Nikki-Rosa

SUMMARY

The speaker says that bringing up childhood memories is always tedious if you're Black, because people always focus on things like living in a suburb of Cincinnati without any indoor plumbing. If you're Black and happen to become well-known, people won't ever mention the fact that you were actually happy that you got to spend so much time with your mother when it was just the two of you, or how enjoyable it was to take a bath in a big metal tub, the same kind that people in Chicago often use for barbecuing. For some reason, whenever you talk about where you come from, people never understand how you could tell exactly what everyone was feeling when your whole family went to meetings about the Black housing development. Despite the fact that you remember things perfectly well, the people writing about your life will never grasp the suffering your father felt when he had to sell his stock and lost yet another dream for the future. They don't understand that even though you didn't have a lot of money growing up, being poor wasn't something that bothered you, or that, even though your parents often argued with each other, the fact that your father drank didn't matter. What did matter to you as a child was the community surrounding you, and that you and your sister enjoyed your birthdays and had wonderful Christmases. The speaker sincerely hopes that no white person ever has a reason to write about her, because they just never grasp the fact that the love felt Black communities is its own form of wealth. Instead, the speaker knows white people writing about her would most likely focus on how difficult the speaker's childhood was, and, in doing so, never see that, the whole time, the speaker was perfectly content.

THEMES

WHITE MISREPRESENTATIONS OF BLACK EXPERIENCES

The speaker reflects on the way that society tends to erase the nuanced realities of growing up Black in the U.S. The speaker describes happy memories from her childhood in Woodlawn, a predominantly Black suburb of Cincinnati, while pointing out that white biographers (and implicitly white society as a whole) tend to misrepresent Black experience, focusing disproportionately on hardship and poverty. The poem shows how these dominant cultural narratives fail to acknowledge the strong sense of community and love that the speaker also experienced, and instead uphold stereotypical and reductive narratives of Black life tied to struggle and misery.

The speaker acknowledges that she and her family experienced material hardship and struggle, describing growing up in a house without indoor plumbing as well as her father's financial losses. But the speaker also emphasizes that her childhood was a happy one, full of family, love, and a sense of community.

For example, the speaker recalls that she and her sister had "happy birthdays and very good / Christmases" because what mattered was that "everybody [was] together." She also notes "how much [she] understood their feelings," showing that her family was close-knit and empathetic. And though the speaker bathed in "one of those / big tubs that folk in Chicago barbecue in," she also reminisces about "how good the water felt when you got your bath / from one of those big tubs." In other words, the speaker recalls the full complexity and particularity of her childhood, including these experiences of joy and pleasure.

Yet the speaker notes that white biographers—and implicitly white society as a whole—only want to focus on hardship within Black life. She says that "if you become famous," these biographers wouldn't talk about "how happy you were," whether this happiness came from "hav[ing] / your mother / all to yourself," or enjoying taking a bath in "one of those big tubs." They don't recognize the positive experiences within the speaker's childhood because they contradict stereotypical ideas about being Black. White society assumes that if someone grew up Black and poor, this can only mean that their life was filled with suffering.

The speaker emphasizes how off-base these cultural representations are. She says that she hopes "no white person ever has cause / to write about [her]," because they would "probably talk about [her] hard childhood," ignoring the fact that she was actually "quite happy" growing up. Implicitly, white society would erase the speaker's actual *experience*, to replace it with their own stereotypical *narrative* about Black hardship.

Ultimately, though, the poem also makes clear that these misrepresentations don't have power over the speaker, since they can't take away her experience or her understanding of what truly matters. The tone of the poem overall is light, suggesting that, while the speaker sees how problematic these white narratives are, she also views them as somewhat ridiculous since they get so much wrong.

The poem itself centers the speaker's experience and recounts the full complexity of her childhood. The poem, then, can be read as a kind of reply to the false narratives of white society, showing that the speaker has ownership and authority over her own experience and her understanding of it.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-33

THE POWER OF BLACK LOVE AND COMMUNITY

While the speaker in "Nikki-Rosa" describes growing up poor, she also recounts a childhood rich in other ways—in family connection and in a sense of Black community and identity. In doing so, the poem asks the reader to consider the true meaning of poverty and wealth. Ultimately, the speaker presents community, love, and family as their own forms of wealth that are more meaningful and lasting than financial prosperity.

The speaker makes clear that her poverty was not the most important part of her childhood. "And though you're poor," she says, "it isn't poverty that concerns you […] but only that everybody is together." While the speaker grew up poor, then, this was hardly the most meaningful aspect of her life. Even when she describes her "father's pain as he sells his stock," the speaker implies that this was primarily significant to her because of seeing what her father went through *emotionally*. In other words, it wasn't poverty itself that mattered to her, but its impact on those she loved.

At the same time, the poem offers a vision of the speaker's childhood that is fundamentally rich in connection and community. The speaker notes that she and her sister "ha[d] happy birthdays and very good / Christmases." The speaker doesn't mention material gifts in connection these holidays, implying instead that the happiness came from the love her family members had for each other.

The speaker also recalls "how much [she] / understood their feelings / as the whole family attended meetings about Hollydale." Hollydale was a Black housing development near where Nikki Giovanni grew up, and where her parents hoped to build a house. The speaker's recollections of attending meetings about this housing development suggest that she was not only connected to her family, but to a larger Black community.

Finally, the speaker asserts that "Black love is Black wealth." Bringing together everything she has said in the poem up to this point, this assertion makes clear that to the speaker, it is not material circumstances that determine one's wealth. Rather, one can be rich in love and community.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-33

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

childhood remembrances are ...
... no inside toilet

The title of "Nikki-Rosa" lets the reader know that the speaker of the poem is a representation of the poet, Nikki Giovanni, and that the poem will be about her experiences. "Nikki-Rosa" was a childhood nickname for Giovanni (given to her by one of her older siblings), and the reader can connect the first word of the title, "Nikki," with the poet's first name. As the poem begins, the speaker also establishes that she is Black, and that in this poem she will explore what it is like to bring up childhood memories as a Black American.

