Brown Girl Dreaming

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JACQUELINE WOODSON

Woodson was born in Ohio in 1963, the third of four children. When she was a child, her family moved to South Carolina and later to Brooklyn, New York, where Woodson spent her adolescence. Woodson has written over thirty books, mostly for children, ranging from picture books to novels, and has received numerous awards for her work. Woodson and her partner live in Brooklyn with their two children.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Brown Girl Dreaming takes place in the 60s and early 70s, during the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements. The Civil Rights and Black Power movements were both social movements that aimed to achieve equal rights for African-Americans. The Civil Rights Movement, lead by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. among others, focused on nonviolent protest as a means of ending racial segregation and discrimination. Thanks to the Civil Rights Movement, Jim Crow laws, which legalized race-based segregation in the South, were abolished. The Black Power Movement, strongly influenced by activist Malcolm X, advocated for socialist politics and black pride as means to improve the lives of African-Americans. Unlike the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Power Movement did not take an explicitly nonviolent approach.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Woodson has cited Virginia Hamilton's book *M.C. Higgins, the Great* among her major influences. Virginia Hamilton was an African-American author of young adult books who wrote over forty books in her career and earned the Hans Christian Anderson Award in 1992 for children's literature. Woodson also considers writer Mildred D. Taylor's novel *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* to be one of her early sources of writing inspiration. In *Brown Girl Dreaming* itself, Woodson directly references the work of poets like Robert Frost and Langston Hughes.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Brown Girl Dreaming*
- **When Published:** 2014
- **Literary Period:** Young Adult Literature
- **Genre:** Verse Memoir
- **Setting:** Ohio, South Carolina, and Brooklyn
- **Point of View:** First person narrative from Jacqueline's perspective

EXTRA CREDIT

Highly praised. Jacqueline Woodson won the Newbery Medal, which is one of the most distinguished literary awards in children's literature, and the National Book Award for *Brown Girl Dreaming*.

Film. One of Woodson's other young adult books, *Miracle's Boys*, was made into a mini-series in 2002 directed by Spike Lee.

PLOT SUMMARY

Brown Girl Dreaming follows the childhood of the author, Jacqueline Woodson, from her birth to around age ten. Jacqueline is born in Ohio, the youngest child of three, in 1963, during the height of the Civil Rights Movement. Jacqueline and her family are African-American. Her father, Jack, is from Ohio, and her Mama, Mary Ann, is from South Carolina. Prior to Jacqueline's birth and the birth of her sister Odella, Mama lost her brother, Odell.

Mama and Jack fight often, eventually causing Mama flee to the home of her parents, Georgiana and Gunnar, in Greenville, South Carolina with Jacqueline, Odella, and their older brother Hope. Eventually, however, Jack comes and begs for Mama's forgiveness, and Mama and the children return to Ohio. After a second try, however, the couple fights again, and Mama leaves Jack for good, taking the children back with her to Greenville.

The children adjust to life in South Carolina. They enjoy spending time with their grandparents, and become so close with Gunnar that they start calling him "Daddy." Gunnar works in a printing press and gardens on the side. Georgiana takes up "daywork" (housekeeping for white families) in order to make ends meet. Jacqueline enjoys South Carolina and spending time with her grandparents. Hope, on the other hand, has difficulty adjusting to the new climate and life without his father. Mama also seems discontent in Greenville, as most of her friends have moved elsewhere.

At the same time, the Civil Rights Movement touches their lives more and more. Jacqueline takes in all the ways that she and her family are discriminated against in South Carolina, from Gunnar's coworkers disrespecting him to segregated buses. In Greenville the children observe sit-ins in Greenville firsthand.

Mama takes a trip to New York City, leaving Jacqueline and her siblings with their grandparents. After a while, Mama returns to Greenville and informs the children and Georgiana and Gunnar

that she will be moving to New York and taking the children with her, much to Georgiana's dismay. The family spends the end of the summer together. Concerningly, Gunnar, a lifelong smoker, develops a persistent cough. Mama leaves for New York again so that she can find a job and an apartment before bringing the children there.

With Mama gone, Georgiana, a devotedly religious woman, encourages the children to participate more actively as Jehovah's Witnesses, spending every weekday afternoon except Friday at Bible study. Gunnar's cough worsens so much he begins to miss work. Eventually, Mama sends a letter telling them that she will soon be back to take them to New York, and also that she is pregnant. At last, Mama arrives back in Greenville with the new baby, a boy named Roman. The family bids Georgiana and Gunnar goodbye and travels together to New York City.

The family moves into a first apartment, but quickly moves out because it is decrepit and uninhabitable. They then move into the apartment below Mama's sister Kay's apartment. Initially, Jacqueline does not like New York City, and misses Greenville. Not long after the family moves in, Kay dies. The family moves again, to a place on Madison Street.

Jacqueline and Odella go to the same school and all the children attend services at the local Kingdom Hall (the name of the building where Jehovah's Witnesses attend services). Odella shines as a student in their new school, while Jacqueline has difficulties reading, but loves to make up stories.

Jacqueline's Uncle Robert moves to New York City, and spends lots of time with the children. Jacqueline begins to feel more at home in New York, but still misses her maternal grandparents.

Roman gets lead poisoning from eating the paint off the walls at the apartment, and so must stay in the hospital for an extended period of time. Jacqueline, Odella, and Hope go to Greenville for the summer, and Mama stays to take care of Roman. Jacqueline, Odella, and Hope find that Gunnar is even sicker than before. At the end of the summer, the children return New York, where Roman is still under hospital care.

At last, Roman is allowed to come home. For the last few weeks of the summer, Jacqueline plays with her new best friend, Maria. Maria's family is from Puerto Rico, and she lives on the same street as Jacqueline. During the school year, Jacqueline continues to engage with writing and storytelling, although writing is difficult for her. She finds books and poems that inspire her, and decides she wants to be a writer.

The next summer the children again return to Greenville, including Roman. Gunnar is gravely ill, and Jacqueline helps attend to his needs. In Greenville, despite the success of the Civil Rights Movement, Jacqueline senses that racial segregation still exists in practice, if illegally.

At the end of the summer, Robert takes the children back to New York City. At school that fall, Jacqueline reads more and makes her first book. A new girl named Diana moves in next door, and becomes friends with Maria and Jacqueline. Jacqueline gets jealous, but is soothed when, at Maria's brother's baptism, Maria refers to her as family.

One day, Mama gets a call that Robert is in prison. When Robert gets moved to a prison upstate, the family goes to visit him. In the spring, Georgiana informs the family that Gunnar is dying and they all fly to Greenville to say goodbye and attend the funeral.

After Gunnar's death, Georgiana moves to Brooklyn to live with the family. Jacqueline resumes her storytelling hobby, attends school, and continues playing with Maria. Robert is released from prison and has converted to Islam. The Black Power Movement gains momentum, and Jacqueline and Maria imitate the activists in the movement, learning about it from Mama, Robert, and the television. Jacqueline's teacher tells Jacqueline she is a writer, validating her dreams. The memoir ends with two poems in which Jacqueline discusses her beliefs and her imaginative writing philosophy, showing how, over the course of the memoir, Jacqueline has developed a sense of her gift for storytelling and of herself.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Jacqueline – *Brown Girl Dreaming* is told through the eyes of Jacqueline, a young African-American girl who loves to make up and tell stories. The book (written by author Jacqueline Woodson about her own younger self) follows Jacqueline from her birth through around age ten. Over the course of the memoir, Jacqueline moves with her family from Ohio to South Carolina and then to New York City, and Jacqueline must learn to reconcile various parts of her identity as they connect to these separate places. Jacqueline's family experiences various hardships and loss throughout this time, but as Jacqueline learns to harness her imagination throughout writing, it gives her resilience and hope.

Odella – Odella, or Dell, is Jacqueline's older sister. She is named after her Uncle Odell, who died before her birth. Odella is a voracious reader and an excellent student. Instead of playing playground games with the other children, Odella prefers to read whenever she can. Jacqueline and Odella go to the same schools, where Jacqueline feels that she is constantly compared to her sister since Odella is so smart.

Roman – Roman is Jacqueline's younger brother, and the youngest child in the family. Roman has a different father than Odella, Hope, and Jacqueline, and has lighter skin and straight hair. When he is a toddler, Roman eats the paint off the walls of their apartment and gets lead poisoning, causing him to be in the hospital for a summer.

Hope – Hope, Jacqueline's older brother, is generally quiet and

reserved, except when talking about his two favorite things: comic books and science. He is named after his paternal grandfather, Grandpa Hope. When the family first moves to South Carolina, Hope suffers from allergies and misses his father. Later he adjusts to South Carolina and then to New York. Hope enjoys experimenting with his chemistry set and playing outside with Jacqueline and the other neighborhood children.

Mama / Mary Ann – Mary Ann Irby is mother to Jacqueline, Odella, Hope, and Roman. After leaving Jack—Jacqueline, Odella, and Hope's father—she moves the children from Ohio to South Carolina and later to New York City. In New York City, Mary Ann, a single mother, works full-time to provide for her children. A quietly progressive figure, she partakes in the Civil Rights Movement and supports the Black Power Movement. During the course of the memoir, Mary Ann suffers the loss of two siblings and her father.

Gunnar – Gunnar is Jacqueline's maternal grandfather. He and his wife Georgiana live in South Carolina. He is a jovial spirit and enjoys maintaining his vegetable garden in his spare time. He has a close relationship with his grandchildren (especially Jacqueline), who live with him for a time and visit every summer after they move to New York. Gunnar frequently takes them out for ice cream, asks for their help gardening, and tells them stories. For most of the memoir, Gunnar works at a printing press. Later, he falls ill because of his lifelong smoking addiction. While Mama and the children are living in New York, Gunnar dies, and the family returns to South Carolina to attend his funeral.

Georgiana – Georgiana is Jacqueline's maternal grandmother. She and Gunnar live in South Carolina. Georgiana is a devoted Jehovah's Witness and an excellent cook. When Mama and her children come to live with her and Gunnar, Georgiana takes a job housekeeping for a white family across town to make ends meet. She ensures that her grandchildren participate actively in their Bible study and attend Kingdom Hall on Sundays. After Gunnar's death, Georgiana moves to Brooklyn to live with Mama and her children.

Diana – Diana is a girl of Puerto Rican descent who moves into an apartment on Madison Street and becomes friends with Maria and Jacqueline. Jacqueline becomes jealous of Diana and worries that she is taking her place as Maria's best friend, but Maria dispels these fears during her brother Carlos's baptism, when Maria invites Jacqueline, not Diana, to the family-only pre-party.

Jack – Jack is Jacqueline's father, after whom Jacqueline is named. Jack, who is from Ohio, dislikes the South because of the segregation and racism he experiences there. Mama and her children live with Jack in Ohio until Mama and Jack separate for good after a series of nasty fights. After that, Jacqueline does not see her father or hear from his side of the family.

Uncle Robert – Robert is Jacqueline's uncle and Mama's brother. Robert moves to New York while the family is living there. Robert is optimistic and generous, and he encourages Jacqueline's storytelling tendencies. Unfortunately, Robert is also involved in criminal activity, and one day is taken to jail. When Robert is later released, he has converted to Islam.

Aunt Kay – Kay is Jacqueline's aunt and Mama's sister, with whom Mama is extremely close. When Mama and the children move to New York, they move in with Kay and her boyfriend, Bernie. Aunt Kay dies from a fall not long after the family moves into the apartment below her. Mama, who was extremely close to Kay, takes her death very hard.

Grandma Grace – Grandma Grace is Jacqueline's paternal grandmother. Grandma Grace, like Mama, is from the South, and the two bond over how much they miss their home. After Jack and Mama separate and the family moves to South Carolina, they fall out of contact with Jack's side of the family, including Grandma Grace.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Maria – After Jacqueline moves to Madison Street in Bushwick, Brooklyn, she meets Maria, a girl whose parents are from Puerto Rico. Maria quickly becomes Jacqueline's best friend. Two play together frequently, and Maria teaches Jacqueline some Spanish. Maria and Jacqueline are so close that Maria considers Jacqueline to be family.

Uncle Odell – Uncle Odell is Mama's brother and Odella's namesake. Odell died after being hit by a car a few months before Odella's birth.

Dorothy – Dorothy is Mama's cousin and best friend. She visits Mama in South Carolina with her children.

Grandpa Hope – Grandpa Hope is Jacqueline's paternal grandfather, whom she sees frequently when she lives in Ohio. After the family moves to South Carolina, they fall out of touch with Jack's side of the family. Later, in New York, Jacqueline learns that Grandpa Hope has died.

Bernie – Bernie is Aunt Kay's boyfriend, who moves to Rockaway with Peaches after her death.

Peaches – Peaches is Aunt Kay's friend, who moves to Rockaway with Bernie after her death.

Ms. Vivo – Ms. Vivo is one of Jacqueline's elementary school teachers. She is a self-identified feminist. Ms. Vivo tells Jacqueline she is a writer and encourages her creative pursuits.

Gina – Gina is a classmate of Jacqueline's and a fellow Jehovah's Witness. Gina is more religious than Jacqueline.

Alina – Alina is classmate of Jacqueline's and a fellow Jehovah's Witness. Like Jacqueline, Alina is not very committed to her religion.

Cora and her sisters – Cora and her sisters are children who

live in Jacqueline's neighborhood in South Carolina.

Leftie – Leftie is a teenager in Jacqueline's neighborhood in Brooklyn who lost an arm in the Vietnam War.

Ms. Bell – Ms. Bell is MaryAnn and Gunnar's neighbor in South Carolina with whom they have a friendly relationship. During the Civil Rights Movement, Ms. Bell hosts secret meetings at her house.

Carlos – Maria's baby brother. Jacqueline attends the party for his baptism.

Mrs. Hughes – Mrs. Hughes runs the day school that Odella, Jacqueline, and Hope attend one summer in Greenville.

Ms. Moskowitz – Ms. Moskowitz is one of Jacqueline's teachers.

Ms. Feidler – Ms. Feidler is one of Jacqueline's teachers.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

MEMORY

As a memoir, *Brown Girl Dreaming* is both shaped by and concerned with memory—"memoir" comes from the French word "memoire," meaning memory. Through her attention to memory in *Brown Girl Dreaming*, Woodson shows how memory works, not only in her own life, but also in storytelling more generally.

An important thread of *Brown Girl Dreaming* is the exploration of how Jacqueline's relationship to memory changes as she grows up. As Woodson portrays it, people create and contain memory by actively retelling and recollecting events. The collapse of the distinction between storytelling and memory is embodied in Jacqueline's own tendency to refer to her family's stories as being memories themselves. So, in the world of the memoir stories are memories, and, on top of that, certain words, objects, and sensations evoke memory. To Jacqueline, the **smell of the air** or a word like "ma'am" can contain personal or historical meaning that makes it a kind of memory.

Memory is a dynamic element in Jacqueline's life that continually shapes her worldview. At points, and particularly towards the beginning of the book, Woodson portrays memory as a negative aspect of Jacqueline's life, as it is confusing, painful, and muddled. For example, memory's relationship to reality is not always straightforward: it obscures aspects of Jacqueline's personal history and prevents her from accessing certain truths. When Jacqueline first mentions memory explicitly in the book, she lists the contrasting ways that Jack, Mama, and Grandma Grace remember her birth. Each of these memories suggests that Jacqueline was born at a different time. Moreover, the memories focus less on Jacqueline and than on each person's own thoughts and feelings about that day. To Jacqueline, this is disturbing— the exact time of her birth is "lost again amid other people's bad memory," she says.

Memory not only impedes Jacqueline from establishing a concrete sense of self, but it also often triggers pain. Mama associates the word "ma'am" with traumatic memories of the oppression she has experienced, and, as a result, Mama refuses to let her own children say "ma'am." Another example of the pain caused by memory is Hope's insistence that Jacqueline is lucky not to remember the fights between their mother and father; by forgetting, Jacqueline escapes the pain that Hope experiences.

As the book goes on, however, Woodson tempers these negative associations with memory by showing how memory can also be beneficial. For example, when Mama returns to Greenville after her first fight with Jack, Woodson shows her reconnecting with her cousins over remembrances of stealing peach pies and illicitly swimming in a neighbor's pool. Memory enables Mama to feel at home again, suggesting the important role memory plays in promoting human connection and warmth.

As Jacqueline grows older, not only does her perception of memory become more positive, but she also begins to understand how memory works—she even becomes able to control and shape it, as is shown when Woodson describes Jacqueline deliberately committing to memory a moment in which Georgiana is brushing her hair. Jacqueline's burgeoning sense of memory as a tool that can be controlled develops in tandem with her sense of language and narrative, By the book's end, Jacqueline recognizes that harnessing control of memory is key to her self-actualization, because memory can be compiled into a narrative that simultaneously takes the power away from painful past experiences and propels Jacqueline towards her future. She states that, "every memory brings me closer and closer to the dream."

RACISM, ACTIVISM, AND THE CIVIL RIGHTS AND BLACK POWER MOVEMENTS

Brown Girl Dreaming focuses on the experience of growing up as an African-American child during the 1960s and early 1970s, a period of intense energy and organization surrounding questions of race and racial justice. The 60s were a turning point for race in America thanks to the Civil Rights Movement, which advocated for an end to Jim Crow Laws (laws that legalized segregation and racial discrimination) through nonviolent protest. The late 60s and early 70s also brought

forth the Black Power Movement, which grew out of the Civil Rights Movement, but focused more on black pride, strengthening black communities, and socialist politics. Unlike the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Power Movement was not specifically nonviolent. Through the work done during these two movements, America took major steps towards racial justice.

Jacqueline grows up in the middle of these two movements, and her life is profoundly shaped by race— mostly negatively. Racial prejudice constantly infiltrates Jacqueline's life and the lives of people she loves. It determines the space she and her family are allowed to occupy in stores and restaurants. It decides the streets she lives on and in what parts of town she is not welcome. It affects aspects of Jacqueline's self-image. Even after the success of the Civil Rights Movement and the fall of legalized segregation, racism still persists; for example, Jacqueline notices how, after the end of Jim Crow Laws, Mama still sits in the back of the now-desegregated bus. Mama does this because, despite the change in laws, she fears violence from the white people on the bus.

Racial prejudice not only hinders Jacqueline and her family by dictating which spaces they are allowed to occupy: racial prejudice and the legacy of slavery also result in economic disadvantages for Woodson's family. For example, when Georgiana must go back to work, the only job available to her as a black woman is housework for white families, which is hard work that is not especially well paid.

Since Jacqueline's daily life is so affected by race, her sense of her own existence is inseparable, not only from race, but also from her connections to the social movements attempting to change racist policy and mindsets. For example, as Woodson describes Jacqueline's birth, she announces the birth and the state of civil rights in the same breath, saying that the United States is "a country caught between black and white." In this beginning section of the book, Woodson also discusses Jacqueline's family's generational proximity to slavery, and lists some specific actors of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements (Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, etc.). By emphasizing the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements in the story of Jacqueline's birth, Woodson firmly anchors her story, and the racial conditions she experiences as she grows up, within the context of a greater African-American history and struggle.

At the same time, by linking the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements to Jacqueline's life, Woodson shows this pivotal moment to be more than just an abstract period in the timeline of American History; this was a time of revolutionary change for the better in the lives of real people. Woodson shows these changes by tracking the desegregation of stores and buses in the South and by showing the rise of Black Power while Jacqueline lives in New York. Thanks to desegregation and Black Power initiatives, Jacqueline's race can finally be a positive aspect of her identity, rather than simply a burden to bear.

Through her examination of activism as a part of people's daily lives, Woodson also shows that the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements did not have a monopoly on activism; while these movements created masterfully organized and publicized marches and protests, they were also bolstered by small, sometimes invisible gestures of defiance. Jacqueline, for example, refuses to shop at Woolworth's in New York because of their poor treatment of black customers in the South.

Woodson also shows how individuals' private obligations and constraints sometimes force them to submit to the racist status quo, arguably contradicting the activism they support. An example of this is when Mama sits in the back of the bus for fear of violence against her children. Although Mama strongly supports the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, she does not want to jeopardize her children's safety. Likewise, Gunnar and Georgiana's neighbor, Ms. Bell, hosts secret meetings in her house and wants to do more for the cause, but fears losing her job. Effectively, Woodson shows the reader a vision of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements that highlights the movements' effects on individuals, rather than just giving an abstracted, idealized history of it.

LANGUAGE AND STORYTELLING

Brown Girl Dreaming is largely about Jacqueline's early impulse towards storytelling and narration. For Jacqueline, writing becomes a way of coming to terms with many of the painful aspects of her life; storytelling empowers her to change her relationship to her own memories, denying them their power to cause her pain.

