

After Tupac and D Foster Study Guide

After Tupac and D Foster by Jacqueline Woodson

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Plot Summary

After Tupac and D Foster takes place during the mid 1990s when two eleven-year-old girls from Queens meet an enigmatic girl named D Foster. The story is set against the backdrop of real-life rapper Tupac Shakur's legal troubles and eventual fatal shooting.

Two African-American girls, Neeka and the unnamed narrator, have known each other since they were babies. They are eleven years old and live in Queens, New York. One day, another girl named D arrives on their block. With strange clothes and a multi-racial look, D is surprising to the girls. They soon strike up a lasting friendship. All three girls love the music of rapper Tupac Shakur. They feel Tupac sings as if he knows them and their struggles personally.

Neeka has a large family, headed by her mother, Miss Irene. Her oldest brother, Tash, is an effeminate homosexual who is in jail for a homophobic hate crime he didn't commit. Her older brother Jayjones works at KFC and aspires to be a professional basketball player. The narrator's own family is small, just her and her mother, and so she often does things with Neeka and her family. Neeka and the narrator are on a tight leash and are unable to leave their neighborhood, while D seemingly roams anywhere in the city she wants to, making the other two girls envious.

Everyone thinks that Tupac's recent legal struggles, in which he is accused of sexually assaulting a woman, are unjust and the result of institutional racism. Tupac is guilty in many people's eyes just because he sings about the "gangster" lifestyle and because he has "THUG LIFE" tattooed on his stomach. One day, they hear that Tupac has been shot. Everyone is shocked and upset, and they listen closely to the radio for every small update as to his condition. Once recovered from the shooting, Tupac goes to jail.

Shortly after Tupac is released, D invites the narrator and Neeka to "roam" in the city. Fearful yet excited, the girls travel to the amphitheater of a city park, and on stage the narrator feels free and whole. It is a transformative experience.

Months pass, and the girls become teenagers. Gradually, D's story is revealed: abandoned by an alcoholic mother, she spent time in and out of foster homes and an orphanage before landing with the kindly Flo. One day, a teary D reveals that her real mother wants her back. Her mother is white, accounting for her mixed heritage. Despite abandonment, D loves her mother, and D compares her complicated relationship to her mother with Tupac's relationship with his own mother.

News comes in that Tupac is shot for a second time. After five or so days, he dies in the hospital. D is gone to live upstate, and her telephone just keeps ringing and ringing. She seems gone forever. But her memory will remain.



Prologue and Chapter 1

Prologue and Chapter 1 Summary

Prologue: The reader is told about a character named D Foster, and that D's "real mama" took her away sometime in the past. At that time, Tupac Shakur, a well-known rapper, had been shot five times, but he miraculously lived. D Foster's time with the unnamed narrator corresponded to the time a few months before Tupac got shot the first time and the summer before he got shot a second time and died. The first time Tupac was shot was November 1994.

The narrator, D, and their other good friend, Neeka, were very fond of Tupac. Tupac's shooting forced some to dismiss Tupac as a mere "gangster", who was a bad influence on black youth. The narrator saw him as a survivor and a hero. Even when Tupac was jailed and released an album from jail, the narrator admired him for his irrepressible spirit. The girls (they are about twelve at the time) daydreamed about growing up as rappers' wives.

Tupac's death (presumably, the narrator is writing the Prologue soon after the death) forces the narrator to think about D and her effect on the narrator's life. The rest of the book will therefore be a flashback to the time D was around.

Chapter 1: The narrator flashes back to the summer of 1995, after D had been in her life for some time. D, the narrator, and Neeka are watching music videos together, eating pizza. The station shows Tupac's music video for the song, "Brenda's Got a Baby," in which a young girl gets pregnant and disposes of her baby in a garbage can. The narrator wonders if Tupac was thinking of his own mother when he wrote the song. His mother was in jail when she was pregnant with Tupac, arrested for being a member of the militant group the Black Panthers. The girls all admire the fact that Tupac loves his mother very much, despite some fights they have. D says looking at Tupac is like looking in the mirror, and that when he sings about his mother, it's like he's singing about D's real mother, whom she does not know.

D's foster mother is named Flo. Neeka and the narrator have never met Flo and have never been to D's house in the year they've known D. They're not even allowed to leave their own block. Flo appears to be a disciplinarian, not allowing D to spend the night, but D figures obeying her is better than rebelling and suffering a life on the street. D also doesn't know who her real father is, and she has tan brown skin, indicating she is of a mixed racial heritage.

D dreams of the day her "real mama" will come to take her away from Flo, but the day never seems to come. In contrast to D's dreary home life, Neeka has an overbearing but ultimately loving mother named Miss Irene. Miss Irene was suspicious of D at first, particularly her mysterious home life, but the family came to trust D eventually.



D is a self-described "roamer" who, during the day, is allowed to go anywhere in the city she pleases on the bus. The narrator and Neeka are quite envious of D's freedom. D, in turn, envies Neeka's close family ties. The narrator is in the middle, with a loving mother, but one who works all the time and who the narrator hardly sees. D talks of finding out a "Big Purpose" for your life, and that becomes a theme the book will return to. The day ends with D taking a bus back to her home.

Prologue and Chapter 1 Analysis

Jacqueline Woodson uses the real-life events surrounding rapper Tupac Shakur's last year or so of life as context for the fictional story of three girls deeply affected by the rapper's lyrics and personal story. The Prologue essentially starts well after the events of the rest of the book, after D Foster has come and gone from the life of Neeka and the narrator. This structure creates questions and interest in the reader. The reader wonders why D Foster was such an important person in the narrator's life. The rest of the story is then told in flashback. This structure also lends a sense of fatalism to the story. Just as the educated reader likely knows that Tupac was famously murdered, despite the "Medical Miracle" of surviving his first shooting, the narrator is telling the reader that D Foster will go away, never to be seen again.

The prologue and chapter one set up a parallelism with respect to D Foster and Tupac Shakur. The narrator intimates that D Foster changed her life as profoundly as listening to Tupac did. This parallelism will continue as the book progresses.