"[C]hildhood remembrances are always a drag / if you're Black," the speaker says. The colloquial phrase "a drag" means that something is annoying or tedious. The speaker, then, seems to be saying that as a Black American, it is always tedious or difficult to recall her childhood. The speaker's use of this colloquialism makes the poem immediately sound spoken and conversational.

The speaker also uses the second person "you." While the reader can infer that the speaker is talking about herself, this "you" also invites the reader to imagine themselves in the speaker's situation. Specifically, the "you" can also be read as an address to other Black Americans who have had similar experiences.

The speaker goes on to bring up specific experiences from her own life, while implying that these experiences—or similar ones—are shared by many Black Americans of her generation. "[Y]ou always remember things," she says, "like living in Woodlawn / with no inside toilet." Nikki Giovanni grew up near Cincinnati, including in the Black suburb of Woodlawn, in the 1940s and 1950s. Here, through the allusion to Woodlawn and the details that follow, the speaker lets the reader where she grew up, as well as the fact that she grew up without indoor plumbing, suggesting that her family dealt with material hardship.

These lines reinforce the poem's opening, where the speaker says that remembering childhood is a "drag / if you're Black." Implicitly, the poem *seems* to be suggesting that these childhood memories are tedious, because "if you're Black," you "always remember" experiences of being poor or struggling in some way. Yet it is exactly this assumption that the poem will go on to challenge and subvert.

LINES 5-8

and if you ...
... all to yourself

The speaker begins to challenge this assumption in the next

lines. Here, she brings up not only how she herself recalls her childhood, but how other people—and implicitly white society as a whole—would view and represent her experience. "[A]nd if you become famous or something," the speaker says, "they never talk about how happy you were to have / your mother / all to yourself."

Since Nikki Giovanni is a famous American poet, the reader can intuit, here, that she is speaking from her own experience, as well as from her observations of how other Black Americans' lives are often represented. And while the speaker leaves the "they" general, it is clear that she is describing biographers (people who would write about her life), as well as the collective "they" of dominant white culture.

Here, the speaker indirectly invokes an experience of growing up with a single mother or being mostly raised by a mother—an experience typically represented in white society as one of hardship and difficulty. Yet, as the speaker points out, this experience could also have its own happiness associated with it, since the "you" the speaker invokes is glad to be able to spend all this time with their mother.

From the outset, then, the speaker points out just how off-base these white representations of Black people's experiences actually are. Rather than seeing the speaker's true experience, the poem implies, these "biographers" look only through their distorting, stereotypical lens, and see what they expect to see.

Implicitly, this is the actual "drag" of childhood remembrances for the speaker as a Black person—not how the speaker truly recalls her childhood, but how white biographers *misrepresent* what she recalls. The speaker juxtaposes her *actual* experience with how her experience would be seen and represented by white society, showing the gap between the two.

Several elements of sound and rhythm reinforce the speaker's meaning. First, the alliterative /h/ sounds in "**h**appy" and "**h**ave" convey that for the speaker, the experience of growing up with one parent isn't necessarily bad at all, and isn't even necessarily an experience of lack or absence, since the sound echoes emphasize the speaker's "happ[iness]" and what she "ha[s]." This positive aspect of the experience is further emphasized by the enjambment of "have / your mother" and "mother / all to yourself," which seem to stretch out what the speaker describes, communicating this sense of time and closeness.

LINES 8-11

and ...
... chicago barbecue in

The speaker goes on to describe another experience that would often be seen by white society as negative or difficult, but that in fact had its own pleasure and enjoyment associated with it. Building on her opening remark about growing up without an "inside toilet"—and by extension, without indoor plumbing—the speaker describes what it was like to take a bath in "one of those / big tubs that folk in Chicago barbecue in." Implicitly, the speaker describes taking a bath in a tub that would have been filled with water heated on a stove, instead of through a plumbing system.

This image, which extends over three lines, communicates one specific memory from the speaker's childhood in vivid, precise detail. The speaker conveys a picture of a big metal tub, big enough to "barbecue in," and emphasizes "how good the water felt" in it.

Again, here, the speaker juxtaposes her *actual* experience with how white biographers would see and talk about her life. The repetition of "and" at the start of this image connects it to the experience the speaker previously described, building a rhythm of polysyndeton that shows just how much isn't seen or grasped by white Americans.

This is another positive experience, she says that "they never talk about"—yet the space given to this memory in the poem shows how much it actually meant to the speaker. And, importantly, the experience the speaker conveys here is exclusively one of enjoyment. She even implies that the water felt *different* in "one of those / big tubs," suggesting that this experience had a particularity and uniqueness that can't be understood by those who haven't shared it.

Where white society, then, would only see lack and difficulty—fitting the speaker's experience into their stereotypical expectations—the speaker knows better. And while the speaker is pointing out here what the "they" never talk about, in the poem itself, *she* talks about her actual experience, making it vivid, palpable, and present for the reader.

LINES 12-15

and somehow when ...
... meetings about Hollydale

The speaker continues to convey her experience of "home" in all of its particularity and feeling. Again, she emphasizes that even though she has tried to describe this to biographers and a white audience, what she actually experienced "never gets across."

Here, the speaker describes "attend[ing] meetings about Hollydale" with "the whole family." Hollydale was a new (at the time) all-Black housing development near where Nikki Giovanni grew up, and where her parents, at one point, hoped to build a house. However, due to racist lending practices, the family was ultimately unable to get the loan they needed.

By alluding to Hollydale, the speaker makes clear that her experience growing up wasn't only limited to her experience within her family; she also connects her experience to that of the larger Black community within which she lived. This allusion implicitly suggests that the experience the speaker describes is primarily one that is understood by those who shared it—including those who would know what Hollydale was and

what it meant.

