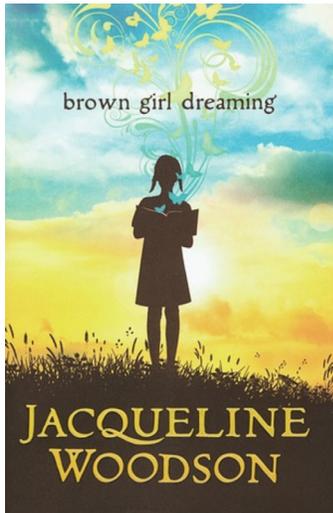


Novel Guide • Student Edition • Grade 6

*Brown Girl
Dreaming*

by Jacqueline Woodson

Part 1: Introduction



Brown Girl Dreaming
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About the story

Jacqueline Woodson's memoir of her childhood, *Brown Girl Dreaming*, is written entirely in verse. Woodson weaves together her own memories with those of her family members for a deeply personal portrayal of growing up between Ohio, South Carolina, and New York. While the book explores where home is for Jacqueline, it also illuminates the experiences of an African American child during the Civil Rights Movement and her burgeoning passion for words and stories.

About the author

Though born in Ohio, Jacqueline Woodson spent her childhood in Greenville, South Carolina and Brooklyn, New York. From a young age, and despite reading difficulties, Woodson knew that stories and words were her brilliance. Woodson has published over 30 titles, including adult and young adult novels, middle grade novels, and picture books. Her works often focus on gender, African American identity and history, and other themes and issues relevant to her readers. Woodson's writing has won many awards and prizes, including the National Book Award, the NAACP Image Award, the Coretta Scott King Author Award, and Newbery Honors. Woodson's writing has also been nominated for various other awards and included in critics' and educators' lists of notable or best books.

Part 2: Text Excerpt and Close Reading Activities

Excerpt: *Brown Girl Dreaming*

“leaving greenville,” pages 136–137

- 1 My mother arrives in the middle of the night,
and sleepily, we pile into her arms and hold tight.
- 2 Her kiss on the top of my head reminds me
of all that I love.
- 3 Mostly her.
- 4 It is late winter but my grandmother keeps
the window in our room slightly open
so that the cold fresh air can move over us
as we sleep. Two thick quilts and the three of us
side by side by side.
- 5 This is all we know now—
- 6 Cold pine breezes, my grandmother’s quilts,
the heat of the wood-burning stove, the sweet
slow voices of the people around us,
red dust wafting, then settling as though it’s said
all that it needs to say.
- 7 My mother tucks us back into our bed whispering,
We have a home up North now.
- 8 I am too sleepy to tell her that Greenville is home.
That even in the wintertime, the crickets
sing us to sleep.
- 9 *And tomorrow morning, you’ll get to meet
your new baby brother.*
- 10 But I am already mostly asleep again, two arms
wrapped tight
around my mama’s hand.

Step 1: Close Reading Activity

Jacqueline's mother has just returned to Greenville to tell her children that they are leaving for New York the next day. Examine the text to determine where home is for Jacqueline.

1. In blue, highlight language that includes details of what it's like for Jacqueline to live in her grandparents' house.
2. In yellow, highlight language that includes details of Jacqueline's interaction with her mother.
3. Look at the text that you've highlighted in blue. What does this language reveal about how Jacqueline feels about living in her grandparents' house?
4. Look at the text that you've highlighted in yellow. What does this language reveal about Jacqueline's relationship with her mother?
5. When you think of the word "home" in a positive way, what images or adjectives come to mind?
6. Is home for Jacqueline in her grandparents' house or with her mother?

Step 2: Connected Excerpts to Continue Close Reading

Continue to investigate Jacqueline's struggle to identify where home is. Examine Jacqueline's descriptive language to determine how much each place feels like home.

