

## PORTRAYAL OF FRANNIE'S HOPE IN FEATHERS BY JACQUELINE WOODSON

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### Abstract

Set in the turbulent, post-integration 1970s, the story follows Frannie, a sixth grade girl attending an African-American high school. When tensions turbulent, post-integration Frannie thinks constantly of a line from an Emily Dickenson poem she learned in school: 'hope is the thing with feathers'. The idea of hope permeates nearly every aspect of *Feathers*. Frannie, the protagonist of this novel is so taken by the poem because the circumstances of her own life make it difficult to retain hope. Frannie is so taken by the poem because the circumstances of her own life make it difficult to retain hope. This article tries to portray Frannie's hope, how it develops in course of the novel and how she holds on to the good memories in life and feel comforted by hope - because hope is all around.

**Key words** - Turbulent, Post-Integration, Embarrassment, Dejection, Race, Prejudice and Retain Hope.

Jacqueline Woodson's *Feathers* (2007) begins on January 6, 1971, in the sixth-grade classroom of an African-American school. Frannie, the protagonist and also the narrator of *Feathers*, is a thoughtful, perceptive sixth-grader. She views herself as more of a listener than a talker. The sixth-grade teacher, Ms. Johnson, has recently read her students the Emily Dickinson poem "Hope is the thing with feathers," and Frannie, is struck by the poem's message of hope "getting inside you and never stopping."

The idea of hope permeates nearly every aspect of *Feathers*. Frannie becomes obsessed with the poem after her teacher reads it to her sixth-grade class; Frannie is so taken by the poem because the circumstances of her own life make it difficult to retain hope. At school, she has to watch Trevor bully the new kid in school, who has done nothing to deserve such treatment; when she is with her deaf brother Sean.

Even though she's a small girl, Frannie stands up for other people when she feels like they're being picked on. Whenever girls dismiss Sean as a romantic prospect because he's deaf, she practically has steam coming out of her nose. Check her out in action:

"He can't talk either?"

"He just did," I said, getting mad. "You just didn't understand what he said. He said the same thing I just said." I put my hands on my hips, like I was daring her to walk away (13.10-11).

Frannie witnesses his embarrassment and dejection when girls reject him after realizing he cannot hear.

The first word I ever learned was *now*. Sean said I was not even two years old when he showed me the word—middle fingers against your palms, thumbs and pinkies up and your hands moving down.

I lifted my head and took a deep breath.

My brother taught me to speak, I wrote. I grew up inside his world of words... (20.26-28)

At home, the shadows of a dead infant, two miscarriages, and her mother's subsequent depressions hang over the house, and the announcement of a new pregnancy leads Frannie not to

hope, but to fear another disappointment. when it's announced that her mama is pregnant again, Frannie is just a tad upset:

I ran my fork through my rice, feeling all kinds of stupid feelings. I was the baby who had made it. It was sad, but each time one of the other babies didn't make it, it seemed clear to me that I was the one who was supposed to be the baby in the family. (8.79)

As Frannie says, if she could talk to Jesus, she would ask him how he can have hope “when there’s always a Trevor somewhere kicking at somebody. When there’s always a mama somewhere who maybe wasn’t *thriving*.” The fact of the matter is that Frannie is used to the way that things are. She’s used to see only black people, and she’s used to be the youngest kid in the family. She is terrified of change, and responds to it with aggression and distrust. When she realizes that change isn’t always a bad thing, though, she learns to like her life. She embraces the pregnancy and even befriends the very strange—and very white—Jesus Boy.

In contrast to Frannie, her friend Samantha begins to harbour a deep, fervent hope that Jesus Boy actually *is* God’s son returned to earth. "He's taking up for Jesus Boy. Bible says when Jesus Christ came back, there were miracles everywhere" (14.24-25). Frannie is struck by the fact that Samantha can so easily believe the boy is really Jesus, while Frannie cannot. However, when Jesus Boy reveals his very human, flawed nature by striking out at Trevor, the situation reverses, as Samantha loses all her hope at once. As Samantha puts it, “when you don’t have that thing to believe in anymore, you don’t have *anything*.” In response to Samantha’s despair, Frannie, hoping to comfort her friend and refusing to see the world in black-and-white terms, finally finds some hope of her own. She suggests to Samantha that perhaps Jesus is inside of all of us, allowing us to be kind even in the face of cruelty; perhaps Jesus is hope itself.

*Feathers* is a book about the different ways people have hope in the world. Frannie’s world is divided by a highway, which separates the black and the white parts of town. Her life changes the day a new boy comes into her school. Frannie and her friends begin to explore their identities and their place in the world by coming to terms with issues of race, faith and difference. In a tight story line where family and friendship are at the center, Woodson writes a compelling novel where hope can be found in our everyday activities.

Despite the fact that she's just a sixth grader, Frannie infuses the narrative in *Feathers* with lots of insights into the way the world works. Even something as mundane as elementary school classroom antics get the Frannie treatment, and she gives us her insightful thoughts about exactly why Trevor is such a huge jerk:

Then Trevor was standing again. Standing but cursing both of us. But his curse words sounded strange—hollow and faraway. Like he was just learning them. Like he was practicing at being some kind of tough kid. Instead of truly being one. (14.57)

Even when Frannie is talking about someone she does *not* like, she presents him in a totally sympathetic light. Frannie doesn't think the worst of people, and she's not filled with gloom and doom, so neither is the tone of the book. Instead, it strives to understand how the world works, and infuses every page with hope that the world will, in fact, get better.

Even though Jesus Boy isn't the real Jesus like Samantha hopes, he is still able to help Frannie and the other kids see that you shouldn't reject people outright just because they are different; you have to practice acceptance and understanding. Frannie doesn't choose to help Trevor because she likes him, or because she feels obligated to. She does so because she finds a voice inside her that tells her it's the right thing to do.

At the end of the novel, Frannie has clearly come to accept this new idea of hope. She shares a loving moment with her pregnant mother, refusing to worry about what could go wrong with the baby, and instead enjoying the love, warmth, and happiness—and hope—of that moment. Frannie realizes that such moments themselves *are* a form of hope, a hope that will remain in your memories and that you can never lose. “*Each moment,*” she thinks as the novel ends, “*is a thing with feathers.*”

Set in the early 1970s, *Feathers* captures a very particular time period in American history, when segregation was practically still in place in many ways. The book won a Newbery Honor in 2008. The book transports readers to this time period to show what it was like to grow up in an African American community during that time period, complete with racial tension. Woodson’s novel

evokes racial tensions and other social issues of the time that set the tone for readers to engage in contemporary conversations about race and prejudice in the 21st century.

To conclude, the title of *Feathers* refers to Emily Dickinson's poem that serves as the book's epigraph. The whole idea of the poem is that hope is a "thing with feathers" and that it persists in the face of all sorts of adversity. Frannie comes to realize over the course of the novel. This is her big revelation as she grows up in the book. The novel is about how Frannie finds hope in the little things in life, like in the love that she has for her family, or in her friendships, or in the abatement of racial tensions that she sees in her own school. All the progress may be small, but it's still there—and that's a beautiful, light, hope-filled thing. Frannie learns to hold on to the good memories in life and feel comforted by hope - because hope is all around. Feathers are connected to flying, and in *Feathers*, Frannie learns to worry less and let her hope soar.

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