The speaker also emphasizes "how much you / understood their feelings," showing the empathy and understanding she felt for her family members throughout this time of struggle and hope, as well as for others at the meetings about this development.

LINES 16-19

and even though ...
... another dream goes

As the speaker continues to describe her childhood, she directly invokes, for the first time, an experience of pain and loss that her family endured. "[A]nd even though you remember," the speaker says, "your biographers never understand / your father's pain as he sells his stock / and another dream goes."

In these lines, the speaker builds on her allusion to Hollydale. Nikki Giovanni's father had invested money and stock in this housing development, in the hope of being able to build a house within it. When it finally became clear that institutional racism made it impossible for the family to get the necessary loan, he sold the stock he had in the development.

This, then is the "dream" that "goes"—the dream of the family to build their own home within this community. The "dream" here also might be a subtle allusion to the American Dream—the idea that anyone can find success and build a home in America if they work hard enough. This is something that, the speaker implies, is much more difficult for Black Americans.

Just as the reader might not immediately understand what specific "dream" the speaker is referencing, the poem strongly implies that this experience is only *truly* understood by those who shared it, or by those who have shared similar experiences—in other words, Black Americans. The white biographers, the speaker makes clear—and implicitly white society in general—"never understand" the true loss or pain the speaker's father experienced.

This moment in the poem is important to its meaning. Here, the speaker shows that it's not only her positive experiences that white society fails to see or understand. These "biographers" also fail to see the true pain and complexity of the speaker's experience as well. Implicitly, it is ultimately the full humanity of the speaker and her family that the larger white society refuses to acknowledge.

Importantly, though, just as the speaker made her happiness palpable earlier in the poem, she also makes this suffering palpable here, so that it is vivid and tangible to the reader. The speaker also emphasizes that it is not the loss of this stock exactly that matters to her, but rather the impact on those she loves, including her parents. The sibilant alliteration of "sells" and "stock" emphasizes the loss the speaker describes.

LINES 20-23

And though you're ...
... makes any difference

The poem continues to highlight the profound gap between what matters to the speaker and how white society represents her life. The speaker makes clear here that the white people who write about her life want to emphasize the fact that she grew up poor and that her father drank—two things that reinforce stereotypes about Black Americans' experience. Yet the speaker also makes clear that it is *not* these parts of her childhood that are the most important, or even that "concern" her. In other words, these stereotypical accounts fail to represent her actual, lived experience.

Several elements of these lines reinforce their meaning and emphasize the difference between the speaker's *actual* feeling and how it has been represented within white narratives. First, the anaphora of "and though" points out that while these things white biographers want to talk about might be *part* of the speaker's experience, they are not what she considers important.

Additionally, the lines create a parallelism in their syntax, as each "and though" is followed by something that is true about the speaker's life, before the speaker goes on to assert that white biographers' representation of this aspect of her life fails to accurately represent how it felt to her.

The alliteration in these lines also reinforces the distinction between the speaker's *felt* experience and how her life has been recounted. The /p/ sounds in "poor" and "poverty" highlight the difference between what it is like for the speaker to have grown up "poor," and the concept of "poverty," which is often applied by a larger white society, and brings with it a range of other associations. Similarly, the /d/ sound in "drinking" and "difference" emphasizes that for the speaker, just because her parents "fought a lot" and her father drank, it isn't these things that truly mattered to her or ultimately made the "difference" in how she experienced her childhood.

LINES 24-26

but only that ...
... Christmases

The speaker goes on to assert what *does* make the difference to her, and what made her childhood a truly happy one, despite how it might be seen by white society. What matters, the speaker says, is that "everybody is together," communicating a sense of family connection and love that these white biographers have ignored.

She then goes on to say that her "birthdays" and "Christmases" were joyful, implicitly because of the sense of family and love that surrounded them. While the speaker alludes to the colloquial phrase "happy birthday" in these lines, she also makes clear that she means this literally, that the birthdays she and

her sister had growing up were truly happy.

Interestingly, the speaker shifts to the present tense in describing her memories in these lines. This suggests that for the speaker, these memories are still immediate and tangible, even though they are from her childhood. This tense also suggests that the memories continue to shape the speaker's experience now and her sense of self.

LINES 27-30

and I really ...
... is Black wealth

In line 19, the poem uses the first-person pronoun "I" for the first time. After addressing a "you" throughout—who is implicitly the speaker, but also, perhaps, other Black Americans who have had similar experiences—here the speaker asserts a new kind of ownership and authority over what she has described. "I really hope," she says here, "no white person ever has cause / to write about me."

The speaker makes clear here that she knows that the same stereotypical, reductive narratives that have been applied to other Black Americans would also be applied to her. These biographers, and white society as a whole, the speaker says, "never understand / Black love is Black wealth."

Here, the speaker brings together everything she has discussed in the poem up to this point. The speaker juxtaposes dominant white conceptions of wealth and richness with her own understanding of what wealth truly is. For the speaker, the poem makes clear, "Black love" *is* wealth, and in her own experience, it has been connection, community, and family that has made her childhood and her life truly rich.

In these lines, the parallel structure of "Black love" and "Black wealth," including the repetition (specifically diacope) of "Black," reinforces the speaker's point, showing that this sense of love and wealth is tied to the speaker's identity and sense of community as a Black American. The speaker shows how powerful this sense of love, identity, and community actually is, implying that is its own form of wealth that white Americans can never grasp or see. Interestingly, this moment in the poem also turns the narratives of white society on their head, since the speaker subtly implies that in this lack of understanding, it is these white biographers who actually lack what matters most.

LINES 30-33

and they'll ...
... was quite happy

With the poem's closing lines, the speaker offers a final juxtaposition between how white biographers would understand her life and what she understands her experience to actually be. "[A]nd they'll / probably talk about my hard childhood," the speaker says, "and never understand that / all the while I was quite happy."

