

Name: _____

Class: _____

Rosa Parks

By Nikki Giovanni
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Nikki Giovanni is a well-known poet, writer, commentator, activist, and educator. She was one of the foremost authors of the Black Arts Movement and has won numerous awards. Her work ranges from covering topics on race, gender, the African American experience and social issues, to children's literature and critical commentary. In this poem, the speaker describes some of the important contributions that people have made to the Civil Rights Movement. As you read the poem, take notes on how the Pullman Porters' actions affect others.

- [1] This is for the Pullman Porters¹ who organized when
people said
they couldn't. And carried the Pittsburgh Courier and
the Chicago
Defender to the Black Americans in the South so they
would
know they were not alone. This is for the Pullman
Porters who
- [5] helped Thurgood Marshall² go south and come back
north to fight
the fight that resulted in Brown v. Board of
Education³ because
even though Kansas is west and even though Topeka
is the birth-
place of Gwendolyn Brooks,⁴ who wrote the powerful
"The
Chicago Defender Sends a Man to Little Rock,"⁵ it was
the
- [10] Pullman Porters who whispered to the traveling men
both
the Blues Men⁶ and the "Race" Men⁷ so that they
both would



[*"Poor Peoples March at Washington Monument and Lincoln Memorial, \[Washington, D.C.\]"*](#) by Unseen Histories has no known restrictions on copyright.

1. African American men who, beginning in the late 1860s, were hired by the Chicago businessman George Pullman to work on the railroads as porters. Though the porters were overworked and often suffered racial abuse, they would go on to form a workers union.
2. a lawyer and civil rights activist who served as the first African American Supreme Court Justice from 1967 to 1991
3. a landmark 1954 Supreme Court case in which it was ruled that racial segregation in public schools was unconstitutional and, therefore, unlawful
4. an African American Poet and teacher
5. a poem about a journalist visiting Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957, during the period when nine African American children were prevented from legally attending an all white school by angry mobs.
6. rhythm and blues musicians
7. a name given to a black man who strongly champions the rights of black people

know what was going on. This is for the Pullman Porters who smiled as if they were happy and laughed like they were tickled when some folks were around and who silently rejoiced in 1954 [15] when the Supreme Court announced its 9—0 decision that “separate is inherently unequal.” This is for the Pullman Porters who smiled and welcomed a fourteen-year-old boy onto their train in 1955. They noticed his slight limp that he tried to disguise with a doo-wop walk; they noticed his stutter and probably understood [20] why his mother wanted him out of Chicago during the summer when school was out. Fourteen-year-old Black boys with limps and stutters are apt to try to prove themselves in dangerous ways when mothers aren’t around to look after them. So this is for the Pullman Porters who looked over that fourteen-year-old while [25] the train rolled the reverse of the Blues Highway from Chicago to St. Louis to Memphis to Mississippi. This is for the men who kept him safe; and if Emmett Till had been able to stay on a train all summer he would have maybe grown a bit of a paunch,⁸ certainly lost his hair, probably have worn bifocals⁹ and bounced his grand- [30] children on his knee telling them about his summer riding the rails. But he had to get off the train. And ended up in Money, Mississippi. And was horribly, brutally, inexcusably, and unacceptably murdered. This is for the Pullman Porters who, when the sheriff was trying to get the body secretly buried, got Emmett’s [35] body on the northbound train, got his body home to Chicago, where his mother said: I want the world to see what they did to my boy. And this is for all the mothers who cried. And this is for all the people who said Never Again. And this is about Rosa Parks whose feet were not so tired, it had been, after all, an ordi- [40] nary day, until the bus driver gave her the opportunity to make history. This is about Mrs. Rosa Parks from Tuskegee, Alabama, who was also the field secretary of the NAACP. This is about the moment Rosa Parks shouldered her cross, put her worldly goods aside, was willing to sacrifice her life, so that that young man in [45] Money, Mississippi, who had been so well protected by the Pullman Porters, would not have died in vain. When Mrs. Parks said “NO” a passionate movement was begun. No longer would there be a reliance on the law; there was a higher law. When Mrs. Parks brought that light of hers to expose the evil of the system, [50] the sun came and rested on her shoulders bringing the heat and the light of truth. Others would follow Mrs. Parks. Four young men in Greensboro, North Carolina, would also say No.¹⁰ Great

