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**Literature**  
Teaching Unit  
*Chapter-by-Chapter Study Guide*



## The Color of Water

by James McBride

- Learning objectives
- Study Guide with short-answer questions
- Background information
- Vocabulary in context
- Multiple-choice test
- Essay questions
- Literary terms



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# Literature Teaching Unit

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# The Color of Water

## 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.

# The Color of Water

## 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.

**1 – Dead**

Vocabulary

**kaddish** – Jewish prayers for the dead

**shiva** – a Jewish ritual in which friends visit the bereaved family to mourn a loss

**tallis** – prayer scarf used by Jewish men to cover their heads or shoulders while praying; the scarf usually has knots at the corners

**Yiddish** – the Jewish language; Hebrew

1. Why is this chapter written in italics?

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2. Why is the mother reluctant to talk about her family?

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3. What do we learn about the mother's birth?

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4. What was her name?

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### 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?

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

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

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**6 – The New Testament**

Vocabulary

**conk** – a hairdo often favored by black men, with smooth waves in front and loose curls at the back

1. How does the author describe the experience of going to church with his mother?

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2. How does the author describe the pastor?

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3. What does the term “get happy” mean in the context of worship?

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4. What does Mommy reply when James asks her if God is white or black?

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5. How did the author’s brother Richie change as an adolescent?

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6. What caused Richie to stop going to Sunday school?

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