and her natural qualities as a woman aids her in her life.

The quintessence of femininity is quite obvious in her famous poem, “Ego Tripping” where a woman is identified as the creator of the world. Right from the beginning of the poem, the female speaker refers to her omnipotence. She identifies herself as a woman who is beautiful and compares herself to “a gazelle so swift / so swift you can’t catch me” (21-22). She attributes to herself all the magnificence of the universe and declares towards the end of the poem:

I am so perfect so divine so ethereal so surreal
I cannot be comprehended
except by my permission
I mean . . . I . . . can fly
like a bird in the sky. (47-51)

She states that no one can understand her without her permission which is true of women, who can create for themselves their own identity by their own inner strength. This is true of the institution of motherhood
and the ability of women to live according to their own potential. The imagery of the bird flying in the vast sky clearly expresses the freedom that women can have in the vast expanse of the world they live in. Amidst the supremacy of men and the distinction of race, when women try to live their own lives, enjoying their personal freedom and deciding their future, their freedom can find no limits. Hence through these lines, Giovanni beckons all women, especially African American women, to overcome all boundaries of gender and race and live a life of freedom that pleases. Hence the revolutionary, feminist Giovanni is seen at her best in this poem.

Giovanni takes her art of writing poems seriously. She communicates her ideas about writing poems. The simple, artistic view of her craft is seen in the poem “Poetry” where she likens her skill of creating poems to different things:

- poetry is motion graceful
- as a fawn
- gentle as a teardrop
- strong like the eye
- finding peace in a crowded room
- we poets tend to think
- our words are golden
- though emotion speaks too
- loudly to be defined
by silence

... a poem is pure energy horizontally contained between the mind of the poet and the ear of the reader if it does not sing discard the ear for poetry is song. (1-10, 27-32)

Giovanni believes that poetry is the medium through which she can convey her feelings. She uses female imagery like quilting and spinning and converts them into metaphors for women. She revels in the ordinariness of everyday chores and takes pride in it. She communicates what she experiences through her poem and she expects her readers to learn from her. Her emotions and experiences are conveyed in a style uniquely her own. She does not use capital letters or punctuations. She experiments with the style of her poems in further volumes too. Her poetry is graceful and emotional and truthful, reflecting the individuality of the poet who writes them.

The readers see a different Giovanni in her volume, Cotton Candy. The idea of the title is based on an incident she experiences as she accompanies her nephew Chris to the zoo. The salesperson refuses to sell her cotton candy owing to the fact that it is raining and the candy would
melt. Giovanni is indignant that she cannot eat cotton candy even when she is ready to pay for it, only because it is raining. The incident stays with her and she writes about it. As a mature poet, Giovanni talks about maturing and aging and the loneliness it brings. She is not filled with self pity; rather she is happy to live her present life, but is curious about life and its immense possibilities. Paula Giddings, the famous critic and a friend of the poet, in her introduction to this volume comments:

*Cotton Candy* is the private moments: of coming to terms with oneself-of living with oneself. Taken in the context of Nikki’s work it completes the circle: of dealing with society, others and finally oneself (16).

She goes on to quote Giovanni’s words to the youngsters:

And while I don’t expect you to save the world, I do think it’s not asking too much for you to love those with whom you sleep, share the happiness of those whom you call friend, encourage those among you who are visionary and remove from your life those who offer you depression, despair and disrespect (17).

She sums up: “Life to Nikki will never be what we accomplish but what we tried” (17). A friend’s comments on Giovanni, marks her enthusiasm for life and the thrill it presents on exploring the secrets.

Giovanni is bent upon going forward in her life, living life, according to
her own rules. This volume sincerely searches for the realities and responsibilities that life brings, along with the insecurities and inevitable changes which have to be faced. She recalls her outing with her nephew Chris, on a rainy day, when she is refused cotton candy by the seller.

Virginia Fowler comments about this incident:

[Giovanni] was prepared to spend her money to buy something that was in fact available, and she could not believe that she was to be prohibited from enjoying as much of it because it would not last, because it would melt before she was able to consume it. The whole episode stayed in her mind, she says, because it so vividly dramatized the belief held by many people that one should not invest in an experience that will be ephemeral or that one will not actually have time to complete. To her, cotton candy became an apt metaphor for life itself, which one invests in and strives to make better despite the inevitability of change and ultimately, death (NG 88).

Giovanni faces the realities of life but she progresses forward to live her full life despite the adverse circumstances of the seventies. She comments on the reasoning of psychologists, politicians and social workers about the decade which would be known for ‘loneliness’, and she compares it to cotton candy:
But since it is life it is
Cotton Candy
on a rainy day
The sweet soft essence
of possibility
Never quite maturing

I have prided myself
On being in the great tradition
albeit circus
That the show must go on. (29-38)

Changes are inevitable in life and one must be prepared to face it and change one self accordingly. She asserts that life has its true worth when one tries to accomplish what goals one reaches for and she is glad to live and try in her life. She ends her poem:

I am cotton candy on a rainy day
the unrealized dream of an idea unborn

I share with the painters the desire
To put a three-dimensional picture
On a one-dimensional surface. (65-69)
Fowler aptly comments:

“Cotton Candy on a Rainy Day” thus refuses to view human mutability or human mortality as inhibitive of meaningful action; indeed as Giovanni frequently states when she reads the poem, those conditions of human life – especially mortality – constitute a kind of imperative that we do as best we can with the short amount of time we have (NG 91).

Giving the best that she can in her life best explains Giovanni.

Self esteem needs are to be fulfilled and she fulfills this factor as she comes to terms with herself and with others. She acknowledges the fact that life is short, however, one realizes that one must make full use of one’s potential and enjoy life as much as possible. For her, cotton candy represents life, for death may come unexpectedly but she wants to strive and make life better and she also wants to invest in it.

The poet empathizes with other people, especially the African Americans. The esteem needs of other people, especially women, are being fulfilled. Cotton Candy marks the beginning of Giovanni’s conscious awareness of women and women issues. She grows to become a woman activist, championing the cause of women. She is more conscious of the limitations and oppression that women have to face in a sexist and racist world. She knows the real condition of women and urges them to fight for
Empathizing with others is a trait which is inherent in the poet. In the poem, named after her father, “Gus”, she empathizes with her father and other African American men, wherein she realizes that her father and men of his generation had only few choices in life because of the color of their skin. She writes explicitly:

The problem with the Life game
For unprotected players
Is not what you don’t have
But what you can’t give
Though ultimately there is the understanding
That even nothing is something
As long as you are there
To give the nothing personally. (73-80)

She acknowledges the role of her father and is thankful that he was available for her and her son, “And his legs are still / quite exceptional /
For a Grandfather” (83-85). She insists that African American men ought to be there for their family and take care of them. As a woman, she wants other people, like herself, to resist and enforce her stand as a person, in a racist and sexist culture. She has great esteem for the other people in her
life. She knows that “There are few choices in life / That are clear” (61-62) but she still wants to have authority and control over her decisions in life.

In the poem, “Choices”, she makes this clear:

if i can’t do
what i want to do
then my job is to not
do what i don’t want
to do
it’s not the same thing
but it’s the best i can
do

if i can’t have
what i want then
my job is to want
what i’ve got
and be satisfied
that at least there
is something more
to want. (1-16)

She wants to go ahead in life with her choices, live by it and be content. To strive to do what she wants, is the motto in Giovanni’s life and she pursues her goal relentlessly. She loves people and her relationships
with them, but her choices in life are her own. She is satisfied in being an independent person, living her life to the fullest, and acting upon her own choices. A more self actualizing aspirant is yet to be seen.