- **Part I, "home":** Jacqueline and her siblings arrive in Greenville.
- **Part I, "the cousins":** The family has a birthday party for Jacqueline's mother.
- **Part II, "lullaby":** What it sounds like at night in Greenville.
- **Part II, "the blanket":** While their mother goes to New York, the children stay with their grandparents.
- **Part II, "changes":** The children are counting down to their own departure from Greenville.
- **Part II, "the letter":** The children's mother sends word that she's coming for them.
- **Part III, "new york city":** Jacqueline experiences New York for the first time.
- **Part III, "herzl street":** The Woodsons get to know their neighbors.
- **Part III, "the johnny pump":** The children play in the water on hot days.
- **Part III, "brooklyn rain":** Jacqueline compares a rainy day in Brooklyn with one in Greenville.
- **Part III, "halfway home #2":** The children talk to their grandmother on the phone.
- **Part III, "home again to hall street":** The Woodson children return to their grandparents' home and not much has changed.
- **Part III, "mrs. hughes's house":** The children are mocked by their peers.

- **Part III, “home then home again”:** Summer is ending, and the children prepare to go back to New York.
- **Part IV, “maria”:** Jacqueline spends time with her best friend.
- **Part V, “mimosa tree”:** Jacqueline’s grandmother brings seeds to Brooklyn.

Step 3: Writing Prompt

Analytical

How has Jacqueline’s understanding of home changed over the course of the novel? By the end, where is home for her? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.

Part 3: Additional Guiding Questions and Projects

Step 4: Guiding Questions to Read the Whole Book

Use the discussion questions below to guide reading throughout the whole book. Students should come prepared to discuss their answers by referring to evidence from the text. Students should also be prepared to respond to comments made by classmates.

Part I: i am born

1. What came before Jacqueline’s birth that she believes may shape the person she will become?
2. How do the differences between Jacqueline’s mother and father affect their relationship?
3. What makes South Carolina feel immediately like home? How does Jacqueline’s mother deal with the negative aspects of that place?

Part II: the stories of south carolina run like rivers

4. How do the children adjust positively to their lives in South Carolina and in what ways do they still feel like outsiders?
5. While in Greenville, what do the children learn about the Civil Rights Movement in the South?
6. In what ways are Jacqueline’s feelings about leaving Greenville different from those of her mother?

Part III: followed the sky's mirrored constellation to freedom

7. What do the children miss about Greenville and what helps fill those voids?
8. What clues reveal that stories and words are becoming increasingly important to Jacqueline? How do others respond?
9. At the end of Part III, how does having two places they consider home affect the children during their visit to Greenville?

Part IV: deep in my heart, i do believe

10. In what ways do the Woodson children feel different from their peers?
11. How is each of the older Woodson children brilliant?
12. What process does Jacqueline use to start crafting songs and stories?

Part V: ready to change the world

13. How does Daddy's death impact the family?
14. What does Jacqueline realize is similar about her relationship with Maria and the evolution of Bushwick? How might this realization affect her writing?
15. What revolution is taking place and how does Jacqueline make sense of it?
16. According to the author, how do worlds and beliefs shape who you are?

Step 5: Extended Discussion Questions

1. There are times when the Woodson children feel like they don't fit in, whether it be in Greenville or New York. What advice would you give a person who is struggling to find their place in your location?
2. Jacqueline struggles to read at first, with the words twisting on the page, and she gets frustrated when teachers tell her the books she is reading are too easy for her age group. How have you dealt with a subject or concept that is difficult during your schooling?
3. Jacqueline's mother, grandmother, and grandfather all subscribe to different belief systems and religions, and throughout the book, Jacqueline works to identify her own beliefs. How have you worked to understand your own beliefs when faced with the belief systems of others?
4. After Diana moves into the neighborhood, Jacqueline is concerned that Maria may not be her best friend anymore. How do you avoid jealousy and self-doubt when your friends make new friends?
5. When Jacqueline reveals that her dream is to be a writer, her family pushes her to consider other options. What would you do if your family wanted you to pursue a dream that was not yours?

Step 6: Writer's Craft

Similes and Metaphors

Throughout *Brown Girl Dreaming*, Jacqueline Woodson uses figurative language, including similes and metaphors, to create strong images and convey deeper meanings.