In Jacqueline's own life, other people's capacity for storytelling soothes her and helps her find catharsis. She finds works that especially touch her, like poems by Robert Frost and Langston Hughes, a short story by Oscar Wilde, and Georgiana's recitation of bible stories. In showcasing these works, Woodson is perhaps nodding to their influence on *Brown Girl Dreaming*—Woodson's choice to write in verse rather than prose, for example, might be reflected in Jacqueline's early affinity for poems and oral storytelling.

Over the course of the book, Woodson tracks Jacqueline's progress in acquiring language skills to show how Jacqueline becomes a storyteller herself. The reader observes as Jacqueline learns, with difficulty, to read and write by transcribing audio into her **composition notebook**. She desperately desires to be able to write her name "by [herself]." By emphasizing the individuality of this act, Woodson seems to imply that writing, identifying, and naming herself are key steps in Jacqueline's quest for self-actualization and identity.

As Jacqueline learns to express herself through storytelling, her narrative style is sometimes questioned or policed. Other

characters pay close attention to how Jacqueline speaks. Mama ensures that her children speak properly, avoiding words like "ma'am" and "ain't." Often, Jacqueline's style of speaking reflects the fact that her family has moved around frequently. At points, Southern children make fun of her Northern accent. Later, after spending time in the South, the Northerners mock her Southern drawl. Jacqueline's childhood dance between the North and the South causes her speech to be constantly scrutinized, provoking a narrative anxiety in Jacqueline.

By the end of the book, though, Jacqueline's Greenville accent has mostly transformed into a Brooklyn one, and Jacqueline seems more comfortable with her style of narration. The multiplicity of her influences, rather than being a burden, becomes a boon. In the last poem, Jacqueline states that there are "many worlds" for her to choose from, which reconfigures her varied experiences as endless possibility rather than crisis. Jacqueline's life as a writer allows her to think about her life in complex ways and find peace in contradictions.

In turn, Jacqueline's rich childhood allows her to write. Despite her initial difficulties learning to write, Jacqueline has mastered reading and writing by the book's end. When Ms. Vivo tells her "you're a writer," she validates one of Jacqueline's biggest dreams; Woodson clearly draws attention to her success in achieving that dream with the title of the memoir itself. The existence of Woodson's book is the clearest indication that Jacqueline has succeeded as a writer and storyteller.

THE NORTH AND THE SOUTH

Woodson examines what the North and the South mean to Jacqueline, and to African-Americans in the 60s more generally, as she follows Jacqueline's moves back and forth between the two regions. Throughout Jacqueline's childhood, she moves between the North (Ohio and New York City, to be specific) and the South (South Carolina). As she does so, both become home to her, but she develops different associations with each.

For Jacqueline, the South comes to connote a sense of belonging, comfort, and love. When she lives in Ohio and during her first few years living in New York City, Jacqueline seems to prefer South Carolina, where she is surrounded by extended family in a familiar setting. Jacqueline often uses positive words to describe the South Carolina landscape, and admires the smell of the South Carolina **air** and the rich red color of the **dirt**. Jacqueline is not the only character with this intense love for South Carolina. When she lives in Ohio, Mama longs for South Carolina as well, and talks about her homesickness with Grandma Grace, another South Carolina native.

The North, as Jacqueline describes it, lacks the sense of warmth and home that Jacqueline finds in the South. During Jacqueline's first few years in Brooklyn, the city feels gray, cold, and lifeless to her. She misses the red dirt under her feet, which has been replaced by pavement and broken glass. Once Jacqueline adjusts to the neighborhood, and as her home in South Carolina changes (especially after Gunnar's death), she begins to feel more at home in New York. Still, the South holds a special place in Jacqueline's heart. In her author's note, Woodson acknowledges that she still misses the South.

However, Jacqueline and her family have more possibility for upward social mobility in Brooklyn than in South Carolina, as they suffer less from overt racism and its corresponding economic effects. Mama moves to New York City from Greenville because of the multitude of jobs to be found there, and Jack, who is from Ohio, says that "no colored buckeye in his right mind would ever want to go [to the south]" because racism is so pervasive there. The racism of the South is outright dangerous for African-Americans; when the Woodson family travels on the bus from South Carolina, they only travel at night to avoid racial violence.

Jacqueline's ambivalence about the North and the South—feeling that the North is alien but more hospitable for African-Americans, and the South is familiar and homey but racially regressive—causes Jacqueline angst as she is torn between the two spaces. Jacqueline is often frustrated by the fact that her accent, which changes from Northern to Southern and back again, marks her as an outsider in both places. Early in the memoir, Jacqueline says she is "born in Ohio but the stories of South Carolina already run like rivers through my veins." This gives the reader a sense of Jacqueline as split between two homes. She uses "but" to connect the clauses, suggesting a tension between these factors of her identity. Jacqueline even asks herself at some point: "Will we always have to choose between home and home?"

By the end of the memoir, however, Jacqueline seems to have made peace with the fact that she has close ties to both the South and the North. Rather than seeing the South and North as two aspects of her identity that prevent her from uniform selfhood, Jacqueline begins to take up the idea that a multiplicity of home spaces could be a good thing. In the last poem of the memoir, Jacqueline states that "there are many worlds" and "you can choose the one you walk into each day." Jacqueline seems to be implying that the different spaces that she can occupy and feel at home in provide her with a rich diversity of experience, a multiplicity that doesn't need to cause internal tension. Jacqueline learns, essentially, that she doesn't need to limit herself to one home.

RELIGION AND SPIRITUALISM

Throughout *Brown Girl Dreaming*, religion features prominently in Jacqueline's life, though her views of religion expand and change throughout the book. Through the eyes of Jacqueline, Woodson explores the benefits, contradictions, and limits of organized and unorganized religion, contrasting various sects of Christianity

and Islam with more abstract forms of spirituality.

In her early years, after the family moves back to South Carolina, Jacqueline and her siblings practice as Jehovah's Witnesses under the watchful eye of her grandmother, Georgiana. Georgiana is extremely pious, and, despite Mama's will that the children be able to explore religion on their own, Georgiana encourages the children to attend Kingdom Hall, the Jehovah's Witness church. After Mama leaves for New York, Georgiana intensifies the children's religious education, structuring their lives around bible study, services, and trips to proselytize to neighbors.

Jacqueline follows Georgiana's routine without resistance, and it is through religion, in the form of Bible stories, that Jacqueline first begins to understand her love of storytelling. Still, Jacqueline fails to grasp the meaning of the religion she follows, and she worries about the ethics of some of the teachings of Jehovah's Witnesses. This is particularly apparent in Jacqueline's dismay over the idea that people who do not attend services will be unable to access heaven; Gunnar, an extremely kind, loving person, does not attend church, which sows doubt in Jacqueline about her religion's inflexibility. In Gunnar, she sees an alternative example of morality—one in which people, rather than the institution of the church, come first.

Jacqueline's doubts continue to grow over the course of the book: she wonders why women cannot give the sermon in church, she is disturbed when an elderly woman interested in the religion is left out because she cannot afford the cost of the pamphlets, and Jacqueline feels excluded from her peers by not being allowed to participate in the pledge of allegiance and birthday celebrations. As Jacqueline realizes that she is not a true believer, though, she encounters other, alternative forms of religion in New York. She meets Maria, who practices a different sect of Christianity. She also observes her mother's spiritual practice; Mama does not attend services, but instead favors more abstract forms of spirituality, like a belief in fate. Later, after Robert is released from prison, Jacqueline observes him practicing Islam, and is especially enthralled by the idea of Mecca as a faraway, imagined space.

As Jacqueline comes in contact with different theological inclinations, she forms a set of beliefs that she enumerates in the second to last poem. These beliefs include, among other things, God, the Bible, the Qur'an, Christmas, the city, the South, Black people, good friends, Brooklyn, the future, and the present. For Jacqueline, this combination of aspects of different religions and seemingly secular things isn't a contradiction—all the elements complement each other. By showing Jacqueline's journey away from a strict, organized form of religion and her turn towards a more eclectic, pluralist spirituality, Woodson suggests her support for the latter as a model of a healthy spiritual life.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

DIRT AND AIR

Throughout *Brown Girl Dreaming*, Jacqueline refers to the soil in South Carolina, contrasting it with the streets of Ohio and New York. Likewise, Jacqueline and Mama discuss how the air in South Carolina smells distinct from the air in New York. The red dirt and the smell of the South Carolina air symbolize a sense of home for Jacqueline, who loves Greenville. It also reminds her of Gunnar, since he worked so much with the soil when gardening, and in turn of Georgiana. When Jacqueline moves to New York City, she thinks of the dirt and air of South Carolina with longing and despair. Eventually, however, Jacqueline learns to love New York City as well, and to appreciate the paved streets and city air.

COMPOSITION NOTEBOOK

In New York, Jacqueline receives a composition notebook. The smell and sound of the pages and the look of the cover immediately enrapture Jacqueline. As the memoir progresses, Jacqueline learns to write her full name in the composition notebook. She goes on to transcribe audio she hears on the radio or television into the notebook, helping her learn to read. Later, Jacqueline writes original stories and poems in the notebook. Seeing Jacqueline's relationship to the notebook develop allows the reader to track Jacqueline's progress as a writer and a storyteller. The notebook also symbolizes Jacqueline's expansive freedom of imagination, which allows her to escape from the painful aspects of her life.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Nancy Paulsen Books edition of *Brown Girl Dreaming* published in 2014.

Part 1 Quotes

I am born on a Tuesday at University Hospital
Columbus, Ohio,
USA–
a country caught

between Black and White.

Related Characters: Jacqueline (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is the opening two stanzas of the memoir, from the poem "february 12, 1963," in which Woodson announces the fact of her birth. The title of the poem includes the date of her birth, while the quote itself gives information about the day of the week and the place where she was born.

Jacqueline's birth in Ohio becomes significant later, as she is pulled between her homes in the North and her home in the South. When Woodson says she is born in the USA, she goes on to describe it as a "country caught / between Black and White." Significantly, Woodson acknowledges the country's racial tension in the same line in which she states the fact of her birth, suggesting that the two are deeply, inextricably linked. The line could also be read as having a double meaning— that not only is the country caught in a time of racial strife, but also that it exists in a muddled gray-area regarding the status of race. In this first stanza of the poem, Woodson's attention to place foreshadows the fact that place, and the tension within and between places, will go on to be a significant theme of the book.

My birth certificate says: Female Negro
Mother: Mary Anne Irby, 22, Negro
Father: Jack Austin Woodson, 25, Negro

Related Characters: Jacqueline (speaker), Jack, Mama / Mary Ann

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

Woodson describes her birth certificate in the second poem of the memoir, "second daughter's second day on earth." This quote is significant because it purports to be a transcription of how the birth certificate itself reads. Shockingly to modern readers, Jacqueline's race and the race of her parents are written on the birth certificate, using the out-of-date term "negro."

The presence of Jacqueline's race on a legal, medical document suggests that her race is an objective medical fact, rather than a societally imposed one. The certificate's racial category shows both how Jacqueline is racialized from the very moment of her birth, and how that racialization, even in a Northern state, is conducted through the government and the medical community. Later in the poem, Woodson lists the Civil Rights activism occurring at the time of Jacqueline's birth; knowing the text of Jacqueline's birth certificate highlights the need for such activism.

My time of birth wasn't listed
on the certificate, then got lost again
amid other people's bad memory.

Related Characters: Jacqueline (speaker), Mama / Mary Ann, Grandma Grace, Jack

Related Themes:

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

In the poem that this quote comes from, "other people's memory," Jacqueline listens to various members of her family describe the day of her birth. Each of them (her mother, father, and grandmother) describe the event differently, and through the lens of their own experience—Mama talks about being mad that Jack was not there, Jack insists he was present, etc.

Jacqueline's birth takes place in the context of other people's already complicated lives. This frustrates Jacqueline, because it prevents her from knowing some objective facts about her existence, such as her birth time. The discrepancy also initiates the reader into the frustrations of memory; Jacqueline must rely on other people's unreliable experience and perception to glean basic facts of her own identity, and she is upset that she cannot access these experiences in her own right.

You can keep your South...
The way they treated us down there,
I got your mama out as quick as I could...
Told her there's never gonna be a Woodson
that sits in the back of a bus.

Related Characters: Jack (speaker), Mama / Mary Ann

Related Themes:

Page Number: 29

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote from "journey," Jack discusses his aversion to the South, which he sees as a place that he "saved" Mama from. Jack's hatred for the South conflicts with Mama's love for it—she considers it to be home. Jack's reason for hating the South, as he suggests here, is that he feels it more racist than the North. Jack sees the South, where Jim Crow Laws (laws that legalize racial segregation) are still in place, as a terrible, oppressive place to live as a black person. Jack does not want his children to be subjected to the overt, traumatic racism he knows exists in the South.

Although Jack means well, it becomes clear as the book progresses that Jack did not really save Mama from anything, and that Mama was not someone who needed saving. Mama loves her home in South Carolina. Rather than condemning the South as an uninhabitable place for black people, Woodson goes on to show how the South becomes a home for Mama and her children despite its difficulties.

"We're as good as anybody.

Related Characters: Mama / Mary Ann (speaker), Grandpa Hope, Odella, Jacqueline

Related Themes:

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

Mama speaks this quote in "greenville, south carolina, 1963," after she walks to the back of the bus and sits down with her children. The family, minus Jack, is on their way to visit Mama's parents in South Carolina, where bus segregation is still in effect. Mama follows the rule, likely fearing violence and wanting to protect her children.

Still, Mama's whispered reassurance suggests that she also fears that her children will internalize the racism they experience, and think that the fact that Mama followed the law means she believes they are inferior to the white people who sit in the front. This quote exemplifies a painful decision that African-Americans had to make under explicitly racist laws— by following the law, Mama fears she will make it seem like she agrees with the laws, but she also cannot afford to risk her safety or that of her children to defy them.

This is a powerful illustration, too, of the stakes involved when Civil Rights protestors like Rosa Parks actually did decide to upend their lives in order to protest an unjust law. While Parks is a hero for her activism, Mama is also courageous in her navigation of complex choices in order to raise her children safely.

Part 2 Quotes

"I'm not ashamed…cleaning is what I know. I'm not ashamed if it feeds my children.

Related Characters: Georgiana (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 55

Explanation and Analysis

Georgiana is referring here, in the poem "daywork," to her new job as a housekeeper for a white family. In order to provide for the household, which newly includes Mama and her children, Georgiana, who already works as a part-time teacher, has to take on the additional work. Many other black women also do daywork, but the job is extremely physically demanding, and leaves Georgiana with sore feet, as well as a bruised sense of dignity.

Indeed, Georgiana's repeated and unprovoked insistence that she is not ashamed of the daywork gestures towards the depth of her shame—she feels that the work is beneath her, and to do it takes an emotional toll. Georgiana is a very proud woman who dresses well and behaves elegantly, and her work cleaning the floors for white women who consider themselves too good for housework is degrading; still, Georgiana continues to do it, as it is a financial necessity and she wants her grandchildren to have a better life than she does. This is, like Mama sitting at the back of the bus, another example of a situation in which African Americans must choose to submit to a racist status quo in order to ensure the safety or financial security of future generations. It's a difficult bargain that must be made over and over again in different contexts throughout the book.

> *Don't ever ma'am anyone!*
> The word too painful
> a memory for my mother
> of not-so-long-ago
> southern subservient days…
>
> The list of what not to say
> goes on and on…
>
> *You are from the North*, our mother says.
> *You know the right way to speak.*

Related Characters: Jacqueline, Mama / Mary Ann (speaker), Grandpa Hope

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 69

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is part of the poem "the right way to speak," in which Jacqueline describes her mother's strict policies around language. Mama punishes the children when they speak in ways that she deems unacceptable or improper, even beating Hope with a willow switch when he says "ain't."

Among the words the children aren't allowed to say is the word "ma'am," a rule which Jacqueline understands to exist because Mama associates the word "ma'am" with painful memories of racism in the days when African-Americans were still expected to be subservient to whites. Mama's hatred for the word "ma'am" shows how words can carry intense, often painful memories.

The reader might conjecture that Mama's intense language policy comes from her fear that, as African-Americans, her children won't be taken seriously by white people if they don't speak "properly," or if they act too subservient and call them "ma'am." The intensity of Mama's focus on language is both a gift and a curse for Jacqueline. On the one hand, it is well-intentioned and it focuses her attention on language, which she grows to love. On the other hand, though, these rules limit the range of expression available to Jacqueline and alienate her from the norms of her peers.

> At the fabric store, we are not Colored
> or Negro. We are not thieves or shameful
> or something to be hidden away.
> At the fabric store, we're just people.

Related Characters: Jacqueline (speaker), Georgiana

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 90-91

Explanation and Analysis

Jacqueline makes this observation in "the fabric store",when she and Georgiana go to the fabric store together. On their way to the fabric store, Jacqueline and her grandmother walk past a number of stores where they don't shop because of segregation. The fabric store, on the other hand, is run by a friend of Georgiana's. The white owner treats them like any other customers, and Jacqueline's statement that there they are "not Colored or Negro" at the fabric store shows how race affects all of Jacqueline's experiences, even at the mundane level of fabric shopping. Race functions in Jacqueline's life primarily as an exclusionary force, one that makes her feel othered. She associates the concept of race with people mistrusting her or making her feel ashamed.

Moreover, when Jacqueline says that in the fabric store they are not "colored or negro," she suggests that the ideas of being "colored" or "negro" are separate from her skin color, as her skin color doesn't change when she enters the store but her racial status does. In other words,Jacqueline's observation suggests that the idea of race is a construction related to, but not inherent to, differences in skin pigmentation. At the fabric store, Jacqueline says, she and Georgiana can be "just people," which implies that Jacqueline understands the possibility of living in a world where brown skin doesn't mean being viewed differently.Conversely, this passage underscores that the circumstances when Jacqueline and her family are viewed as "colored" or "negro" are essentially dehumanization.

> In downtown Greenville,
> they painted over the WHITE ONLY signs,
> except on the bathroom doors,
> they didn't use a lot of paint
> so you can still see the words, right there
> like a ghost standing in front
> still keeping you out

Related Characters: Jacqueline (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 92

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote from "ghosts," which constitutes an entire poem, Jacqueline looks at a segregation sign that has been painted over. Jacqueline's ambiguous use of "they" makes it unclear who actually painted over the sign— it's possible that legislation has made segregation illegal everywhere except bathrooms, or that the signs have been painted over in protest of Jim Crow laws that still stand. Either way, Jacqueline can still see the paint underneath declaring "white only," which she describes as "like a ghost...still keeping you out."

Jacqueline senses that, although the sign has been painted over in an attempt to cover it, the effect of the sign lingers. The sign could be read as a metaphor for the fact that, even though the country is undergoing legislative change, black people still face violence and derision from the white people around them if they stop following the norms of segregation that were so long in place. It also shows the power of language itself; even the suggestion of this language can effectively keep people out, despite the fact that no one is watching.

Retelling each story.
Making up what I didn't understand
or missed when voices dropped too low, I talk
until my sister and brother's soft breaths tell me
they've fallen
asleep.

Then I let the stories live
inside my head, again and again
until the real world fades back
into cricket lullabies
and my own dreams.

Related Characters: Jacqueline (speaker), Grandpa Hope, Odella

Related Themes:

Page Number: 99

Explanation and Analysis

Jacqueline narrates this quote from "grown folks' stories" after she and her siblings have been sitting on the stairs, illicitly listening to their grandparents talk with friends on the porch. Jacqueline, Hope, and Odella quietly absorb the gossip that their grandparents wouldn't want them to hear. Afterward, Jacqueline continues to think about the stories, and describes herself filling in the stories' gaps. Meanwhile, Hope and Odella fall asleep, which indicates that Jacqueline' storytelling fascination is not a universal interest inherent to all children, but rather a specific proclivity of Jacqueline's.

Here, Woodson shows Jacqueline beginning to practice storytelling and understand its mechanics, an understanding made clear by her ability to add to the stories the contents of her own imagination and vision. This exercise clearly excites Jacqueline, for whom the stories seem alive, and it marks important development for her as a storyteller. Jacqueline finding inspiration in music, which recurs throughout the text, comes into play here as well, since she describes fading out of the story and back into the "cricket lullabies" of the South Carolina night.

And I imagine her standing
in the middle of the road, her arms out
fingers pointing North and South:

I want to ask:
Will there always be a road?
Will there always be a bus?
Will we always have to choose
between home

and home?

Related Characters: Jacqueline (speaker), Mama / Mary Ann

Related Themes:

Page Number: 104

Explanation and Analysis

When Mama indicates to the children in "halfway home # 1" that she intends to eventually take them with her to New York to start a new life, Jacqueline is confused. This quote exemplifies the sense that Jacqueline has of being pulled between different places: the North and the South, Ohio, Greenville, and eventually Brooklyn. Jacqueline imagines her mother standing in the middle of a road pointing in different directions, which highlights the confusion that Jacqueline feels, and her sense of being lost.

