

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

The Color of Water

by James McBride

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The Color of Water

About the Book

The Color of Water is the story of a young man of mixed-race parentage (white mother and black father) and his search for his own identity. This search requires that he learn more about his mother's past, about which she has been very secretive. In an effort to learn about his mother, he proposes that they write the book together, and their stories are intertwined.

The book pairs her story of awareness and independence with his, and the reader is able to see how two very different people became assertive adults in the racially and morally complex society of twentieth century America.

Note to the Teacher: *The Color of Water* is the story of two searches for identity, and it includes elements of sexual abuse, marijuana use, alcohol use and abuse, physical violence, and mental cruelty.

All references come from the Riverhead Books edition of *The Color of Water*, published in 1996.

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Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. Discuss the role of Judaism in the formation of Ruth's character.
2. Discuss race as a factor in James' search for identity.
3. Cite examples of racism in American culture.
4. Evaluate the importance of religious leaders in the community.
5. Analyze the efforts of the Shilsky family to be assimilated into American life.
6. Discuss anti-Semitism as it was experienced by Ruth's family, including family members in New York as well as the Shilsky family in Virginia.
7. Discuss the quest of the adolescent to become independent of his or her parents, and cite examples from Ruth's story and James' story to show milestones on that quest.
8. Evaluate the success of writing a book with two narrators.
9. Discuss the role of poverty in the formation of character, citing both Ruth and James as examples.
10. Discuss the significance of the many names by which James' mother was known.
11. Recognize and discuss the rituals of an Orthodox Jewish household.
12. Comment on the importance of churches and church membership in black culture as shown in *The Color of Water*.
13. Analyze the varying role of women in *The Color of Water*, using Mameh, Aunt Mary, and Ruth as examples.
14. Comment on the concept of family, illustrating the elastic nature of this concept in Ruth's life with her birth family, her mother's family, her reception by the McBride family, her approach to raising her own children, and her relationships with her children after they reached adulthood.

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Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Trace the element of pride in the lives of Ruth and James, showing how it is an obstacle at times and a key to their success at other times.
2. The title of this book, *The Color of Water*, refers to the answer Ruth gives when James asks if God is white or black. Discuss why God's race was so intriguing to James and why this answer was so important to Ruth.
3. Write a character sketch of Dennis McBride and discuss his importance in the life of his son James, despite the fact that James never met him.
4. The theme of discrimination is important in *The Color of Water*. Examine and discuss discrimination against immigrants, Jews, and blacks as shown in this book.
5. Several women are important in the development of both Ruth's character and James' character. Discuss how women helped Ruth and James, including Mameh, Aunt Mary, and Aunt Candis in your consideration.
6. Write a character sketch of Mameh, evaluating her effect as a Jewish wife, an advocate for her children, and a figure in the community.
7. For many immigrants, hard work is seen as the path to success and attainment of the American way of life. Compare and contrast Rabbi Shilsky and Aunt Mary in this framework.
8. This book includes several religious men as characters. Evaluate the following men as representatives of God and community leaders: Rabbi Shilsky, Rev. Owens, Rev. Brown, and Rev. McBride.
9. In some respects, Mommy led a very integrated life, but in others, she seems to have pushed her children into a white world. Discuss Mommy's varied experiences of race, and evaluate what she admired and deplored about different racial and ethnic groups, specifically Jews, blacks, and whites.
10. Discuss the theme of "the outsider" as it is manifested in this book.
11. A soliloquy is a speech given by a single character. Discuss the soliloquy given by Chicken Man, and discuss its importance to James.
12. Comment on the role of traditional social institutions (such as school, church, and family) in a young black man's quest for identity, considering how these institutions fostered or blocked James in his search for individuality, self-confidence, and responsibility.

3 – Kosher

Vocabulary

claustrophobic – fearful of small, enclosed spaces

halvah – a cookie-like sweet made with sesame seeds and honey; popular sweet in Jewish and Middle Eastern cultures

kosher – following the dietary rules of the Jewish faith

rov – a rabbi who arranges a marriage

1. What piece of paper did the author’s mother carry for twenty years, and why did she carry it?

2. Where did the author’s mother first live in America?

3. What does the author’s mother say about Bube’s wig?

4. Who was Dennis?

5. Describe Helen.

6. What caused Helen to leave? Where did she go next?

7. What happened when Mommy went to ask Helen to return?

16 – Driving

Vocabulary

dissipation – scattering

LSD – an illegal drug that causes hallucinations and flashbacks

1. What changes did James resolve to make when he returned to New York after Chicken Man was killed?

2. What kept James from moving forward right away?

3. What was so ironic about Ruth's decision not to drive?