The awakening of gender consciousness and women issues in Giovanni are evident in her poem “Woman”. Here the woman portrayed, tries to be dependent on a man but he refuses to provide any kind of support to her. She tries to be different but he does not change or support her. The woman tries to be a ‘blade of grass’, ‘a robin’, a spider’s ‘web’, or a ‘book’ but the man does not agree to be the ‘dandelion’, the ‘tree’, the ‘corner’ or the ‘reader’ of the book respectively (1-17). When the man fails in this respect, the woman decides to preserve her own identity regardless of the co-operation of men. She boldly declares her independent decision:

she decided to become

a woman

and though he still refused
to be a man

she decided it was all

right. (18-23)

Woman rights at its supreme best are seen here. Women finally decide and declare to conquer their dependence and live their own, independent lives, looking into themselves for their survival and the
strength to go on. Women strongly assert themselves and decide to move forward to build their own identities, regardless of the choices of men.

Giovanni looks into the relationship of African American men and women too. She expounds this issue in the poem, “Their Fathers” where she is angry at the African American men, who do not reciprocate any concern for their women who constantly love and take care of them. Race and gender intersect in the lines:

someone said the only emotion
black men show
is rage or anger
which is only partly true
the only rage and anger
they show are to those
who would want to love them
and bear their children
and with them walk into the future
why do we
who have offered expectation
have to absorb pain

... it’s only natural
that bitterness rests within
my spirit. (86-97, 107-109)
She is enraged at the African American men who show their anger and resentment at their women instead of the white oppressors. She hails her community to stand up and fight as a people because “black americans stand to prove / a people can be a peninsula / we are extended phallic like in an ocean / of whiteness” (72-75). She confirms the strength and unity of the African Americans and urges her people to be aware of it.

As an African American woman poet, Giovanni uses her poems as a medium for writing her convictions and she feels that she has her release of emotions and convictions through them. In the poem, “Boxes”, she declares:

i would not reject
my strength
though its source
is not choice
but responsibility
. . .

something within demands
action
or words
if action is not possible
. . .
i write because
i have to. (13-17, 20-23, 37-38)
The poet considers it her responsibility to write and through it, she conveys what she feels is right and true. Her convictions and her honesty are seen in her words.

Giovanni finally confronts the issues women writers have to face, in the poem “A Poem off Center” which begins by dealing with the domestic responsibilities that hinder a woman from writing. These responsibilities ‘decimate’ the poems that ought to be written. Not only does she have to finish her domestic duties, but when she writes, she also has to take into consideration the criteria of the ‘writing establishment’ which is mostly male dominated. For them, women’s poetry is unacceptable. The poet compares this situation of the woman writers to that of the Black people in a white society:

i feel     i think     sorry for the women
they have no place to go
it’s the same old story blacks

hear all the time
...
it’s a little off center
this life we’re leading
maybe i shouldn’t feel sorry
for myself
but the more i understand women
the more i do. (1-34, 43-48)

This conclusion is one of the strongest statements that the poet makes on the life of the African American women of her times. She is furious at the life these women lead and she lashes at the oppressors through her words.

Fowler comments on the title of the poem and says that the words “reinforce[s] the connections Giovanni is drawing between gender and writing; both women’s lives and women’s poems are “off center”, that is, have been marginalized by men” (NG 104). She resists being subjugated by men and says so boldly and truthfully, thus being a feminist in her own right. She urges her fellow African American women to be so too, strong in their independence and bold in their convictions. Moreover, she urges them to be independent and creative in their own right. She compels them to join her in attaining the goals in life rather than crying over the hurdles that have to be faced. This striving to reach for the ideal is a significant step towards self actualization. She empathizes with the women folk of her race in a genuine way. She revels in the reality of being a woman, able to fend for herself, as she states in “Space”: “i too am an astronaut / having applied for my own space” (3-4). At the same time, she has high esteem for her fellow women and cares for their welfare too. Her esteem towards women of her own kind is depicted by her urge to assist women in using
their women strength to its full potential. And she is dearly loved by her readers for her firm stand.

The bold, vivacious poet is an example to others by living her life in the way she decides. Her attitudes and style of writing poems change drastically in *Night Winds*. She brings in a new poetic form which explicitly demonstrates a new attitude in her process of writing poems. They are written in a lineless form with gaps of three dots in between. A strategic change in approach signifies her new attitude which challenges old traditional forms. She dares to be innovative in her writing style, opposing traditional norms, just like the night riders, who dare to travel dangerously along with the dark and dangerous night winds.

Giovanni applauds the night riders who travel daringly. She prefers to travel with them rather than with the day trippers. The ‘riders’ of the night are more daring than the day ‘trippers’ as they have to travel the dark nights, overcoming all the unknown obstacles lurking in the darkness of the night. And she applauds their bravery.

The comments of Virginia Fowler on this volume aptly summarize Giovanni’s goal of self actualization. She writes: “[In] *Those Who Ride the Night Winds*, Giovanni began to center her poetry on human efforts to reach the ideal rather than on the gap between the ideal and the real”. (NG 105)
Giovanni is proud of the efforts of the adventurous people— who dared to be different and determined in their life. Her dedication to the volume makes this clear:

This book is dedicated to the courage and fortitude of those who ride the night winds— who are the day trippers and midnight cowboys— who in sonic solitude or the hazy hell of habit know— that for all the devils and gods— for all the illnesses and drugs to cure them— Life is a marvelous, transitory adventure— and are determined to push us into the next century, galaxy— possibility. (6)

In her preface, the poet adds:

But change . . . both gradual . . . and violent . . . is a necessary ingredient . . . with Life . . . Art. . . and by necessity . . . artists . . . are on the cutting edge . . . of change . . . The very fact . . . that something has been done . . . over and over again . . . is one reason . . . to change . . .

Everything . . . must change . . .

. . .

Though people say . . . they cannot change . . . change we do . . . in our abilities . . . desires . . . understanding

. . .

While there is surely much . . . to be done . . . some change has rent . . . its ways . . . I changed
. . . I chart the night winds . . . glide with me . . . I am the walrus

. . . the time has come . . . to speak of many things. (7, 8)

The poet’s invitation to her readers to ‘glide’ with her as she joins
the daring ‘night riders’ and her mention of the inevitability of change and
of the time which has arrived when ‘many things’ need to be said, all
indicate her bold decision to step forward in her life, move towards the
goal she wants to achieve, trusting in her inner strength. In this volume, she
applauds exemplary people like Lorraine Hansberry, John Lennon, Charles
White and Robert F. Kennedy. Using her new found freedom of language,
Giovanni speaks directly to her readers, asking them to ride with her and
the night winds, exploring the dangers and adventures of the night and at
the same time, find life exciting and filled with pleasure.

