

ESL 106 THE COLOR OF WATER

*Introduction, Dead, The Bicycle, Kosher*

pp. xvii –19

1. What ideas come to your mind when you read the title of the book, the front cover and the introduction?
2. Who does the author dedicate the book to?
3. Why does James' mother refer to herself as being "dead"?
4. Describe his mother's family. Where was she born? Where did her family come from?
5. The author begins his story when he is fourteen. He describes a bicycle with great detail. What does he say about the bicycle and why is this important?
6. Describe James' first day of school. Why was it so important to him? What happened?
7. What does the word *Kosher* mean?
8. What does James' mother ask her children to do when she dies? Why?

**Vocabulary**

Unearth

Betwixt and between

Kosher

Hauled

Snickered

Gawked

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*Black Power, Old Testament, New Testament*

pp. 21 – 55

1. How did James learn about his mother's past?
2. Why does Ritchie tell James that he should not be concerned over his mother's past?
3. What does the expression "Black Power" mean?
4. What was James' biggest worry with "Black Power?" What did he think would happen?
5. Why did James punch the boy in the bus?
6. Why did Ruth's father start his business in the "colored side of the town"?
7. Why does Ruth say that she did not have a family life when she was a child?
8. If you were Rev. Owens, how would you answer the question that James' brother asked him? "Is Jesus White?"
9. How do you interpret Billy's words when he stands up in front of everyone and says, "Jesus wept"?

### Vocabulary

Jibe

Divulge

slithering

convulsing

hollering

bad mouthing

wincing

congregation

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*Sam, Brothers and Sisters* (pp. 57 – 78)

1. Who would Mameh say “No, no thank you” despite the fact that she couldn’t speak English? What were her reasons?
2. What would black folks buy in Tateh’s store to cure themselves in case they were sick? Describe this product and explain why it made them feel better.
3. Who was Sam? What happened to him? Why is this significant for the story?
4. James describes his house as orchestrated chaos. What do you think this means? Explain it using your own words.
5. How did Mommy control the children even though she worked until 2:00 a.m. at the hospital?
6. What would Mommy say about chewing gum? Did her children obey her?
7. Mommy was not a good cook nor was she a good housekeeper; however, this did not concern her very much since she truly only cared about one thing. What was it?
8. Who was Dennis? Why does the author call him the family pioneer?
9. Why did Helen run away from home? Who did she have an argument with and why?

**Vocabulary:**

**pillage**

**scavenging**

**foraged**

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*Shul and School* (pp. 79 - 105)

1. What was “shul”?
2. Why did Ruth go to a gentile school?
3. How does Ruth describe her feelings about living in the south?
4. Who was Frances?
5. Why does Ruth say that people in Suffolk were a different type of poor than the poor people of today? What does she mean by this?
6. James never considered Jewish people as white. Why?
7. How did Ruth communicate her Jewishness to her children?
8. How did James escape from his painful reality?
9. What does the author mean when he talks about the “king/queen system”?
10. What happens when James tries to return the spoiled milk?

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**Boys (pp. 107-115)**

1. What were some of the things Tateh didn't like? Why? Why does Ruth say, "So it stands to reason that the first thing I fell in love with in life was a black man."
2. How were black men treated in the South when Ruth was young?
3. In many ways, Ruth was a normal teenager. She loved to dance and she wanted to go out on dates like the other girls. How does Ruth describe her life as a teenager? What happened to her in school? Why was this happening?
4. What does the word *WASP* mean?
5. Finally, Ruth becomes friends with a boy. How does she describe him? What does she say was the first thing she liked about him? Why was this important to her?
6. How do Peter and Ruth see each other?
7. Why were Peter's friends afraid of Ruth?
8. What was the Klan? Why was Ruth afraid of these people?
9. Ruth finds herself in a difficult situation, but she thinks Peter will find an answer to her problem. After all, she admired and loved him, and she really believed that he had all the answers. How does she feel when she realizes that he doesn't have all the answers as she previously thought?
10. Describe what happens with her bracelet.

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*Daddy, New York* (pp.117 - 135)

1. When did James first begin to think about having a father? Why did he think about it at this particular time? Who was his father and why happened to him?
2. What did Ruth say to Mr. Hunter when he asked her if she went to the movies?
3. What did Ruth's children think of Mr. Hunter? Describe him. What names did Ruth's children give him and why?
4. James describes Mr. Hunter and his brothers as the epitome of old-time cool. Why does he say this?
5. Describe what happened when Mr. Hunter asked James to go with him on a drive. What happened after they had a serious conversation that day?
6. Why would Mameh send Ruth to New York in the summers?
7. How did Mameh's sisters live? What did Mameh's sisters think of Ruth's family?
8. Who was Bubeh?
9. Who was Aunt Betsy?

## **The Color of Water**

### ***Chicken Man/Graduation* (pp.137-158)**

1. After his stepfather's death, James changes. How does he change? What does he start doing?
2. What happens to Ruth's orchestrated chaos after Mr. Hunter dies?
3. What does James do to keep his mother from finding out about his grades? How does Ruth react?
4. Who were the boys on "The Corner?" What does James learn from them?
5. Who is Chicken Man?
6. Who is Pike and why does he help James find a job? What kind of job is it?
7. What happens with Ruth and Peter when she returns from New York?
8. What does Tateh care more about than his daughter's graduation?
9. What was wrong with Mameh?
10. What happened on the day of graduation?

