

Song Lyrics/Poetry Analysis
Annotated Analysis (discussion starters)

Title *"What's Going On"*
Writers *Marvin Gaye, Al Cleveland and Renaldo Benson*

First, read the writers' biography. List two details that might have influenced the writing or your understanding of the song/ poem.

1. *Gaye, Cleveland, and Benson are African Americans; composers on Motown label, Benson was member of the Four Tops; Gaye had a religious and military background*
2. *These Motown artists became increasingly political in the late 1960s, particularly after Gaye's brother Frankie returned from Vietnam and could not find a job and Benson saw San Francisco police attack a group of hippies.*

As you read the song/poem:

- Underline parts that relate to historical facts, especially African American issues
- Circle words/phrases that stir up emotions
- Place a question mark next to ideas that you don't recognize and may need to research
- Place [] around parts of the song/poem that seem musical (call and response, rhythm, refrain, repetition, etc.)

After you read the song/poem, answer the following questions, quoting parts of the song/poem that led to your responses:

1. What historical background does a reader need to better understand this song/poem?

___ *Racial unrest of the 1960's— "picket lines," "too many of you dying," "brutality"* _____

___ *peace movement vs. Vietnam War or nonviolence vs. revolution in Civil Rights — "war is not the answer"*

___ *Gulf of Tonkin and LBJ's decision to increase U.S. presence in Vietnam — "we don't need to escalate"*

2. How does this song/poem relate to African American issues? Refer to the historical context and text of the song/poem.

___ *" picket lines" to protest discrimination in housing, employment, schools; improve pay and work conditions*

___ *violence against African Americans, police brutality leading to the riots — " Don't punish me with brutality"*

___ *Dr. King's acts of nonviolent resistance during the Civil Rights Movement — "come on talk to me"*

3. Look at the emotional words you circled. Are those emotions more negative, or more positive? Both?

What emotions do you think the writer wanted those words make you feel?

___ *" crying," "dying," "brutality," --all negative and common experiences of African Americans* _____

___ *" only love can conquer hate"— Dr. King's philosophy of the "beloved community"*

4. What musical qualities of the poem or song lyrics might influence the audience? How?

___ *Repetition—mother, brother, father—draws attention to the encompassing nature of the racial problems*

___ *Call and response— "right on"—expected to elicit audience participation* _____

5. Think about your responses to questions 2-4. What might the writer be persuading the audience to think or do? Write your responses in a sentence.

He wants mothers/brothers/fathers to "find a way" to resolve the issues peacefully and to "bring some loving' here today."

6. What did you learn by analyzing this song/poem?