It is clear the girls love Tupac because he "speaks their language." He speaks about issues that affect them or people they know, such as racism, poverty, teen pregnancy, and the complicated nature of the relationship between mother and child. It is also important to the girls that Tupac came from a similar socio-economic background, and that he did not inherit his status or wealth. Woodson uses real-life Tupac songs, such as "Brenda's Got a Baby" and "Dear Mama" to deepen the reader's understanding of the characters. With both songs, D is able to relate to her own complicated relationship with her mother, and how, despite some regrettable actions on the part of her real mother (who abandoned her), D still feels love for her.



Chapter 2 and Chapter 3

Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 Summary

Chapter 2: The narrator has known Neeka since they were babies, and they live across the hall from each other. D was different; she just appears on their block one day. D's initial appearance "just caught something in me. Made my heart jump a bit" (p. 23), according to the narrator. D's odd clothes, "white-girl clogs," and strange coppery hair color all seem foreign to the narrator. The girls introduce each other, with Neeka in particular interrogating D about her clothes and where she came from. D says she's an only child, and that she was attracted to their block by the pretty trees. The narrator and Neeka are jealous of D's seeming ability to roam around town wherever she pleases. D leaves to go to the bus stop, and Neeka tells her to bring a jump rope next time so they can play Double Dutch.

A few days later, D returns with a jump rope. Neeka teases D about only liking her because of her jump rope. A few younger girls watch as the girls begin jumping rope. They have an instant rhythm with the rope.

Chapter 3: Jayjones is Neeka's older brother, a star basketball player for the Grady High School football team. He works at KFC. His full name is Jackson Jones, but after a basketball jersey is printed as "J. Jones," Jayjones became his nickname. Jayjones aspires to play professional basketball.

One day, Jayjones comes home with fried chicken from his work and offers it to the girls. Jayjones is attracted to D and tells her that pretty girls eat chicken wings (as opposed to legs or breasts). Jayjones doesn't say the same thing to the narrator, and she feels inferior for a moment.

Neeka's other brother is named Tash. The narrator calls him a "Queen" and a "sissy from day one", indicating he is a homosexual. Neeka and the narrator find the rampant homophobic lyrics in some rap songs hard to listen to, considering they love Tash. Tash is in jail for an unnamed crime. Neeka's very large family includes two sets of twins, boys and girls, younger than her, for a total of seven children in the family.

One of the boy twins is named Albert, and the narrator questions the name. Albert was named after Albert Einstein because he was "born looking smart." The narrator questions the assumption that Albert Einstein was smart; she heard he was actually born with a brain disorder and that confused people who couldn't understand him labeled him a genius. The narrator has a reputation as a brainy nerd and the other kids tease her about her intelligence. The narrator is usually quiet and reserved and always has her nose in a book.

The narrator has another attack of jealousy when Jayjones walks D back to her bus stop, and she observes some slight flirting between the two.



Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 Analysis

D's initial appearance is described carefully and thoroughly by the narrator; it is a clearly a big moment in her life. For the narrator, D represents otherness and freedom, a yearning for something more beyond the small neighborhood block the narrator (per her mother's orders) is confined to. Not unrelated, all the girls are on the cusp of the teenage years and are entering the next major stage of their lives toward becoming independent adults - much like the prospective reader.

Characteristic of a typical girl just beginning to discover boys, the narrator expresses a twinge of jealousy when JayJones offers D a chicken wing and a compliment about being pretty. D is maturing through puberty faster than either the narrator or Neeka, increasing her sense of otherness and her promise of independence and the future.

In this section, the reader learns that the narrator has a reputation for being a bookworm and an intelligent person. She is therefore an ideal person to provide commentary on D's importance and how D relates to her own maturation. The narrator also has the knowledge to offer historical perspective on Tupac, such as his mother's association with the Black Panthers.

Woodson smartly and subtly interweaves exposition about the characters (such as JayJones and Tash) throughout both her narration and the dialogue of the characters. Several elements of the exposition create questions in the reader's mind, propelling him or her forward. These elements include the exact nature of Tash's crime and whether or not JayJones will fulfill his dream of becoming a professional basketball player, or if his trajectory will end in disappointment.



Chapters 4 through 8

Chapters 4 through 8 Summary

Chapter 4: The narrator's mother, "Mama", asks about D, fearful that her daughter is associating with the wrong type of person. The narrator assures her D is a good person. Mama expresses dislike for the narrator saying "ain't", a habit she picked up from D. Mama questions the narrator about where D came from and what her family is like, but the narrator doesn't know. The narrator doesn't know who her own father is, either. Mama expresses regret for the narrator not having a father. Some days Mama looks sadly out the window, and the narrator can tell she's thinking of what could have been.

Chapter 5: On the Friday before Thanksgiving, Neeka and the narrator are outside trying to teach the littler kids to jump rope. They give up when the kids don't do as they say, figuring everyone has to learn rope on their own.

Jayjones arrives anxious and out of breath. He had been exercising in the park and a cop stopped him, presumably because he is black and the racist cop believed he was running from a crime. Neeka tells Jayjones that these events should convince him to give up basketball and pursue college and a decent career, but Jayjones believes a mere suit and a college education do not prevent pervasive racism. Jayjones is a poor student, but several colleges have contacted him because of his athletic skills. Neeka reminds Jayjones of his poor grades and tells him that he should put on a hat in the cold, and Jayjones accuses Neeka of sounding just like their mother.

Chapter 6: Mama is reading a newspaper article about the trial of Tupac, in which the rapper is accused of sexually abusing a young woman. Mama and the narrator agree that Tupac is innocent of the charges against him and that the judge and jury are being overly harsh because of racism and because of the "thug" lifestyle portrayed in Tupac's music. Tupac has "THUG LIFE" tattooed on his stomach, and the media as well as judge are using this as ammunition against him.

Chapter 7: Neeka and the narrator hear on the radio that Tupac has been shot. He was robbed of jewelry at a recording studio and shot five times. This shocks the girls to the core of their souls, and the narrator feels numb. Neeka cries, and Mama tries to assure the narrator. Tupac is currently in the hospital, with doctors trying to stabilize his condition.

Chapter 8: D arrives with red and swollen eyes, just as upset about the news of Tupac's injury as the other girls. The girls cry together. Jayjones also arrives and shares a sad moment with the girls. Jayjones shares his own experience with Tupac, how he followed the rapper from his early days with the group Digital Underground and onward. They recall Tupac's starring role in the movie Juice, as well as his first significant single, "If My Homie Calls". Jayjones declares that Tupac speaks to him and helps him clarify issues in his own life. Neeka counters that Tupac often has disparaging things to say



about gays, and so their family (with gay Tash) and Tupac don't have everything in common.