In the first poem of the volume, “Lorraine Hansberry: An Emotional
View”, the poet confesses about the dangers lurking on them for writing
what is true. Her profession as a poet or writer, that is, of making books, is
compared to the book makers, the gamblers. The writers also are gamblers
who write what they feel are true and are not sure of the response of the
readers. The poet writes:

If you want to share . . . a vision . . . or tell the truth . . . you pick
up . . . your pen . . . And take your chances . . . It is life . . . open-
ended . . . and once the play has begun . . . the book made . . .
time . . . is the only judge. (37-39, 42-43)

The only thing that writers can be confident of is that they are honest to themselves when they write. They do not think of the outcome but they are true, for they obey their own dictates, their own conscience and this thought allows them to continue writing. All artists are in the same category as the writer, which prompts Giovanni to say:

But the writer . . . the painter . . . the sculptor . . . the creator . . . those who work . . . with both the mind . . . and the heart of mankind . . . have no reason . . . to be hopeful . . . We have . . . in fact . . . no right to write the happy ending . . . or the love poem . . . no reason . . . to sculpt David . . . or paint . . . like Charles White . . . We who have seen . . . all sides of the coin . . . the front . . . the back . . . and the ribbed edge . . . know what the ending . . . will surely be . . . Yet we speak . . . to and of . . . courage . . . love . . . hope . . . something better . . . in mankind . . . when we are perfectly honest . . . with ourselves . . . we cannot justify . . . our faith . . . Yet faith we do not have . . . and continue to share. (18-29)

Not knowing what the future holds for them, artists continue their honest work, time being their only judge. Giovanni realizes that “To be Black . . . in America . . . is to not at all understand . . . time” (50-51, 55-56). She is always aware of the fact that African Americans
were always the sufferers under the white Americans. But in this poem, she boldly declares her independence as a writer:

But I’m only a colored poet . . . and my wishes . . . no matter which star I choose . . . do not come true . . . But I’m also a writer . . . and I know . . . that the Europeans aren’t the only ones . . . who keep time . . . some of the time is going . . . to be my time . . . some of the time is going . . . to be my time . . . too. (70-74)

No more is she going to be burdened with the restrictions made by the whites, she is not going to ponder over what has happened. She is being a tower of strength to other women of her race too. Her decision to look forward into the future with hope is clear in these lines:

Life teaches us not to regret . . . not to spend too much time on what might have been . . . It is neither emotionally . . . nor intellectually possible . . . for me to dwell on might – have – beens. (75-77)

It is at this juncture that the poet thinks of Lorraine Hansberry, who had the courage to tell the world what the poet herself believed in. Giovanni believes that Lorraine set an example for all others, that she:

possessed that quality of courage . . . to say what had to be said . . . to those who needed to hear it . . . If writers are visionary
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. . . her ministry was successful . . . She made it . . . possible for all of us . . . to look . . . a little . . . deeper. (93-96)

Irrespective of the circumstances, one must be bold like Lorraine to speak out one’s convictions. Though writing the truth is a risky job, Giovanni ventures to be truthful and also to her readers, through her poems.

The poet feels that nobody understands her completely as she has chosen the difficult and different vocation of being a true writer of feelings. But she is glad that she is true to her own convictions. This exploration and confession of her inner feelings is seen in the poem “A Song for New-Ark”:

When I write I like to write . . . in total silence . . . Maybe total . . . silence . . . is not quite accurate…I like to listen to the notes breezing in my head. (1-3)

She hears her inner voice and at the same time, hears the voices of lonely people in the city. In the last stanza of the poem, the poet invokes in her readers the desire to be night riders, exploring the dangers of darkness, rather than being day-trippers. She asks her readers to join her in exploring her own inner self. She expresses her wish to say useful things just like the birds in the vast expanse of the sky. Here we are reminded of her earlier poem, “Ego Tripping” where she wanted to fly like the bird in the sky.
Now she wants to be a melody which would be pleasing to the ear of her listeners and wishes to be the song which soothes her listeners.

In the poem, “Love: Is a Human Condition”, the poet states that one is adventurous only when one tries to love others and keep the human connections intact:

We love . . . those who do . . . because we live in a world requiring light and Darkness . . . partnership and solitude . . . sameness and difference . . . the familiar and the unknown . . . We love because it’s the only true adventure . . .

I’m glad I’m not an amoeba . . . there must be more to all our lives than ourselves . . . and our ability to do more of the same. (11-17)

Writing poems is an adventure for the poet, writing from her imagination against all odds and criticisms, with the hope of a bright future. She is willing to go for the adventurous journey along with the night riders regardless of the results or risks involved. She makes this clear in the poem, “A Journey”, where she writes:

It’s a journey . . . that I propose . . . I am not the guide . . . nor technical assistant . . . I will be your fellow passenger . . . (1, 2)

The poet confesses that she neither knows the way nor the outcome of the journey but she is willing to undertake it, declaring that she is not
afraid of the unknown. The courage and determination of the poet encourages her readers to accompany her on this journey though she lays bare the fact in these lines:

I promise you nothing . . . I accept your promise . . . of the same we are simply riding . . . a wave . . . that may carry . . . or crash. . . .

It’s a journey . . . and I want . . . to go . . . . (12-14)

Riding along with the night winds or on a wave is risky and ensures nothing, but the poet is ready to venture out on this journey of exploring her true identity. Her determination and courage lead her to undertake this journey.

If the night riders learn to be optimistic and hopeful, the poet believes that they will be able to overcome the risks involved in their adventure. At the same time, they can also enjoy exploring unknown territories. According to Virginia C. Fowler:

night-rider becomes for Giovanni a metaphor for those who are explorers, whether of inner or outer space. Quite clearly, such individuals explore not simply for the adventure but, more important, in order to enhance the quality of human life. Yet their efforts to bring joy or comfort to others are likely to be rewarded with their destruction by these others, not with gratitude. (NG 112).
Giovanni asserts the fact that all the night riders have earned their right to be called adventurous by risking their lives for uplifting their society. They get no reward, instead they have to suffer and the poet praises their efforts.

The night riders are likened to eagles who build their ‘nests on precipitous ledges’ in the poem, “Eagles (a poem for Lisa)”. These eagles are majestic birds who are ‘unafraid’ and who teach their young ones to fly and be like them:

Eagles perched . . . on these precipitous ledges . . . insist upon teaching . . .

the young . . . to fly . . . (15-17)

The young ones are taught to fly in the vast expanse of the sky, despite the fact that their nests are built on the edge of the rocks. Quoting their example, the poet urges her readers to be like the eagles. She calls upon her younger generation to follow the path of the night riders, in spite of the dangers bound to confront them. Giovanni urges her readers to accompany her on the adventurous journey she is undertaking, along with the night riders.

Further, the poet talks about the night riders of her own gender. She starts by celebrating women as a whole, and in particular the African American women. In the poem, “Hands: For Mother’s Day”, she talks
about the hands of women who are wives and mothers, whose hands always reach out to others, hands that are always caring and comforting:

The wives and mothers are not so radically different . . . It is the hands of the women which massage the balm . . . the ointments . . . the lotions into the bodies for burial . . . It is our hands which: cover the eyes of small children . . . soothe the longing of the brothers . . . make the beds . . . set the tables . . . wipe away our own grief . . . to give comfort to those beyond comfort . . .

I yield from women whose hands are Black and rough . . .

We of the unacceptably strong take pride in the strength of our hands . . . . (23-30, 35-36)

Unlike the rich American women, the poet asserts that the African American women never do anything special to take care of their hands but they take pride in its strength, for they are aware of its indispensable quality. Giovanni belongs to this group of strong women and she is quite proud of it.

The poet further highlights the supreme qualities of the lives of African American women, using the appropriate symbol of the quilt which is their ‘mosaics’:

We weave a quilt with dry, rough hand . . . Quilts are the way our lives are lived . . . We survive on patches . . . scraps . . . the
left-overs from a materially richer culture . . . the throwaways from those with emotional options . . . We do the far more difficult job of taking that which nobody wants and not only loving it . . . not only seeing its worth . . . but making it lovable . . . and intrinsically worthwhile . . . (41-47)

Here Giovanni applauds women who make worthless things worthwhile. The metaphor of making quilts from patches and scraps are likened to the making of a worthwhile African American culture from the ‘leftovers’ of the white culture. Giovanni speaks quite plainly about the difficulties her people have to face from other people but in spite of it, they make their culture a rich one, with their own efforts, love and inner strength. The poet attributes the harmony of their race to the inherent qualities of their women.