Here, the enjambments after "they'll" and "that" emphasize the disconnect between what these white biographers see and the speaker's true understanding of her own life. The repetition of "never understand," which previously appeared in line 17, heightens this sense of disconnect, as the speaker implies that this cultural ignorance on the part of white Americans is ongoing.

At the same time, the alliterative /h/ sounds tie "hard" to "happy"—but here, the alliteration works to emphasize the gap between the two, poking fun at these white biographers and white society who are so far off the mark and who fail to see so much. Here the word "hard" sounds only ironic. The speaker makes clear that in *her* understanding, and in her actual experience, the idea of a "hard childhood" is just a reductive framework that misses her experience altogether, since in fact she was "happy" growing up.

Interestingly, while the speaker emphasizes how wrong these stereotypical frameworks are, her tone throughout the poem, including at the poem's ending, is notably light. Implicitly, the poem suggests that these white narratives can't really harm the speaker or her understanding of her life. As the poem has shown throughout, the true feeling and experience of her childhood, with all of its richness and complexity, remains intact, and powerfully whole.

SYMBOLS

THE DREAM

In lines 18-19, the speaker describes seeing her "father's pain as he sells his stock / and another dream goes." Here, the poem refers to a specific memory from the poet's childhood. Nikki Giovanni's parents had hoped to build a house in Hollydale, a new all-Black housing development near where they lived. But as a result of racist lending practices, her parents weren't able to obtain the loan they needed and her father had to sell the stock he had invested in the project.

The "dream," then, refers to this specific dream of the poet's family—to build a home in this neighborhood. At the same time, the dream can be read as a symbol. Dreams, of course, represent hopes and aspirations. Additionally, the poem may be subtly invoking the American Dream—the idea that anyone can achieve middle class prosperity in the U.S. if they try. Yet, as the poem points out, this dream has all too often been barred to Black Americans. The "dream" of the poet's family, then, also symbolizes many other people's dreams that have been lost as a consequence of systemic racism.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 18-19:** "your father's pain as he sells his stock / and another dream goes"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLUSION

Several allusions appear in "Nikki-Rosa" and are important to the poem's meaning. First, the title of the poem alludes to the poet, Nikki Giovanni. Nikki-Rosa was a childhood nickname for Giovanni, given to her by one of her older siblings; the title, then, lets the reader know that the poem will be about Giovanni's experiences and in particular her experiences as a child.

Within the poem, the speaker alludes to growing up in Woodlawn. Woodlawn was a Black suburb of Cincinnati, where Nikki Giovanni partly grew up. This allusion grounds the poem in the poet's actual experiences. At the same time, the particularity of the allusion suggests that, in a way, what the poem is saying is meant for people who are already part of this community or who have shared experiences, specifically, other Black Americans who have had the experience of living in neighborhoods that are segregated.

Similarly, later in the poem the speaker alludes to Hollydale. Hollydale was, at the time Giovanni grew up, a new all-Black housing development where her parents hoped to build a house. However, due to racist lending practices, her parents were unable to get the loan they needed, and her father had to sell the stock he had invested in the development. This allusion to Hollydale, like the allusion to Woodlawn, is specific; yet readers who have had similar experiences of losing dreams for the future as a result of systemic racism could relate to it.

These allusions to the particulars of the speaker's experience show how complex, nuanced, and specific the speaker's childhood actually was—in contrast to white narratives that would reduce her experience to a flattened stereotype. At the same time, the fact that the speaker doesn't *explain* her allusions suggests that she is not translating her memories or her life for a white audience. Instead, she is addressing people who can relate to what she describes, from a place of shared identity and community.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "Woodlawn"
- **Line 15:** "Hollydale"

ANAPHORA

Anaphora appears in a key moment in "Nikki-Rosa," when the speaker starkly contrasts how white biographers would represent her life with how she actually feels and thinks about her life. These lines are also an example of parallelism, the first half of the phrase introducing a seemingly negative fact about the speaker's childhood, and the second half—introduced with "it isn't"—insisting that said fact didn't actually matter all that much:

> And though you're 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

Here, the repetition of "and though" emphasizes the speaker's meaning. After the colloquial, conversational feel of much of the poem, these lines create music and rhythm, imbuing what the speaker says with authority.

More specifically, the phrase "and though" suggests that, while these things biographers want to highlight might have been *part* of the speaker's experience, there was much more to things. For example, the speaker says that she grew up "poor," but she doesn't view her life through the lens of "poverty," a concept often applied by white society with a range of connotations. This moment of anaphora, then, shows the profound gap between white society's representation of the speaker's experience, and what she understands her actual experience to be.

The repetition of the word "and" itself marks other moments of anaphora in the poem, as the speaker lists positive things that *she* recalls from her childhood but that she knows white biographers would erase. Although these iterations of the word "and" are separated by several lines, they still create a sense of accumulation, of piling up, as the speaker's list unfolds:

> and if you become famous or something
> [...]
> and somehow when you talk about home
> [...]
> and even though you remember
> [...]
> and I really hope [...]

This anaphora communicates how rich the speaker's memories of her life truly are, while simultaneously conveying the sense that all of this richness and specificity would be left out of white representations of her life.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "and"
- **Line 12:** "and"
- **Line 16:** "and even though"
- **Line 20:** "And though"

- **Line 22:** "and though"
- **Line 27:** "and"

ENJAMBMENT

While "Nikki-Rosa" is written without punctuation, readers can still sense distinct moments of enjambment and end-stop from context.

For example, lines 1and 3 end with moments of softer enjambment. In line 1, the speaker says, "childhood remembrances are always a drag / if you're black," and the enjambment comes between the first part of what the speaker says and the modifying phrase, "if you're black." Similarly, the speaker goes on to say, "you always remember things like living in Woodlawn / with no inside toilet," the enjambment again occurring before the modifier, "with no inside toilet." In both of these instances, the enjambment occurs right before the speaker adds to what she has said with a key detail—in the first case, the speaker emphasizing that these childhood remembrances are a drag specifically "if you're Black," and in the second case, pointing out that these memories of growing up in Woodlawn also included not having indoor plumbing. In these opening lines, then, enjambment works to emphasize these modifying clauses and their importance to the speaker's meaning.