D reveals how she loves Tupac because she feels he knows what extreme hunger is like and what it is to go hungry because you don't have enough money. D's friends are shocked that D had such an impoverished upbringing. Neeka assures D that her mother will always have food for D, and D is grateful.

Chapters 4 through 8 Analysis

Chapter four demonstrates a difference between childhood and adulthood. Mama is suspicious of D because of her mysterious family background, whereas the narrator is innocently trusting. Mama also develops a dislike for D because D has introduced "ain't" and similar nonstandard grammar to her daughter. This tension also develops because of class difference; the narrator and Neeka's families are working class, struggling but surviving, while D is truly poor.

This section introduces thematic material about the nature and value of what might be termed "THUG LIFE", per the tattoo Tupac Shakur had on his stomach. Like D, Tupac is doubted by Mama; as a member of the older generation, Mama is fearful that Tupac and his celebration of the "thug life" lifestyle may have a deleterious effect on black youth, who may try to emulate what they hear in rap songs. However, Mama also defends the right for Tupac to engage in artistically portraying the gangster lifestyle, as part of an individual's freedom of expression. Mama feels it is an injustice to teach Tupac a lesson with a harsh prison sentence because of the content of his songs. This naturally also relates to racism, a theme that is often touched upon. Tupac is being persecuted in part because of his race and because his words resonate with an African American audience.

Tupac's first shooting has a severe and immediate impact on everyone. This shows how Tupac was, to many African Americans youth, almost a part of the family. Jayjones testifies that Tupac spoke directly to him, even though Tupac in reality did not know Jayjones. The author intimates that Tupac had a unique power to relate to the African American community. A key word in the text is "clarify". Tupac "clarified" issues and conditions important to the African American community.



Chapters 9 through 12

Chapters 9 through 12 Summary

Chapter 9: Valentine's Day arrives. Tupac recovers from his shooting and is sent to prison by a judge, sentenced to up to four and a half years for sexually assaulting a woman, even though the evidence was scanty and contradictory. Tupac's imprisonment has a further numbing effect on the narrator, and she relates it to the arrests of several people around Queens. In May, the narrator as well as Neeka turn twelve.

Chapter 10: The narrative fast-forwards to November, when Tupac is let out of jail early. The families are walking home from church. Jayjones declares that "brothers be hunted," and explains to young twin Emmett that black people can't walk too fast or can't be caught in different neighborhoods, or else the (white) police will harass them. Just like older brother Tash doesn't belong in jail, and just like Tupac didn't belong in jail, many black people have been falsely imprisoned due to racism.

Chapter 11: One wintry Friday night, D asks Neeka and the narrator if they would like to "roam" with her. The narrator is hesitant, but Neeka is excited. "Roaming", or traveling outside of their neighborhood block, is not permitted by their mothers, and the narrator fears a beating. But, finding the prospect of travel irresistible, the girls bundle up in winter coats, and they board the bus. D doesn't tell the girls where she intends to take them, and the city soon looks strange and unfamiliar outside the bus windows.

After what seems like a long time, D has them hop off the bus at a certain stop. D takes them to a large, dark city park. Neeka fears three teenaged girls going alone into such a park are sure to be beaten or raped, but D dismisses her fears, and they travel into the park.

The girls arrive at an amphitheater, with audience benches carved from stone surrounding a central stage. The narrator is enchanted with the oldness and atmosphere of the place, and the beauty of the moonlight hitting the stage. The girls stand on stage, and the narrator reports that she feels "whole" for the first time. She feels transformed. Ecstatic and uninhibited, the girls yell "We're here!" as loud as they can, which echoes around the place. They then make snow angels in the snow on the stage.

The girls take the bus back home and sneak back in, taking off their wet clothes and taking showers. Neeka and the narrator smile at each other, knowing they've shared a special moment that night.

Chapter 12: The next May, the narrator turns thirteen. The narrator is in the middle of puberty, and she has grown by a remarkable amount and is now taller than D or Neeka. The narrator feels awkward and clumsy. Mama gives the narrator a birthday gift: a



photograph in a small blue frame, showing the three girls smiling for the camera on the stoop outside. There is also twenty dollars behind the picture.

Chapters 9 through 12 Analysis

Chapters nine and ten return to a theme of racism. Tupac is a victim of injustice due to racism, and when the narrator watches television footage of Tupac entering jail, she detects a sadness and confusion that stems from being the victim of racism. The narrator relates this sadness and confusion to her own neighborhood, Queens, in which it seems to her a high number of black men have recently been arrested.

Chapter ten once again uses Jayjones to give voice to another aspect of racism. In a previous chapter, Jayjones stated that racism haunts a black person, regardless of whether they are a poor "thug" in the ghetto or a college-educated professional in a suit. Chapter ten further articulates this theory of racism when Jayjones states that no matter who you are, you will be "hunted" if you are black.

Chapter eleven is perhaps the most important chapter in the book. Its central event involves the three girls disobeying their mothers' orders not to leave the block. This act is literally and figuratively evidence of maturation. The maturation culminates in a personal transformation Neeka and the narrator feel when they are on the stage of the amphitheater. They announce "We're here!" as if proclaiming their entrance into adulthood. Examining the symbolism of the setting, the girls have finally gone from mere onlookers in life to the doers, the actors, on stage.



Chapters 13 through 15

Chapters 13 through 15 Summary

Chapter 13: One Saturday in the summer, the narrator goes with Miss Irene and the rest of Neeka's family to visit Tash in prison. Neeka's father has to work and cannot go with them. The narrator endures a flavorless breakfast of oatmeal, and then a long train and bus trip to get to the prison Tash is in. Neeka is resentful of having to corral rambunctious Albert and Emmett, and she is in a foul mood on the ride over.

The family must take an East Side train to get to the bus to the prison, and the train is full of white people, making them feel uneasy, and putting Neeka into an even more foul mood. Neeka complains about her noisy family and how she cannot find her "Big Purpose" in the midst of such a family. The narrator envies her noisy family, considering her own too-quiet home life. Immature Neeka wonders whether she should "do something wrong" in order to be sent away to juvenile detention, where she could finally get some peace and quiet.