Apart from being an ordinary woman, a sweet inspiration, a bird in the sky, a melody, Giovanni now wishes to be a cumulus cloud:

I wish I were a cumulus cloud . . . then I could control the sunshine . . .

I want to

be a friendly cotton ball playing in the blue . . . calling, as all cotton clouds do . . . my family around me. (67-68, 71-73)
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Giovanni is fascinated by the nature of these clouds and likens them to the community of African Americans. She believes in the togetherness of her community and believes that their strength lies in their oneness.

Giovanni thinks of her African American family and wishes to be with them always. She believes that just as one cumulus cloud brings together all the other clouds; one individual is enough to bring all others together. This one cumulus cloud, this individual night rider, this African American female, is this poet, Giovanni, who through her poems, strives to bring together her whole, extended family to understand their inherent qualities.

The concluding stanzas of the poem praise mothers and the poet states that the nature of mothers and that of the cumulus clouds are the same. She writes:

It was very clever of nature to invent both cumulus clouds and mothers . . . Both would be nice to hold. (74-76)

Now the poet says that these mothers, these women, who care for their families and hold them together, continue their role in their society, in the history of mankind itself. The poet evaluates the history of evolution and reaches the conclusion that women have always stood up to care for their young ones and their families:
WOMAN stood to free her hands . . . to hold her young

. . . to embrace her sons and lovers . . . WOMAN stood to applaud

and cheer a delicate mate who needs her approval . . . WOMAN

stood to wipe the tears and sweat . . . to touch the eyes and lips

. . . that woman stood to free the arms which hold the hands

. . . which hold. (90-95)

Women stood up to nurture her younger generation and she still
continues to do so, disregarding her own needs. Thus Giovanni celebrates
all women, regardless of color, who play an important role in holding their
family and thereby the society together.

Giovanni talks about the bondage of women in general, women who
are suppressed due to their marital and domestic obligations. Giovanni is
angry that women can hardly find time for themselves and for their
activities, as they are always bound to their other duties like caring for their
husbands and children. The poet is indignant at this condition of women.
She writes poignantly in the poem, “Linkage”:

Women . . . are considered complete . . . when they marry . . .

We have done . . . it is considered . . . our duty . . . when we

safely deliver a person from the bondage of Father . . . to the

bondage of duty . . . and husband . . . from house slaves who

read and write . . . to housewives who have the time for neither . . .
We are happy . . . when their own race is chosen . . . their own race reaffirmed . . . their own desire submerged . . . into food . . . dishes . . . laundry . . . babies . . . no dreams this week thank you I haven’t the time . . . Like overripe fruit in an orchard by frost . . . the will to live turns rotten . . . feckless . . . feculent. (78-87)

Shifting the focus from the plight of women to the plight of slave children, Giovanni is angry that these children are deprived of their childhood and made to work as slaves. She is outraged at the heartless people who make children work, disregarding their tender age. She feels that the categories of ‘children’ deprived of their childhood, ‘women’ having no private time, being under male supremacy all their lives and ‘slaves’ under the oppression of their masters, all are under bondage in one way or another. She comments:

What is a woman . . . to think . . . when all she hears . . . are words that exclude her . . . all she feels . . . are emotions that deceive . . . What do the children think . . . in their evening quest . . . of those who from platform and pulpit . . . deride their condition . . . yet purchase their service . . . What must life be . . . to any young captive . . . of its time . . . Do we send them back . . . home to their remembered horrors . . . Do we allow them their else-wheres . . . to parade their talents . . . Do we pretend that all is well . . . that Ends . . . (88-96)
Giovanni, with her distinct questions, seeks the attention of her readers to the plight of the oppressed. She is of the opinion that every human being, regardless of age, gender or race, has the right to express one’s convictions and live according to their own dictates. The poet becomes the strong advocate of all oppressed people and she urges them to give up their bondage and lead independent lives of their own. She also asks the oppressors to ponder over what they are doing and requests them to free the oppressed.

“Harvest (for Rosa Parks)”, celebrates Rosa Parks for her courageous act on a bus on December 1, 1955. The act made history. The event is described in the words of Mrs. Parks in the monologue which forms the text of the poem:

when the driver told us . . . it was four of us . . . to move . . . Three people moved . . . I didn’t . . . I couldn’t . . . it was just so . . . wrong . . . Nobody offered to go . . . with me . . . A neighbor . . . on the same bus . . . didn’t even tell . . . my husband . . . what had happened . . . I just thought . . . we should let them know . . . I should let them know . . . it wasn’t right . . . You have to realize . . . I was forty years old . . . all my life . . . all I’d seen . . . were signs . . . that every thing was getting worse . . . (49-57)
Rosa Parks violated the law for she felt it was her duty to act against the existing unjust law. She had the courage to act according to her conscience, even though she was abused and cruelly attacked. Her determination and courage paved one step ahead towards the freedom of her people, the African Americans. Through the example of Rosa Parks, Giovanni stresses the fact that the determination of one person is sometimes just enough to change existing social conditions. She dwells upon this point through her words:

I just think . . . it makes a difference . . . what one person does . . .

young people forget that . . . what one person does . . . makes a difference. (75-77)

Thus the poet calls upon her readers to act individually wherever necessary, to realize that one can put an end to oppression and strive towards realizing their goal of freedom.

During the last decade of the twentieth century, Giovanni embarks on another journey as she tries to satisfy her love needs. Her love and respect for other people mark her prominence as a daring and different poet. She continues to fight for the downtrodden and for the less fortunate people. Giovanni dedicates Love Poems to Tupac Shakur, a young rap artist who was brutally murdered. The dedication is bold: “For Tupac Shakur (1971-1996), a lover whose love was often deliberately misunderstood but who will live in the sun and the rains and whose name
will echo through all the winds whose spirit will flower and who like
Emmett Till and Malcolm X will be remembered by his people for the
great man he could have become and most especially for the beautiful boy
that he was” (5). In the poem, “All Eyez on U”, the poet declares that he
will be remembered by his people for who he was:

your shooting him will not take him from us  his spirit will fill
our hearts  his courage will strengthen us for the challenge  his
truth will straighten our backbones. (33-35)

She applauds the fortitude of this young man, which she feels must
be imitated by all.

She insists that his courage ought to be a sign for his people to act
boldly like him. She pays her tribute to this young fighter and martyr, who
is her son’s age. She empathizes strongly with the mother of Tupac Shakur,
Alfeni, as she can imagine the pain, ‘2Pac has a mother  the lovely Alfeni
had to bury her son  it is not right’ (38-39). Empathizing with others is a
trait that heightens the self actualization of the poet. She truthfully declares
her allegiance to her people.

Giovanni, in this volume, expounds on the various aspects of love.
In different volumes, she talks about the various kinds of love, between
lovers, between parents and children and among African American people.
This beautiful volume exalts love in all its forms.
Not only does she talk about love, Giovanni defines it so as to remind her readers about the responsibility that it brings about. In the poem titled “Love Is”, she explains:

Some people forget that love is
tucking you in and kissing you “Goodnight”
no matter how young or old you are

Some people don’t remember that love is
listening and laughing and asking questions
no matter what your age

Few recognize that love is
commitment responsibility no fun at all
unless

Love is
You and me. (1-11)

To love responsibly, with commitment, is necessary when it comes to Giovanni. She renders this love to all her readers and to the people around her.