Jacqueline's many desperate but unspoken questions also give the reader a sense of how unsettling moving is for her. "Will we always have to choose between home and home?" Jacqueline thinks, suggesting the pain of this choice. Interestingly enough, it is not Jacqueline who is actually

choosing— it is her mother. Although Jacqueline frames this move as a choice, much of Jacqueline's discomfort might come from the fact that, as a child, she has little control over decisions about her life. Though Jacqueline will not be able to control the circumstances of her life, she will eventually learn to control the narratives through which she understands these confusing decisions and situations, which gives her some peace.

❝ But I want the world where my daddy is
and I don't know why
anybody's God would make me
have to choose.

Related Characters: Jacqueline (speaker), Gunnar

Related Themes:

Page Number: 123

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote from "two gods, two worlds," Jacqueline struggles with her understanding of religion and morality. Gunnar, with whom Jacqueline is extremely close (and who is a very kind, moral person) does not attend Kingdom Hall with the rest of the family. According to what Jacqueline learns as a Jehovah's Witness, failing to attend church means that Gunnar will not go to heaven. Jacqueline does not understand this, and she insists that she does not want to go to heaven if it means Gunnar won't be there.

Woodson shows Jacqueline beginning to doubt her religion because of its strict rules that she sees as morally untenable— how could a good person like her grandfather deserve to be barred from heaven just because he didn't go to church? Jacqueline feels caught between these two threads of spiritual thought: the organized religion that Georgiana clings to, and Gunnar's insistence that being a good person is enough. Despite her ambivalence, though, the quote makes clear Jacqueline's inclination; she doesn't identify with a God that would make her choose between heaven and someone she loves. This marks a development in Jacqueline's discovery of her own ethics and identity.

Part 3 Quotes

❝ Sometimes, I lie about my father.
He died, I say, *in a car wreck* or…
He's coming soon…
if my sister's nearby she shakes her head. Says,
She's making up stories again. Says,
We don't have a father anymore.
Says,
Our grandfather's our father now.
Says,
Sometimes, that's the way things happen.

Related Characters: Jacqueline (speaker), Odella

Related Themes:

Page Number: 170

Explanation and Analysis

Jacqueline, now in New York, notices in "sometimes" that their family is one of only two fatherless families on their street. The other family's father died, and so Jacqueline begins to say the same, telling people their father died in various accidents, or inventing other reasons why they don't live together. These inventions are more appealing to Jacqueline than the fact of her parent's separation, which echoes Odella's remark suggesting that her memories of their parents fighting are painful. Jacqueline, though not burdened by these memories, seems to be ashamed of the fact that their father doesn't live with them, and she feels painfully different from her peers because of it.

For Jacqueline, using her imagination to think of different possible realities is a way of escaping from the pain that her reality causes her. The reader sees how Jacqueline uses storytelling to avoid pain and construct realities that she finds more comfortable, a coping mechanism that she will continue to use throughout the memoir.

Odella, however, exposes Jacqueline's storytelling, clearly believing that it is better to face the truth. Odella prefers to respond to questions about their father directly but euphemistically, without referring directly to their parents fighting. Woodson seems ambivalent about these two different ways of coping with painful subject matter, never clearly establishing which she thinks is healthier.

It's hard to understand
the way my brain works— so different
from everybody around me.
How each new story
I'm told becomes a thing
that happens,
in some other way to me...!

Keep making up stories, my uncle says.
You're lying, my mother says.

Related Characters: Jacqueline (speaker), Uncle Robert, Mama / Mary Ann

Related Themes:

Page Number: 176

Explanation and Analysis

Jacqueline's storytelling continues to be a big part of her life, but it becomes a problem when she fails to distinguish between storytelling and lying. Some adults in Jacqueline's life, like Mama, find Jacqueline's storytelling concerning, believing it to be dishonest and thinking it will lead to trouble. Robert, on the other hand, is amused by Jacqueline's stories, and encourages her to keep up her habit.

Jacqueline doesn't seem to understand the problem with storytelling/lying, or the source of her mother's anger. Here in the poem "believing," The difference in the ways that adults respond to Jacqueline cause her to wonder if her brain works differently from other people's—an idea that could be alienating or exciting, or both. This quote shows Jacqueline's confusion and angst as she is unsure of whether to be proud of her talent or ashamed of her difference; she is struggling to decide whether storytelling is a gift or a burden, and the adults in her life can provide her no clarity. This is a pivotal moment in her intellectual development, as she must make a decision about her values that will, no matter what, defy the advice of someone she loves.

Our feet are beginning to belong in two different worlds—
Greenville
and New York. We don't know how to come
home and leave
home
behind us.

Related Characters: Jacqueline (speaker), Mrs. Hughes, Grandpa Hope, Odella

Related Themes:

Page Number: 194-195

Explanation and Analysis

With Roman sick in the hospital, Jacqueline, Hope, and Odella visit Greenville for the summer without Mama or their little brother. Since Gunnar is sick and Georgiana has to work, the children spend their days at a daycare run by Mrs. Hughes, where they are bullied for their accents. Jacqueline narrates this quote from "mrs. hughes's house" after Odella gets in a fight with the other children.

This quote underlines the anxiety Jacqueline feels about her two different homes, and how shuttling between New York and Greenville makes her feel displaced, as if she doesn't fully belong anywhere. The reader sees the children once again caught between the North and the South, and, significantly, it is the children's language use and their accents that reveal their difference from others. Though language is often a useful tool for Jacqueline, it also alienates her from others. It is through these moments of difficulty that Jacqueline must learn to protect her love of language from some of the negative associations that she has with speaking, an assertion of will that helps to define her own values and identity.

Part 4 Quotes

Is that what you want us to call you?

I want to say, *No, my name is Jacqueline*
but I am scared of that cursive *q*, know
I may never be able to connect it to *c* and *u*
so I nod even though
I am lying.

Related Characters: Jacqueline, Ms. Moskowitz (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 218

Explanation and Analysis

This situation described in "late autumn" takes place during class, when Jacqueline and the rest of the children are asked to write their names on the board. Jacqueline writes her name easily in print, but when asked to write it in cursive, she opts for "Jackie" instead of "Jacqueline," unsure

of how to write the cursive "q."

In this quote, Woodson shows the reader how Jacqueline's language skills limit her ability to express herself, and how this limitation in self-expression affects her identity. Throughout the memoir, the concept of naming and being able to write one's own name recurs as a trope that is linked to self-actualization— in the book, naming is a form of identity-making. The fact that Jacqueline changes her name because of her difficulties writing shows how her language skills affect and change her identity. It also shows her deep insecurity about her inability to master language, which is a form of power.

Words come slow to me
on the page until
I memorize them, reading the same books over
and over, copying
lyrics to songs from records and TV commercials,
the words settling into my brain, into my memory.
Not everyone learns
to read this way— memory taking over when the rest
of the brain stops working,
but I do.

Related Characters: Jacqueline (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 221-222

Explanation and Analysis

Jacqueline narrates this quote from "writing #2" as she and her mother are sitting in the kitchen listening to the radio. Jacqueline writes down the lyrics to the song that is playing in her composition notebook to help her learn to write.

Jacqueline's determination to write, and her frustration with not being able to, is palpable in this quote as she lists the various audio sources from which she writes down words: the television, songs, etc. It's clear, then, that Jacqueline's difficulty with writing is not a lack of comprehension or curiosity. Woodson shows the reader that Jacqueline is aware that her learning style differs from most people, but, unlike in earlier poems (where Jacqueline's differences from others made her uncomfortable), Jacqueline ends the poem firmly and confidently, stating "but I do."

Woodson again shows the reader how Jacqueline's experience of language is deeply connected to orality and memory, which is also reflected in Woodson's choice to write the memoir in verse.

If someone had taken
that book out of my hand
said, *You're too old for this*
maybe
I'd never have believed that someone who looked like me
could be in the pages of the book
that someone who looked like me
had a story.

Related Characters: Jacqueline (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 228

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote from "stevie and me," Jacqueline contrasts the books that she is assigned at school with the books she enjoys at the library, where she is allowed to pick out whatever she wants. School is difficult for Jacqueline, who learns differently than everyone else, but Jacqueline becomes extremely excited to find a book that features a black boy as the protagonist. Though the book is potentially below her reading level, the content of it resonates deeply with Jacqueline, which emphasizes that Jacqueline is still learning and growing despite her difficulty with reading.

More significantly, Woodson seems here to be commenting on the lack of diversity in the books assigned to children in school, and the need for representations in popular media that validate the experiences, identities, and abilities of children of color. Jacqueline's lack of enthusiasm for the books she reads in school is partially due to the fact that she does not identify with the white characters in the books, and part of her lack of confidence in her own abilities as a storyteller is due to her rarely having seen a person of color telling their own story. Woodson suggests that giving students books with characters they can identify with shows children that they are valuable and important, like when Jacqueline realizes for the first time that "someone who looked like me had a story."

It's hard *not* to see the moment—
my grandmother in her Sunday clothes, a hat
with a flower pinned to it
neatly on her head, her patent-leather purse,
perfectly clasped
between her gloved hands—waiting quietly
long past her turn.

Related Characters: Jacqueline (speaker), Georgiana

Related Themes:

Page Number: 238

Explanation and Analysis

Just before this quote from "what everybody knows now," Georgiana and Jacqueline had sat in the back of the bus, despite the fact that buses are desegregated. They did this because Georgiana did not want to cause trouble. Further, Georgiana, who is out shopping with Jacqueline, tells Jacqueline they are not going to go to Woolworth's; even though the store has been legally desegregated, the store clerks ignored Georgiana on her last visit.

This quote highlights the fact that legal segregation did not end racism in the South or elsewhere, and that racism and discrimination continued to be carried out in subtler, but no less painful, ways. The image of Georgiana waiting "long past her turn" in her best clothes is heartbreaking. The moment highlights how, although Georgiana is gracious, well dressed, and extremely dignified, it does not prevent the store clerks from behaving hatefully towards her.

This is perhaps Woodson's way of commenting on the damaging claim that, if black people are "respectable," white people will behave well towards them and racism will end. Woodson shows that, in fact, racism and the systemic oppression of African-Americans do not follow that logic, and that patience and silence in the face of racism have limited success in ending bigotry.

I love my friend,
and still do
when we play games
we laugh. I hope she never goes away from me
because I love my friend.
–Jackie Woodson

Related Characters: Jacqueline (speaker), Maria

Related Themes:

Page Number: 245

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote from "learning from langston," Jacqueline copies the structure and much of the language of a poem by Langston Hughes, but inserts details from her own life. The poem becomes an ode to the closeness of Jacqueline's relationship with Maria, who is the friend that Jacqueline references.

Jacqueline's imitation of Hughes's poem indicates that Jacqueline is beginning, not only to find literary works that she connects with, but also to imitate them in her own writing. Jacqueline's discovery of her writerly influences is an important step in her journey to become a writer because it gives her new forms and inspirations to fuel her self-expression.

This poem also shows how Jacqueline, although advancing in her relationship to writing and language, still has a long way to go. Jacqueline completely misses, or ignores, the relationship between form and tone in Hughes's work, changing the tone from sad to happy. Jacqueline's poem also shows that Jacqueline still has an underdeveloped sense of ownership over her work, as she is content to copy liberally from Hughes's poem instead of finding her own path to expressing herself.

We take our food out to her stoop just as the grown-ups
start dancing merengue, the women lifting their long
dresses
to show off their fast-moving feet,
the men clapping and yelling,
Baila! Baila! until the living room floor disappears.
When I ask Maria where Diana is she says,
They're coming later. This part is just for my family.

Related Characters: Maria, Jacqueline (speaker), Diana

Related Themes:

Page Number: 256

Explanation and Analysis

This quote from "pasteles & pernil" takes place during Maria's brother's baptism. Maria and Jacqueline eat on the stoop while her family dances inside. Recently, Maria's friend Diana has been making Jacqueline jealous because Diana shares Puerto Rican heritage with Maria, and Jacqueline is afraid that, consequently, Diana will surpass

her as Maria's best friend. When, in this quote, Maria tells Jacqueline that Diana is coming later because "this part is just for my family," she affirms Jacqueline's place as her best friend.

Moreover, by calling Jacqueline "family," Maria dispels Jacqueline's notion that Diana and Maria's shared racial and cultural identities will create a bond between them that Jacqueline, with her different racial and cultural identity, could not match. This quote shows Jacqueline how differences in racial and cultural identities do not have to mean emotional distance. Moreover, Maria's implication that Jacqueline is "family" undoes genetic notions of family and closeness. For Maria and Jacqueline's friendship, racial and cultural differences are not impediments, and, in fact, their bond is formed in part by sharing their differences with each other.

> *What's wrong with you?*
> *Have you lost your mind?*
> *Don't you know people get arrested for this?*
>
> *They're just words,* I whisper.
> *They're not trying to hurt anybody!*

Related Characters: Jacqueline, Uncle Robert (speaker), Maria

Related Themes:

Page Number: 261

Explanation and Analysis

As detailed here in "graffiti," After Robert catches Jacqueline and Maria writing their names in spray paint on a building, he is furious with them. Jacqueline and Maria, who see other children their age doing graffiti, do not understand why this is so bad.

Robert's anger clearly stems from his fear for the children. After asking "have you lost your mind?" Robert asks them "don't you know people get arrested for this?" The reference to legal trouble is significant because, in the rest of the memoir, Woodson hints at the fact that the legal system often treats people of color unjustly.

Jacqueline, however, has no understanding of this, and so she cannot figure out why Robert is so mad. To Jacqueline, the graffiti is just another form self-expression, of storytelling, and of language practice—acts which Robert has previously encouraged her to pursue. She does not understand how words could "hurt anybody," or that the context of her writing might lead her to get hurt.

This quote also showcases Jacqueline's naiveté. She has had many experiences in her life that suggest the power of words, from her mother's refusal to say "ma'am" to her own self-actualization through writing. Her ability to dismiss her graffiti writing as "just words," then, shows that she hasn't fully recognized the importance and power of language, a realization that will be crucial to her future maturity as a writer.

Part 5 Quotes

> I still don't know what it is
> That would make people want to get along.
>
> Maybe no one does.
>
> Angela Davis smiles, gap-toothed and beautiful,
> raises her fist in the air
> says, *Power to the people,* looks out from the television
>
> directly into my eyes.

Related Characters: Jacqueline (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 305

Explanation and Analysis

Through television and conversations with her mother and uncle, Jacqueline becomes aware of the Black Power Movement, which is gaining momentum in the United States. In this quote from "say it loud," Jacqueline returns to a question she asked Georgiana when they still lived in Greenville during the Civil Rights Movement; she wondered then what would make people stop being racist and want to get along. She says she still doesn't know what it is that would do that, clearly indicating that, despite the strides made under the Civil Rights Movement, there is still more work to do.

When Jacqueline suggests that "maybe no one" knows how to end racism and make people get along, she indicates that she has a level of skepticism towards the Black Power Movement. Still, she is called towards it and excited by it, as indicated by the way she is drawn to Angela Davis's image on the television. This marks a new phase of Jacqueline's self-actualization, both in her burgeoning pride about her

race (rather than insecurity about it), and in her ability to make her own moral choices.

> Some evenings, I kneel toward Mecca with my uncle.
> Maybe Mecca
> is the place Leftie goes to in his mind, when
> the memory of losing his arm becomes too much. Maybe Mecca is
> good memories,
> presents and stories and poetry and *arroz con pollo*
> and family and friends…

Related Characters: Jacqueline (speaker), Leftie, Uncle Robert

Related Themes:

Page Number: 306

Explanation and Analysis

Here in "maybe mecca," Jacqueline expresses her interest in Islam as she prays with Robert. While she has pulled away from her commitment to the Jehovah's Witnesses because of the contradictions and immoralities she sees in the religion, Jacqueline is nonetheless intensely drawn towards spiritualism in general. She loves the idea of "Mecca" that Robert teaches, and imagines it as a place where people, like her, go to escape painful memories. She also suggests that Mecca might represent the other happy things in her life at present, including good food, happy memories, family, and friends.

For Jacqueline, Mecca is also imagination and storytelling, which represent, to her, both passion and escapism.In being drawn to Islam instead of the Jehovah's Witnesses, Jacqueline reveals her increasing self-knowledge. She has always been drawn to situations that allow her to prioritize imagination over rules, and by choosing to pray with Robert she is allowing herself to explore her interests and intuitions instead of forcing herself into a situation that seems wrong for her.

> And all the worlds you are—
> Ohio and Greenville
> Woodson and Irby
> Gunnar's child and Jack's daughter
> Jehovah's Witness and nonbeliever
> listener and writer
> Jackie and Jacqueline
> gather into one world
> called You
> where You decide
> what each world
> and each story
> and each ending
> will finally be.

Related Characters: Jacqueline (speaker), Jack, Gunnar

Related Themes:

Page Number: 319-320

Explanation and Analysis

In the final stanzas of the final poem of the memoir, "each world," Jacqueline shows the reader her personal and writerly growth. Jacqueline, for whom so many aspects of her identity were in conflict throughout her childhood, seems to be at peace with the complexity of her life. Jacqueline indicates this by listing the various contradictions that comprise her identity (north and south, Jehovah's Witness and nonbeliever, etc.) and saying that they all gather "into one world called You." This suggests that she has become able to hold these different identities together at once without feel disturbed by the dissonance.

After often feeling overwhelmed by her lack of control, Jacqueline's narrative skill as a "listener and writer" allows her to decide how her story will go and what the ending will be. Clearly, Woodson, who is writing the story as an adult, has asserted complete narrative control over the story. The existence of the memoir itself speaks to Jacqueline's success in self-actualization, writing, and understanding her identity. It also shows that the ability to construct a narrative is a powerful tool for resolving and exploring the pain and complexity of a life.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PART 1: I AM BORN

february 12, 1963. In this opening poem, Jacqueline Woodson states the fact of her birth and where it took place (Columbus, Ohio). She situates her birth in the context of her family's history, describing the place of her birth as "not far" from where her great-great-grandparents worked as slaves. She also describes her birth in the context of the Civil Rights Movement, stating that the movement's purpose is to provide children with freedoms denied to their parents and grandparents.

In this opening poem, Woodson makes it clear that Jacqueline (Woodson's younger self, and the protagonist of the story) exists in the context of a greater struggle for racial equality. She does this by highlighting the fact of her ancestors' bondage and by noting the events of the Civil Rights Movement that are taking place when Jacqueline is born. By connecting the very first moments of Jacqueline's life with these struggles, Woodson is suggesting that the history and preexisting racial conditions of the United States will affect Jacqueline's life even from its first moments. In noting this, Woodson shows how the legacy of slavery has continued to affect the lives of African-Americans long after the institution of slavery ended.

second daughter's second day on earth. Jacqueline describes her birth certificate, which notes that she and her parents are "negro." She further ties her birth to the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements by relating it to different organizers and artists who are a part of the movements (like Malcolm X, Rosa Parks, and James Baldwin). Jacqueline then compares herself to Ruby Bridges, the first black child to attend an all-white school after it was desegregated.

Woodson further situates the reader in the racial climate of the 1960s when she describes the racial classification on her birth certificate. This shows the reader the way that Jacqueline is officially, legally racialized from the moment she is born. This underscores that racism in the 60s was institutional and governmental as much as it was interpersonal. Evoking the story of Ruby Bridges shows, too, that children like Jacqueline were not exempt from discrimination and vitriolic racism, and nor were they absent from Civil Rights activism.

a girl named jack. Jacqueline relates how her father wanted to name her "Jack," his own name, rather than Jacqueline. Jacqueline's mother (Mama) and her aunt, however, said it was not a suitable name for a girl. When Jacqueline's mother refused to name her Jack, her father left the hospital angrily and her mother named her "Jacqueline" instead.

This poem begins to show Jacqueline's relationship to family stories and memory. Because Jacqueline was an infant at the time that the event she recounts took place, she is obviously retelling a story that was told to her, not one that she remembers herself. The idea of memory's effect on storytelling—particularly the unreliability of other people's memories—later becomes an important theme in the memoir. Woodson also shows the reader early tensions between Jack and Mama, foreshadowing their separation.

the woodsons of ohio. Jacqueline discusses the history of her family on Jack's side, who believe they are the descendants of the relationship between Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings, who was the President's slave. Jacqueline notes how the Woodsons take pride in this legend, attribute their success to it, and like to recount it whenever they can.