Example 1:

- “I am born in Ohio but
the stories of South Carolina already run
like rivers
through my veins.” (2)

Example 2:

- “So many years have passed since we last saw
our father, his absence
like a bubble in my older brother's life,
that pops again and again
into a whole lot of tiny bubbles
of memory.” (103)

1. In example 1, stories are being compared to rivers. How would you typically describe rivers?
2. Does the comparison between rivers and the stories of South Carolina make sense in this context? Explain.
3. In example 2, the Woodsons' father's absence is being compared to bubbles. How would you describe bubbles?
4. Does the comparison between bubbles and the Woodsons' father's absence make sense in this context? Explain.
5. Find three more examples of similes or metaphors that Woodson uses throughout the book. Complete the same process as above to understand the meaning of each comparison.

Part 4: Final Projects

Step 7: Writing Prompt

In *Brown Girl Dreaming*, Jacqueline Woodson uses rich imagery to describe the places that she thinks of as home. Identify a place where you feel most at home and describe it using sensory images and specific word choice to convey the feelings you have in and about that place.

Step 8: Final Project

Dreams

Jacqueline Woodson includes the poem “Dreams” by Langston Hughes just before Part I. In part, this memoir tells the story of Woodson’s journey to achieve her dream to become a writer.

Langston Hughes was an African American writer and poet most often associated with the Harlem Renaissance. Hughes’s writing sought to represent the African Americans of his time and give voice to their experiences.

- Read “Dreams” by Langston Hughes.
- In one color, highlight lines that are repeated exactly.
- In another color, highlight lines that start the same but are slightly different at the end.
- In another color, highlight lines that are unique.
- Why might Hughes have structured his poem in this way?
- Look carefully at the simile in the 3rd and 4th line of each stanza. What adjectives would you use to describe the image being compared to life in these examples?
- Jacqueline Woodson was able to pursue her dreams. Rewrite this poem to reflect what life is like when dreams are followed. Use the same structure as Hughes and consider your images carefully.

Step 9: Challenge

Memories and Who We Become

Much of *Brown Girl Dreaming* focuses on Jacqueline’s realization that her memories and experiences contribute to a greater understanding of self and illuminate what her future might hold. During Jacqueline’s childhood, there were many people who acted bravely in the face of racism and segregation. Some of those people were neighbors and friends, but others loomed larger and had an impact on the entire nation.

Choose a person from the list of names provided on pages 3 and 4 in “second daughter’s second day on earth.” Conduct research to determine what memories and experiences may have driven the person you selected to try to change the world:

- What was happening socially and politically during your person’s life that they found problematic and wanted to change?
- What did your person do to try to change the world?
- What events or situations did your person experience in their youth that might have helped them decide to try to change the world?

- Who helped to foster the confidence and belief system that made it possible for your person to try to change the world? How?
- What has Jacqueline Woodson done to try to change the world?

Return to *Brown Girl Dreaming* and write an answer to the following:

What memories and experiences drove your person to try to change the world? In what ways are your person, the memories and experiences that drove them, and their actions similar or different from Jacqueline Woodson, her memories and experiences, and her actions? Use evidence from your research and *Brown Girl Dreaming* to support your answer.

Step 10: Extra

In “writing #2,” Jacqueline describes how she hears Sly and the Family Stone’s “Family Affair” on the radio and that “it’s / [her] mother’s favorite, the one she plays again and again” (221). The song seems to speak to the Woodsons because Jacqueline also remarks that “the song makes me think of Greenville and Brooklyn / the two worlds my heart lives in now” (221).

Listen to the song, which can be found on Spotify or by searching online, and follow along with the written lyrics, which can be found on sites such as lyrics.com.

- **Research:** On a sheet of paper, paraphrase the lyrics stanza by stanza. Next to each paraphrased version of the stanza, jot down a few ideas as to how this part of the song relates to the Woodsons and their experiences.
- **Discuss:** Share the notes you wrote in the previous step with a small group. Record your classmates’ ideas if you think they make sense.
- **Write:** Why was “Family Affair” a meaningful song to Jacqueline and her mother? How do the lyrics relate to the Woodsons and their experiences? Use evidence from the song lyrics and *Brown Girl Dreaming* to support your answer.

Step 11: Extended Reading

- *How I Discovered Poetry* by Marilyn Nelson
- *Inside Out & Back Again* by Thanhha Lai
- *The Crossover* by Kwame Alexander
- *One Crazy Summer* by Rita Williams-Garcia
- *Fish in a Tree* by Lynda Mullaly Hunt
- *The Poet X* by Elizabeth Acevedo