The poet goes on to pay tribute to all mothers who are true lovers of their family. Their silent demonstration of love by nurturing their family on a daily basis is finally acknowledged. The everyday chores that
homemakers do often go unnoticed and unappreciated by others and hence the poet takes it on as her responsibility to finally acknowledge these caretakers. In “Mothers”, she rightly talks about the greatest lesson she has learnt from her mother: “we must learn / to bear the pleasures / as we have borne the pains” (37-39). And she reveals the joy that she feels in being a mother in the poem, “For Tommy”, who “defined my nature / and gave me a new name (mommy) / which supersedes all others / controls my life / and makes me glad / that he does” (5-10). The joy of motherhood and the love between mother and son is expressed delightfully in these poems. She uses images from home and from cooking, and gratefully thinks of the steady dependence of the family, which is often taken for granted in the poem “The Only True Lovers Are Chefs or Happy Birthday, Edna Lewis”:

more better than anything at all // that mothers cook meals each day for ungrateful children and spouses

... 

ain’t that love that soaks cold chicken wings in buttermilk and gets the heavy iron pot out and puts just the right pat of lard in it at a high temperature

... 

yes I’d say that’s love all right
but cooking /// now that is something you learn from your
heart then make your hands do what your grandmother’s hands
did. (4-6, 32-34, 37, 39-40)

She acknowledges the hard work put into cooking delicacies by her
grandmother and her mother, when things were not as easy as it was with
the poet. She says that these women did all the hard work because of their
love for their family.

She also talks about the love among the African Americans. She
praises the energy and determination of her people who stand united in the
face of racial oppression. She praises the perseverance of her people to go
forward in life despite depressing circumstances and numerous failures.
She reinforces that rap music is theirs to begin with and which is now used
by the other Americans to suit their purposes. She asks her people to use
their own music and their capabilities for newer possibilities, to explore
and to learn from new experiences, “expressing a brand new us”. She
affirms to her people in the poem, “When Gamble and Huff Ruled”:

that’s when we were strong and determined to change the
world and if not change it leave it different from when we
first met it and i like black people for

that
i like us for our faith and our energy and loving our mamas and ourselves and the world and all the chances we took in trying to make everything better which we did for some and definitely not for others and i dislike other people for taking our music our muse and our rap to sell their cars and bread and toothpaste and deodorant and sneakers but never seeming to have enough to give back to the people who created it and that’s not a huff or a gamble but the awful truth of white America

that’s when the possibility was possible and we got in our orange beetles and drove across country and back and rocked and rolled into a newer possibility while lassoing and harnessing and ultimately riding the night winds that bucked and resisted but we held on and we were right and the possibilities closed down but the beat goes on the beat goes on the beat beat beat goes right on. (35-51)

This is indeed a creed applauding the ingenuity of the African Americans. Giovanni is seen at her creative best here as she celebrates her community with the deserved pomp and splendor.

Learning from the experiences of her mother and grandmother, Giovanni also lives in the present, thus juxtaposing the old and the new and making herself an intergenerational poet whose popular appeal transcends
age, color and nations. Towards the end of the twentieth century, Giovanni goes into the world of plastic cards and money, and dwells on the comprehension of modern women, of whom she herself is a representative. She hints at the ordinary ways of living and loving, in a way the people of today would understand, in the poem called “I take Master Card”:

I take Master Card

You can love me as much as your heart can stand
then put the rest on
account and pay the interest
each month until we get this settled

You see we modern women do comprehend
that we deserve a whole lot more
than what is normally being offered but we are trying
to get aligned with the modern world. (6-14)

With a tinge of humor, Giovanni compliments the modern women on their capacity of understanding and appreciating love according to what they receive.

Giovanni reflects on the different stages in her life, of being a young adult, then grown up and later entering old age. She enjoys the four seasons, Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter of which she comments in her poem, “In All Seasons”. She thinks of the seasons in her life too. She
vows to live on, enjoying the different experiences that love and life gives her. There are certain things that she can do and others that she can’t, but still she watches and enjoys her life as it is, irrespective of the seasonal changes. She admits that she ‘can’t can and don’t quilt’ (10-11) but she can write poems and can continue to explore life in all its fullness. She can:

- anticipate the white hair on my head . . . signaling not my physical survival so much . . .as my emotional commitment . . .
- to continue the adventure . . . of life . . .in all . . . seasons. (15-18)

She vows to live on and to enjoy her life in the present. She enjoys her life and eagerly anticipates the future, with her characteristic enthusiasm for living life truthfully, in relationship to the world around her and enjoys it as much as she can.

Giovanni raises her voice against the destroyers of the natural order of the world. She is a fierce environmentalist in the volume, *Blues*, which she dedicates to her friend, Virginia Fowler who shares the same cause.

She comments on this volume in her personal letter dated 24 February 2007: “*Blues* . . . is, to me, my look at the environment at how we (humans) treat other life forms. One critic of my work, however, wrote that she thinks *Blues* is my response to lung cancer.” Construction done in the name of advancement brings about the destruction of nature and the plant and animal world. The poet laments this deliberate harm caused by people, for she is against destruction of any kind. She feels sad for the helpless
animal world and the environment that is uprooted in the wake of human endeavors of expansion. Her esteem for others extends to the natural world and to her fellow beings. She laments the destruction caused to the natural world. At the same time, she respects all courageous people of whom she never loses sight of, in all her works. She mentions people like her sister, father and mother and applauds them for fighting against the injustice meted out to them.

Giovanni applauds the unity and strength of the African Americans and talks about the love that unites them together even at the turn of the century. In the poem, “Sound in Space”, she affirms the love and trust of the African American community which holds them together in a unique way. This accounts for their courage and determination to fight in the face of opposition. She writes:

I am here to tell you I know: the density of a Black hole does not prevent light from escaping but rather that once light encounters the Black whole it finds such beauty and peace and comfort it no longer needs to search which is another word for love…and I do. (70-73)

The poet emphasizes the strength of her community, playing with words, the ‘Black’ ‘hole’ and ‘whole’ and how the search ends with finding love and commitment in her people. She believes that her people can teach others about achieving peace and contentment in a troubled
world. She has immense faith in her people and she is confident of their never-ending love which keeps her going forward in life.

In the poem, “The Faith of a Mustard Seed”, Giovanni mentions the attitude and bravery of the new generation of her times and how they stand up to their convictions. She celebrates the energy of the courageous people:

We were brave and we did not back down when the heat was heaped on us. We made it through the rain. And kept our point of view.

I like us for that.

I like my generation for trying to hold these truths to be self-evident. I like us for using the weapons we had. I like us for holding on and even now we continue to share what we hope and know what we wish. (41-46)

Giovanni is proud of her people who have proved to be courageous by fighting for their rights. Here her sense of achievement is evident and she acknowledges the unique goals achieved by her people. The path of self actualization which the poet takes is clearly visible here. She concludes the poem by saying that there is more to do, but she likes her generation for their willingness to change for the better:
We need, still, a new system. But I like my generation for trying to change the old system, for questioning everything and for having the faith of a mustard seed in the power of a poem. (56-58)

The poet uses the medium of poetry to praise her generation and her people for trying to change the system and the circumstances they live in. She also expresses through her poem, her genuine desire and wish to change the old system for a new order. She is happy that her people are now bold enough to question their circumstances. She upholds her belief that poets can and must change the society in which they live.

The poet firmly believes that the African Americans today are still strong in their convictions as they were fifty years ago and she upholds this belief with pride. She asserts that they need to be honored and accepted for all the things they have done for their country.