Once again, Woodson connects Jacqueline's personal and family history to greater African-American history, and also, here, to the history of America itself. By including her family's legend that the Woodsons are descended from Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings, Woodson highlights how closely the proud mythology of America (represented by President Jefferson, author of the Declaration of independence) is tied to the horrifying institution of slavery (as embodied by Sally Hemings).

the ghosts of nelsonville house. In this poem, Jacqueline describes the ancestral home of Jack's family, a big, white house in Nelsonville, where her father grew up. She describes the rooms in the house and how the house used to be filled with children. Jacqueline looks at photographs of the house in its prime and the people in them (aunts, grandparents, uncles, her father). In these people, Jacqueline sees herself "beginning."

In this poem, Woodson shows Jacqueline, as she looks at family photographs, beginning to situate herself in the context of her family's own stories and reaching into the family's memory to look for clues to her own identity. The Nelsonville House, for Jacqueline, is the site of her relatives' childhoods, which then shaped their adulthoods, which later influenced Jacqueline's own childhood. Woodson also showcases Jacqueline's early imaginative powers, as Jacqueline pictures her relatives playing there as children.


it'll be scary sometimes. Jacqueline describes her great-great-grandfather, born a free man in Ohio in 1832. Jacqueline mentions how he fought in the Civil War and his name is on a memorial in Washington D.C. She notes that his son, her great-grandfather, was the first African-American in his white school. Mama tells Jacqueline to think of him whenever she is the only African-American in a group of white people.

Jacqueline learns, once again, how intimately her family history is tied with major events in American history. In this poem, Woodson also shows Mama teaching Jacqueline a survival strategy for coping with spaces in which she is the only black person. Mama tells Jacqueline to think of her great-grandfather— effectively showing her how to use stories as a source of strength. As Jacqueline grows up, storytelling will continue to be a source of catharsis and control for her when facing not only racial alienation, but also grief and pain.


football dreams. Jacqueline discusses Jack's youth playing football and his football scholarship to Ohio State. She describes how easy it is to get to the South from Ohio, but Jack says that no sane black person would ever want to go the South.

Here, Woodson shows that, because of the racism in the South, Jack harbors negative opinions about South Carolina. For him, the overt racism and segregation is so disturbing that he rejects the South entirely. This seems to be a source of tension between him and Mama, who is from the South and loves her home.


other people's memory. Jacqueline describes how various family members tell the story of her birth. These accounts differ greatly from one another, suggesting that she was born at different times and in different conditions. Grandma Grace believes she was born in the morning, while Mama remembers her birth in the afternoon and her father trying to arrive on time. Jack remembers her birth at night. Jacqueline feels that her birth has been lost in "other people's bad memory."

Here, Woodson shows the reader one of the ways in which memory can be problematic. As Woodson describes the three different ways that three of her relatives remember her birth, she highlights the unreliability of memory and the way that objective reality becomes lost to people's perceptions of what happened. Jacqueline, presumably hearing these memories recounted as a child, is upset by the ambiguity of the time of her birth. She implies that a part of her personal narrative is lost to this subjectivity and she resents this "bad" memory as a result. In this poem, memory is a problem for Jacqueline.

no returns. When Mama brings Jacqueline home from the hospital, her brother wants to "return" her since she is a girl.

This moment provides an element of comedy to the story of Jacqueline's birth. Again, Woodson cannot possibly remember this moment, and so it is constructed through the memories of other people.

how to listen #1. Jacqueline states that in her brain, sensations become memory.

Again, Jacqueline emphasizes memory as a central theme of the memoir.

uncle odell. In this poem, which takes place before Jacqueline's birth, Mama receives the news that her brother, Odell, has died after being hit by a car. Jacqueline imagines her mother's pain as a result of the news.

Throughout the memoir, Woodson catalogues the grief that her family experienced during her childhood. That Jacqueline is telling a story that took place before her birth implies that the sadness of Mama's loss of her brother still, in some way, affects Jacqueline's life as well.


good news. Odella, Jacqueline's older sister, is born several months after Uncle Odell's death. Jacqueline imagines her maternal grandmother, Georgiana, picking up the phone in South Carolina to hear the good news.

By discussing the happiness of Odella's birth right after the terrible sadness of Odell's death, Woodson evokes a sense of ambivalence that continues throughout the rest of the narrative. Like memory, the North and South, etc., all aspects of Woodson's childhood carry elements of both good and bad or mixed connotations.


my mother and grace. Jacqueline describes Mama's relationship with her mother-in-law, Jacqueline's paternal grandmother, Grace. Both hail from the same city in South Carolina, and they bond over this shared history.

Here, Woodson shows Mama and Grace's nostalgic longing for their childhood home in the South. As the two bond over their shared home, Woodson gives the reader a sense of what it's like to be alienated from familiar home spaces, a theme that continues throughout the book.

Meanwhile, Mama still mourns Odell's death as she nurses her new baby, Odella. Grace tells Mama the baby is a gift from God to replace her brother, but both know that despite this sentiment, the grief Mama feels cannot be abated.

When Grace tells Mama that Odella is a gift from God to replace Odell, Woodson shows the reader that religion and religious feeling are limited in their ability to relieve pain. Although the narrative of an all powerful God might seem helpful, it falls flat for Mama—as the memoir later shows, Mama does not find organized religion compelling.

each winter. Jacqueline describes Mama's winterly migration to her home in South Carolina to visit her family. During this time, Jack usually stays in Ohio, but Jacqueline and her siblings go with their mother. She thinks her mother will never be entirely at home in the North.

Woodson further emphasizes the distance between Jack and Mama when she describes how Jack does not go with the family to Greenville. Jack's hatred of the South and Mama's deep love for her home there become a source of tension. Mama is unable to totally adjust to her life in the North, and continues to be pulled home despite her many connections in Ohio.

journey. Meanwhile, Jack has no interest in the South, which he sees as a place rife with racist oppression. He does not want his children or his wife to have to experience that kind of struggle.

Again, Jack's aversion to the South is primarily due to the overt racism he experiences there, and the grief he feels knowing that his wife and children experience it too when they visit.

greenville, south carolina, 1963. Jacqueline describes Mama moving to the back of a bus with Hope, Odella, and Jacqueline in South Carolina, where segregation is still pervasive and black people must leave the front seats of buses open for white people. After doing so, Mama whispers to her children, "We're as good as anybody."

In this poem, Woodson shows the everyday consequences of legalized segregation in the South. Her family is affected by these racist laws—they are not just the stuff of history books. Likewise, Woodson shows how, out of a concern for her children's safety, Mama must comply with these racist laws. Mama's whispered reassurance to her children is incredibly poignant, as she tries to remind them they are "as good as anybody" in a society that constantly and systematically denies that fact.

home. Mama, Jacqueline, Odella, and Hope arrive at the home of Mama's parents, Georgiana and Gunnar, in South Carolina. Jacqueline's grandmother greets them by saying "welcome home," and her mother cries.

Until now, Woodson has only shown Mama to the reader as a person alienated from the place she feels most comfortable, and has only described the South as a place to be loathed or missed. Finally, the reader sees the home in the South that Mama left behind to go to the North with Jack, and this home is a place that is warm and loving.

the cousins. Still in South Carolina, Mama celebrates her birthday with her cousins. While listening to music and dancing, they reminisce about their childhoods spent playing together. Mama is extremely happy. As she dances with them, they tell her "you belong here [in the South] with us."

Mama is able to reconnect with people in Greenville through their shared memories of their childhoods, which shows that memory can be a positive, unifying force instead of a source of disagreement and division. Mama's sense of being at home in the South is cemented when her cousins assert that she "belongs" there.

night bus. Jack arrives in South Carolina to beg Mama's forgiveness for the fight that made Mama take her trip to South Carolina. He apologizes, Mama accepts the apology, and the whole family goes back to Ohio the next day.

When Jack comes to beg Mama's forgiveness, he comes in spite of his deep aversion to the South. Similarly, Mama, despite feeling so at ease in South Carolina, returns to the North with him. In a moment of unity, the two overcome their sense of foreignness in each other's territory in order to be together.

after greenville #1. Jacqueline describes the family getting ready for the trip back to Ohio. They pack food and clothes, Mama puts on lipstick, and Jack shaves. Then the family says goodbye to Georgiana and Gunnar. They board the night bus so that people who might mistake them for civil rights activists won't harass them.

After the descriptions of the family's preparations for travel, Woodson notes that the family must travel at night for fear of racial violence. This remark highlights the high level of hostility that white people harbored towards black people affiliated with the Civil Rights Movement. This hatred could be so intense that even black families with small children and no obvious links to the Movement had to fear for their safety in the South.

rivers. Jacqueline describes the Hocking River, which deviates from the path of the Ohio river before joining up with it again later. She imagines it saying "I'm sorry… I'm home again."

Woodson uses the path of the Hocking River as a metaphor for her mother's departure from, and later return to, the North with Jack.

leaving columbus. Jacqueline describes the final fight between her parents, which ended their relationship. Jacqueline notes that there was only one photo of them together, which was a wedding picture. She imagines what Mama looked like leaving him: proud and with her children, while Jack (whose skin reminds her of the "red **dirt** of the south") waves goodbye.

Woodson takes account of this definitive moment of her childhood—when her mother left her father for the final time. For Jacqueline, this not only means the end of her parents' relationship, but also the end of her life in Columbus and the beginning of her new life in South Carolina. Woodson foreshadows this new life in the South when she notes that Jack's skin was red like South Carolina dirt, an image that Jacqueline repeatedly returns to as emblematic of the South.

PART 2: THE STORIES OF SOUTH CAROLINA RUN LIKE RIVERS

our names. After their move to South Carolina, Jacqueline notes that people start to refer to her, Odella, and Hope in relation to their grandparents (saying, for example, they are "Georgiana's babies"). She also pays attention to how her grandmother says the names all in one breath, while Gunnar says them slowly.

Woodson shows Jacqueline's early attention to language when she describes the different ways that people refer to her in South Carolina. Jacqueline not only considers how people refer to her in relation to her grandparents, but also the specific sound these names and the speed at which they are said. Jacqueline's early interest in the sounds of words foreshadows her interest in poetry.

ohio behind us. Jacqueline and her siblings ask Mama how long they will stay in South Carolina, and their mother replies that she does not know. Mama tells them that she doesn't feel as at home in South Carolina as she did when she was younger and her siblings still lived there.

This conversation with Mama makes it clear that Mama's sense of being at home in South Carolina is waning. Although Jacqueline's own sense of belonging in South Carolina is tied deeply to the land (she refers again and again to the soil), Mama's seems more tied to people, and many of Mama's loved ones have moved North.

the garden. Jacqueline describes Gunnar's garden, talking about the promise the **dirt** holds for yielding vegetables and fruits. She notes that Gunnar only missed slavery by one generation. She mentions that, as the first free man of his lineage, Gunnar's father worked on a farm picking cotton, and so Gunnar grew up familiar with farm work.

In this poem, Woodson links Gunnar's favorite pastime, gardening, with the history of his family, and, disconcertingly, with the legacy of slavery. She connects his hobby with the fact that his ancestors worked picking cotton, even after slavery had ended. Woodson's connection between Gunnar's gardening and the legacy of slavery tempers the positive associations Jacqueline has with dirt. Like the South in general, it is both comfortingly familiar and deeply troubled.


gunnar's children. Jacqueline describes watching Gunnar come down the road from work while singing, a daily practice. She imagines his daughter, Aunt Kay, hearing him and thinking of home. When Gunnar is close enough, Jacqueline and her siblings run to him and climb on him playfully.

Woodson begins to show the extremely close relationship that Jacqueline has with Gunnar, with whom she shares many personality traits. Gunnar's singing enraptures Jacqueline, and makes her imagine her aunt listening along. Again, Woodson shows Jacqueline's attention to sounds and music, and how sounds help to trigger Jacqueline's imagination.

Jacqueline notes that she, Odella, and Hope call Gunnar "Daddy," because it is also what Mama calls him. Jacqueline describes his appearance, saying he is tall and handsome. Gunnar reminds his grandchildren, "Y'all are Gunnar's children."

Again, Woodson shows Jacqueline's close relationship with Gunnar. Importantly, she does this through language. When Jacqueline and her siblings call Gunnar "daddy," it suggests a much closer relationship than the average child has to a grandparent. Once again, Jacqueline pays special attention to the depth of feeling that original language can reveal.

at the end of the day. Jacqueline describes Gunnar's work at a printing press, where he is a foreman. The ink of the printing press obscures the race of the workers, but despite this, the white workers still call Gunnar by his first name instead of "Mr. Irby." Gunnar attributes this disrespect and others (like the fact that sometimes they don't listen to him) to the quickness with which the South is changing.

Woodson shows how, despite Gunnar's higher status in his workplace, race still negatively impacts him at his job. His coworkers' disrespect is revealed through language use— it is the fact that they call him "Gunnar," not "Mr. Irby," that shows their racist sentiments, along with the fact that they often don't listen to his directions. Gunnar's explanation for this— that the South is changing too fast—shows again that white Southerners' attitudes towards race are deeply regressive.

Jacqueline notes that each man who works at the press clocks out the same way, but only the African-Americans go back to Nicholtown. Nicholtown is populated exclusively by "brown people." Georgiana tells Jacqueline that racial segregation is how the South has traditionally been organized, but that times are changing. Jacqueline says that she is "happy to belong to Nicholtown."

Woodson highlights the way that, despite equal job responsibilities in the workplace, social and geographic segregation is rampant in the South. Although they share a workplace, African-Americans and white Americans don't live in the same places. Jacqueline seems to feel ambivalent about this social segregation— although it is clearly born out of racism, Nicholtown is also a place where she is surrounded by people like her, and where she feels comfortable and welcome.

daywork. Jacqueline describes the "daywork" (housework for white families across town) that African-American women do to make ends meet. Georgiana starts to do daywork two days a week to supplement her income as a part-time teacher now that she must also provide for her grandchildren. She dresses up in a hat and white gloves, and says "I'm not ashamed if it feeds my children."

Jacqueline's description of Georgiana's daywork clearly highlights that cleaning for white families is an act of desperation for her grandmother, rather than a choice she happily makes. Although Georgiana says she is not ashamed of the work she must do, her insistence on this fact, and the fact that she dresses so well to go to her job, seems to suggest the opposite— that cleaning up the houses of white families is, in fact, a job that makes her feel lowly. Woodson shows again how race affects the dynamics of work, and how necessity brings Georgiana to take a job that makes her feel racially debased.

When Georgiana returns from the daywork, she is extremely tired, and her body aches from the hard housework she has done all day. She tells Jacqueline and Odella to never do daywork, since she is only doing daywork so that they never have to. While their grandmother finally relaxes, Jacqueline, Hope, and Odella wash her feet in Epsom salts to reduce the swelling.

Woodson shows the reader how difficult and straining daywork is, and how much daywork pains Georgiana both physically and emotionally. Georgiana's hope that they will never have to do daywork shows how deeply upsetting she finds the job. Georgiana's physical discomfort because of her job cleaning for white families shows how racial inequality is a phenomenon that takes a toll, not only emotionally, economically, and socially, but also physically, on the bodies of African-Americans.

lullaby. Jacqueline describes the sounds in the South Carolina night—dogs, owls, frogs. The crickets, she says, are the loudest, and they continue after the other sounds have ceased, chirping what Jacqueline refers to as a "lullaby."

Once again, sounds and music fascinate young Jacqueline, and her special attention to them foreshadows her later forays into verse, as poetry is a form of writing that has a particular allegiance to sound and spoken language. The sounds of the South, which she describes as a lullaby, make Jacqueline feel comfortable.

bible times. Georgiana tells Jacqueline, Odella, and Hope about the Bible stories she reads each night before she goes to bed. When she tells them, for example, about Noah and the flood, Jacqueline and her siblings pepper their grandmother with questions. The story of Salome, one of the Bible's villains, scares them. Meanwhile, fall arrives in South Carolina, bringing a chill, but the house is warm and full of delicious food.

Jacqueline's fixation on stories and storytelling is clear again in this poem. Rather than simply focusing on sounds and words, though, Woodson shows a slightly older Jacqueline beginning to be excited by more complete forms of storytelling. It is significant that some of Jacqueline's first excitement over storytelling is linked to religion, as religion becomes an important theme in the memoir. Jacqueline vascillates between embracing and rebelling against religious narratives.

the reader. Jacqueline continues to describe daily life in South Carolina, noting how, from time to time, Odella disappears under the kitchen table to read. When Hope and Jacqueline try to distract her with playful noises, she ignores them.

Jacqueline's descriptions of daily life show how at home she has begun to feel in South Carolina. Odella, meanwhile, begins to become a foil to Jacqueline (meaning her character contrasts emphatically with Jacqueline's)—Woodson shows Odella reading (a fixation on written language), while Jacqueline becomes more and more fascinated with storytelling (spoken language).

the beginning. Odella teaches Jacqueline, age three, to write the letter "j." Jacqueline revels in the ability to write it, and looks forward to writing her whole name herself.

This poem describes Jacqueline's first attempts at writing. As she learns to write a "j," the first letter of her name, Jacqueline's excitement shows her intense desire to express herself through language.

hope. Hope isn't adjusting well to South Carolina, due to his allergies in the warmer climate and his homesickness. This reminds Jacqueline of Jack saying, "you can keep your south." Since moving to South Carolina, Hope has become withdrawn, taking refuge in comic books.

Although Jacqueline feels quite at home in South Carolina, Hope longs for the North, where he spent his early childhood, and for his father. His unhappiness in the South is reflected in his increasingly reserved personality. The family's pull between the North and South causes Hope pain and discomfort.

the almost friends. Jacqueline considers the other neighborhood children: a boy with a heart defect who listens to their stories and asks why they have Northern accents, Cora and her sisters, and three brothers from down the road. Georgiana won't let her grandchildren play with these other children, but they know not to ask why (the reason is never made clear).

Though Jacqueline likes the South, she and her siblings are somewhat isolated from their peers there— in this poem, Jacqueline's loneliness is palpable. Though Georgiana's reason for keeping the children apart is ambiguous, it seems to be out of some kind of elitism. The boy with the heart defect asks about the children's Northern accents, which shows that the children's language still marks them as outsiders in Greenville.

the right way to speak. Jacqueline recounts an instance when Mama beat Hope with a willow switch for saying "ain't." This reminds the children of the particular ways they must speak—avoiding words like "y'all" or "gonna," which Mama believes are the improper, Southern way of speaking. Mama also insists they never say "ma'am," because she links it to the racist insistence on black subservience.

This poem suggests the complicated relationship between race and language use. Mama insists that her children speak properly, presumably out of a fear that they will be mocked or disrespected by white people if they speak in stereotypically Southern ways. Mama also makes her children promise to never say "ma'am," because, for her, it represents black subservience. When Mama beats Hope for failing to follow these rules, Woodson shows the intense fear Mama has that her children will be demeaned because of their speech, and how unjust it is that the onus of defying racist stereotypes should be on them.


the candy lady. Gunnar takes the children on Fridays to a woman down the street who sells candy out of her living room. Gunnar always gets a lemon-chiffon ice cream, and the children follow suit. Together, they walk home slurping their ice creams.

Woodson again shows the close relationship that Jacqueline has to her grandfather, and her happiness in her life in the South. Later in the memoir, the memory of lemon-chiffon ice cream returns as a reminder of her grandfather's kindness and the belonging she feels in Greenville.

south carolina at war. Gunnar explains to the children the reason behind the Civil Rights Movement, which is happening throughout the South. He tells them about how the protestors want to end segregation, and he explains that segregation continues the legacy of slavery.

During their outing to get ice cream, Gunnar's explanation of the Civil Rights Movement allows the reader to see Jacqueline's increasing racial awareness. Woodson also shows how racial injustice is embedded into even the most pleasant and unremarkable moments of the children's lives. It also demonstrates again how the legacy of slavery still affects the present.

When Jacqueline, Odella, and Hope go into Greenville, they see the sit-ins for themselves. Gunnar explains that peaceful protest is the only way to get what they want, but that he is also ready to die for the cause. Jacqueline thinks of how Mama, too, participates in Civil Rights meetings, which causes Georgiana to worry. Jacqueline refers to the movement and the backlash against it as a "war."

As the children witness the sit-ins in Greenville first hand, and Gunnar explains why he supports nonviolent protest, the reader gets a better sense of the tone of and reasoning behind the Civil Rights Movement. Later in the memoir, when Woodson describes the tone of the Black Power movement, the reader can contrast these two senses of social justice. Jacqueline's reference to the movement as a "war" reflects both the real danger activists in the 60s faced and the importance of the political movement.

the training. Dorothy, Mama's best friend and cousin, visits with her children, who say they won't play with Jacqueline, Odella, and Hope because of the fast, Northern way they speak.

Again, Jacqueline, Odella, and Hope's Northern way of speaking alienates them from their peers and marks their difference from children born in the South. Once again, language keeps Jacqueline from fitting in.