Later, enjambment works to slow the poem down. For example, the speaker goes on to say:

> they never talk about how happy you were to have
> your mother
> all to yourself and
> how good the water felt when you got your bath
> from one of those
> big tubs that folk in chicago barbecue in.

Here, the enjambment breaks apart clauses, lengthening the poem and creating more space around the speaker's memories. The enjambment here pushes the reader to linger over what the speaker is saying, and to fully imagine these enjoyable memories she describes. The enjambment also suggests that, in a way, this is how the speaker recalls these memories—as spacious and extended over a long period of time.

Finally, toward the end of the poem, the speaker says:

> [...] they'll
> probably talk about my hard childhood
> and never understand that
> all the while I was quite happy

In these lines, enjambment occurs notably after "they'll" and "that"—both instances when the speaker is pointing out how the "they" of white culture would represent her childhood. In these final instances, then, enjambment emphasizes the disconnect between how white society would represent the speaker's life, and how she actually understands her life to be.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "drag / if"
- **Lines 3-4:** "Woodlawn / with"
- **Lines 6-7:** "have / your"
- **Lines 7-8:** "mother / all"
- **Lines 8-9:** "and / how"
- **Lines 10-11:** "those / big"
- **Lines 13-14:** "you / understood"
- **Lines 20-21:** "that / concerns"
- **Lines 24-25:** "you / and"
- **Lines 25-26:** "good / Christmases"
- **Lines 27-28:** "cause / to"
- **Lines 30-31:** "they'll / probably"
- **Lines 32-33:** "that / all"

END-STOPPED LINE

In addition to its moments of enjambment, "Nikki-Rosa" also contains numerous end-stopped lines. Although the poem leaves out punctuation, the reader can tell these lines are end-stopped because the line endings coincide with a natural pause in the speaker's syntax—with the ending of a clause, phrase, or "sentence."

For example, as the speaker lists all the positive things she remembers from her childhood—things that white biographers would fail to acknowledge—she uses a number of end-stopped lines, alternating with moments of enjambment, to parse this list. These biographers never mention, she says:

> how good the water felt when you got your bath
> from one of those
> big tubs that folk in chicago barbecue in

Or:

> [...] how much you
> understood their feelings
> as the whole family attended meetings about
> Hollydale

In these descriptions, the speaker uses instances of enjambment ("those / big tubs," "you / understood their feelings"). She then follows these moments with end-stops ("that folk in chicago barbecue in," "as the whole family attended meetings about Hollydale"). End-stopped lines appear when the speaker concludes each thought or memory. They also help to create moments of breath in the speaker's extended list.

This pattern, which appears with slight variations throughout the poem, creates energy and variation in the poem's movement. The end-stops create another kind of spaciousness, and imbue the speaker's closing thoughts about each memory or utterance with authority.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Black"
- **Line 4:** "toilet"
- **Line 5:** "something"
- **Line 9:** "bath"
- **Line 11:** "in"
- **Line 12:** "home"
- **Line 14:** "feelings"
- **Line 15:** "Hollydale"
- **Line 16:** "remember"
- **Line 17:** "understand"
- **Line 18:** "stock"
- **Line 19:** "goes"
- **Line 21:** "you"
- **Line 22:** "lot"
- **Line 23:** "difference"
- **Line 26:** "Christmases"
- **Line 28:** "me"
- **Line 29:** "understand"
- **Line 31:** "childhood"
- **Line 33:** "happy"

ALLITERATION

Alliteration appears several times in "Nikki-Rosa." For example, in the poem's opening, the speaker remarks on how white biographers would never talk about "how happy you were to have / your mother / all to yourself." Here, the speaker alludes to an experience of growing up with a single mother (or mostly with a mother), an experience that is largely represented in the broader society as negative or harmful. Yet the poem emphasizes that for some people, this experience could also be positive, since someone might be glad to have so much time just with this parent. In these lines, the alliterative /h/ sounds of "how," "happy," and "have" emphasize this meaning, calling attention to how much the "you" has, and how happy she is within this circumstance that would be misunderstood by a white biographer.

The alliteration of the loud /b/ sound in "bath," "big," and "barbecue" (supplemented by the consonance of "tubs") draws attention to the image at hand. The bright, bouncy /b/ sound subtly evokes the happiness the speaker felt upon bathing in these tubs, and imbues the memory with a sense of joy and vitality—making it a happy memory, rather than a painful one as society might try to characterize it.

Later in the poem, sibilant alliteration again emphasizes the speaker's meaning and the feeling within her experience. When she describes "your father's pain as he sells his stock," the sibilance, which calls to mind a hiss, conveys the feeling of underlying threat and pain within this experience. Yet this pain, too, the speaker makes clear, would also not be adequately understood or captured by white biographers writing about her life.

As the poem progresses, the speaker uses alliteration to emphasize even more pointedly the gap between her actual experience and how her experience would be represented. For instance, the speaker goes on to say:

> And though you're 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

Here, alliterative /p/ sounds connect "poor" and "poverty," and /d/ sounds connect "drinking" and "difference"—yet the alliteration, in these instances, conveys the divide between the speaker's *felt* experience and what white biographers would want to see or represent from it. The speaker uses alliteration to show that she may have grown up "poor," but that doesn't mean that she views her life through the lens of "poverty"; similarly, her father may have drank, but it wasn't this factor that truly made the "difference" in whether her childhood was happy or not.