The environmental poems in this volume connect the environment to human beings very closely. She communicates the importance of woman rights, peace and non-violence through her poems. She becomes the spokesperson of the African Americans in “The Inaugural poem”:

we do not still think we should allow the Whites to run roughshod over the rest of us and we have to say that affirmative action is good and right that equal pay is good and right that
paying our taxes is good and right that women have a right to our bodies and that life decisions cannot always reside with those who can enforce their desires with physical strength so this is an Inaugural poem wishing this country and this president well with the hopes that this country and this president do equal good to this earth so that this world and the sun will bring a brighter possibility to us all. (46-54)

The poet’s rights as a woman and especially as an African American woman are reinforced here in full force. She calls for peace in the country and the individual rights for all and especially for women, all in one poem, thereby blending the public and the private again in her own unique way.

The poet is very troubled with the inequalities that the African Americans have to face in order to attain what they need. She stresses the fact that Americans and the African Americans get entirely different treatments for the same cause in their country, even in the twentieth century. In the poem, “A Civil Rights Journey”, she mentions this problem:

I know that segregation was another word for affirmative action only when we reach out to white people we call it incentives when we reach out to people of color we call it welfare. When we want white people to change we offer them wonderful things; when we want people of color to change we increase the misery. Something is very wrong. (32-37)
She lashes out at the injustice that her people have to face. She takes the role of a social leader upon herself, a person who needs to change the world in which she lives. She declares:

We need a new definition of neighborhood, community, society. We need to make white America tell us why they hate and fear and hoard. We need a new definition of life so that we can find a truer definition of death. We all need a definition of responsibility

... but our first decision must be to change from the rather hateful, selfish species we are into something a bit better. (68-72, 74-75)

The true African American woman poet as always, Giovanni rages against the white Americans and at the same time, asks her people to be realistic and responsible citizens.

“This Poem” continues the analysis of the African American pride and its rich heritage. It is interesting to note how they keep on surviving despite the threats they have to face. The situations remain unchanged but the strength with which the African Americans survive keeps them going forward in life. She questions the never changing situation of the African Americans:
no matter the news reports that never change . . . never give the
Black man his due . . . nor praise the Black woman . . . just the
same old news . . . which cannot change. (17-19)

Some things never change but the poet is happy that the courage of
her people also does not change and they live boldly, according to their
own standards. Her people courageously continue their lives by struggling
to live decent lives. She brings in domestic images which symbolizes how
African American women live their lives:

This poem dreams of sheets dried in the sun . . . pillows fluffed
to their feathery height . . . quilts sewn by hand in intricate
patterns. . . this poem dreams of home . . . while wishing it could
step on the moon . . . or rocket to the sun . . . this poem is
determined . . . to fight on. (40-43)

This perseverance of the African American women is highly
commendable. They have their household duties to be done but their power
to dream enables them to fight, to survive and to try to achieve the heights
they dream about. This life is worth living for them.

Giovanni goes on to advise people to explore their outer and their
inner lives. She wants to do so and she urges her fellow women to explore
along with her. In the poem, “Writing Lessons”, she writes:
I definitely want to rocket to outer space. . . I also want to
explore inner space

. . .

I know that life is interesting and you can never go wrong
Being interested
If I were giving advice I would say: Sing

People who sing to themselves

People who make variations on songs they know

People who teach songs to other people

These are the people other people want to be with

and that will let you be a good writer

Because

There are . . . still . . . so many ideas to conceive. (6, 10-18)

The poet encourages people to write and be creative, to explore and
to conceive ideas to reckon with. She also urges the young readers to write
as they will and talk of their own ideas. She believes in this community of
writers and she firmly believes that they can make a difference in the
society in which they live.
The poem, “On My Journey now”, recalls all the domestic images one gets when one thinks of home and she believes that this is precisely that binds the African Americans together:

There is this special feeling you get
when you snuggle under a quilt
that was made by your great-grandmother,
washed and cared for by your mother
passed on to you soft clean sweet smelling from the days before
washing machines did wash
and dry cleaners did pressing

... 

There is a feeling you get
when you look back at the beauty and wonder of our people. (1-7, 11-12)

Family traditions remind readers of the love and affection passed down from one generation to another and cherished by all. The poet dwells on these household images and revels in the rich tradition of African American values. She is richer all the more because of her family traditions and love. Her pride in being an African American is clearly portrayed here.

The poet’s appreciation of the natural world and her hatred of the construction workers are highlighted in the poem, “Road Rage”. The poet is disturbed by the construction going on near her house, disrupting the peace of the land and the lives of helpless birds and animals. It’s about
the construction workers who are killing the birds and shaking your house” (60-61). She is angry at not being heard but she fights for her cause:

what is really happening is that no one is listening to you and no one cares about your concerns and you have no rights that anyone is bound to respect and you are finally made to realize that you are just a small colored woman trying to protect her home and that will not be allowed. (74-77)

The inconvenience caused to the surroundings is not at all the concern of the ‘R.Knack Kracker’ construction company while they go about destroying the wetlands and directing streams onto the background of houses. She is enraged at this destruction done to the harmony of the surroundings in the name of progressive construction.

During her convalescence after surgery, Giovanni observes a family of robins where a little robin is hurt and cannot fly. This incident is described in the poem, “Me and Mrs Robin” where she narrates how her friend Ginney and she rescue the little robin. She lashes out against the construction developers after citing the hurt robin:

so it’s not hard to understand why I hate R.Kneck Kracker and Kracker’s Pipe and Excavating Company who have destroyed the entire grove of trees who killed the nestlings who have confused the birds and murdered the possum and groundhogs because they
want to build houses which could be built around trees with birds and possum and groundhogs and other things in mind but they come with their real live Tonka toys and cut a hill down to white boy size and they want someone to think they have done a job and they can’t convince me that a job has to consist of killing things so I have no respect for the so-called construction workers. (91-99)

The poet voices her hatred for the people who mercilessly destroy the balance of Nature. She sympathizes with the birds and animals. Her relationship with Nature makes her a poet who is aware of her environment as well as her relationship with it. She is true in conveying her feelings and is bold enough to fight for her cause. She is a champion of her people and for the environment in her own unique style. Giovanni, the environmentalist, is loved all the more for it. She honors the African American people for their sacrifices and courageous deeds for their country and at the same time, thrashes out against the detractors and oppressors of nature and the people on the whole. Her esteem for the natural world and for other people, especially the African Americans, renders her growth as a self actualizing poet.

Not only realizing the goal but releasing the strength for achieving it is also essential. Readers can see an amalgamation of ideas in the personal and the political poems seen in the volume, QBP. Giovanni proves herself
to be a proud citizen of America, who believes in her capabilities and is content in her present day life situation. In this volume, she is seen to be harsh to the detractors of peace but kind towards her fellow beings. She empathizes with the sufferers of war and destruction which disrupts ordinary life. She recognizes the relationship of the individual with the community.

Giovanni raises moral questions by showing the fragility of life through quoting her own illness of lung cancer and by reaching out to others in similar situations. She empathizes with the sufferers and they feel one with her. She states the facts of life and urges her young readers to explore the unknown challenges of life. She applauds her ancestors, at the same time, urges the younger generation to move forward in life.

Giovanni is quite contemporary in her thinking. She is keen to embrace the new things of her generation but at the same time, she laments the derogatory aspects of the contemporary society. She comments on the political events and feels strongly for the innocent victims of the political atrocities. She continues to be a strong advocate for the downtrodden. She also remains a champion of the rights and the privileges of the African Americans.

QBP is a unique collection of poems that explores the America of the twenty-first century with its political and social unrest. Giovanni is able to write on all the major events which have shaped the destiny of America.
She succeeds in touching upon subjects close to her heart. Hope in the midst of hopelessness and turmoil is the only thing that can endure the unknown future. Giovanni urges her readers to be hopeful even in the midst of utter hopelessness.