## **The Color of Water**

*Driving/Lost in Harlem* (pp.159-176)

1. Why does James begin to change? Like his mother, James does something to help him through moments of stress. What does he do?
2. What does James drink when he runs out of pot or wine?
3. How long does Ruth suffer after her husband's death? What type of things happen to her? What would she do? How did her children react?
4. How does James describe his mother's transformation from Rachel to Ruth?
5. When Ruth returns to New York after leaving her family, she works for her Aunt Mary. What does she do at this job? Describe who works there and what type of things happen.
6. This is the first time that Ruth speaks about Andrew McBride. Who is he? According to Ruth, what type of man was he?
7. Ruth gets tired of the way her Aunt Mary treats her, so she quits her job and moves to Harlem. She tries to find a job but runs into some problems. Why?
8. She eventually gets a job as a hairdresser. How long does the job last? Why?
9. What does the saying "You'll be ready as a radio" mean?
10. Who is Rocky? What does he do?

**ESL 106 THE COLOR OF WATER**  
*Lost in Delaware and The promise (pp. 177 - 201)*

1. What are the differences between Wilmington and New York?
2. What happened to make Ma want to move back to New York?
3. What helped James stay out of trouble when he enrolled in school?
4. Who helped James go to Europe with the American Youth Jazz Band? How do they help him? What does James do in exchange for the help? What happens?
5. What does James mean when he said that he sometimes thought “the truth was a bandy-legged soul who dashed from one side of the world to the other and I could never find him?” What happens to make him say this?
6. James’ mother was unhappy in Delaware. Describe the incident which epitomizes her entire experience in Delaware. What does the word epitomize mean?
7. When it’s James’ turn to leave for college, his mother walks him to the bus station and gives him \$14. He says that she pushed him away like she had pushed his elder siblings when it was their turn to go to college. Describe what happens next.
8. How does Ma describe people’s reaction when they see her with Dennis?
9. Who was Aunt Candis? How does Ma describe her? What does she do to help Ruth?
10. Ruth goes back to Virginia to help her mother and father. Describes what happens when she returns. What promise does she make to her sister?

**ESL 106    The Color of Water**  
***Old Man Shilsky and A Bird Who Flies*    (pp. 203 –218)**

1. Why does James begin his journey to Virginia in November 1982? What is he doing at this time? What does he discover while working for the *Boston Globe*?
2. When James heads for Suffolk he goes looking for Frances and her mother who could cook like the dickens. When he finally arrives at Suffolk, he stops to eat. What does he discover at this moment? How does he know?
3. Who is Eddie Thompson? Why does he laugh so hard he can't control his laughing and begins to cry? What is so funny?
4. James uncovers two truths when he speaks to Eddie Thompson. What are they?
5. Where does Eddie Thompson say Old Man Shilsky is today?
6. What happens when Eddie speaks to Rachel?
7. While Ruth is in Suffolk, her mother gets a letter from New York asking her if she wants three room's worth of furniture. What does this mean? What happens?
8. Ruth argues with her father because her father doesn't want her to leave. Finally, he tells her that if she marries a shvartse she could never come home again. What does he mean by this?
9. While she is on the bus going back to New York, Ruth finds something inside the lunch bag her mother had prepared for her. What was it?
10. What does Ruth mean when she says that when she became a Christian the Jew in her began to die. Finally, the Jew in her does die. When does this happen? What does Mameh when she talks about birds that fly?

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***A Jew Discovered and Dennis* (pp. 219 –247)**

1. Why does James say that black males are closely associated with crime in America, and not with white Jewish mothers? When does he say this?
2. What does James discover as a result of his search for the Shilsky family?
3. When James meets with Aubrey Rubenstein, he gets additional details about his family. As he says goodbye, Rubenstein tells James to send his regards to his mother. James asks Rubenstein to leave his message on the tape recorder. What does Rubenstein say? What else does Rubenstein promise James?
4. James decides that he has found what he has been looking for, and it's time to go home. The night before he leaves, he goes to the river and imagines how his grandmother must have felt when she was a new immigrant in a lonely town. He also reaches a conclusion about life and religion. What is it?
5. Ruth tells James that when her mother died, she decided to stay on the black side. Why does she say this? How does she describe her married life with Dennis?
6. At one point, Ruth decides to change religions. After she does, she decides she doesn't want to live in sin any longer and tells Dennis they must get married. How does she describe Dennis and the type of family he came from?
7. Ruth describes the difficulties of their married life because they were an interracial couple, yet how they survived. She also mentions that they could never go to the south together. Why? Did she ever go to the south with Dennis?
8. Together, Dennis and Ruth start a church in the Red Hooks Housing Project. They have happy life together with their growing family until Dennis gets sick and has to be hospitalized. When does Ruth find out what is wrong with him?
9. Dennis' death devastates Ruth because the children and her depended on him for everything. Who comes to her aid?
10. Despite the help Ruth received from the black community, she was still desperate because she had so many children. In her desperation, she turned to her Jewish family? What happened?

**ESL 106      The Color of Water**  
***New Brown, Finding Ruthie and Epilogue*      (pp. 249 –285)**

1.      What is New Brown?
  
2.      How old was Dennis McBride when he died?
  
3.      What did James find in his father's old briefcase?
  
4.      Why did it take Ruth years before she started to talk about James' father?
  
5.      When doctors discover squamous cell cancer in Ruth's face, James says that his mother is a flying compilation of competing interests and conflicts. Why does he say this?
  
6.      James explains that it took him many years to find out who his mother was because he never knew who he was. When he finally begins the process of self-discovery, what does he find out about the "white man's world"?
  
7.      How does Ruth react to James' tendency of quitting jobs all the time?
  
8.      When does James get the first hint that there is more to his mother's life than he knows? How does Ruth react when he asks her for her maiden name?
  
9.      How does James describe his feelings when Ruth finally agrees to talk to him about her past?
  
10.     When does Ruth decide to face the ghosts of her past? Describe what happens.
  
11.     Why did Ruth agree to work with James on his book? Where is she now and what is she doing?