In the closing lines, the speaker again uses alliteration in this way, as she points out that biographers would:

> probably talk about my hard childhood
> and never understand that
> all the while I was quite happy

The /h/ sounds in "hard" and "happy" call to mind the /h/ sounds in "happy" and "have" at the poem's opening. They show how far off the mark these white biographers are, since all they see is what they want to see—a "hard childhood"—and miss how much the speaker truly had. The /w/ sounds in "while," "was," and "quite," meanwhile, combine with assonance (of that long /i/ sound) to imbue the poem's final moment with music and melody, ending things on a lyrical, pleasing note.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "like living"
- **Lines 3-4:** "Woodlawn / with"
- **Line 6:** "how happy," "have"
- **Line 9:** "bath"
- **Line 11:** "big," "barbecue"
- **Line 18:** "sells," "stock"
- **Line 20:** "poor," "poverty"

- **Line 22:** "fought"
- **Line 23:** "father's," "drinking," "difference"
- **Line 31:** "hard"
- **Line 33:** "while," "was quite," "happy"

REPETITION

Repetition is an important part of the poem. Some of this repetition is specifically anaphora, which is discussed in its own entry in this guide. A separate kind of repetition the speaker turns to often is diacope, the most striking example of which comes in line 30:

> Black love is Black wealth

The speaker's repetition here emphasizes the power and strength of Black community, which forms its own kind of "wealth" that contrasts sharply with the "poverty" the speaker's biographers want to focus on.

The speaker also repeats similar phrases when she describes white biographers and implicitly white society as a whole: "they never talk," "it never gets across," "your biographers never understand," "they'll probably talk," "they never understand," and so forth. This repetition conveys the speaker's understanding that white society *continually* misrepresents and fails to see or acknowledge the full complexity of Black American's experiences.

The speaker also at times uses versions of these phrases in reference to *herself*: "when you talk," "how much you understood." She repeats "you"/"your" in reference to her own (and implicitly other Black people's) experiences and "they" when talking about white society. By using such repetitive language, the speaker keeps drawing attention to the divide between her *actual* experience and society's *narrative* of that experience.

Finally, the speaker repeats "happy" three times in the poem. The repetition of this word emphasizes the speaker's true experience, showing that whatever white biographers might say about the circumstances within which she grew up, she knows what it felt like to her.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "childhood"
- **Line 2:** "Black"
- **Line 6:** "they never talk," "how happy"
- **Line 9:** "how good"
- **Line 12:** "when you talk"
- **Line 13:** "never"
- **Lines 13-14:** "how much you / understood"
- **Line 17:** "never understand"
- **Line 20:** "And though," "poor it isn't poverty"
- **Line 22:** "and though"
- **Line 23:** "it isn't"
- **Line 25:** "happy"
- **Line 29:** "they never understand"
- **Line 30:** "Black love is Black wealth"
- **Lines 30-31:** "they'll / probably talk"
- **Line 31:** "hard childhood"
- **Line 32:** "never understand"
- **Line 33:** "happy"

IMAGERY

Although the poem doesn't contain many visual or sensory images, the speaker does recount one image in detail, over the course of several lines. Toward the beginning of the poem, she describes:

> how good the water felt when you got your bath
> from one of those
> big tubs that folk in chicago barbecue in

In these lines, the reader can imagine this particular type of tub—a large metal tub some people might use for barbecuing. The speaker also describes "how good the water felt," suggesting that the water, which would have been heated on the stove and then poured into the tub, had a particular quality or feeling associated with it. The fact that the image is extended over three lines also asks the reader to slow down and linger over the image.

Since most of the poem omits sensory detail, this moment stands out. In all of its particularity, it conveys one aspect of the speaker's childhood that is unique and that clearly made a strong impression on the speaker. It makes tangible to the reader the enjoyment the speaker felt and disrupts the assumptions the reader might bring to the poem, about what it would be like to grow up without indoor plumbing. At the same time, because it is so specific, the image also implicitly alludes to *other* images, other specific memories, that the speaker doesn't mention here. This one image, then, works to convey a world of feeling and sensory experience that might be overlooked by white biographers but that is vividly, palpably real.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-11:** "how good the water felt when you got your bath / from one of those / big tubs that folk in chicago barbecue in"

COLLOQUIALISM

"Nikki-Rosa" as a whole feels conversational and immediate, as though the speaker is addressing the reader directly. One element that contributes to this sense is the speaker's use of

colloquialisms, or everyday phrases that might be used in casual conversation.

For example, at the very beginning of the poem, the speaker says that "childhood remembrances are always a drag / if you're Black." The colloquial term "drag" means that something is annoying and tedious. Here, the speaker's use of the word also immediately establishes the poem's tone, since the speaker seems to be saying this in an off-hand way, and even with a level of humor.

Later, the speaker alludes to a colloquial phrase when she says that "you / and your sister have happy birthdays." The phrase "happy birthday" is, of course, a common phrase, said to someone on their birthday. Here, though, the speaker points out that she means this colloquialism *literally*; that she and her sister truly *did* have happy birthdays.

The speaker's use of colloquial language, then, establishes the poem's conversational feel but also creates tone and meaning. As the speaker expresses her actual experience, in contrast to how her experience would be represented, this use of language, this use of language is important, conveying the sense that the speaker is simply directly stating how she views and understands her life.

Where Colloquialism appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "a drag"
- **Line 25:** "happy birthdays"

JUXTAPOSITION

Throughout "Nikki-Rosa," the speaker juxtaposes her actual experience growing up with how white biographers, and white society as a whole, would view and represent her childhood. For example, the speaker points out that these biographers "never talk about" all the happy memories she actually experienced. She then goes on to enumerate these experiences, implicitly pointing out how much these biographers miss and fail to see.

She also notes that these biographers, "never understand" the pain her father experienced, when, as a result of racist lending practices, he lost the dream of building a home and had to "sel[l] his stock" that he had invested in the undertaking. Implicitly, these biographers, and white society as a whole, refuse to see or acknowledge the full range of the speaker's humanity, including her actual joy and her family's pain.