The collection begins with the title poem which describes a journey to Mars and the poet equates it with the Middle Passage which was the journey where people were purchased as commodities in Africa and sold as slaves in America. They were brought to America in desperate situations and they had to endure the cruelties meted out to them. They did so with utmost courage. The journey to an unknown destination can be endured only by the courageous and they are, according to the poet, the African Americans, as they were the ones who have hoped and survived. They are the survivors and they have prospered in a land where they were brought as slaves. The poet endeavors to take her readers into the unknown future by trying to embark upon a journey of exploring the unexplored. She remembers all the important people who have changed the course of American history.

In this volume, Giovanni takes pride in the courage and strength of the African American people. She applauds the survival skills of her people and boldly asserts that the rest of the Americans ought to take lessons from them. To find hope and a song in the middle of utmost disillusionment and
disappointment was possible only by the African Americans since they were able to survive their first journey to America.

The poem “Quilting the Black Eyed Pea” exults in the ‘adventure’ or ‘life-seeking thing’ of going to the Mars, of exploring an unexplored territory. In this poem, Giovanni talks about peace, rest and the will to change. She is sure that the future is theirs and as always, she takes pride in being an African American. She asserts that any adventure could be understood only through African Americans:

The trip to Mars can only be understood through Black Americans I say, the trip to Mars can only be understood through Black Americans. (74-75)

She believes this firmly as she feels that only they have gone through tough, unexpected experiences on their first journey to the country as slaves. They only can understand what it feels like to encounter unexpected hazards and so she feels that lessons should be taken from them before going to Mars. Through vivid description, Giovanni also succeeds in relating to her readers the terror and agony their people had to face:

The people who were captured and enslaved immediately recognized the men who chained and whipped and herded them into ships so tightly packed there was no room to turn… no privacy to respect… no tears to fall without landing on
another...were not kind and gentle and concerned for the state of their souls... no... the men with their whips and chains were understood to be killers...feared to be cannibals... known to be sexual predators... The captured knew they were in trouble... in an unknown place... without communicable abilities with a violent and capricious species...But they could look out and still see signs of Home

they could still smell the sweetness in the air

they could see the clouds floating above the land they loved. (76-88)

The fortitude of the African Americans was to be applauded. They continued to move forward and hope even when there was no hope:

and a song was raised... and that song would offer comfort... and hope... and tell the story... (99-100)

Their pride is highly evident in these lines. The poet brings parallels between going to the Mars and the Middle Passage, so she says that the scientists from NASA ought to learn from the African Americans how they endured through their hardship and survived in an unknown territory:

They need to ask us: How did you calm your fears... How were you able to decide you were human even when everything said you were not... How did you find the comfort in the face of
the improbable to make the world you came to your world…

How was your soul able to look back and wonder

And we will tell them what to do: To successfully go to Mars

and back you will need a song . . . (108-14)

The courage and determination of the African Americans as well as their adventurous spirit is evident in these lines. The poet pictures an image of how the African Americans would be in Mars when the whites reach there. She writes:

and as you climb down the ladder from your spaceship to the Martian surface . . . look to the left . . . and there you’ll see a smiling community quilting a black-eyed pea . . . watching you descend (122-125)

The unique picture drawn here outlines the resourcefulness of the African Americans. They are unique in their traditions and their ingenuity. They know how to smile and be happy even in the midst of adverse circumstances and it is this hope that guides them through all life’s calamities, helping them to emerge victorious.

Giovanni mentions about the African American community with reference to this poem in her personal letter dated 24 February 2007: “The Black eyed pea is a legume. It grows underground. It and sweet potatoes offered both comfort and substance to the slaves during slavery and to the
Emancipated at the beginning of freedom. Quilts and quilting are a part of the fabric of the Black Community. West Africa is noted for weaving which is a higher form, in my opinion, of quilting . . . taking little things to make a bigger thing”.

The poet praises the African American community for their resourcefulness and their fortitude. She uses images common to her community to convey their courage and determination to her readers. Her pride in her people is truly evident in her words.

Giovanni applauds the strength and persistence of women in the poem, “What We Miss: A Eulogy”. She dwells on the fact that she misses the persistence of older African American women in the younger generation of today and urges them to follow the footsteps of their mothers, “we miss the instructions”, (7) she says. She goes on to expound on the other things that they miss:

What we miss: The excited chatter spreading the good news of victory or the horrible news of setbacks always wondering why and questioning when hoping now or at least soon. (14-16)

The lesson of hope continues in the next section too:

but knowing whatever better is in change from that which cannot be tolerated today so tomorrow must be sought defined
embraced and prepared for and those voices from these women urged us on. (21-23)

This persistence on the part of women has helped the African American people to move on boldly in spite of the many obstacles they endure. The poet urges her readers to follow the footsteps of her ancestors who had the courage to resist and the hope to envisage a bright future. She insists that they ought to believe in their own strengths and capabilities, for this will enable them to go on in life:

to do anything

we are called to do because “nobody is better than you” and we believed that because of the conviction in those voices urging us on

What we accept: The love the challenge the hope they offered . . . the necessity to remember . . . the vision to follow in their footsteps while blazing new trails. (37-42)

While following the path of their ancestors, she also encourages the youngsters to explore new frontiers and make a way of their own in this world of today. Thus the poet succeeds in blending tradition and exploring new ways, thereby making a new world of hope and opportunities for the people of today.
The theme of the poem, “The Self - Evident Poem” is hope in the midst of hopelessness. The poem votes for peace and happiness in the midst of war and unrest. It takes pride in the courage of the African American folk who can sing songs of hope amidst the atmosphere of chaos and confusion:

It’s self-evident that life is about the good we do not the evil that is left behind and there is so much evil in the world sitting in so many high places telling so many lies while choking the life out of the vulnerable and the helpless and you’ve just got to love black folks for being able to bury the lynched and the burned for being able to bear the lash and lies for finding a song to lift our spirits and send our souls to a better place. (13-19) 

Irrespective of the hardships they have to face, the African American folks are happy and this optimistic attitude leads them to victory. She also makes this poem a message of peace and urges all her readers to contribute to peace and harmony, hope in a hopeless world:

So this poem prays for peace and hopes it can find another poem to peddle for peace and they find a poem which walks for peace and they find a poem which flies for peace and maybe they will all get together and raise a song that drowns the war cries the capital punishment cries and sad cries of lost people looking for an empire that was never theirs to begin with. (24-29)
The poet is a messenger of hope and a song is to be sung which would dispel all gloom. The poet continues to dream of her country and how she hopes it would be a country where people would be able to love and live a peaceful life, where people would be able to appreciate more freely the differences between individuals and still be free to love everyone.

In “My America”, she states:

Not a bad country . . . but attention must be paid . . . to how the bounty came to be ours . . . to all the people . . . who make up the people . . . that we are

A thought here and there . . . a “maybe this could have been done differently” . . .

the patience that is required of those who aspire to be . . . if not the best . . . then at least better

Not a bad country in fact . . . most likely . . . the best possible hope . . . of human beings . . . to exemplify differences that:
can share prosperity . . . can tolerate choices . . . can respect individuals . . . can teach us all . . . to love. (7-16)
Love is considered to be the epitome of all virtues and Giovanni urges her readers and her fellow citizens to love and respect each other, irrespective of caste and creed.

Giovanni has a special word for children also. She tells them to love and care for other people too. She also urges them to be creative and live their life to the fullest. She also comments on children’s literature in the poem, “Redfish, Eels, and Heidi”: “I love children’s literature because it really isn’t children’s literature, it is folk literature. It is stories for people to carry to each other.” (51-53). She believes that the true heroes are those who live their lives victoriously and with hope for the future. Giovanni, through her creativity, urges little children to be creative and optimistic in their lives. “And isn’t that what literature should teach us. To be our own hero. To love. To care. To cry. To laugh. To live. And try to let others live, too” (82-84).