Neeka next expresses a desire to attain Tupac's level of fame. She wants people to know her name—her real name, Daneeka Lucy Jones. The wise narrator responds Neeka has a large, loving family and good friends who already know her name. Neeka says that to become known, she wants to be a law or math professor in college. She wants to command a room full of students and be wise and make everyone listen to her. She also wants to learn law in order to help Tash out of his legal predicament. Tash, like Tupac, is in jail due to gross injustice; Tash would not hurt a fly.

Lastly, the narrator remarks on the beautiful new day outside of the bus windows, and how she can't imagine greeting a new day through prison bars like Tash has to on a daily basis.

Chapter 14: In this very brief chapter, the narrator remarks that the "loudest sound in the world is the soft click of prison gates locking behind you" (p. 94). The family and the narrator enter the prison through door after door, and the prison guards seem to stare them down with the implicit threat of imprisonment should they step out of line.

Chapter 15: The family is subjected to a metal detector prior to seeing Tash. Even little Albert has to take his wire-frame glasses off. They sign in, and finally they enter a room in which many families are greeting convicts. Among others, an older mother is greeting her son with tears, and a young couple with children are sharing an intimate silent moment.

Tash appears, and he has grown thinner since the narrator saw him last. Tash has lost none of his swagger or energy, however. Playing to the stereotype of the "Queen," Tash is a hyper-effeminate gay man who refers to himself as a "sister". Everyone greets Tash warmly, and tears flow.



They enjoy a large picnic-style lunch, with chicken, corn bread, and macaroni and cheese. Miss Irene expresses frustration at having to deal with Tash's lawyer, who doesn't explain things in plain English. Tash says that he expects to be out by the end of the summer, and that he'll work hard to repay Miss Irene all the legal fees she's had to pay. Tash remarks that, to him, injustice is color-blind, and that Puerto Ricans, whites, blacks, and others are all doing time.

The family worries about Tash's skinniness, but he assures them he's all right. Tash asks Jayjones how his basketball career is coming along. Tash promises that the first thing he's going to do when he gets out of prison, is to visit the "river", a place where gay men gather. Tash emotionally tells Jayjones never to commit a crime and go to jail, and Jayjones promises not to. A photographer is there taking pictures of families, but Miss Irene declines, as she never wants to remember the time when her son Tash was in jail.

Chapters 13 through 15 Analysis

Despite the maturation of the girls, Neeka displays a lingering immaturity when she bemoans her raucous family life and wonders whether she should commit a crime to go to jail where she could finally get some peace and quiet. However, the reader must discriminate between text and subtext. The subtext of the train/bus trip to Tash's prison is that the family is full of anxiety about Tash. The trip reminds them of how their family has been divided by the imprisonment, and they are fearful of Tash becoming sick or injured (or worse) in prison. Given this, Neeka's immature rants are simply a symptom of the worry she has about her brother Tash.

This section continues the book's exploration of adult themes and material that may be new or poorly understood by the young adult reader - racism, injustice, homosexuality, and AIDS. Miss Irene mildly objects to her son Tash's "fabulous" and outrageously effeminate behavior, wishing to spare her younger children from his influence. Tash only wishes to be who is he is and not hide. This creates a moment of tension in the narrative. But in the end, Miss Irene's love for her son overcomes her objections. Given the unconditional love in the family, the author is clearly advocating for tolerance of homosexuality.

Tash is also interesting in that he provides an alternate theory to the pervasive racism observed by Jayjones. Tash, in the reality of the prison environment in which all different races are represented, does not perceive injustice as simply white-on-black racism, as Jayjones does. Everyone can be the victim of injustice. And Tash's injustice is borne more from homophobia than racism, providing another dimension to the discussion of discrimination.



Chapters 16 through 19

Chapters 16 through 19 Summary

Chapter 16: Before his jail term, Tash played piano in church, and his music was so beautiful and stirring that it made church ladies cry. Tash had slender and elegant long fingers, and piano playing seemed a natural vocation. Tash's piano teacher was a man named Randall, and Randall early on recognized and encouraged Tash's talent. Randall, like Tash, was an effeminate gay man.

Romantic and reckless Tash has a tendency of falling in love with the wrong men. Tash fell in love with a young man named Sly. Unlike Tash, Sly was masculine and tough, but Tash was convinced he was gay and in love with Tash. Tash had been meeting with Sly for months, and Sly was always alone and seemingly without friends or family.

One night, Sly convinced Tash to take him and another "music lover" to Randall's house, so that Tash could play music on Randall's baby grand piano. It was a ruse, and Sly and the other man wound up beating Tash and Randall badly and stealing many of Randall's possessions. Randall was hospitalized and could not tell his side of the story. Tash swore he knew nothing of Sly's intentions, but Tash was nonetheless imprisoned as an accomplice to Randall's beating. Sly and the friend also (falsely) testified that Tash was in on the robbery. Randall recovered, but he did not recall anything about the evening.

Tash spent a few weeks at Rikers Island, but was moved when a fellow convict started to harass him about his homosexuality. Tash attacked and cut the man with a knife. Tash was then moved to his current prison.

Chapter 17: One night, very late, D appears on the narrator's stoop, asking if she could sleep over. When the narrator asks about D's disciplinarian mother, D simply states, "Flo don't own me." Neeka comes over as well, and D explains her sudden late-night appearance.

D was in a group home for runaway children, and late one night she heard a counselor refer to her kind as "throwaway kids", a term she hated. From that point on, D vowed to be the perfect child so that no foster parent would have any reason to throw her away. However, a few unscrupulous foster parents took her on just because of the government benefits, and she was in and out of several foster homes before finally landing with Flo, who was a kind woman and who didn't want D just because of the extra money.

D has just learned from Flo that her real mother wants D back and that the court system has approved the mother as competent to take care of D. So D will be leaving the neighborhood to live with her mother. Neeka and the narrator are confused and hurt, and D herself is ambivalent. She has always told herself she wanted to live with her



mother, but now she is scared and she doesn't want to leave her friends. The friends vow to stay friends forever, no matter where they live.

Chapter 18: In this brief chapter, Neeka and the narrator discuss D's absence while trying on shoes at a shoe store with Miss Irene. There is also news that Tash is getting released from jail. Neither of the girls have a new address or phone number for D, and there is no way to contact her.