Jacqueline, Odella, and Hope spend time with Dorothy and Mama. Dorothy talks about activist training with their mother, which teaches protestors the non-violent approach in the face of humiliation and attacks. Dorothy says that she would not be able to follow the training in the face of such a response, quipping that, in such a circumstance, "this nonviolent movement is over!"

The Civil Rights Movement continues to feature prominently in the children's lives, as it is frequently discussed and explained by adults. Through Dorothy, Woodson suggests the drawbacks of peaceful protest. Dorothy, who has attended nonviolence training, admits that she would stop being nonviolent in response to certain humiliations. Woodson seems to be implying that the expectation that protestors should endure such degradation and violence without ever reacting is difficult, and perhaps unfair.

the blanket. Mama goes to visit New York, leaving Jacqueline and her siblings with Georgiana and Gunnar. Jacqueline reflects on the close relationship she has with both grandparents, and how the sadness of her mother's departure is tempered by their blanket-like love.

This poem serves mostly to forward the plot, as Mama leaves the children with their grandparents to explore the possibility of a life in New York City. It also affirms the sense of belonging Jacqueline has come to feel with her grandparents in South Carolina, as she describes being enveloped in their love as being wrapped in a blanket.

miss bell and the marchers. Jacqueline describes the goings-on at the home of Miss Bell, a woman who hosts secret Civil Rights meetings at her house. Miss Bell cannot participate publicly because her white boss threatened to fire her, so instead she provides her home as a space to gather and organize.

Through the character of Miss Bell, Woodson shows the potential economic repercussions of partaking in the Civil Rights Movement. By protesting, Miss Bell risks losing her job, and Woodson makes clear the bravery and cleverness of Miss Bell's solution to this predicament when she discusses Miss Bell's secret meetings at her house.

how to listen #2. Jacqueline states that she and her family are followed around in stores because they are black.

Jacqueline points out the everyday bigotry that she and her family experience just because of their race.

hair night. On Saturday night, Georgiana does Jacqueline and Odella's hair. While Georgiana works to straighten Jacqueline's hair with a hot comb, Odella reads long, difficult books aloud. Jacqueline, meanwhile, imagines the faraway scenes in the books, leaning in toward her sister. Her grandmother tells her to hold still, so she sits on her hands while her mind wanders.

In this intimate moment, Woodson asserts once again Jacqueline's love for and deep interest in storytelling, writing, and the possibilities of imagination. As Odella reads aloud, Jacqueline is so overcome by her excitement that she leans in towards her sister, showing how the words attract her. Woodson shows Jacqueline's rich imagination as she pictures all the events of the story in her mind.

family names. Gunnar and Georgiana tell their grandchildren all the names of their own siblings (the children's great aunts and uncles). Gunnar's parents "gave their kids names that no master could ever take away." They discuss Hope's name, which Odella says is strange for a boy. Hope argues it's because he's the hope of the family.

Again, the discussions that Jacqueline recalls from her early childhood are primarily conversations about words and names, reflecting Jacqueline's interest in language. Gunnar's parents' decision to give him a name that "no master could ever take away" reflects the fact that slave owners gave slaves their own last names as a sign of ownership. Through this, Woodson shows naming to be a politically significant act, and self-naming to be an important aspect of self-possession and liberation.


american dream. While the children wash Georgiana's sore feet in Epsom salts, she tells them that the Civil Rights protests didn't just start recently; they have been going on since her own children were young. Jacqueline asks what would make people live together in peace, and her grandmother replies, "People have to want it, that's all." She goes on to say that everyone has the same dream, which is to live in a free, equal country.

Georgiana's assertion that the Civil Rights protests are not a new phenomenon reflects Woodson's interest in portraying African-American history and racial justice not as a series of disconnected events, but as a continual, interconnected stream of history. Georgiana's belief that everyone dreams of living in a free, equal country connects racial justice with the very foundations of American political thought, showing how the same ideals white Americans valorize are incompatible with a racially segregated society.

Georgiana then changes gears, saying how, when Mama was little, she wanted a dog. Georgiana thought a dog might turn on them, and so said no. In response, Mama brought home kittens, which Georgiana let her keep. The children try to picture the scene.

Georgiana's ambiguous metaphor in this section of the poem could be read several different ways. The dog could be a figure for violent protest (think of police dogs in Birmingham turned on Civil Rights protestors), while kittens may represent nonviolent action. The metaphor could also speak to the idea that by asking for big leaps in racial equality, African-Americans will achieve at least some progress (just like asking for a dog leads, at least, to kittens). The ambiguity of the metaphor allows it to carry a variety of possible resonances.

the fabric store. Jacqueline says that, on some Fridays, she and her siblings go with Georgiana to the fabric store, which is the only store in downtown Greenville that doesn't actively discriminate against African-Americans. Georgiana knows the white owner, and they chat about their families and sewing as she shops. Jacqueline thinks, "At the fabric store, we are just people."

Jacqueline's description of the fabric store shows the reader what racial equality could look like—uncomplicated everyday experiences. Because of the friendship between Georgiana and the white shop owner, the fabric store is a space where Jacqueline and her family can be "just people," rather than having their interactions mediated through the lens of race. The observation that the fabric store is a place where they can be "just people" shows also how racist spaces effectively deny the humanity of African-Americans.

ghosts. Jacqueline describes the "whites only" signs in downtown Greenville, which have been painted over. The paint is thin, and so she can still see the lettering underneath, which is "like a ghost."

Downtown Greenville has been desegregated, but the lettering of "whites only" signs is still visible. This reflects the fact that the legal change has not yet been accompanied by a social one, and the "ghost" of segregation still haunts the town.

the leavers. Jacqueline describes watching men, women, and families, dressed in their best, taking the bus to leave Greenville for other cities. According to the stories that circulate in Greenville, these cities hold more economic promise for African-Americans.

Jacqueline observes African-American families migrating North in search of jobs. This foreshadows her own family's future and supports her father's assertion (and the sense among the community in Nicholtown) that there are more opportunities for black people in the North than in the South.

the beginning of leaving. Mama returns from New York and reveals that she plans to take the children back there with her. She shows them pictures of the city, and talks about her friends from Greenville who have moved there. Georgiana is extremely sad about the news.

This poem serves again to forward the plot, describing Mama's homecoming and her announcement about their move to New York. The pictures Mama brings offer the children an idealized version of the city. Presumably, these pictures, along with the stories they've heard about the economic prosperity there, spark Jacqueline's imagination of the city.

as a child, i smelled the air. Mama, drinking coffee on the porch, says that the New York **air** smells different. Jacqueline joins her on the porch. She predicts that she will remember the different scent of the Greenville air when she moves to New York. The smell, her mother says, is like memory.

Mama takes note of the different sensations of the North and the South when she says to Jacqueline that the air seems different. Jacqueline states that she will remember the smells of the Greenville air, showing the reader how, before she even moves, Jacqueline is attempting to gain control of her memory by giving it a narrative. This poem also shows how sensations evoke memory.

harvest time. Gunnar's garden is in full bloom, and once the vegetables in it are picked, Georgiana makes them into side dishes.

Gunnar's garden marks the change in the seasons as fall arrives and the vegetables are picked. The garden, despite its earlier associations with the history of slavery, is a source of happiness and abundance for the family. This shows the potential of regaining control over fraught aspects of life in order to derive joy from contradictions.

grown folks' stories. One fall night, the neighborhood women quilt on the porch together and talk. Meanwhile, Hope, Odella, and Jacqueline sit on the stairs and eavesdrop, quiet for fear that Georgiana will put them to bed. From the adult gossip, Jacqueline fills in the gaps in various stories herself, adding to them and thinking them over after her siblings are fast asleep.

Jacqueline and her siblings, hungry for adult stories and gossip, eavesdrop on their grandmother and her friends. Jacqueline makes use of her highly active imagination and penchant for storytelling, as she often misses parts of the conversation and makes them up later. She mulls the stories over in her head and adds detail, testing her ability to invent and embellish. Through this practice, Jacqueline builds her storytelling skills.

tobacco. Jacqueline thinks over Gunnar's smoking and his perpetual cough. He is so short of breath that he can no longer sing as he walks home. She thinks of how tobacco is grown, and says she does not yet realize that sometimes "the earth makes a promise it can never keep."

Gunnar's cough worsens, making Jacqueline anxious. His inability to sing on the way home saddens her, since, with her special love for oral sounds and music, she really loved his voice. Jacqueline refers to the abundance of the garden when she worries that "the earth makes a promise it can never keep." This suggests that tobacco plants, rather than providing nourishment, are, in fact, very destructive. The presence of tobacco plants—along with the legacy of slavery that they evoke—is another contradiction inherent to the garden.

how to listen #3. Jacqueline awakes, startled, to Gunnar's coughing.

Gunnar's coughing disturbs Jacqueline and makes her worry.

my mother leaving greenville. Jacqueline describes the woodstove burning in the house, warding off the autumn chill, before acknowledging that it has been many years since she saw her father Jack. Hope tells her she is lucky she doesn't remember how their parents used to fight. Jacqueline is sure that, unlike those memories, she will remember what's happening presently: Mama's second departure from Greenville.

As the woodstove symbolizes Jacqueline's comfort and sense of warmth in the South, she thinks about her weakening connection to the North and her father. When Hope tells her that she is lucky to not remember their parents fighting, he implies that he associates those memories with pain. Memory, for Hope, is a source of hurt rather than comfort. Jacqueline's lack of memory is a blessing, but her sense that she will remember her mother's second departure suggests that she will not be exempt from sad memories in the future.


halfway home #1. Mama tells them she is leaving for New York, as she is planning to eventually move the whole family there into a house of her own. Mama says that, in Greenville, they are only "halfway home."

As Mama leaves again for New York, she tells the children they are only "halfway home," which reflects the larger sense in the book that Jacqueline and her siblings are always caught between the North and the South, and suspended between two different homes.

my mother looks back on greenville. After the children's pre-bedtime routine, Mama boards the bus to New York. She sits at the back of the bus and looks out the window, teary but hopeful.

Woodson, who was not present for the events she describes in this poem, is clearly either inventing them or describing her mother's memories. Again, Woodson tests the limits of memory and of memoir by using other people's memories and not just her own.

the last fireflies. Jacqueline, Odella, and Hope, knowing that they will soon be moving away from Greenville, catch their last fireflies each evening, then let them go again. Jacqueline thinks it's as if the children believe that by being kind and letting them go, they might be allow to stay in Greenville forever.

Jacqueline and her siblings have the sense that their lives are about to change drastically. When the children release the fireflies, Jacqueline imagines that the three of them think that if they let the fireflies go, they will be allowed to stay in Greenville. She effectively imagines a narrative in which she can control and stabilize her life, and it comforts her.


changes. As Georgiana styles Jacqueline's hair, Jacqueline has a sense that the feeling of the brush is already becoming a memory. Jacqueline sits on the porch with Hope and Odella and they talk about how, once they've moved to New York, they'll still come back to Greenville, and it will be the same as before. However, Jacqueline says that they know they're lying; they realize that Greenville will have changed, and they will have changed, too.

Again, in this poem, the reader sees Jacqueline imagining a narrative that provides her with comfort, one in which Greenville, and her connection to it, don't change. Jacqueline explores how, by providing herself with narratives that comfort her, she can soothe the sense of displacement she often feels. Jacqueline also increasingly harnesses control of her memory—as her grandmother brushes her hair, she recognizes it as a memory-in-the-making, willing it into memory in the process.



sterling high school, greenville. The high school that Mama attended as a teenager burns down during a senior dance. Mama believes it was due to the Civil Rights protests. Because of segregation, the students cannot attend the all-white school, and so instead have to join the lower school. Jacqueline thinks of the photos of Mama and her friends in her yearbook, including a young Jesse Jackson. Jacqueline thinks that not even arson could stop them from changing the world.

Racial violence inserts itself again into Jacqueline's life when the family finds out that the high school that Mama attended as a teenager was burned down in retaliation for Civil Rights protests. This moment shows racial violence not only as a hateful act in itself, but as one with rippling repercussions. As a result of the arson, the lower school must accept the displaced students and provide them with resources, straining their ability to provide for the younger students, and lowering the quality of education for all the students. Still, Jacqueline ends on a hopeful note, believing that hateful violence will not, in the end, defeat racial justice.

faith. Following Mama's departure, Georgiana forces her grandchildren to practice their religion more fervently (they are Jehovah's Witnesses), and to read the Bible more. Jacqueline and her siblings, however, don't really seem to grasp the meaning of their religion.

Without Mama to keep Georgiana's fervent beliefs at bay, religion becomes a bigger part of Jacqueline's life. Jacqueline, however, doesn't really understand her religion in a meaningful way. Woodson seems to be suggesting that religion without genuine religious feeling lacks real significance, and that forcing religion upon people is ineffective.

the stories cora tells us. Cora and her sisters play with the Woodson children in the evenings. When Jacqueline steps on a mushroom, Cora tells Jacqueline that she "killed the Devil," and says the devil will come after her. Jacqueline cries. Georgiana finds her and comforts her, saying it is just a superstition, and that she shouldn't believe everything she hears.

Jacqueline shows that she is susceptible to believing fantasies during this poem. It is Jacqueline's own wild imagination, which so often comforts her, that leads her to believe Cora's superstition in this instance. The superstition is linked to religion, as Cora evokes the idea of the devil—this shows the negativity that can be tied up in religion and spirituality.

hall street. Jacqueline, Hope, and Odella spend their Bible study time on the front porch, drinking hot chocolate and doing their work. The children wish they were playing outside instead, enjoying Gunnar's company and the fall weather.

Again, religion features in this poem as a negative aspect of Jacqueline's life, one that prevents her from enjoying the outdoors. Rather than inspiring awe or devotion, religion seems to be an annoying obligation for Jacqueline.

soon. When the phone in the house rings, the children run to it, knowing it is Mama calling. Hope picks up the phone, but Georgiana takes it from him, and promises them each a few minutes to talk to her.

This poem serves as a reminder that Mama is far away in the North, and that the children miss her. While Jacqueline is still enjoying Greenville, she is pulled between her life there and her desire to be with Mama.

how i learn the days of the week. Jacqueline lists her weekly schedule. On Mondays and Tuesdays she does Bible study. Wednesday is laundry night. Thursday is ministry school, where the children learn to spread God's word. On Friday the children have no obligations, and so they play. Saturday, they act as missionaries, knocking on doors and handing out pamphlets about Jehovah's Witnesses. Sometimes people are nice to them when they approach with their materials, and other times they shut their doors on them. On Sunday, they study *Watchtower*, a religious magazine.

Jacqueline, as she lists her weekly schedule, shows the reader the enormous amount of time that she and her siblings spend in religious environments or studying religious texts. Again, Jacqueline does not describe her immersion in Jehovah's Witness theology as a positive influence or a particularly spiritually meaningful experience. In this poem, it seems to structure her life practically rather than morally. This makes Jacqueline's evangelizing come across as ironic— at her grandmother's urging, Jacqueline walks around town trying to convert people, despite the fact that she shows little faith in the religion she peddles. In exposing the hypocrisy of this paradox, Woodson indicates her skepticism towards forcing religion upon children.

ribbons. Jacqueline and Odella wear ribbons in their hair every day except Saturdays, when they wash the ribbons. The girls wish their grandmother would declare them too old for the ribbons. They wish the ribbons would blow away when hung to dry after the wash.

Like with the list of her weekly schedule, the intensity and strictness of Jacqueline's routine is daunting. When considered with the preceding poem, Woodson seems to be drawing a parallel between the religion that structures Jacqueline's life and the ribbons she must wear every day: both, for Jacqueline, are things that style and control her life without carrying important personal meaning.

two gods, two worlds. One Sunday morning, Jacqueline awakens and listens to her grandfather coughing. Despite his bad lungs, he has not stopped smoking. Gunnar will not go to Kingdom Hall with them, as he is not religious, in part because he wants to continue smoking and drinking. Jacqueline wishes he would stop smoking and join them at church. She notes that Jehovah's Witnesses believe that anyone who doesn't go to church will be unable to go to paradise. Jacqueline, however, says she would not want to live anywhere, even paradise, without her grandfather, and she doesn't understand why God would make her "have to choose."

Jacqueline again confronts her vexed relationship with religion when she contemplates Gunnar's lifestyle and illness, as well as his apparent condemnation by the church. Thinking through this problem, Jacqueline does not find herself wanting to convert her grandfather—instead, she begins to doubt the morality of her religion. She does not understand the idea of a God who would punish Gunnar, and cannot stomach the possibility of a paradise without him. Essentially, Woodson shows religion to be a force that Jacqueline confronts, rather than embraces. It's a set of rules that seem unfair but that, as a child, she cannot change or remove herself from.

what god knows. Georgiana and the children pray for Gunnar, since he is a non-believer. Gunnar, however, thinks they don't need to; he thinks that it's enough to be a good person, which he knows he is.

Gunnar's insistence that his own individual morality is sufficient and that he does not need organized religion offers Jacqueline a different perspective on religion from the one that her grandmother drills into her. Woodson shows Jacqueline struggling between these two very different conceptions of morality and religion.

new playmates. Mama sends Jacqueline and Odella dolls from New York and writes about the city's architecture, the ocean, the toy stores, and the hair salons. The children, however, focus only on the dolls, pretending to be their mothers. They tell them "we will never leave you."

Mama uses her lush descriptions of the city to try to instill in the children an excitement about their move to New York . Instead, Jacqueline and Odella focus on their dolls, pretending to be mothers to them that, unlike their own mother, will never leave. Woodson again shows Jacqueline's life as torn between the South, where she lives, and the North, where her mother is.

down the road. Georgiana warns the children to not exert themselves when playing with the boy who has a hole in his heart. The boy asks them lots of questions about their mother and New York City, and expresses his own desire to go there.

Woodson describes the ideas that people in Greenville have about New York, and this confirms Jacqueline's sense that economic prosperity is practically inevitable there. These stories appeal to Jacqueline, but later, once she moves to New York, they turn out to be false.

god's promise. It is almost Christmas, and Christmas paraphernalia is everywhere. Cora and her sisters play on the swings behind the house while the Woodson children have to do Bible study. This infuriates the siblings.

Again, being a Jehovah's Witness seems like a burden to Jacqueline rather than a benefit.

the other infinity. Georgiana tells her grandchildren that they are the "chosen people." They do not understand what she means when she attributes their possessions, like the swings in the backyard, to God. Still, Jacqueline, Odella, and Hope continue their Bible study, hoping for the "eternity" promised by the Church. The empty swing set reminds them of this bargain.

The children fail to grasp the significance of their religious study and they do not understand the way that Georgiana and other Jehovah's Witnesses imagine God to work. Despite their lack of genuine belief in their religion, they abstractly believe Georgiana and Kingdom Hall when they promise paradise and eternity in return for devotion.

sometimes, no words are needed. Jacqueline sits on the porch swing on a winter night with Gunnar, quietly enjoying the company, the view of the stars, and "the silent promise that the world as we know it will always be here".

The title of this poem, "sometimes, no words are needed," suggests that Jacqueline is experimenting not only with effusive narration, but also with the power of silence. Sometimes, she understands, silences can be appropriate and productive, and language can sometimes be unnecessary or insufficient to describe feeling.

the letter. On Sunday, a letter arrives from Mama. Odella reads it aloud after breakfast, and they all learn the news that Mama is coming to take them back to New York with her. The news is bittersweet– the children are happy to be rejoining their mother, but sad to be leaving Greenville and their grandparents. The letter also carries the news that their mother is pregnant with her fourth child.

This poem serves primarily to forward the memoir's plot, as the big change Jacqueline anticipated is finally going to happen: the family is officially moving to New York. Likewise, the news of Mama's pregnancy marks a big change in Jacqueline's life. The fact that the news is delivered in the form of a letter, rather than a phone call, perhaps foreshadows the fact that, in the third part of the memoir, it's writing (rather than speaking) that will take precedence as Jacqueline's primary mode of storytelling.


one morning, late winter. Gunnar is so sick with his cough one day that he misses work and stays in bed. Jacqueline cares for him, wiping his head with a cool rag and telling him stories to distract him from his discomfort.

Jacqueline begins to use her skills as a storyteller, not only to bring herself comfort, but also to comfort others. Here, Woodson shows Jacqueline successfully comforting her grandfather in his illness by distracting him with stories of her own invention, which marks her progress as a storyteller over the course of the book.

new york baby. As Jacqueline sits on her lap, Georgiana tells her that she will no longer be the baby of the family when Mama arrives with her new sibling. Jacqueline worries, realizing that she enjoys her role in the family.

Jacqueline struggles with the idea of her role in the family changing, which challenges her identity as the youngest child. Not only will Jacqueline be moving to the North, but she will also have a slightly different role in the family; the title of the poem suggests that Jacqueline connects the two changes.

leaving greenville. Mama arrives back in Greenville late at night. She lies down with the girls in their room while the cool winter **air** streams through the open window. She tells them they have a home in New York now, and Jacqueline is too tired to tell Mama that Greenville is her home. Mama promises they will meet their baby brother in the morning, and Jacqueline falls back asleep.