8. a large stomach

9. a pair of eyeglasses where each lens has two parts, one for near vision and one for distant vision

10. a reference to the “Greensboro Four,” who were four young African American men who staged a sit-in at a

[55] voices would be raised singing the praises of God and exhorting us "to forgive those who trespass against us." But it was the Pullman Porters who safely got Emmett to his granduncle and it was Mrs. Rosa Parks who could not stand that death. And in not being able to stand it. She sat back down.

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lunch counter after they were denied service, because of the color of their skin

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. Which statement best expresses a theme in the poem?
 - A. African Americans who contributed to the Civil Rights movement were not always able to prevent people from being murdered.
 - B. African Americans from different cities spread confidential information that helped support the Civil Rights movement.
 - C. African Americans from different walks of life made important contributions to the Civil Rights movement.
 - D. African Americans who made important contributions to the Civil Rights movement found fame through their acts.

2. How does the use of repetition help develop the poem's tone?
 - A. The repetition helps remind us whom the poem is dedicated to, and develops a respectful tone.
 - B. The repetition helps remind us whom the poem is dedicated to, and develops a sorrowful tone.
 - C. The repetition helps remind us that the speaker is frustrated, and develops an unhappy tone.
 - D. The repetition helps remind us that the speaker is frustrated, and develops an angry tone.

3. Which statement best describes the relationship between the Pullman Porters and Rosa Parks?
 - A. Rosa Parks was inspired by Thurgood Marshall, who the Pullman Porters helped 'go south.'
 - B. Rosa Parks was inspired when she read about the news the Pullman Porters were spreading.
 - C. Rosa Parks was inspired by the thought of the Greensboro Four, who were in turn inspired by the Pullman Porters.
 - D. Rosa Parks was inspired by the thought of Emmett Till's murder, which the Pullman Porters prevented from being covered up.

4. Which of the following lines from the text provides the best evidence for the connection between the Pullman Porters and Rosa Parks?
- A. "This is for the Pullman Porters who organized when people said / they couldn't. And carried the Pittsburgh Courier and the Chicago / Defender to the Black Americans in the South so they would / know they were not alone." (Lines 1-4)
 - B. "This is for the Pullman Porters who / helped Thurgood Marshall go south and come back north to fight / the fight that resulted in Brown v. Board of Education" (Lines 4-6)
 - C. "This is about the / moment Rosa Parks shouldered her cross, put her worldly goods / aside, was willing to sacrifice her life, so that that young man in / Money, Mississippi, who had been so well protected by the / Pullman Porters, would not have died in vain." (Lines 42-46)
 - D. "Others would follow Mrs. Parks. Four young / men in Greensboro, North Carolina, would also say No. Great / voices would be raised singing the praises of God and exhorting / us 'to forgive those who trespass against us.'" (Lines 51-54)
5. How does the free verse structure of the poem help support the author's theme?

Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. In the context of the poem, how do people overcome adversity? How do the people in the poem deal with adversity? How does the role that people play in the poem collectively contribute to a larger cause? Have you ever been part of a group that collectively dealt with adversity? What was the role that you played in this group? How did it contribute to the group's objective?
2. In the context of the poem, how has America changed over time? Consider the poem's references to Rosa Parks refusing to leave her seat, the murder of Emmett Till and Brown vs Board of Education, and contrast this with the current climate and race relations within America today. How have things changed? In what ways have circumstances changed for the better, remained the same or even grown worse?
3. Why do you think the poet decided to name the poem "Rosa Parks?" Use specific examples from the poem, history, or other literature to support your views.
4. Consider the experience the African Americans face in the poem and discuss the following question: What does it mean to be resilient? How do you think the people in the poem demonstrated resilience? How have you had to demonstrate resilience in your life?