Chapter 19: It is September. Miss Irene is organizing a welcome home party for Tash. At the same time, the girls receive a bootleg copy of Tupac's newest album, and they are listening to it on the stoop. Suddenly, they are shocked to see D walking toward them with a tall white woman. They share a warm and excited hug with D. D introduces the white woman as her mother, which explains her tan brown skin and mixed race features. The mother also reveals that D's real name is Desiree Johnson, and not D Foster. D only chose "Foster" because of her foster child status. Neeka remarks that D is a puzzle and that they have a few more pieces to put together. D responds that her "puzzle" will never be complete; her mother doesn't know who D's father is.

D has to leave on a bus to live upstate. They share a teary goodbye, and all three vow to never forget each other and the moments they've shared.

Chapters 16 through 19 Analysis

Chapter sixteen answers the question of what led Tash to a prison term. He is indeed a victim of injustice, and particularly of homophobic violence. Tash is portrayed as a good and wholesome person, even saintly, playing piano in church and glorifying God to the point that church ladies cry at the sound of his music. Tash is only guilty of loving too much, and of loving the wrong person. Tash's incarceration is made all the more inexplicable by the fact that he, like Randall was beaten, and by the fact that everyone who knows Tash knows he is not at all capable of unjustified violence.

Chapter seventeen continues the thematic attention to problems with government institutions. Whereas previous chapters are concerned with problems in the criminal court system, Chapter seventeen points to problems in the family court system. D is a "throwaway child", and the system allows foster parents to take her on (for government payments) and then dispose of her at their will. Furthermore, the reader gets the sense that the court has erred in granting D's real mother custody, considering the mother's history of alcoholism and negligence. In any event, D's life is more than ever resembling Tupac Shakur's own complicated relationship to his mother.

Chapter nineteen continues the parallelism between D and Tupac. Precisely when Neeka and the narrator are listening to Tupac's newest album, D reappears in their life. The girls are naturally shocked to see D with a white mother, in another instance of complicated race issues bubbling to the surface of the narrative. In this chapter, D continues to be enigmatic, revealing that her real name is Desiree Johnson. The narrator reflects on the paradox that one can both know and not know a person at the



same time. D feels like a sister to the narrator and Neeka, yet at the same time they never saw her house and never even knew her real name.

The girls' discussion that D is a "puzzle" that must be put together relates to the controlling idea of the "Big Purpose." The narrator states that maybe everyone's "Big Purpose" is simply discovering themselves, and this is certainly true in D's case, who is putting together the fragments of her disjointed childhood and trying to make sense of them.



Chapters 20 through 26

Chapters 20 through 26 Summary

Chapter 20: Jayjones receives several college scholarships to play basketball. He is thrilled to receive a scholarship from Georgetown, a university with a well-respected and top-tier basketball program. Jayjones already plans having money enough to take care of his family's problems in four years when he is drafted into the NBA.

Tash has a small party at the house. He invites several of the "girls" (gay friends) over. He plays a keyboard as Neeka and the narrator sing "By and By". Their voices have changed from puberty, but the result is still beautiful and harmonious. The narrator guesses that maybe their "Big Purpose" is to simply figure themselves out and find their place in the world.

Chapter 21: Neeka and the narrator attend school. Miss Irene insists on dropping them off and picking them up in order to keep them out of trouble, and the girls feel a little embarrassed at being on such a tight leash. The narrator has an argument with Mama about it, and she excuses herself to the stoop.

Tash is coming the narrator's way. A few men on the street look at Tash funny and laugh and make remarks, and the narrator is sad knowing that they are belittling Tash for his effeminate behavior. In a conversation, Tash reveals that he was able to get out of jail early because Randall recovered enough to tell the police that Tash had no knowledge of Sly's intentions for the robbery and beating that night.

Chapter 22: Jayjones brings Neeka and the narrator news that Tupac has been shot a second time, in a drive-by shooting. All day Sunday, the girls listen to the radio for the latest updates on Tupac's condition. It doesn't sound good; Tupac has to get a lung removed, and he is not improving.

Chapter 23: On the day after Tupac's shooting, D calls the narrator. They share sadness about Tupac's condition, and D thinks that Tupac will not survive. The narrator asks how D is doing. D tells her that she and her mother are trying their best. They live in the mountains in upstate New York, where phone reception is sometimes difficult. D's mother, who believes in reincarnation and other New Age concepts, believes that Tupac must leave the earth in order for another soul to arrive. D thinks her mother is a little crazy, but she's sticking with her. D gives the narrator her number, but states that her mother isn't too good about paying the phone bill and that it might sometimes be disconnected.

Chapter 24: On the next Friday, Tupac dies. Neeka and the narrator stand outside in the rain, shocked and saddened. The narrator tries the phone number D gave her, but it just rings and rings.



Chapter 25: Jayjones comes back from a visit to Georgetown, very enthusiastic about the prospect of playing there. Jayjones seems more serious to the narrator, more intent than ever on creating a lasting basketball career for himself. Jayjones is becoming a man.

Chapter 26: In the days after Tupac's death, the narrator listens to Tupac's songs and hears about him on the news, and it is difficult for her not to think about D. Tupac's lyrics often touched upon issues D had to deal with, like hunger and a difficult relationship with one's mother.

The narrator hears rumors that Tupac isn't dead, that he faked his death and now lives on a Caribbean island, and she tries hard to believe the rumors no matter how outlandish they are. The narrator still cannot get a hold of D; D's phone just keeps ringing. The narrator imagines that, somewhere and somehow, D and Tupac might be wandering down a beach together, completely happy and whole.

Chapters 20 through 26 Analysis

These brief final chapters emphasize a slice of life sensibility on the part of the author. In slice of life stories, events are "sliced" from a character's life and presented with a de-emphasis on narrative/plot. Tash accompanying the girls with a rendition of "By and By" or the girls being fitted for shoes at a shoe store do little to advance a narrative or even reveal character. They are valuable as realistic snapshots of life in this setting, Queens in the mid 1990s.

Chapter twenty-two presents the news of Tupac's second (and eventually fatal) shooting. It is an exceptionally short chapter, and the very brevity of the chapter helps to emphasize the shock and suddenness of that moment in the life of the narrator. Chapter twenty-four follows a similar pattern, and is very brief as it charts the narrator's reaction to the news of Tupac's death.

