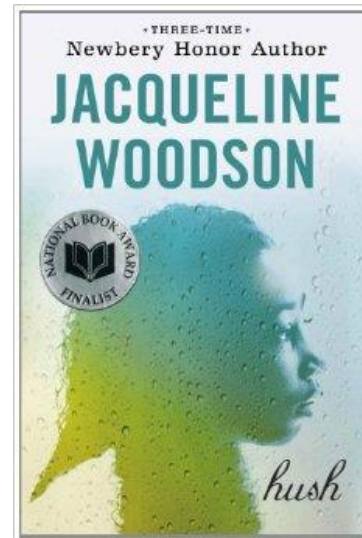


Witnessing and Responsibility: Jacqueline Woodson's *Hush*

Synopsis and Themes

Toswiah Green is forced to change her name, home, and friends when her family is moved into the witness protection program. Her father, the only black policeman in their town, sees two white policemen shoot a young black, unarmed, male. After heavy deliberation with his family, Toswiah's father decides to tell the truth about the murder committed because of *racial profiling*. As the family adjusts to a new town with *new identities*, they face struggles with fitting in with classmates, finding jobs, searching for a greater *reason* or *spirituality*, and battling depression: all of which lead to the following questions: what is the *responsibility* of a witness? and Are we *punished* or *protected* for telling the *truth*?



Recommendations for Utilizing Text

Hush can attract students who are interested in social justice, identity, and the power of voice. This text lends itself to being read alongside research on contemporary stereotyping and racial profiling. For example, students could read current news articles on the Ferguson shooting, subsequent protests, and social movement. Since Ferguson is not an isolated incident, video interviews and segments from Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* also provide a thorough perspective on current research. For teachers, Vol. 102, No. 4 of *The English Journal* focusses on the theme "Teaching English in the Age of Incarceration."

Connections

- Novels: *Invisible Man* (Ralph Ellison), *Monster* (Walter Dean Myers), *Bastard Out of Carolina* (Dorothy Allison), *The Bluest Eye* (Toni Morrison), *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Harper Lee)
- Poetry and Plays: *Joker, Joker, Deuce* (Paul Beatty), *A Raisin in the Sun* (Lorraine Hansberry)

Critical Conversation

Students will develop a critical eye for the current, national implications of an unjust social system. Furthermore, they will examine their own responsibility as a witness to diversity and difference in race and culture. When reading *Hush*, we might ask ourselves: How new is Ferguson?

Possible Assessments

Formative:

Students may keep a timeline of the events in the text in order to unpack the braided narrative of flashbacks and present events. Students may be assigned to analyze what they witness in daily life: what is said in song lyrics, in pictures they take with their phones, then create a new identity for themselves and compare their new identity to their real one based on the daily life reflections. By analyzing what they witness, they may think critically about what is often seen but not often discussed.

Summative:

Based on their critical interpretation of the text, their formative reflections on witnessing, and research on current social justice issues concerning discrimination, students will develop a claim concerning what they want to change in their communities that would promote cultural pluralism and social justice. They will then create a social justice campaign using social media, visuals (posters, flyers), spoken word, letters to government officials, and present their campaigns to the class.