Giovanni believes in literature and believes that it is one’s own creativity that makes a person a complete human being. People learn to care and share for other people as well and make the world a better place to live in. Giovanni hopes that children will take responsibility for their actions. She hopes that children of today will be better citizens of tomorrow, people who will grow up with love and concern for other people too.

Through the poems in this volume, it is made clear that hope for a bright future, even in the midst of a bleak and chaotic today, is possible. Reading through the poems of Giovanni is a delightful experience as the
hope which she experiences in life as she survives lung cancer is evident in her poems too. She continues to motivate people through her life and her poems. She firmly believes that hope is essential to survive in this tough world of today and she conveys this message through her poems. She absolutely gives no place to despair in her life. Her optimistic attitude brightens her life as well as those of her readers. She continues to be the harbinger of hope and truth through her latest collection of poems. She continues to be loved, not only by the Americans but by her readers all over the world.

Giovanni’s poetry for children is written in simple and truthful words, with great vision. She writes in a simple language and in a style which is easy for children to read and understand. She has written many volumes of poetry for children.

Giovanni’s poems for children take on the perspective of children and little things are noticed, things that often go unnoticed by adults. The poems talk on topics that children are fond of—napping, dancing, playing, stars, mommies and daddies, friends and fears. In these poems for little children, she does not forget the theme close to her heart—her message of African American love and pride, which she wants to instill in the little children. For instance, in the “dance poem”, she writes according to the rhythm and beat of Black music:
all you children gather round
we will dance and we will whorl
we will dance to our own song
we must spin to our own world
we must spin a soft Black song
all you children gather round
we will dance together. (19-25)

She instigates her little readers to be individualistic, as she writes in the way they can understand, in the poem called “the drum”:

daddy says the world is
a drum tight and hard
and i told him
i’m gonna beat
out my own rhythm. (1-5)

This little poem alongside the picture of a happy, smiling African American boy, who enjoys playing on his drum, highlights the message of individualism, of relying on one’s own inner potentials. The poet teaches the younger generation the need to be daring and different in their growth process, even at a very young age. The poet also insists that through education and personal determination, girls ought to be different and unique in their individuality. Lofty ideas are inculcated in the children at a very tender age. The poet believes that the life goal of every young African
American girl should be to achieve uniqueness. The poet herself, who is different, inspires her young readers to be independent and grow towards achieving their own goals in life.

In the poem, “Ego-Tripping”, Giovanni writes:

I am a beautiful woman

... 

I am so perfect so ethereal so surreal

I cannot be comprehended

except by my permission

I mean... I can fly

like a bird in the sky. . . . (15, 47-51)

Her assertion is that to understand her, one needs to ask her permission. Her vision of flying freely as a bird in the vast expanse of the sky, with its unlimited possibilities, makes Giovanni special to her young readers. Her initiative of being free and individualistic compels them also to think and act differently.

The famous poem, “nikki-rosa” highlights the poet’s pet theme, ‘black love is black wealth’, which underlies her theme of life and that of all her poems. She believes that other people, especially the white Americans, cannot comprehend her or her people, of their happiness in spite of their poverty and struggles.
The poem, “Covers”, assures the child the security of a good night’s sleep. The picture of a child sleeping peacefully under a cover filled with different images, gives a feeling of immense protection and love for the child:

Nighttime covers

   all the things that creep

Blankets cover me

   when I’m asleep.(5-8)

Reassuring the child and taking images from nature gives the child an overall sense of security and love that is needed. Thus, on the whole, this volume of poems delight the readers as they venture into the world of children and enjoy the time of vacation and of life in general, in happiness and fun, instead of the gloominess of the title poem mentioned earlier. Entering into a child’s world from a child’s perspective enables the poet, and along with her, her readers, to enjoy life to the fullest, despite responsibilities and struggles. The poet convinces her readers that happiness can be attained with contentment in life, relying on one’s inner resources and capabilities. The poet is a self actualizer to the core, even in the world of little children.

“Knoxville, Tennessee”, illustrated by Larry Johnson, celebrates summer life, out in the open, in the community of people one loves. The warmth and love flowing around the people surround the little children and give them a sense of security and belonging. Bright illustrations of eating
okra and cabbage, buttermilk, fresh corn and homemade ice-cream add to
the loving and togetherness of the African Americans. The church
community, picnic and gospel music—all highlight the rich cultural heritage
brought through the African Americans. They are depicted as happy people,
reveling in their relationship with each other. Genuine love and support is
portrayed through the words and through the pictures in the book.

Warmth and love radiates among the African American people and
the poet believes that it is this communion that keeps her people strong and
determined to fight all the detractors of their freedom. She continues to
believe that their love is their biggest wealth and she values it all the more.

“The Genie in the Jar”, is typical of Giovanni as she puts her words
into African American songs and images and makes her own,
individualistic, yet powerful music. The words are few but precise and the
rhythm of the blues is evident in the lines:

make the sky sing a Black song  sing a blue song
sing my song make the sky sing a Black song
from the Black loom from the Black loom
careful baby
don’t prick your finger. (9-13)

The warmth and togetherness of the African Americans is
highlighted in the poem. Instructions are aptly provided:
take the genie and put her in a jar
put her in a jar
wrap the sky around her
take the genie and put her in a jar
wrap the sky around her
listen to her sing
sing a Black song our Black song
from the Black loom
singing to me
from the Black loom
careful baby
don’t prick your finger. (14-25)

When the girl is released from the warmth of her mother’s arms, she is asked to be careful as she explores the world on her own, away from the loom and the support of her community. Here also, the little girl is asked to go on her own but to be careful of the outside world. One ought to explore new possibilities carefully and at the same time, being aware of the risks involved- is one theme that Giovanni wants to convey to all the younger generation and this is beautifully conveyed through the poem.

In all of her poetry for children, Giovanni uses language that children can understand and easily relate to. The fun and frolic that children enjoy are colorfully displayed and beautifully crafted with words
accompanying the rhythm and beat familiar to the African Americans. The poet leaves a legacy of simple, well written, beautiful poems for little children. She believes that children should be aware of the history of their ancestors but at the same time, live for themselves, depending on their individual decisions. She relates to the young children easily. Thus, Giovanni continues to be loved by all her people, both young and old alike.

Giovanni relates easily with older people too. She always values the wisdom of older people. She has a special love for her grandmothers and for older people in general. It is this love for the older generation that prompts her to teach at a writer’s workshop at a retirement home called “Warm Hearth”. Biographer Josephson comments:

She encouraged the men and the women in her class, many in their seventies, eighties and nineties, to write stories from their own lives. Little by little, a supportive group of writers formed. Giovanni encouraged her Virginia Tech students to visit the retirement center and learn from the older students (Poet 86).

The result of this venture is a publication by the name, “Appalachian Elders: A Warm Hearth Sampler” (1992). The elder people were thrilled to find a book published, by their own effort. The poet has also edited books on grandmothers and grandfathers which portray stories and incidents by people about their grandparents.
The poet, on writing about grandparents and her relationship with them and making other people share similar experiences, creates a new way of expressing love and remembering elders of her times. Her ease with her grandparents and their generation brings about warm memories and experiences.

Giovanni’s love for the older generation is just the same as her enthusiasm for the younger generation and for little kids. She can relate easily with people of all ages. Her empathy towards other people and also towards other living beings and the environment is astounding. These relationships truly make her a poet of all generations and well loved by one and all.