The last couple of chapters cement the resemblance the book has forged between D and Tupac. The narrator cannot help but think of D when she listens to Tupac's music. And the last image has these two enigmatic, unreachable figures (one dead, one unreachable by telephone) walking alone a serene beach, finally at peace. What is the reader to make of this final "afterlife" image? It is highly unlikely the narrator wishes D was dead so that D wouldn't have to deal with the troubles of the world. More likely, the narrator hopes that D found her "Big Purpose" and that she has come to some sort of peace with her mother. It is also an acknowledgment that the narrator may never see D again, and that D is essentially "dead" to her but still very much alive in her memory and thoughts.



Characters

D Foster

D (short for Desiree) is an eleven-year-old girl at the outset of the novel, and thirteen by the time the narrative ends. D arrives on Neeka and the narrator's block one day, dressed oddly, and develops a quick friendship, initially over Double Dutch jump roping.

D doesn't say where she comes from, and she doesn't give up much information about herself, causing the other two girls to wonder about her past. Eventually, D's past is revealed. She was abandoned by her alcoholic mother, who is unsure of who D's father is. D spent time in a group home for abandoned children for some time, and then was bounced around to several foster families before settling in with Flo. D's mother is white—and presumably, her father was black—accounting for D's unusual skin, eye, and hair color.

Like the other girls, D is infatuated with the music of Tupac Shakur, especially with the songs "Brenda's Got a Baby" and "Dear Mama." Both songs are about complicated issues between a mother and child, and D strongly relates to that subject.

Flo allows D to roam around the entire city via bus throughout the day, causing Neeka and the narrator to be envious, considering they are ordered by their mothers to stay on their own block. D shows them an amphitheater in a city park, and it is a magical moment for the girls.

Neeka

Neeka is the best friend of the narrator and someone who has lived with the narrator on the same street since they were both babies. Like the other girls, Neeka is eleven years of age at the beginning of the novel, and thirteen by the end. Unlike D, Neeka has a warm, noisy, and large family. This includes two sets of younger twins, older brother Jayjones, and oldest brother Tash. The matriarch of the household is Miss Irene, while Neeka's father works most of the time and is hardly ever home.

Neeka sometimes resents her large, rowdy family, and yearns for peace and quiet. She resents having to watch over her rambunctious younger brothers and sisters and she also resents being confined to the neighborhood block while her friend D is able to roam the city freely.

Like the other girls, Neeka loves Tupac Shakur, and is devastated when hearing news of his two shootings. However, she does not like it when Tupac, like many other rappers, raps homophobic/anti-gay lyrics, as her own beloved brother Tash is gay.

Neeka is strong-willed and smart-mouthed, and never backs down from telling her brother Jayjones off or asking forceful questions. Neeka is inseparable from the



narrator, and often stays the night at the narrator's house in order to get away from her family.

The Narrator

The narrator is never referred to by name. Like Neeka and D, she is eleven years old at the outset of the novel, and thirteen by the time the novel ends. She has a reputation for being an intelligent bookworm, quiet and thoughtful, who always has her nose buried in a book. Her home life is quiet; her mother (Mama) works all the time, and she has never known her father. She is envious of Neeka's large family and also envious of D's independence. She often does things with Neeka's family, such as visiting Tash in prison.

Tupac Shakur

Tupac Shakur was a real-life rap artist who was famously gunned down in 1996, likely as part of the East Coast-West Coast rap rivalry. The girls in the novel greatly admire Tupac, and feel that he articulates issues that are important to them. An initial shooting (which Tupac survived), a criminal case and eventual incarceration, and then a second, fatal shooting, are all referenced in the novel, providing emotional moments for the characters.

Jayjones

Jayjones is Neeka's older brother. He is a star high school basketball player and aspires to one day play basketball professionally. By the end of the novel, he has received a scholarship to play basketball at Georgetown University.

Tash

Tash is Neeka's oldest brother. Referred to as a "Queen," he is an effeminate gay man and refers to himself as a "sister." Tash spends most of the novel in jail unjustly for a crime he not commit.

Miss Irene

Miss Irene is Neeka's overbearing mother and the unquestioned head of the family. Miss Irene keeps a tight leash on Neeka and will not allow her to leave the block.



Mama

Mama is the narrator's mother. As a struggling single mother, she works much of the time. While she does not agree with Tupac's gangster lifestyle, she defends his right to express himself, and believes Tupac's criminal trial is the equivalent of a witch hunt.

Sly

Sly is a man whom Tash fell in love with. Sly convinced Tash to go to piano teacher Randall's house to listen to Tash play the piano. Instead, Tash and Randall were beaten for being gay, and Randall's house was robbed. Later, Sly implicated Tash in the crime, and Tash was imprisoned.

D's Mother

D's unnamed mother is a white woman and a recovering alcoholic. She abandoned D as a baby, but by the end of the novel, she has reformed and petitions for custody of D. According to D, she is in to meditation and "crystals" and other New Age concepts.



Objects/Places

Brenda's Got a Baby

"Brenda's Got a Baby" is one of Tupac's songs. It is about a woman who abandons her baby in a trash can. D relates to the song, as she was also abandoned as a baby.

Dear Mama

"Dear Mama" is one of Tupac's songs. It is about Tupac's own tumultuous but ultimately loving relationship with his mother. The girls, and especially D, relate to the song with respect to their own mothers.

Queens

Queens is one of the main boroughs of New York City. This is the working-class neighborhood in which the characters live.

Big Purpose

Big Purpose is D's name for one's purpose in life, and what one is striving for. The girls spend the novel attempting to discover their own Big Purpose.

Double Dutch

Double Dutch is a jump rope game. Neeka, the narrator, and D first bond by participating in a game of Double Dutch, one in which their rhythm comes easily and naturally.

Thug Life Tattoo

Tupac has "THUG LIFE" tattooed on his stomach. Many critics around the time of the trial used this fact to stir controversy about Tupac's apparent advocacy of the gangster lifestyle.

City Park Amphitheater

One night, the girls sneak away from the neighborhood and arrive in an amphitheater in a city park. Standing on the stage is a transformative and magical moment in the life of the narrator. She feels whole.



