

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?