When Mama arrives in Greenville at last, Jacqueline takes in some of her last breaths of Greenville air, which represents the South to her. Jacqueline, though comforted to be back with her mother, clearly worries about the impending move. When Mama tells them they have a new home in New York, Jacqueline wants to reply that Greenville is their home—this shows Jacqueline's deep ties to Greenville.

roman. The next morning, Jacqueline meets her baby brother, Roman. Hope is happy to have another boy in the family. Jacqueline, however, resents the new baby, and she pinches him, making him cry. Odella scolds her and picks Roman up, hugging him until he calms down.

Jacqueline, feeling that her role in the family is threatened, resents Roman and pinches him. Given Jacqueline's earlier sense that Roman is a "new york baby," Jacqueline seems to be taking out her anxiety, both about her familial role and about the move North, on Roman.

PART 3: FOLLOWED THE SKY'S MIRRORED CONSTELLATION TO FREEDOM

new york city. The family arrives in New York City, and Jacqueline finds that it is nothing like how the Southerners described it. Unlike their romanticized view of the city and its sparkling wealth, the city that Jacqueline encounters is gray and cold. As the family descends the bus at the Port Authority, Jacqueline thinks she will never call New York home.

The idealized version of New York City that Southerners peddle to each other turns out to be totally unlike the city that Jacqueline encounters. This shows again the negative side of Jacqueline's overactive imagination and her tendency to believe the fantastic stories she hears—it sometimes results in Jacqueline feeling misled and disappointed. Jacqueline's insistence that she will never call New York home shows Jacqueline's discomfort in the North.

brooklyn, new york. The family does not stay in the apartment that Mama found them, which turns out to be uninhabitable. Instead, they move in with their Aunt Kay and her boyfriend Bernie.

The apartment into which the family first moves, which is so decrepit and disgusting that they must move out, only further exacerbates Jacqueline's disillusionment with New York City.

herzl street. Jacqueline, Mama, and her siblings move into an apartment at Herzl Street. Aunt Kay and Bernie live upstairs. They socialize with other people from Greenville and elsewhere in the South, who chat with Kay while she cooks on Saturdays. They share experiences of living in the South, and Jacqueline feels like they are family.

Jacqueline's sense of alienation in New York is lessened somewhat when they move in with Aunt Kay and Bernie. Her aunt's circles include many people from the Greenville area, who come together at her house to chat while Kay cooks southern food. This sense of community makes Jacqueline feel more at home in New York City, and Jacqueline feels immediately close to other people from the South who share the same memories.

the johnny pump. Jacqueline misses the **red dirt** of Greenville and walking in bare feet. In New York she wears shoes because the streets are hot and glass-covered. Some summer days, however, a local man opens a fire hydrant with a wrench so the children can play in the cool water while the adults watch. Even Mama takes off her shoes and smiles at the scene.

Despite the community of Southerners that Jacqueline and her family have found, Jacqueline still misses the landscape of South Carolina, represented by her longing for the red dirt. The streets of New York seem inhospitable to her, as they are hot and covered in glass. Still, the city is not hopeless for her, and when she plays in the water of the opened fire hydrant, Jacqueline is joyous. Even Mama, who seems extremely stressed after the move, enjoys herself.

genetics. Jacqueline notes that she, Mama, Gunnar, and all her siblings have the same gap in their front teeth. Jacqueline then goes on to ponder why Roman is much lighter skinned than she is. People remark on this difference, thinking that the siblings are not related.

Jacqueline notices the way that people react to her brother's complexion versus the way they react to hers. She is puzzled by the difference in their skin color, and by the fact that people can't imagine that she and Roman are related because of the difference in their skin colors. The limits of other people's imaginations in this respect seem to bother her.

caroline but we called her aunt kay, some memories. Jacqueline lists memories of Aunt Kay, thinking of her with her arms open for a hug, dressed up for a night out, braiding her hair, etc. Then Jacqueline indicates that Aunt Kay had "a fall" (the details of which are unclear) and died. After her funeral, Jacqueline has no more memories of Aunt Kay.

Jacqueline begins to process Aunt Kay's death by listing memories of her, thinking of the various moments of love and affection that they had together. Although Kay's death clearly is painful, Jacqueline uses the memories as a way of processing her grief. Jacqueline states that she has no more memories of Aunt Kay after her funeral, and clearly the inability to make more memories with her pains Jacqueline.

moving again. After Kay's fall, the stairs, which the siblings used to climb to see Aunt Kay, seem strange to them. Bernie and Peaches move to Rockaway, a beach town in Queens, after Kay's death. Mama grieves her sister, with whom she was so close that they were like twins.

Although the memories of Aunt Kay seem to help Jacqueline process her death, the family also seems to find the stairs, which recall Kay's memory, extremely painful. Bernie and Peaches clearly find the memories painful as well, and they move away. This shows that memory can be both helpful and harmful in a time of grief.

Unable to live in the apartment that reminds them so much of Kay, the family moves to a house on Madison Street. The landlord tells them that the house is protected by a statue of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus outside, though Mama is skeptical and jokes about it. Still, Jacqueline catches her mother smiling at the sculpture, and imagines she is thinking of Aunt Kay.

The family's apartment is much too painful to stay in, because it recalls Kay so strongly. In their new apartment, Mama is amused by the landlord's reference to the religious statues out front, as she is skeptical about religion in general. Still, Jacqueline senses that the statues bring Mama some comfort, which suggests that religion might provide healing possibilities for Mama.

composition notebook. Jacqueline receives a **composition notebook**. She is enraptured by the look of the cover and the sound and smell of the paper inside. Odella is perplexed by this fervor, since Jacqueline can't yet write.

Jacqueline's excitement about her composition notebook shows her intense love of anything related to writing and storytelling, even before she can write herself. Jacqueline thinks the book is aesthetically beautiful. Odella, herself a big reader, cannot understand Jacqueline's excitement, which marks their different relationships to writing.

on paper. Jacqueline writes her full name for the first time in the **composition notebook**, and it makes her feel like she could write anything.

This moment marks an important step in Jacqueline's linguistic abilities, and it is also a profound moment of self-actualization—after much discussion of naming in the memoir, Jacqueline finally writes her own name.

saturday morning. In the family's new apartment, they sometimes only eat pancakes; back in Greenville, by contrast, there was always lots of good food. The children wish they were back in Greenville, but they don't complain to Mama about it.

Jacqueline continues to miss Greenville and the south, as Woodson shows when Jacqueline wishes for the food that Georgiana made in Greenville. The food seems to stand in, at least in part, for missing Georgiana herself. But the children sense Mama's stress, and so they don't complain.

first grade. As Jacqueline and Odella walk to school, Odella tells Jacqueline that the school, P.S. 106, used to be a castle. Jacqueline proclaims that she is in love with her school and that she loves her teacher, Ms. Feidler.

Despite Jacqueline's discomfort in New York City, she loves her new school. Odella lies to Jacqueline and tells her it used to be a castle, appealing to Jacqueline's imagination. Jacqueline's love of learning becomes even clearer.

another kingdom hall. In response to Georgiana's prompting, Mama finds a Kingdom Hall where the children can attend services on Sundays. This reminds Jacqueline of their lives in Greenville, especially when their mother braids their hair like their grandmother did. Unlike in Greenville, though, Jacqueline and Odella have to iron their own dresses because Mama's hands are full with baby Roman. Mama does not attend the meetings at Kingdom Hall; instead, she sits and reads.

Religion comes back into the children's lives at Georgiana's insistence. Although Jacqueline does not seem especially drawn to the services, they do comfort her in that they remind her of Greenville. Mama, who generally expresses skepticism towards religion, does not attend the services with the children. When Jacqueline mentions that she and Odella iron their own dresses, she gives the reader a sense of the intense stress Mama is under as a single working mother raising four children.

flag. Jacqueline cannot pledge allegiance to the American flag at school because it is against her religion as a Jehovah's Witness. As she is supposed to, Jacqueline walks out with the other Jehovah's Witnesses, Gina and Alina, during the pledge. Gina suggests they pray for the other children, and Jacqueline says that Gina is the "true believer." Alina and Jacqueline, on the other hand, don't have any serious commitment to their religion. When they return to the classroom, Alina and Jacqueline sit far away from Gina, and Jacqueline feels that Gina is judging her.

Like in South Carolina, Jacqueline finds the constraints of her religion frustrating and alienating. She also feels acutely aware of the fact that she does not genuinely believe in the teaching of Jehovah's Witnesses, and is only doing what she's told. When Jacqueline must leave the room during the pledge of allegiance, Gina's devotion makes Jacqueline feel judged because she does not share it. Again, rather than providing support and guidance for Jacqueline, Jacqueline portrays her religious duties as a burden that she does not know why she must carry.

because we're witnesses. Due to their faith, the Woodson family celebrates no holidays. This includes birthdays, and so Jacqueline must leave the classroom when another student brings in cupcakes for their birthday. Being a Jehovah's Witness demands also that they not vote, fight, or go to war.

Jacqueline's religion separates her from her peers during birthdays, when she is not allowed to eat cupcakes with the class. Jacqueline lists the other things she is not allowed to do, seeming to sense that these prohibitions prevent her from experiencing the depth and breadth of experience that the people around her are allowed to have.

brooklyn rain. Jacqueline contrasts the rain in Brooklyn with the rain in Greenville. In Greenville, the rain is pleasant, whereas in New York it only means Jacqueline must stay inside. To pass the time, Jacqueline makes up stories in her head that transport her back to the South. She thinks of catching raindrops on her tongue and Gunnar's garden.

Jacqueline continues to miss her home in Greenville, especially because in New York she is not allowed to play outside in the rain. Bored and homesick, Jacqueline imagines stories that take place in Greenville to relieve her sorrows, remembering or imagining catching raindrops on her tongue there and thinking of Gunnar's garden. Jacqueline's imagination allows her to escape her despair in New York.

another way. In November, Jacqueline, Odella, and Hope beg to watch television or play outside, but Mama won't let them. Instead, Mama brings home a bag of board games. Roman and Jacqueline want to play chess with Hope and Odella, but they are too little to follow the rules. Roman and Jacqueline insist that they can play chess their *own* way, but Hope and Odella refuse. Jacqueline and Roman play something else together, while wishing they were old enough to play chess.

Here, Jacqueline experiences the limits of imagination— she wants to be able to invent her own rules and imagine the conditions of the chess game, but the others refuse to let her. Although imagination and storytelling often helps Jacqueline, sometimes she cannot imagine her way out of following the rules that are set for her.

gifted. Jacqueline describes Odella's intelligence and how her teachers believe she is "gifted" and send her home with certificates of excellence. Jacqueline receives none of these praises. She has difficulties reading, which greatly frustrates her.

Odella continues to serve as a contrasting character to Jacqueline. Odella's success in school makes Jacqueline feel even worse about her struggles with reading, a skill that, despite her love of storytelling, Jacqueline has been unable to master.

sometimes. Only one other house on Madison Street is occupied by a family without a father. When Jacqueline asks the boy who lives there why he is fatherless, the boy tells her his father died. Jacqueline admits that sometimes she lies about Jack and says he is dead. When Odella hears these tall tales, she shakes her head, tells the truth, and says that Jacqueline is "making up stories again."

When people ask Jacqueline where her father is, Jacqueline starts to lie, saying that he is dead or elsewhere, in order to make her family seem more like the other families on the street. Lying makes Jacqueline feel less self-conscious about her situation. This shows, again, how Jacqueline uses storytelling to relieve her sorrows and make herself more comfortable in the world.

uncle robert. Jacqueline's Uncle Robert moves to New York City. He arrives around midnight. The children are excited and Mama, initially grumpy, smiles. Robert gifts Odella a pair of silver earrings for "how smart she is." Bitterly, Jacqueline tells Robert that she knows a girl ten times smarter than Odella. When Robert asks if she is lying, Jacqueline wants to tell him that lots of things are true in her head that aren't true outside of it. Robert gives Mama a new record, and the whole family dances to the music.

When Uncle Robert gives Odella a pair of earrings for her intelligence, it strikes a nerve in Jacqueline, who feels inferior to her older sister due to her academic struggles. Jacqueline tells Robert she knows someone much smarter than Odella. When Robert calls out Jacqueline's spiteful lie, Woodson shows us that Jacqueline's storytelling is more like an alternative reality than an intentional undermining of the truth. The moment ends happily, with the family dancing.

wishes. Robert takes the children to the park, and tells them that if they blow on a dandelion puff, then their wishes will come true. Jacqueline does so, hoping what he says is true.

Contrasting with the preceding poem, where Jacqueline's own lying is called out, Woodson shows how adults often lie innocently to children. This poem suggests that this kind of lying might be partially responsible for Jacqueline's wild imagination.

believing. Jacqueline tells Robert made-up stories. Her uncle finds the stories amusing, and encourages them. Mama, however, accuses her of lying, and says that if she keeps lying she'll start stealing. Jacqueline gets the sense that her brain works differently than those of the people around her. She isn't sure whether to continue storytelling, as her uncle encourages, or to stop, as her mother says she must.

Jacqueline continues to experiment with storytelling and fictionalizing life, which Robert encourages and finds endearing. Mama, however, gets angry at her, because she is concerned with what a lying child will imply about her own parenting and she thinks lying will lead to stealing. The difference in these perspectives confuses Jacqueline, and she begins to see that her storytelling sets her apart from other people, though she isn't sure whether this is a good or bad thing. She is unsure of how her storytelling relates to her identity, due to the mixed messages she receives.

off-key. The children are habitually late to Kingdom Hall, and they usually walk in during the singing at the service's opening. Jacqueline's voice is off-key, but she sings anyway. She finds the religious lyrics boring, but enjoys the music, even though the people around her think she's singing it incorrectly.

Jacqueline's love of music, first noted when she listens to Gunnar singing on his way home from work, recurs in this poem, as Jacqueline and her siblings sing in church. Again, Jacqueline's enjoyment of music, despite the fact that she is off-key, reflects her interest in sound and musicality, which influences her desire to write poetry rather than prose.

eve and the snake. Women aren't allowed to give Sunday sermons at Kingdom Hall, a fact that confuses Jacqueline. That Sunday, the preacher tells the story of the fall of Adam and Eve. According to Jacqueline's interpretation of the sermon, Eve's actions are the reason they must attend Kingdom Hall on Sundays. Jacqueline wishes God would give them another chance to say no to the snake.

Jacqueline continues to question her religion as she wonders why women are not allowed to preach at Kingdom Hall. She interprets the Sunday sermon her own way, further asserting her own will and vision in a religion that contradicts it. Jacqueline sees attending Kingdom Hall explicitly as a punishment for Eve's actions, rather than worship in which she happily partakes. As Jacqueline wishes for another chance, she imagines the possibility of deliverance from her boredom in the service.

our father, fading away. Since moving to New York, the children have fallen out of touch with their family in Ohio, and their memories of Jack have faded. Through a friend, Mama learns that the children's paternal grandfather, Grandfather Hope, has died. They are not upset, since they did not even know he was still alive. Briefly, Jacqueline thinks of her father. Hope says he is "out of sight out of mind," but Jacqueline isn't sure this is true.

Jacqueline's memory of her family in Ohio has dimmed significantly. Though Jacqueline was, according to the memoir, close to her family there as a child, the time and distance between Jack's family and the Woodson children have severely diminished these bonds. For Hope, the family is "out of sight out of mind," but Jacqueline, who has such a rich inner life of memory and imagination, thinks this might not be so true. The idea of her father fading out of her memory disturbs Jacqueline.

halfway home #2. Jacqueline feels more at home in New York, and her speech is becoming more Northern. When she and her siblings speak to Georgiana on the phone, Georgiana laughs and asks "Who are these city children?" Jacqueline wishes she had more time to explain her life in the city to her grandmother. When Georgiana says, "I love you too," her Southern accent makes Jacqueline miss Greenville.

Jacqueline's increasing comfort in New York City is reflected in her speech; her accent, which has consistently plagued her and marked her difference throughout the memoir, has become assimilated to Brooklyn. Though this accent makes her more at home in Brooklyn, it alienates her from Greenville, which she still longs for. Georgiana's accent is the focal point of Jacqueline's nostalgia for Greenville, which is appropriate, since Jacqueline has such a love of sound.

the paint eater. Roman eats the paint off the walls in the children's bedroom.

This poem serves primarily to forward the plot, as Roman's paint-eating becomes a problem later. Jacqueline's rich description suggests that she is imagining this scene.

chemistry. Hope has developed an interest in two things: comic books and science. Mama buys him a chemistry set, and Hope spends his free time concocting solutions. The mixtures spark and smell, so finally Mama tells him to stop. Hope then takes apart his train set piece by piece. Jacqueline thinks it is Hope's way of looking for something "way past Brooklyn."

Hope has been withdrawn and shy since they first moved to South Carolina, but he develops a love of science that piques his interest and gets him talking. Mama tries to encourage this interest, but it eventually becomes a nuisance that, with her busy schedule, she can't handle. Jacqueline sees Hope's interest in science as a kind of escapism, like what she herself does with storytelling. Jacqueline indicates this when she says that science is Hope's way of looking for something "way past Brooklyn."

baby in the house. One day, Roman does not get up. He refuses to eat, and cries profusely. Mama takes him to the hospital and has to leave him there overnight. After previously wishing to be the baby of the family again, Jacqueline now only wishes for her baby brother to come home.

When Roman's sickness results in a hospital stay, Jacqueline reflects on how, before she met Roman and in the early days of knowing him, she worried about no longer being the baby of the family. Now, Jacqueline, having adjusted to Roman's presence, loves him and wishes he were back home. This shows Jacqueline's growing maturity and her acceptance of the baby that she once dismissed based on his connection to New York.

going home again. Jacqueline, Odella, and Hope kiss Roman goodbye in the hospital before taking the train to Greenville for the summer. Roman must stay in the hospital because the paint he ate gave him lead poisoning. The older children promise they won't have fun without him, and Mama says goodbye.

With Roman extremely sick with lead poisoning, he and Mama cannot join the other siblings in Greenville for the summer. The children's visit back South, long awaited and exciting, is saddened by the fact that Roman is ill. Though returning to the South will be a kind of homecoming for the children, it is an incomplete one, as they have to leave Mama and Roman behind.

home again on hall street. In Greenville, Georgiana's kitchen is the same as ever. She stands at the sink washing collard greens and chastises Hope when he lets the screen door slam. Later they will drink lemonade and play checkers on the porch with Gunnar. To Jacqueline, Greenville feels like home.

Greenville seems to be just as it was when they left, with Georgiana cooking good food and Hope making a ruckus. Jacqueline takes comfort in the routine of life in the South, feeling at home there in a way that she does not yet feel at home in the North.

mrs. hughes's house. Since Gunnar is sick and Georgiana works full time, the children spend the days at Mrs. Hughes' Nursery School. When Georgiana drops them off there, Jacqueline is "maybe" crying. The children at the daycare make fun of them for their Northern accents. Odella cries too, and, furious, fights the other children who make fun of them. Hope, meanwhile, is stoic. Jacqueline gets the sense that they are caught between two homes: New York and Greenville.

Gunnar is still sick with the same cough he had when the children left for New York, which Jacqueline still worries about. This is a way in which Greenville has remained the same, but Georgiana's new full time work schedule results in major changes, including nursery school. Although the children feel safe, welcome, and at home in their grandparents' house, the time in the nursery school shows them that they have changed since leaving Greenville. Their northern accents, which help them blend in in New York, cause them to be bullied in the South. Again, Jacqueline's language prevents her from being totally at home in either the North or the South.


how to listen #4. Odella tells Jacqueline that they are better than the mean children who make fun of them.

Odella's sense of superiority over the children who mock them recalls how Georgiana's pride led her to forbid the children to play with the other children on their street.

field service. Thanks to Georgiana's influence, Jacqueline, Hope, and Odella spend their Saturdays evangelizing. For the first time, Jacqueline is allowed to knock on a door alone. An old woman opens the door, but she cannot afford the cost of the pamphlet. This make Jacqueline upset. She tells her grandmother it is not fair, but her grandmother reassures her that another Jehovah's Witness will pass through the neighborhood and eventually the woman will "find her way."

Jacqueline, evangelizing to neighbors on her own for the first time, is saddened when an old woman can't afford the pamphlets. This injustice makes Jacqueline question her religion. Woodson shows how Jacqueline's own moral compass at times conflicts with her religion's teachings; to Jacqueline, denying someone spiritual guidance because they do not have enough money to pay for the materials feels wrong and marks a greater uncertainty about the foundation of her religion as a whole.

sunday afternoon on the front porch. Miss Bell waves to Georgiana, who sits with her grandchildren on the porch. Gunnar, meanwhile, gardens. When Jacqueline worries about his sickness, Gunnar tells her that she is too young to worry.