Additionally, the poem juxtaposes the dominant white society's views of wealth with the speaker's understanding of wealth. Where white society might view the speaker's childhood through the material lens of "poverty," the speaker presents her childhood as rich in other ways, including in community, love, and family. Ultimately, the speaker asserts that "Black love is Black wealth"—a concept, she points out, that white society by and large fails to understand.

Ultimately, then, juxtaposition works within the poem to show a racial divide, as the speaker emphasizes how much within her own experience as a Black person would be misrepresented, misconstrued, or ignored altogether by white society as a whole. At the same time, though, the speaker highlights the integrity within her own experience, showing the continuing strength and power of Black love and community both in her childhood and in shaping her ongoing understanding of what wealth truly is.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- Lines 5-33

PARALLELISM

Parallelism appears in two key moments in "Nikki-Rosa," reinforcing the poem's meaning. First, the speaker uses parallel phrasing when she says:

> And though you're 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

This assertion can, as a whole, be read as a complete sentence, divided into two sections. In each half, the speaker begins by saying "And though." She then states something that might be true about her childhood—that she grew up poor, or that her parents fought. Then, though, she goes on to say, "it isn't," before pointing out that these details from her childhood aren't what truly matter to her. In this instance, then, parallelism works to emphasize the disconnect between white biographers' representations of the speaker's life, and her *felt* experience of her life.

Later, the speaker uses parallel syntax to create a different effect. "Black love is Black wealth," she says near the poem's ending, bringing together everything she has said in the poem up to this point. Here, the speaker's assertion is structured through parallelism, as the first phrase "Black love" *is*, as the speaker says, "Black wealth." Each half of the speaker' assertion begins with the word "Black," emphasizing the importance of Black identity and community within the speaker's meaning. This is the key element, the speaker argues, that connects "love" and "wealth" together, conveying a sense of richness and wholeness that white society fails to see or understand, but that is powerfully present within the speaker's experience and the poem.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 20-23:** "And though you're 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"
- **Line 30:** "Black love is Black wealth"

VOCABULARY

Nikki-Rosa () - The title of the poem, "Nikki-Rosa," is a reference to the poet, Nikki Giovanni. "Nikki-Rosa" was a nickname for Giovanni, given to her by one of her older siblings. The title, then, lets the reader know that the poem will be about the poet's experiences, and in particular her childhood.

Woodlawn (Line 3) - Woodlawn is a historically Black suburb of Cincinnati, where Nikki Giovanni lived for part of her childhood.

Hollydale (Line 15) - At the time Nikki Giovanni was growing up, Hollydale was a new all-Black housing development where Giovanni's family hoped to build a house. The meetings the poet refers to are meetings about this development, which would likely have been attended by the poet's family as well as other Black families in the community.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Nikki-Rosa" does not follow a traditional or fixed form. However, the poem creates its own form that is important to its meaning.

First, the poem is written in a long, single stanza. This unifies the poem and suggests that the speaker's childhood memories are similarly unified, part of the complex and rich whole of her experience. Secondly, the poem omits punctuation, and in many places, capitalization. In leaving these out, the poem seems to be following its own rules, not the forms of punctuation considered normative in the dominant society.

These qualities make the poem sound spoken and immediate, as though the speaker is directly addressing the reader in conversation. Additionally, in a poem that deals with the ways white society distorts and misrepresents Black experience, it is important that the speaker creates her *own* form for the poem, telling the story of her experience on her own terms.

METER

As a free verse poem, "Nikki-Rosa" does not follow a set meter. Instead, the poem uses varying line lengths to create a natural-sounding rhythm, one that evokes a regular conversation. This spoken quality is important to the poem, as the speaker seems to be articulating her experience in a way that is colloquial, immediate, and direct.

It is also worth noting that, while the poem doesn't use meter throughout, there are moments in the poem that partly gain their power through their metrical stress. Specifically, the speaker uses spondees—clusters of two stressed syllables— to convey her meaning when she says, "Black love is Black wealth." Here, "Black," "love," "Black," and "wealth" are all stressed, meaning that the line is driven by a cluster of stresses, all of which are given equal weight. Implicitly, this sends the message that what the speaker says is authoritative and true. Since these words are equated *rhythmically*, in their stress and emphasis, they are implicitly connected in their meaning.

RHYME SCHEME

"Nikki-Rosa" is a free verse poem that does not have a rhyme scheme. Given that the poem is meant to sound conversational, a strict rhyme scheme would likely feel rather forced and artificial. The speaker wants to narrate her own experiences without forcing them into a prescribed societal narrative, and similarly refuses to make her poem conform to any sort of formulaic rhyme scheme.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "Nikki-Rosa" can be understood as a representation of the poet, Nikki Giovanni. The poem takes its title from Giovanni's childhood nickname (given to her by an older sibling). Even without this information, the reader can connect the first word of the title ("Nikki") to the poet's first name.

Within the poem, several details the speaker evokes are details from the poet's own childhood. For example, Giovanni grew up in neighborhoods near Cincinnati, including the Black suburb of Woodlawn. Giovanni's parents hoped, at one point, to build a house in a new all-Black housing development called Hollydale. Ultimately, though, racist lending practices made this impossible, and Giovanni's father had to sell the stock he had invested in the development. Finally, Nikki Giovanni is a well-known poet, so she herself knows what it is like to become famous and have her life represented in ways that don't match her own experience.

The poem, then, describes the poet's childhood in its specific detail. At the same time, the speaker describes her experiences in such a way that readers, and in particular Black Americans, can relate to what she says. In a way, then, the poem uses Giovanni's own childhood as a lens to show how much white society erases the particulars and nuance of Black people's experiences, and in doing so denies their full humanity.