Prison

One Saturday, Neeka's family and the narrator visit Tash in prison. They are made to feel fearful and humiliated by the prison guards. Tash tearfully warns Jayjones never to get into a situation where he might end up in prison.

Blue Picture Frame

For her thirteenth birthday, the narrator receives a blue picture frame and a photograph of the narrator, Neeka, and D sitting on the stoop outside. The narrator swears to always keep her two best friends in her heart and mind.

Georgetown University

By the end of the novel, Jayjones has accepted a basketball scholarship to Georgetown University and is very excited about it.



Themes

The Big Purpose

As crystallized in frequent references to the "Big Purpose," the girls at the heart of the novel are attempting to find their place in the world, and are learning what it's like to go from childhood to adulthood. In the most easily graspable manifestation of this, the book covers the years in which the girls are experiencing puberty and are physically transforming into adults.

But beyond puberty, the girls end the novel having grown up and attained a deeper appreciation for the fragile and fleeting nature of life, and how one must make the most out of a few precious moments. By becoming such good and permanent friends, the girls succeed in seizing the day and making the most of their time together. This notion is encapsulated in the narrator's thirteenth birthday present, a blue picture frame containing a photograph of all the girls together and happy. This is also related to the controlling idea of the "Big Purpose." First mentioned by D, "Big Purpose" is explained by the narrator as an endless process of self-discovery; in effect, maturation. D pursues her Big Purpose by re-establishing a relationship with her mother, in an attempt to answer burning questions about her childhood and heritage. On the other hand, the narrator pursues her own Big Purpose by reading, thinking, and reflecting. It could even be said that the narration of the book itself was a step in the narrator's achievement of the Big Purpose, as it allowed her to reflect upon her time with D and come to some conclusions about what D meant to her.

The Power of Tupac

The novel is built around the real-life final years of rapper Tupac Shakur, and through the characters' affection with Tupac, the author demonstrates the significant emotional impact that music can have. As Jayjones says, Tupac doesn't know him "from a can of paint," and yet Tupac's artistry is powerful enough to speak to all of them, as if Tupac personally knew them. Tupac deals with issues such as racism, police harassment/brutality, teen pregnancy, life in the ghetto, hunger, and child abandonment, and often these issues "hit home" for the characters, forcing them to reflect on their own lives.

Jayjones says that Tupac helps him to "clarify" certain issues in his life. Thus, musicians (and, more generally, artists) have the ability to articulate aspects of the human condition that resonate with us and move us, because these aspects are universal and familiar. Naturally, art can be especially potent when it is race- or culture-specific. In this case, Tupac's status as an African American who came from a very poor background particularly resonates with the working-class blacks in the novel.



When Tupac is shot, incarcerated, and then shot again, the news is shocking and horrible for the girls, as if Tupac was a member of their own family or a very good friend. The intimacy attained by Tupac is a testament to his artistic abilities and sensibility.

Racism

While there are very few overt examples of racism in the book - such as Jayjones being harassed in the park by white police officers for running - the book provides a more nuanced view of racism's effects. The book seems to theorize that, decades after the historic advances in civil rights in the 1960s, racism is still pervasive, but it exists in a subtler, "latent" form.

Latent racism can manifest itself as institutional racism. When Tupac is arrested for sexual assault, the book infers that Tupac is innocent of the charges against him, and that he is being persecuted and "made an example of" because of his race and because of his gangsta rap reputation. Because gangsta rap is strongly associated with the African-American community, white America's attack on gangsta rap becomes, by transference, a racist attack on black America.

Furthermore, perhaps even the girls' impoverished upbringings can be blamed on latent racism, given documented racial disparities in income level, education, housing, etc. Additionally, Jayjones points to the fact that latent racism creates an atmosphere of fear and intimidation, such that an African American has to drive slowly and strictly obey all traffic laws to avoid undue harassment by white police officers. Another example is when Neeka's family and the narrator have to board the East Side train on the way to Tash's prison. Among mostly-white passengers, the family feels awkward and out of place, and they feel they must be particularly well-behaved. The book indicates that racism does not have to be overt to be deleterious to African Americans.

Style

Point of View

The story is told in first-person narration, filtered through the eyes, ears, and thoughts of the young unnamed narrator. The narrator is eleven at the outset of the novel, and thirteen by the end. Nearing adulthood as she is, and described as the "smart one" by her friends, the narrator has a mature perspective on events but is nonetheless still a child who cannot fully comprehend certain things, such as the racist motivations behind Tupac's persecution.

The narrator struggles with many of the typical puberty-era challenges the target reader may be struggling with: issues of acceptance and peer pressure, awkwardness due to sudden growth spurts, uncertainty about one's purpose or ultimate goals, and a desire to break free from one's parents to become an independent individual. Target readers will likely identify with the narrator's struggles and relate these struggles to their own lives.

With significant candor, author Jacqueline Woodson introduces several adult subjects - homosexuality, racism, details of Tupac's death, the questionable value of gangsta rap, and foolish dreams among inner-city black youths of becoming professional athletes. Woodson usually does not try to "sugar-coat" or simplify these issues for her young audience; she presents them with most of their complexities intact. For example, she presents both the view that gangsta rap is a valuable artistic expression, and the opinion that gangsta rap is a potentially harmful celebration of an immoral lifestyle.

Setting

The setting is a working-class, predominantly African-American neighborhood in Queens, New York City, in the mid 1990s, from late 1994 to late 1996. This corresponds with the arrival and departure of D Foster, as well as several major events in the final years of real-life rapper Tupac Shakur.

The plot of the story is hung, in a sense, on the real-life events of Tupac's last years, including his November 1994 shooting, his sexual assault criminal case, and his fatal September 1996 shooting. These aspects of Tupac's biography become momentous and emotional events in the lives of the three girls, who follow news updates on Tupac's condition closely. Not without coincidence, Tupac's death marks a final stage in the maturation of the protagonists and particularly the unnamed narrator. Tupac's death is also a kind of death of childhood innocence.

The time period of the story is also important insofar that race relations was a "hot topic" at the time. The mid 1990s marked an explosion in the popularity of "gangsta rap." This in-your-face music, with lyrics about killing policemen, doing drugs, having casual sex, etc., caused alarm in many segments of the country, particularly in white America, which



in turn perhaps exacerbated racial tensions. The author is indirectly commenting on many of the issues brought to the forefront at that time as a result of the proliferation of gangsta rap.

