

Discussion Questions

“Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference” by Audre Lorde (1980)

1. Audre Lorde wrote “Age, Race, Class, and Sex” in 1980 partially to address racism within the feminist movement, and in it she uses strong language about racial oppression, sexism, ageism, and classism. Which of her points (if any) seem relevant in your life today? Which of her points (if any) seem outdated, in your experience?
2. Lorde notes, “I am constantly being encouraged to pluck out some one aspect of myself and present this as a meaningful whole, eclipsing and denying the other parts of the self” (120). She argues that we must integrate all the parts of identity in order to fully acknowledge human complexity and the intersecting modes of oppression that people must deal with in life. As you are reading *Giovanni’s Room*, note all of the different aspects of David’s identity. Which of these aspects place him in an “outsider” or “oppressed” role? Which align with the “*mythical norm*” Lorde describes on page 116? What greater insight does this intersectional analysis of his identity give us?
3. In her essay, Lorde writes, “For in order to survive, those of us for whom oppression is as American as apple pie have always had to be watchers, to become familiar with the language and manners of the oppressor, even sometimes adopting them for some illusion of protection” (114). What do you think she means by this? Identify and discuss a few instances in which David adopts the “language and manners of the oppressor.” Why do you think he does this?

Giovanni’s Room by James Baldwin (1956)

4. Examine the theme of entrapment and flight in *Giovanni’s Room*. Why does David go to Paris? What are his explicit (stated) reasons, and what do you find to be his underlying reasons? What is he running from, and how does this behavior pattern appear throughout the text? Does he succeed in his flight?
5. What role does race play in this text? What is the significance, if any, of the fact that David is a white character? How do you characterize Joey’s race? Giovanni’s? What gives you this impression? Considering Baldwin’s role in the struggle for Civil Rights and racial equality in the United States, speculate about the purpose behind these racial choices.
6. How does the text approach the controversial subject of homosexuality? Is it clearly advocating for the acceptance of homosexuality? Is there some underlying homophobia within the text? If so, where? Do you think these instances simply serve as character development, or do you think they reflect an internalized homophobia within Baldwin himself?
7. Look at Jacques’ conversation with David on pages 54-58 (the morning after David and Giovanni first meet and Jacques asks David about how he feels). What is Jacques trying to tell David? How does this conversation illuminate the theme of safety and risk? How does it function as a moment of foreshadowing?
8. What does Giovanni’s room represent in the text? How does it serve as a symbol or a metaphor? Does its meaning shift or change throughout the course of the novel?
9. What other themes and symbols do you find to be particularly interesting and/or important in the novel? Why do these stand out, and how can we connect them to the larger theme of the novel and/or the historical moment in which the novel was written?