SETTING

The primary setting of "Nikki-Rosa" is the setting of the poet's

own childhood, in the predominantly Black neighborhood of Woodlawn near Cincinnati. The speaker describes this setting with specific details, noting that there was "no inside toilet"—and implicitly no indoor plumbing—but also calling attention to the pleasure of taking a bath in "one of those / big tubs" that people might use for barbecuing.

The setting of the poem, then, is one that is unique and distinctive, and seen through the eyes of the speaker as a child. Since the speaker of the poem can be understood as Nikki Giovanni herself, the reader can intuit that the speaker's childhood within the poem is the 1940s and 1950s, when Giovanni was growing up.

Importantly, too, the speaker creates an *emotional* setting for the poem and for the childhood she depicts, conveying a world of feeling that the reader can imagine and partially inhabit. For instance, the speaker describes a sense that "everybody is together," and her empathy for family members when they all "attended meetings" about the housing development where her parents hoped to build a house. This emotional setting is crucially important to the poem's meaning, since the speaker implies that what matters most in her experience is not the material circumstances within which she grew up, but the powerful sense of community, love, and family that surrounded her. The speaker emphasizes *this* setting within the poem, making its presence palpable to the reader.

Finally, the speaker describes her childhood, now, from the present tense. This suggests that while the speaker grew up in Woodlawn in the 1940s and '50s, now she is somewhere else and writing from a vantage point of time. Interestingly, though, the poem doesn't let the reader know where the speaker is at the time of the poem's composition. Implicitly, it is the setting of her childhood, and this powerful sense of community she experienced, that continues to shape her life.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"Nikki-Rosa" was first published as part of Nikki Giovanni's 1968 collection, *Black Feeling, Black Talk/Black Judgment*. This collection, which brought together what were originally two separate books—*Black Feeling Black Talk* and *Black Judgment*—drew significant critical attention and helped to establish Giovanni as a major poet of her generation. In the collection, as in "Nikki-Rosa" specifically, Giovanni sought to center and explore Black Americans' experiences.

On a larger level, Nikki Giovanni was a leading poet in the Black Arts Movement. This movement, which is thought to have formally begun following the assassination of Malcolm X in 1965, brought together Black artists and writers who sought to nurture a distinctly Black aesthetic separate from the dominant white society. The movement included such writers as Gwendolyn Brooks, Amiri Baraka, Maya Angelou, Etheridge Knight, June Jordan, and Audre Lorde. In response to ongoing racism and discrimination following the civil rights movement, these writers worked to establish their own values and priorities, rather than assimilating to those of the white establishment.

Although the Black Arts Movement began to wane in the 1970s, its influences are still felt in American literature. As poet Ishmael Reed remarked, "I think what Black Arts did was inspire a whole lot of Black people to write. Moreover, there would be no multiculturalism movement without Black Arts [...] Blacks gave the example that you don't have to assimilate. You could do your own thing, get into your own background, your own history, your own tradition and your own culture."

Similarly, Nikki Giovanni has gone on to become a major American poet whose work continues to influence American poetry and literature. Her work, especially "Nikki-Rosa," has been widely anthologized, and she has published numerous collections, including poetry, children's literature, and essays. She has taught and lectured internationally, and is now a Distinguished Professor of English at Virginia Tech.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Two aspects of historical context are important to "Nikki-Rosa": the historical context of the speaker's childhood, evoked within the poem, and the historical context of the poem's publication.

First, "Nikki-Rosa" is based on the poet, Nikki Giovanni's, own childhood. Giovanni grew up in the 1940s and 1950s near Cincinnati, including in the Black suburb of Woodlawn. Additionally, her parents hoped to build a home in what was then a new all-Black housing development called Hollydale. However, racist lending practices made it impossible for Giovanni's father to get the loan they needed, and he had to sell the stock he had invested in the project—all details that the speaker alludes to within the poem.

Historically, then, the speaker describes her experiences growing up during segregation and the early years of the civil rights movement. The fact that she grew up in an all-Black suburb and her parents hoped to build a house in an all-Black development is not coincidental, but crucially important to the poem's meaning. The speaker describes what it was like to grow up in these circumstances of racism, segregation, and systemic discrimination that barred her family from pursuing their dream to build a house. Despite this, she emphasizes the ongoing strength and perseverance of Black community and love, and how this shaped who she is today.

The poem itself was first published in 1968, three years after the Voting Rights Act and the Civil Rights Act were passed in 1965. Despite these legal victories, Black Americans have continued to face pervasive discrimination, racism, and violence in all aspects of society. "Nikki-Rosa" addresses one such form of ongoing discrimination, in examining how much white society

distorts and misrepresent Black Americans' actual experiences. However, the poem crucially centers the speaker's perspective and understanding of her own life. In doing so, it implicitly suggests that these distorting narratives don't have power over the speaker, and that what *does* have power is the ongoing strength of her identity and sense of community, connection, and love.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Collection of Work from the Black Arts Movement — Explore this special feature at the Poetry Foundation website to learn more about the Black Arts Movement. This collection includes a range of poems by Black Arts Movement writers, as well as podcasts and essays about their work. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/148936/an-introduction-to-the-black-arts-movement)
- Biography of Nikki Giovanni — Read about Nikki Giovanni's poetry and critical responses to her work in this biography at the Poetry Foundation. This page also includes links to other poems by the poet, articles that talk about Giovanni, and other related information. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/nikki-giovanni)
- The Black Arts Movement — Learn more about the history of the Black Arts Movement, and its connection to the Black Power Movement, in this article from the New York Public Library. (https://www.nypl.org/blog/2016/07/15/black-aesthetics-bam)
- The Poem Recited by the Poet — Watch Nikki Giovanni recite "Nikki-Rosa" in this video from 2014. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H3X2EwKgOk0)
- Nikki Giovanni's Website — Learn more about the poet's life and work at her website, which includes a chronology of important events in her life and a full list of her published works. (https://nikki-giovanni.com)

HOW TO CITE

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