Although many of the neighborhood happenings are the same as ever, Gunnar continues to get sicker and sicker. Though he still gardens, it is now much harder for him. Gunnar represents how, although Jacqueline didn't want it to, her life in the South continues to change.

Jacqueline knows that soon she will change out of her Kingdom Hall clothes and into gardening wear so that she can help Gunnar. After gardening, they will return to the house and she will rub his sore hands with Epsom salts. Meanwhile, Jacqueline prays that Roman will be well soon, and that they will always have their life in Greenville with their grandparents.

In this poem, Jacqueline takes stock of her life in Greenville, from her vexed relationship with her religion, to her deep love of her grandparents. She also thinks about the things she misses in New York, like Roman and her mother. Jacqueline, as she prays both for Roman and for her grandparents, seems in this moment to attempt to bring all these things together, expressing her deep desire to reconcile her life in New York with her life in the South.

home then home again. The summer in Greenville is ending. Mama calls Georgiana to plan the children's return. The children miss Roman, and Jacqueline thinks of him running to them when they return from school. The children play on the swings, but are no longer as enthralled with them as they once were. Gunnar promises to cement the swing set down so that they can swing higher. Slowly, the children pack their clothes.

Jacqueline understands clearly now that Greenville has changed while she was away, and her changing relationship to the swings also confirms the changes within herself. When Gunnar promises to cement the swing set while the children are gone, it gives Jacqueline a change to look forward to, one that contrasts with the other changes that she dreads.

PART 4: DEEP IN MY HEART I DO BELIEVE

family. In the books that Odella reads to Jacqueline, there is always a happy ending. When Jacqueline and her siblings return to Brooklyn from Greenville, their reunion with Roman and Mama is an "almost happy ending," because Roman still has a hospital band on his wrist, and must return the next day.

In this poem, Woodson shows the reader how the conventions of storytelling frame Jacqueline's point of view. When Jacqueline compares the "happy endings" of the stories that Odella reads to her with the "almost happy ending" that she experiences reuniting with Mama and Roman, the reader sees how markedly the complexity of Jacqueline's life contrasts with the typical arc of a children's story.

one place. Roman travels between the apartment and the hospital until his treatment is done. Mama moves Roman's crib far from the wall so he can't reach the paint. At last, the family is together again.

The title of this poem, "one place," highlights the sense of internal division that Jacqueline feels when she is separated from her mother and brother. Despite her sense of being pulled between the North and the South, Jacqueline seems at peace here at last with her family together.

maria. During the last weeks of summer, Jacqueline makes a new best friend, Maria, who lives two doors down. Every morning they play together. Maria teaches Jacqueline the Spanish word "amiga," meaning "friend."

Until now, Jacqueline's social circle (even in New York) has been mostly limited to English-speaking Southerners, but now she begins to learn Spanish from her new friend Maria. This is another instance when Woodson shows Jacqueline's language skills expanding, evolving, and becoming richer.

how to listen #5. Maria asks Jacqueline what her deepest wish is.

Wishing recurs throughout the memoir as a concept that jogs Jacqueline's imagination and her desire to tell stories.

tomboy. Odella reads for fun instead of engaging in more active pursuits, like handball or jump rope. Jacqueline, on the other hand, likes playground games, and so she is called a "tomboy." Her walk reminds Mama of Jack.

When Mama say that Jacqueline walks like Jack, she suggests an alternative mode of memory that exists in the body rather than in language. Despite Jacqueline's fading memory of her father, she evokes him every day in her gait.

game over. Mama calls the children inside for the night. The children whine. Outside, their friends, who are allowed to stay out later, complain that Jacqueline and Hope shouldn't have to go inside so early.

Mama continues to enforce her strict behavioral rules, and, like with their religious restrictions, Jacqueline and her siblings continue to feel set apart from other children by the norms of their family.


lessons. As Mama cooks pancakes, she tells Jacqueline that Georgiana tried to teach her how to cook, but she didn't want to learn. She tells Jacqueline about how Robert was stealing peaches while she and Kay stayed inside cooking, and how Georgiana let them play outside that afternoon so they could have fun too. After they came back at suppertime, Mama says, "it was too late" to learn to cook.

As Jacqueline listens attentively to Mama's story, the reader sees again how much she appreciates other people's stories. It's notable that when Woodson reproduces the scene of her younger self (Jacqueline) listening to her Mama's story, she remembers such a fine level of detail from Mama's descriptions—this speaks to Jacqueline's close attention to her storytelling, even at this young age. Again, storytelling is a deep love of Jacqueline's that allows her to access a past that either she doesn't remember or wasn't alive for.


trading places. When Maria's mother makes a particular dish that Jacqueline really likes, Jacqueline brings a plate of Mama's food to exchange for Maria's dinner. Then they sit on Maria's stoop and eat them side by side. When Maria says that Jacqueline's mother makes the best chicken, Jacqueline responds, "I guess my grandma taught her something after all."

This poem serves in part to show the budding friendship between Maria and Jacqueline. It also exemplifies cross-cultural, interracial exchange. This tender moment, which occurs between two children of color, models an acceptance and sociability between people of different races that the white people in the book so often fail to strive for. This moment also shows the subjectivity of Mama's story in the preceding poem, since Maria and Jacqueline think she is a good cook.


writing #1. Jacqueline finds oral storytelling easier than writing. She struggles to remember the spellings of words and is frustrated by how much she must erase and rewrite.

Jacqueline continues to struggle with writing, which strengthens her preference for oral storytelling. She feels limited by written language in a way that she doesn't when she speaks. Woodson shows the reader how Jacqueline's language acquisition affects her storytelling capabilities.

late autumn. Jacqueline's teacher Ms. Moskowitz tells her class to write their names on the board. Jacqueline writes it easily in print. When her teacher asks her to write it in cursive, she writes "Jackie" because the cursive "q" is so difficult. When Ms. Moskowitz asks if that's what she wants to be called, Jacqueline nods to avoid explaining that she cannot write a cursive "q."

In this poem, Woodson shows the reader how Jacqueline's struggles with writing are not self-contained, and how her inability to express herself in writing affects her identity. Though she prefers to be called "Jacqueline," she agrees to be called "Jackie," since she does not want to admit she cannot write a cursive "q." Her lack of control over her name due to her writing limitations shows how her struggle with writing prevents her from controlling her identity, as naming represents self-actualization at various points in the book.

the other woodson. When Jacqueline's teachers meet her in the fall, they accidently call her Odella repeatedly because they look so much alike. They expect her to be as smart as Odella, and Jacqueline feels their interest in her waning as they realize that she is not as gifted as her older sister.

Odella's brilliance continues to make Jacqueline feel insecure, as she feels her teachers slowly realizing that she is not as academically talented as her sister. Jacqueline continues, as described in other poems, to struggle with reading and writing, two skills at which Odella excels. It is unclear whether the teachers genuinely dismiss Jacqueline as a student, or Jacqueline's insecurity makes her feel that way.

writing #2. As Mama listens to the radio, the song "Family Affair" comes on and she turns the volume up. Jacqueline transcribes the lyrics, which make her think of her pull between Brooklyn and Greenville. She is slowly becoming a proficient writer and reader by transcribing audio from radio or TV. Jacqueline's mind wanders to the meaning of the song, and then her mother says, "stop daydreaming," so Jacqueline returns to transcribing.

In the end, Jacqueline adjusts her learning method to improve her reading and writing skills. Jacqueline, for whom orality has always been easy and interesting, learns to write by transcribing the lyrics of the music on the radio. Again, Jacqueline's interest in music, melody, and rhythm are integral to her ability to grasp writing, which foreshadows her decision to write her memoir in verse. Though the music keeps Jacqueline's interest and helps her to understand writing, it also triggers her imagination, which she has to put aside in order to continue to focus on learning to write.

birch tree poem. Jacqueline's teacher reads her class the poem "Birches" by Robert Frost. First she shows them a picture of a birch tree, and then she reads aloud. Jacqueline says "some of us put our heads on our desks to keep the happy tears from flowing."

In this poem, Woodson shows the reader Jacqueline's continued literary development, as she identifies a specific writerly influence. Though Jacqueline has been learning storytelling from her family and the books Odella reads aloud, Robert Frost's poem is the first time Jacqueline mentions a specific work that she finds moving.

how to listen #6. Jacqueline states that when she sits under the oak tree on her street, "the world disappears."

Perhaps influenced by Robert Frost's poem about a different variety of tree, Jacqueline's imagination wanders under a neighborhood oak.

reading. Jacqueline continues to have difficulty reading. Her teachers tell her to read more difficult material and to read faster. Jacqueline resists these commands, however, because she likes to read slowly and repeatedly so she can remember what she's read.

Jacqueline's difference in learning style continues to be a problem as her teachers push her to read harder books faster. For Jacqueline, the pleasure in reading lies in committing the stories to memory, which highlights the relationship that Jacqueline cherishes between memory, writing, and storytelling.


stevie and me. On Mondays, Mama takes the children to the library and allows them to pick out seven books each. Jacqueline relishes the fact that she can read whatever she wants, and she reads a book about a boy named Stevie, who, like her, is brown. Jacqueline enjoys reading books about "brown people," and they make her feel that "someone like [her]" has a story to tell.

In this poem, Woodson shows the reader the power of literary representation and the importance of diversity in literature. When Jacqueline finds a book about a boy who, like her, has dark skin, she becomes excited because it makes her realize that "someone like [her] has a story to tell." For Jacqueline, this is an essential moment in her development, as it validates her as a storyteller. The existence of the book encourages her to find her own voice, despite the pervasive racism that makes people of color feel that their stories aren't valuable. Woodson suggests here the importance of publishing and assigning diverse children's books.


when i tell my family. Jacqueline tells her family she wants to be a writer, and they respond by telling her that writing is a nice hobby, but that she should be a teacher or a lawyer. Jacqueline thinks that maybe her insistence that she will be a writer is another one of her made up stories.

Though Jacqueline feels validated in her storytelling by the books she connects with, Jacqueline's family continues to devalue her imagination and her desire to be a writer. Though they have the best intentions, their gentle suggestions that she become a lawyer or a teacher make Jacqueline doubt her ability to be a writer, thinking it is an impossible dream.

daddy gunnar. One Saturday, Gunnar calls from Greenville, and all the children fight for the phone, so Mama makes them take turns. Gunnar coughs and asks how they are. Jacqueline tells him she loves him, and he responds in kind.

This poem shows how Gunnar continues to get sicker. Despite Jacqueline's hope that their world in the South will not change, Gunnar's phone call shows how life in Greenville is going on without them, emphasizing the distance between their lives in the North and the South.

hope onstage. Hope sings at a school concert, impressing and surprising his family with the quality of his voice. In response, Jacqueline thinks that maybe in each person there hides "a small gift from the universe waiting to be discovered."

Jacqueline, always drawn to music, is impressed by her brother's singing. As Hope is typically so quiet, his performance is especially impressive. When Jacqueline thinks that in each person there's "a small gift…waiting to be discovered," she is perhaps also referring to her own storytelling inclinations.

daddy this time. When the children return to Greenville for the summer, Roman comes with them, and he swings on the swing set that Gunnar cemented down. Gunnar is by now gravely ill. Jacqueline brings Gunnar chicken soup, but after a few mouthfuls he is too tired to eat.

Back in Greenville for the summer, Jacqueline notices changes to her home in the South. Some are good, and predictable: Roman is with them and the swing set is cemented down. Others, like Gunnar's sickness, are upsetting. This poem shows how, despite Jacqueline's wishes, her home in the South changed while she was in the North.

The other children avoid Gunnar's sick room. Jacqueline, however, attends to Gunnar, who whispers between coughs that she is his favorite grandchild. Jacqueline tells him stories, occasionally speaking to him in the Spanish she learned from Maria. She sings to him, and he does not think she is off-key.

Jacqueline, who so often uses her storytelling to escape the troubles in her own life or ease her own discomfort, tells Gunnar stories on his sickbed. Storytelling, for Jacqueline, not only helps her express herself and control her own narrative, but it can also be used to comfort and heal others. Jacqueline puts to work many of the skills she's learned in New York in this project, speaking Spanish and singing.

what everybody knows now. Despite the end of legal segregation in the South, Georgiana still sits in the back of the bus with the children to avoid "having white folks look at [them] like [they're] dirt." When Jacqueline argues that they aren't dirt, Georgiana nods, but says it is easier to stay in the back. Jacqueline decides that when that she grows up she wants to be one of the people who sit in the front of the bus.

Even though legal segregation is over, the racial divides that plague Greenville are still in place. Georgiana's decision to sit in the back of the bus in order to avoid conflict and derision shows how racial progress through legislation is limited in its efficacy. Although the legislative step of desegregation was essential, Woodson suggests here that, without changing the attitudes of people, it can only do so much. Unlike her grandmother, Jacqueline pledges to challenge the racist status quo.

Once in town, Georgiana and the children do not go into Woolworth's. During one recent visit, the store employees would not help Georgiana and they made her wait an inordinately long time. Jacqueline imagines her well-dressed, dignified grandmother waiting "quietly long past her turn."

When Georgiana tells Jacqueline about how she was not served at Woolworth's because of her race, Jacqueline imagines the scene. She pictures Georgiana, who is so polished and upright in everything she does, respectfully waiting as the store employees ignore her out of racism and hate. Woodson seems to be suggesting that quietly and respectfully waiting for racial justice is not always effective, and she emphasizes the positive potential of Jacqueline's vivid imagination.

end of summer. The Greenville summer ends and Robert takes the children back to New York. When Jacqueline hugs Gunnar, she notices he is extremely thin. They wave at their grandparents as their taxi pulls away.

Jacqueline and her siblings perform the same goodbyes they do every time they leave Greenville to return to New York, and once again Woodson shows how Jacqueline is caught between the South and the North. Gunnar's sickness exacerbates the pain of leaving Greenville, since he is so unwell.

far rockaway. Robert doesn't linger at the house when he arrives back at Madison Street with the children. The children tell him he must come back soon and take them to Coney Island as he promised. Robert assures them he won't forget, while Mama gives him an ambiguous look. Jacqueline thinks of a recent incident when policemen knocked on their door late at night, looking for Robert. Mama tells Robert to stay safe and avoid trouble, and Robert assures her that he will.

Finally back in New York, Robert's quick leave-taking makes Jacqueline and Mama suspicious. Woodson implies that Robert, who is a devoted, fun-loving uncle, is mixed up in trouble. Jacqueline seems to grasp the gist of the situation, taking in the ambiguous look that Mama gives to Robert and the quickness with which he leave the house. Strikingly, Jacqueline, who loves to fill in the gaps of situations she doesn't understand, does not try to imagine what's going on with Robert. This perhaps indicates her understanding that it is something unpleasant.

fresh air. Jacqueline, back from Greenville, looks for Maria, but Maria's mother tells her Maria is in upstate New York visiting a family with a pool. When Maria returns, she tells Jacqueline that she stayed with rich white people, and that the people she stayed with told her she was poor and tried to give her things. Maria tried to explain to them that, in Brooklyn, she's not poor. Jacqueline tells Maria she should come to Greenville next summer, and Maria says she will. The two of them write "Maria & Jackie Best Friends Forever" in chalk over and over again on the sidewalk.

Maria's experience upstate with a rich white family highlights the gap in understanding between the well-meaning white family that takes her in and how Maria sees her own life. Though they are trying to help, the family's insistence that Maria is poor and their attempts to give her gifts comes across as arrogant and condescending. Maria's explanation— that in Brooklyn she's not poor—shows how little the family understands the life and story of the girl they think they know. Both Jacqueline and Maria are clearly unimpressed by this show of misguided generosity. When Maria accepts Jacqueline's offer to go to Greenville with her, the reader pictures a much happier summer, in which Maria is not a charity case, but a treasured friend.

p.s. 106 haiku. In a haiku form of poem, Jacqueline writes her name and her grade, and says that it's raining outside.

Jacqueline experiments with writing her own poetry, drawing on the facts of her life, just as Woodson does in her memoir.

learning from langston. Jacqueline quotes Langston Hughes's poem "Poem," in which Hughes bemoans the loss of a friend. Jacqueline closely imitates the poem, but changes it to be a happy poem about her friendship with Maria.

In this poem, Woodson again shows how specific writers influence Jacqueline. As Jacqueline copies Langston Hughes's work, Woodson displays Jacqueline taking on a kind of apprenticeship, learning from master writers while adding her own touch.

the selfish giant. Jacqueline's teacher reads the Oscar Wilde story *The Selfish Giant* to the class. The story is about a giant who falls in love with a boy. The story makes Jacqueline cry. Later she begs Mama to take her to the library. Jacqueline checks the book out of the library to read over and over again.

Woodson adds to the list of literature that Jacqueline connects with deeply. Her excitement about the book shows how reading can be exciting for children (even despite persistent difficulty reading) when they find books that they personally connect with.

During class one day, Jacqueline's teacher asks her to read aloud. Instead, Jacqueline recites the whole story of *The Selfish Giant*. Everyone is impressed, and Jacqueline does not know how to explain her propensity for telling and memorizing stories, but she realizes it is a gift.

Oscar Wilde's book, which Jacqueline has read enough times to memorize it, helps Jacqueline become confident in and proud of her storytelling talent. When she recites the book off the cuff, impressing her classmates and teacher, Jacqueline receives the encouragement she needs to think of her imagination and memorization skills as a gift.

the butterfly poems. Jacqueline says she is writing a book about butterflies, and she looks in the encyclopedia at pictures of the butterflies for inspiration. No one believes that she can write an entire book about butterflies; Hope insists that it's impossible since butterflies have short lives. But Jacqueline believes that on paper "things can live forever."

Jacqueline, who is increasingly confident in her abilities as a writer and a storyteller, pores over an encyclopedia to get inspiration for her newest writing idea. Whereas previously Jacqueline internalized her family's assertions that she could not be a writer, this time, when they say she cannot write the butterfly book, Jacqueline ignores them. She thinks about writing as a medium of infinite possibility.

six minutes. In groups, the women of Kingdom Hall write and perform skits about evangelization. Jacqueline asks to write her group's skits all by herself. Jacqueline inserts horses and cows into the script, and Mama chastises her for being too imaginative. Jacqueline starts over, promising herself that she will use the rest of the story somewhere else.

Jacqueline asks to take on the responsibility of writing a skit for her church, continuing to find spaces to exercise her talent. Like the rest of the family, Mama lacks appreciation for Jacqueline's powers of imagination and she criticizes Jacqueline for inserting horses and cows into what is suppose to be a realistic roleplay. Jacqueline agrees to make the skit more realistic, but promises herself she will use the story elsewhere, which shows her growing commitment to her own artistic vision.

first book. Jacqueline makes her first book. It is composed of haikus, and entitled "Butterflies."

Jacqueline's first book, written in spite of her family's doubt, marks an important step for her as a writer and storyteller.

john's bargain store. Jacqueline and Maria shop on Knickerbocker Avenue, a major shopping street. Jacqueline refuses to go into Woolworth's because of the way they treat black people in Greenville, and so she and Maria go to a bargain store and buy matching t-shirts so they can dress alike each day. Jacqueline hopes someone will ask if they are cousins.

In New York, Jacqueline remembers how Woolworth's employees treated her grandmother in the South because of her race, and she refuses to shop there in protest. In doing so, Jacqueline links her lives in the South and the North— though the North is more progressive, the same companies that discriminate based on race in the South profit from stores in the North. Jacqueline and Maria instead shop elsewhere, not letting the memory ruin their outing.

new girl. A new girl named Diana moves in next door and becomes friends with Maria and Jacqueline. Like Maria's mother, Diana's mother is from Puerto Rico. Maria tries to dispel Jacqueline's worries that, as a result, Diana will surpass Jacqueline as her best friend. When it rains, Jacqueline jealously watches them play from her window.

Jacqueline's worry that Diana will surpass her as Maria's best friend stems in a large part because of Diana and Maria's shared race, heritage, and culture. Though Maria insists this will not be the case, she cannot dispel Jacqueline's worries. Race in Jacqueline's life generally has served as a segregating factor, and so she worries that, with someone more racially and culturally similar to her, Maria will forget about Jacqueline.

pasteles & pernil. Jacqueline goes over to Maria's house for her brother's baptism. The two of them look at the baby, whose gown is pinned with money. The girls think about taking some, but worry that God is watching.

Jacqueline celebrates Maria's brother's baptism with her and her family, showing another instance of how Jacqueline and Maria, who practice different sects of Christianity, partake respectfully in each other's culture. Despite Jacqueline's ambivalence about religion, she fears God enough to not take the baby's baptism money.