Language and Meaning

The narration, and particularly the dialogue, is often peppered with examples of African American Vernacular English, sometimes referred to as Ebonics. African American Vernacular English involves nonstandard vocabulary and nonstandard uses of verb tense. For examples of vocabulary, one of the girls might exclaim "Dag, my girls!" or ask, "Where the frick-frack you been?" (p. 143). There are also more well-known examples, many pulled from hip-hop culture, such as "gangsta" or "homies." As an example of nonstandard verb tense, D says, "They don't hardly never be playing Pac [...] It's like they scared of him or something" (p. 8). This vernacular has elements of Southern American English, as when one of the girls says "Y'all," meaning "you all." This use of vernacular is meant to realistically portray how African American girls growing up in such a neighborhood might have talked.

As the girl with the reputation for being intelligent and book smart, the narrator only occasionally resorts to the vernacular in her narration, and the vernacular is much more prevalent in the dialogue. D and Neeka are the most frequent users of the vernacular.

Outside of the African American Vernacular English, the book uses simple vocabulary, as it is intended for young readers.

Structure

The book is divided into twenty-six chapters. Some chapters are extraordinarily brief for dramatic effect. For example, chapter twenty-two, in which the girls learn that Tupac has been shot a second time, is very brief, as if to echo the suddenness and shock of the moment as the girls experienced it.

While the majority of the book is written in chronological order, there are some exceptions. The Prologue is written after the events of the rest of the novel and after D has gone away. It presents an older and wiser narrator reflecting on D's importance in her life and trying to remember how D came into her life, thus "spawning" the rest of the novel as a memory flashback.

However, D's introduction does not take place until chapter two. Chapter one is devoted to an unknown night sometime after D has become good friends with the girls. Chapter one helps to introduce thematic and character material, such as D's enigmatic status, the notion of the "Big Purpose," and D's complicated relationship with her mother.

This scrambling of chronology, in which Tupac's death and D's disappearance are already known to the reader by the first few sentences of the Prologue, lend a kind of

fatalism and even sadness to the narrative. The major events at the end of the book are already known.



Quotes

"But when I saw Tupac like that - coming out of the hospital, all skinny and small-looking in that wheelchair, big guards around him — I remember thinking, 'He ain't gonna try to get revenge on nobody and he ain't trying to be a disgrace to anybody either. Just trying to keep on.' Even though he wasn't smiling, I knew he was just happy and confused about still being alive."

Prologue, p. 3

"And then it made sense to me - crazy-fast sense in a way it hadn't before. D walked out of her own life each time she stepped into one of those other places. She got off the bus or walked up out of the subway and her life disappeared, got replaced by that new place, those new strangers - like big pink erasers."

Chap. 1, p. 18)

"Something about the way [D] stood there, just looking - no smile, no frown, nothing - it just caught something in me. Made my heart jump a bit. Something about the way she stood there was real familiar to me, like the way I'd want to stand someplace new and watch people I didn't know."

Chap. 2, pp. 23-24

"Mama always said about her and Daddy that staying together wouldn't have been good for anybody. But some days she sat by the window in the living room, just staring out over the block and looking sadder than anything. Those days I knew she was thinking of a better life, a different life."

Chap. 4, p. 43

"I see Tupac rapping and I see he got that same look that I got - like we both know what it feels like to be that hungry, to want to eat something that bad. And then when you finally get something to eat, your stomach gets all cramped up around it and you can't even keep it down. Can't even keep it inside you."

Chap. 8, p. 61

"But I was still a few months away from twelve when I was first starting to understand. And I'd sit in my room watching the stars on the ceiling begin to fade up into a glow and I'd just try to figure it all out. Just a little kid really without any of the words I needed to explain all the things my mind was just beginning to think about."

Chap. 9, p. 65

"For a minute, all three of us just stood there [on the amphitheater stage] staring. I



shivered. Something strange happened. With all that beautiful stone around me and the moon shining through the trees and down on us like that . . . and us three just standing there staring up . . . I felt whole - like my two selves had come together - finally meeting for the first time."

Chap. 11, p. 78

"Seemed wrong to be seeing all that beauty outside with Neeka feeling sad and us going to see Tash in jail. Where Tash was, the walls were all painted the same sorry gray and there was always the sound of somebody yelling. The windows were real small and had bars on them. I couldn't even imagine how it felt to look out on a beautiful new day through some bars."

Chap. 13, p. 93

"Mama, I'm in jail. Give me little bit of joy. I ain't hurting nobody. I ain't never tried to hurt nobody who wasn't hurting me first. I know who I am and you know who I am and every one of these kids knows who I am. Ain't that good enough?"

Chap. 15, p. 101

"I nodded, my head spinning. [D] was our friend and we didn't really know her. Every minute it was like there was a little bit more about her that made everything so . . . so complicated. I couldn't even imagine trying to walk through the world after somebody said I was a throwaway kid."

Chap. 17, p. 117

"Y'all let me play with you once. And when I get to upstate, I'm sure there's gonna be some sisters looking for somebody to take the other end of the rope and it's gonna be me all over again. And then I'm gonna get on a bus, head down here and show you how they rocking it up there. But I ain't saying good-bye. I ain't never saying good-bye to you."

Chap. 19, p. 129

"D and Tupac. Tupac and D. Walking along some beautiful beach like they be having in the videos. Tupac all dressed in white, his shirt open and blowing in the wind, his beautiful brown chest soaking in all that sun. His sad eyes finally laughing. And D with her hair blowing, her green eyes brighter than anything. Her sweet half smile . . . finally whole."

Chap. 26, p. 151

Topics for Discussion

Why is Tash in jail? Why is his incarceration unjust?

Does Jayjones have a chance to become a professional basketball player, or is he throwing his life away pursuing an unrealistic dream? Discuss.

Why is the night on the amphitheater stage so important to Neeka and the narrator? What does it mean for them?

What is Mama's opinion about Tupac's legal troubles and his "gangster" reputation?

Explain the subject of "Brenda's Got a Baby," and why the song is so important to D.

How is the term "throwaway kid" used in the novel?

What opinion does the author express about Tupac Shakur through her story and characters? Is he a bad influence, an important artist, or both?