Maria's mother cooks pernil, but Jacqueline cannot eat it because Jehovah's Witnesses cannot eat pork. Instead she eats "pasteles" filled with chicken. There is a party at the house, and while the girls eat on the stoop, the adults dance merengue. When Jacqueline asks where Diana is, Maria says that she is coming later because "this part is just for my family."

Jacqueline's worries that Maria will choose Diana over her as a best friend are dispelled in this poem. During the pre-party, Jacqueline and Maria navigate each other's cultural differences, such as Jacqueline's religious prohibition from eating pork. When Maria includes Jacqueline in her definition of "family," she not only affirms Jacqueline's place in her life, but also disabuses Jacqueline of her worry that race would be a factor in their emotional connection.


curses. People tell Mama that Jacqueline and her siblings are very polite. They do not curse or behave in ways that Mama thinks are inappropriate. Their friends laugh at them for this and try to goad them into saying curse words. The children refuse, thinking of their mother.

Mama's strict control over her children's language seems to have worked, as the children are considered to be very polite. Although they are made fun of for their inability to curse, they stick to their mother's orders, showing how firmly this early linguistic influence has shaped them.

afros. Robert comes to the house sporting an afro, and afterward Jacqueline begs Mama to let her wear her hair like that. Mama says no, but Mama wears her own hair in an afro. Jacqueline thinks this is unfair, but Mama says, "this is the difference between being a grown-up and being a child." Jacqueline sticks her tongue out at her mother when she's not looking, and Odella catches her. Odella repeats her mother's phrase, rolls her eyes, and returns to reading.

Robert's afro symbolizes, in part, his embrace of the Black Power Movement, which rose in the late 60s and 70s and included, among many other stances, an interest in celebrating natural hairstyles for black people rather than conforming to white, Eurocentric standards of beauty. Mama likewise adopts this hairstyle and supports the Black Power Movement (as will become explicit later), but refuses to allow Jacqueline to change her hair. The reader might remember, during this poem, the many hours Georgiana used to spend coaxing Jacqueline's hair into smooth ringlets.

graffiti. Jacqueline and Maria try graffiti, but are caught by Robert. Jacqueline does not know how to express that she tried graffiti out of a desire to write. Robert is extremely angry, and Jacqueline doesn't understand, because "they're just words."

For Jacqueline, who uses words as a positive and necessary form of self-expression, graffiti is an exciting new way of expressing herself. She cannot understand her uncle's anger over her and Maria's graffiti attempts, believing that words could not hurt anyone.

music. In the mornings, the family listens to the radio, and Mama lets the children choose what to play. Her only condition is that the songs can't contain the word "funk." Unfortunately, all the songs on the black radio stations that the children deem cool contain the word "funk," so they have to listen to white stations. Odella likes the music, but Jacqueline sneaks over to Maria's house to listen to the other music and to sing and dance along, repeating the word "funk" until it loses its meaning.

Mama, with her strict policy around language use, refuses to let the children listen to the exciting new music on the black radio stations because the songs use the word "funk." While Odella happily complies and listens to white radio stations, Jacqueline, ever rebellious, sneaks to Maria's house and listens to the banned music there. Jacqueline's love of music prevails over her desire to obey her mother, and the reader can see that Jacqueline is beginning to question the ways in which Mama polices her language. Jacqueline sees words as unthreatening and neither essentially good nor bad, unlike Mama.


rikers island. Mama gets a phone call in the middle of the night from Robert, who has been thrown in jail. The next morning, Mama tells the children Robert won't be around for a while since he is in jail, but she does not tell them why, except that he "played the wide road" rather than staying on the straight and narrow path. It rains that day, so the children must stay inside, and Jacqueline has writer's block.

When Mama leads the children through the knowledge that their beloved uncle has been thrown in jail, she uses religious imagery to explain it to them, saying he did not stay on the straight and narrow path. Despite Mama's own lack of enthusiasm for religion, she does seem to find it helpful in certain instances throughout the memoir.. Jacqueline is so troubled by this news that she cannot write at all, showing how her writing not only affects her life, but her life affects her writing.


moving upstate. Robert is moved to a prison upstate, where the family hopes to visit him soon. When people ask, Jacqueline does not tell them that Robert is in jail. She is still very upset about what happened.

Jacqueline, unable to face the painful reality of her beloved uncle's imprisonment, resorts to making up stories and lying, as she did when people asked about her father. Again, Jacqueline's storytelling becomes a form of emotional relief for her.

on the bus to dannemora. The family boards a bus to visit Robert in prison. Jacqueline falls in and out of sleep listening to the radio, and then thinks of a story, inspired by the song's lyrics, about a love train full of free people. The bus is quiet, and Jacqueline thinks each of them is dreaming their own dream of relatives in prison who will one day be free.

On their way to visit Robert, Jacqueline finds storytelling inspiration in the lyrics of a song played over the radio (once again, the reader sees how Jacqueline is especially inspired by music). In Jacqueline's mind, she pictures each of the people around her dreaming that their imprisoned relative is free and that they are all joined together in love. Jacqueline's imaginative story is a source of both empathy and catharsis for her.

too good. Still on the bus, Jacqueline starts to make up a song. Odella asks who taught it to her, and she doesn't believe Jacqueline when she says it is original, saying it's "too good" for that. Jacqueline is happy about this accidental compliment.

Jacqueline continues to engage her imagination on the way to visit Robert in prison. When Odella doesn't believe that Jacqueline made up the song, Odella's doubt, rather than discouraging Jacqueline, encourages her. This is a sign of Jacqueline's strengthening identity and confidence.

dannemora. At the prison, the family goes through the gate and past the guards. The prison disturbs Hope, and Jacqueline can tell. Jacqueline watches a security officer pat Hope down, and thinks how quickly he could become just an inmate number like Robert.

Jacqueline is disturbed by the idea that Hope, like Robert, could quickly be reduced to a criminal statistic. Woodson is perhaps referring here to unjust treatment of black people in the criminal justice system. One of the aims of the Black Power Movement was to change this relationship and to make the legal treatment of African-Americans fairer.

not robert. When the family sees Robert at last, he is not himself. His afro is shaved, and Jacqueline senses a sadness in him that did not exist before.

The fact that Robert's afro is shaved makes Jacqueline sad. It represents how he has been forced to conform to prison standards and sacrifice his individuality and black pride.

mountain song. On the bus home from the prison, Jacqueline continues to develop the song she was writing about the mountains they pass on their trip. Jacqueline cries, thinking of Robert, Gunnar, and Greenville: things she perceives as already lost. Jacqueline thinks that if she can remember the song and write it down later, she will be a writer, able to capture every memory.

In this poem, Jacqueline synthesizes her understanding of the relationship between comfort, writing, and memory. Jacqueline plans to use writing as a way of combatting her fear of losing the people she loves, because writing will allow her to commit those people to memory forever. Jacqueline's sense of memory as the preservation of her loved ones, and her use of writing as a way to create memory, shows how she is beginning to understand her writerly motivation.


poem on paper. When Jacqueline's family asks what she is writing, she gives them vague answers. Mama tells Jacqueline that anything is fine as long as she doesn't write about their family, and Jacqueline thinks she is not *really* doing so.

Once again, Mama's idea of what Jacqueline's writing should be contrasts with Jacqueline's. Jacqueline, however, defies Mama's instructions, asserting her own sense of the proper subject for her writing.

daddy. In the spring, Georgiana informs the family that Gunnar is dying, and tells them to come to Greenville. The weather, Mama says, is the kind of weather Gunnar loved to garden in. The family flies to Greenville, and Jacqueline wants to tell Gunnar all about the flight. However, Gunnar is asleep when they arrive, and that night he dies. The silent funeral procession winds through Nicholtown. The family buries Gunnar, tossing handfuls of **dirt** on the casket.

When Georgiana calls the family to tell them that Gunnar is dying, Jacqueline's biggest worries and worst fears come true. Before Jacqueline can share more stories with Gunnar, who always encouraged her storytelling gift, Gunnar passes away. Jacqueline notes that the funeral procession is silent—significant because she loves sound so much. The family says goodbye to Gunnar by tossing the Greenville dirt on his casket, which, for Jacqueline, always represented both the South and Gunnar, who loved to garden.


how to listen #7. Jacqueline states that a person can find stories in silence if they listen.

Jacqueline, reeling from the grief of Gunnar's death, is still able to find storytelling inspiration in the silence he leaves behind.

PART 5: READY TO CHANGE THE WORLD

after greenville #2. After Gunnar's death, Georgiana moves to Brooklyn to live with Mama and the children. Spring turns to summer and then to winter. From her chair by the window, Georgiana watches the leaves fall. Jacqueline learns to jump double-dutch while her grandmother watches. Jacqueline remarks that, "both of [their] worlds [are] changed forever."

When Georgiana comes to live with them, the part of Jacqueline's life that took place in Greenville is over. Woodson portrays Georgiana's grief in a poignant, understated way, emphasizing her lack of energy and purpose as she sits in her chair for months, looking out the window. Despite Jacqueline's efforts to immortalize Gunnar and her life in Greenville through writing, she has the sense that the family's world is irrevocably changed.

*mimosa tree.*Georgiana planted a mimosa tree seed in the spring, and in the winter the sapling emerges. Jacqueline meditates on how some days she feels that the New York that people glorified in Greenville does not exist. But other days Jacqueline feels optimistic about the mimosa tree, and thinks that it will bring a piece of Greenville to New York.

Jacqueline sometimes feels pessimistic that the New York that was promised to her in the stories people told her in Greenville does not actually exist in real life. But she has hope that the sapling of a mimosa tree that Georgiana planted will bring her a sense of unity in New York that she didn't feel before, when she was so often shuttling between two homes. Jacqueline thinks the tree, and her grandmother's presence, will unify her internal division.

bubble-gum cigarettes. Jacqueline and Maria walk to a bodega nearby to buy bubble-gum cigarettes. The two girls pretend to glamorously smoke their bubble-gum cigarettes until Odella comes out and says smoking is how Gunnar died. Then Maria and Jacqueline chew the cigarettes into gum and stop pretending to smoke.

Though Jacqueline and Maria mean no harm in their fake cigarette smoking, Odella's painful reminder that smoking killed Gunnar shows Jacqueline how symbolism can still be upsetting. It recalls Jacqueline's earlier naivety when she insisted to Robert that words are only words— like in that instance, Jacqueline is only just learning how symbolic meaning can still have a significant impact.

what's left behind. Georgiana tells Jacqueline that she reminds her of Gunnar while holding a picture of him in her hands. Together, they look at the picture, and Jacqueline tells Georgiana that she remembers Gunnar's laugh. Georgiana smiles and says it's because Jacqueline's laugh is so much like Gunnar's, calling them "two peas in a pod."

Georgiana and Jacqueline remember Gunnar, whom they both loved very deeply, in this touching anecdote. Woodson reminds the reader again how memory can be carried not only in active storytelling, but also in evocative sounds, words, objects, and in the body itself.

the stories i tell. In the fall, Jacqueline's teacher asks her class to write about their summer vacations. Most of the class goes South for the vacation, but Jacqueline's family does not go to Greenville anymore because it makes Georgiana too sad. So Jacqueline writes that her family went to Long Island, despite the fact that she has never been there. She fabricates the details of her life to make it more appealing to her, changing her religion and the composition of her family in the stories.

Jacqueline's class assignment evokes painful memories of Greenville, where she no longer spends her summers. Instead of describing her summer in New York, or explaining why they no longer go to Greenville, Jacqueline invents stories about fake summer vacations. Once again, Jacqueline's imagination allows her to escape from painful realities and memories as she sculpts an alternative, written reality.

how to listen #8. Jacqueline remarks that "someone" is always asking "do you remember…?" and that the other person always responds affirmatively.

Harnessing memory, for Jacqueline, is not only a way to gain control over her own life, but also a way that she can connect with other people over shared history.

fate & faith & reasons. As Jacqueline and Mama fold laundry together, Mama tells her that "everything happens for a reason," and talks about how her sister Kay believed in fate. Mama tells her that the move to Brooklyn was part of their fate, and not an accident. When Jacqueline asks Mama what she believes in, Mama tells her she believes in "right now… the resurrection… Brooklyn" and her four children.

Mama and Jacqueline discuss the idea of fate and the concept that "everything happens for a reason," topics which have a distinctly spiritual bent. Mama believes in fate like Kay did, telling Jacqueline that their move to Brooklyn was fate. This seems to surprise Jacqueline, whose mother does not attend church and generally seems to have a troubled relationship with religion. When Jacqueline asks her what she believes in, Mama lists a range of different things, showing that her spirituality, rather than being absent, is plural and diverse.

what if…?. Jacqueline wonders what would have happened if Madison Street hadn't been built, if Maria and she didn't live near each other, if she had laughed at Maria's nickname when they first met, or had had less in common. Maria says she can't imagine any of that, and Jacqueline agrees.

As Jacqueline's mind wanders, she wonders to Maria what their lives would have been like if various conditions hadn't occurred. When Maria says she doesn't want to think about it, Jacqueline's agreement seems to indicate that she is identifying an aspect of imagining alternative reality that does not make her happy. This seems to be a new development.

bushwick history lesson. Jacqueline learns about the history of Bushwick in class. She thinks about how before the neighborhood was populated by Germans, Dominicans, and African-Americans, it was settled by the Dutch, slaves, and freedmen. Jacqueline writes that she understands her own place in a long history.

As Jacqueline learns about the history of New York, it helps her situate herself in a larger narrative of the city's institutional memory. Jacqueline begins to fit her own personal narrative into broader histories, including the founding of America and African-American history.


how to listen #9. Jacqueline writes secretly under the back porch.

Jacqueline's relationship to language continues to be an important personal outlet for her.

the promise land. Robert is freed from jail. During his time in prison, he converted to Islam, and he tells the children about his new faith. Jacqueline kneels beside him when he prays, curious about Mecca and the promised land he has told her about.

Robert's conversion to Islam shows Jacqueline a new, alternative religion that is very different from the sect of Christianity she has always known. Perhaps it is Jacqueline's dissatisfaction with her religion that fuels her curiosity about Robert's practice.

power to the people. After watching activist Angela Davis on television, Jacqueline walks the neighborhood with Maria, their fists raised to symbolize black power. They fantasize about joining the Black Panthers, an activist group that helps lead the Black Power Movement. Jacqueline doesn't understand why Angela Davis is persecuted for her beliefs.

This poem shows Jacqueline connecting with the Black Power Movement, which grew out of the Civil Rights Movement and focused on promoting socialism and black pride. Though Jacqueline and Maria clearly are too young to truly understand the political significance of the movement, the energy surrounding it still excites them, and the image of Angela Davis appeals to them.

say it loud. Mama tells the children how the Black Panthers are organizing to help black children, and describes the free breakfast program they started for children in Oakland. The children sing black pride songs until Mama tells them to be quiet.

Mama, too, seems to subscribe to the social and political agenda of the Black Power Movement, as she praises the Black Panthers to her children. Still, she tells them to quiet down when they sing black pride songs— either because she is tired, or because she fears repercussions for the racial politics they imply.

Jacqueline thinks about how white people and people of color live on opposite ends of Bushwick, and about the old woman in her neighborhood who gives them cookies and describes what Bushwick was like when it was all white. Jacqueline wonders what could make people "want to get along," and she returns to watching Angela Davis on TV.

Jacqueline clearly cannot fully grasp the changing racial situation in America. She senses the implied judgment of the neighborhood woman who nostalgically tells them about the neighborhood when it was white, but she cannot fully articulate her discomfort. Jacqueline cannot understand why racial segregation occurs, or why people do not want to get along.

maybe mecca. Jacqueline describes a boy they call Leftie who says he lost his arm in the Vietnam War; she particularly focuses on the sadness in his eyes. She thinks that the Mecca that Robert describes is what Leftie thinks of when the loss of his arm and the memories of the war are too painful. Jacqueline imagines Mecca is an intensely happy place, and she longs to go there.

Woodson mentions the Vietnam War for the first time in this poem, again situating Jacqueline's life in the context of U.S. history. Jacqueline responds to Leftie's sad memories of the war by imagining him escaping into his imagination, a place that Jacqueline thinks must be like Robert's Mecca. Jacqueline believes that Robert and Leftie probably use their imaginations, like she does, in order to escape painful memories.

the revolution. During a walk to the park, Robert encourages the children to learn about "the revolution" (i.e. the Black Power Movement) firsthand. Jacqueline ponders the revolution, thinking of Shirley Chisholm, a black woman who ran for president. She says that when she hears the word *revolution* she thinks of a carousel, and this idea inspires her to write. As they arrive at the park, she toys with how she will put the idea into words.

Robert's encouragement that the children learn about Black Power firsthand suggests that he distrusts the media outlets and how they portray the struggle for racial justice. Woodson shows the reader how the struggle for racial justice not only inspires Jacqueline and her family politically, but also inspires Jacqueline to make art. Jacqueline pays special attention to the sounds in the word "revolution," as she is always so attentive to sound. While racism and race often cause problems for Jacqueline and her family, liberation serves as part of Jacqueline's writerly inspiration.

how to listen #10. Jacqueline describes her writing process in a few words, and emphasizes the importance of listening.

Woodson shows Jacqueline to be aware not only of her desire to write, but of her writerly process.

a writer. Jacqueline's teacher Ms. Vivo reads one of Jacqueline's poems and tells her that she is a writer. Jacqueline mentions that Ms. Vivo is a feminist, and so is a part of the revolution too. Jacqueline desperately wants to believe her claim that she is a writer. As she reads her poem aloud to the class, Jacqueline gains confidence.

Jacqueline admires her teacher, not only for her teaching skills, but also for her political inclination towards feminism and "the revolution." Ms. Vivo encourages Jacqueline to write, but also states that she is a writer already, giving Jacqueline support and confidence in her goals. Jacqueline continues to gain confidence as she shares her work with classmates, hoping to feel, like Ms. Vivo does, that she is a writer.


every wish, one dream. When Jacqueline blows dandelion puffs, finds heads-up pennies, or wishes on stars, she wishes for only one thing: to be a writer. She senses that all of her reading, writing, experiences, and memories are bringing her closer to this dream.

Encouraged by Ms. Vivo's praise and validation, Jacqueline devotes herself to her writerly dream. Her reading, writing, and daily experiences feel like they are purposeful and driving toward her goal. The reader gets a sense that Jacqueline has fully committed to her dream of being a writer and is determined to get there.

the earth from far away. On Saturdays the children watch a television show called *The Big Blue Marble*. The opening theme shows a globe that zooms in on different countries to tell stories of children around the world. Jacqueline likes hearing the multitude of different stories, and feels inspired to write.

Jacqueline is inspired not only by her own life, which was previously the most prominent subject matter of her writing, but also by the breadth of stories of different people around the world. The television helps her to access these stories, and they inspire her to keep writing.

what i believe. Jacqueline lists her beliefs, ranging from religious beliefs to the belief in the possibility of racial justice, to belief in her family and her neighborhood. She ends by saying that she believes in the future and the present.

Jacqueline, who has struggled with her relationship to religion throughout the text, at last seems to have crystallized her understanding of religion and her belief system. This belief list shows Jacqueline's maturity compared with early part of the book, when her values were not yet clear.

each world. Jacqueline states that there are "many worlds" a person can choose to "walk into each day." These worlds include ones where she is as smart as Odella, ones where she is more like her brothers, or ones where she is a mother. Jacqueline's ability to put herself in other's shoes makes her feel loved in return. The plurality of the places where she feels at home (Ohio, South Carolina, Brooklyn) and the identities she carries (daughter, Jehovah's Witness, writer, etc.) are also, to Jacqueline, different "worlds" that collapse into one personhood. Jacqueline has the sense that she can decide the terms of each world she lives in and what the ending to her story might be.

In her final poem of the book, Woodson shows the reader that Jacqueline has a fully developed worldview and a mature relationship to reading, writing, storytelling, and memory. To Jacqueline, language and storytelling allow her to walk through various different "worlds," stepping into alternative realities, different consciousnesses, and past memories. Meanwhile, Jacqueline's ability to control her own narrative has empowered her to reconcile her relationship with place (she now feels at home in the North and mentally visits the South of her memories), and has given her tools to think about race and racial justice. Together, this maturity gives Jacqueline a cohesive worldview and identity that makes her feel in control and powerful. At last, Jacqueline has become someone who can control her own story.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Churchill, Katherine. "*Brown Girl Dreaming*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 7 Feb 2017. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Churchill, Katherine. "*Brown Girl Dreaming*." LitCharts LLC, February 7, 2017. Retrieved April 21, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/brown-girl-dreaming.

To cite any of the quotes from *Brown Girl Dreaming* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Woodson, Jacqueline. Brown Girl Dreaming. Nancy Paulsen Books. 2014.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Woodson, Jacqueline. Brown Girl Dreaming. New York: Nancy Paulsen Books. 2014.