

Advanced Placement in  
English Literature and Composition

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

**The Color of Water**

by James McBride

Written by Rita Truschel

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# The Color of Water

## Objectives

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

1. identify the writing conventions of memoir as a genre.
2. identify motifs in the novel and explain how they contribute to thematic development.
3. evaluate a narrator to determine the narrator's level of reliability.
4. identify conflict(s) in the text and analyze the text to explain how the author produces conflict.
5. analyze the use of literary elements such as in medias res, irony, metaphor, simile, and tone.
6. analyze the effect of word choice and sentence structure on meaning, tone, and thematic development.
7. offer a close reading of *The Color of Water* and support interpretations using evidence from the text and knowledge of literary allusions and period history.
8. respond to multiple-choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition Exam.
9. respond to writing prompts similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition Exam.

## Introductory Lecture

### I. AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND MEMOIR

Autobiography is the story of a person's life, written by that person. Since ancient times, autobiography has been the purview of people with important and lasting accomplishments, for the purposes of explanation, self-justification, public instruction, moral example, and entertainment. With the rise of the popular press in the 17th century, the scope of autobiographical subjects expanded to include popular celebrities and lesser persons with significant or scandalous experiences.

Memoir is a form of autobiography, typically focused on meaningful incidents within a certain time span. Memoir relies on the author's memories, feelings, and interpretations of events' significance. The memoir author is selective, not all-inclusive, and the degree of intimacy can vary widely. Historically, a famous public figure could focus on major events and participants, goals, and outcomes without disclosing much about personal or interior life. However, modern memoirs have begun to gravitate more toward their authors' personal lives, increasingly focusing on emotional honesty and analyses about singular experiences. Memoirs are less restrictive than traditional autobiographies; this gives authors the freedom to recount the events of their lives out of chronological order if they wish, and some authors rearrange these events to establish a dramatic narrative structure to create certain effects, much as a novelist would do.

Some autobiographies are confessional in nature; the early Christian bishop St. Augustine (354–430) authored *Confessions*, the prototypical confessional autobiography. In a confessional autobiography, private, secret, or shocking details of an author's life are revealed. St. Augustine wrote his *Confessions* to reflect on his childhood, lusty youth, and intellectual and spiritual growth leading to his religious conversion. As one of the first Western autobiographies, Augustine's *Confessions* remains influential in Western civilization.

Autobiography's value is as a record of an author's direct and intimate knowledge and perceptions. Autobiographical writers may incorporate feedback from family and friends, journalistic investigation and research to add information, verify impressions, and widen perspective. Effective memoirs expand into larger themes of history, culture, gender, or spirituality. However, authors writing about themselves may be unreliable narrators who withhold or misjudge information out of ignorance, faulty memory, bias, or self-protection. Readers should take care to examine the author's persona, the image that the writer projects to readers.

Contemporary memoirs have been met with some criticism regarding their veracity. Memoir writers have been criticized for using composite and invented characters, altered chronology, imagined dialogue and scenes, factual omissions, and subjective emphasis. Vivian Gornick, author of *Fierce Attachments* and other personal narratives, has justified these methods as art shaping material that would not otherwise interest readers. Nonetheless, James Frey's 2003 book about addiction, *A Million Little Pieces*—a book marketed as a brutally honest memoir—caused a publishing scandal when he admitted he exaggerated details for dramatic effect. Readers must apply the same critical standards to memoir as they do to other forms of literature.

## II. CONFLICT

Conflict is essential to narrative. A story requires action, and conflict is the impetus to that action. The characters' motives and behavior should justify their actions in a believable way. Something has to be at stake to make the plot move toward a climax and sustain readers' interest in the outcome of events. Writers create tension and suspense by arranging conflict in a story.

What happens in a conflict could involve physical obstacles, verbal disagreements, or mental, emotional, and moral problems.

There are several classic conflicts in literature and drama:

- character vs. character, the most important being the protagonist against an antagonist
- character vs. self, when a character struggles with personality traits, feelings, secrets, beliefs, or conscience
- character vs. nature, in which the setting or some natural force is the challenge
- character vs. society, in which oppression, justice, or conflicting roles cause action
- character vs. the supernatural, including an unworldly force, fantasy, horror
- character vs. machine, pitting a human against a mechanical or technological threat
- character vs. fate, in which a person's will and choices are overpowered by a predetermined destiny

James McBride addresses several major conflicts in his memoir.

First, there is a very basic conflict in his family life: James must compete with 11 raucous siblings for scarce food, shelter, attention, and approval. Early in the book, McBride details the way of life in his mother's household: "kill or be killed." The reality is not so dire as that, but James's brothers and sisters hide food from one another in an attempt to make sure they have enough to eat. This conflict could be considered *character vs. character* or *character vs. society*; it is probably more appropriate to place this conflict in the latter category because it is primarily about James's struggles with the complex social structure of his mother's household; there is no clear antagonist, so to categorize this conflict as *character vs. character* is somewhat more difficult, but an antagonist is not strictly necessary for *character vs. character*. Though he describes his brothers and sisters as his best friends, he must still compete with them. Another reason this conflict can be considered *character vs. society* is that James's family is poor, and the competition between siblings would likely not exist otherwise.

James also deals with psychological conflict throughout *The Color of Water*. In any childhood, maturing boys and girls must create a separate identity apart from their parents. But young James has an internal conflict: his mother is white but he is black, and he struggles to reconcile these facts in his mind. This conflict manifests itself in embarrassment and fear. His mother's refusal to acknowledge their racial differences confuses him until he puzzles out the truth behind her life choices. Complicating James's psychological conflicts, the death of his respected stepfather distracts him from school and church and attracts him to drug use and petty crime. The reader should be able to see the *character vs. self* conflict in these struggles.

## Practice Free-Response Questions

### PRACTICE FREE-RESPONSE QUESTION 1

A literary work's tone can reveal a writer's attitudes toward a subject just as effectively as action or exposition; sometimes, tone is even more effective. Carefully read the passage, from Chapter 4 of *The Color of Water*, that begins, "In 1966, when I was nine ..." and ends, "... my answer is no, whatever it is." Then, write an essay in which you identify the tone of the passage and explain what the tone conveys about the speaker's feelings on the subject of the passage.

### PRACTICE FREE-RESPONSE QUESTION 2

Carefully read the passage, from Chapter 4 of *The Color of Water*, that begins, "I knew of no other white woman ..." and ends, "... his face melted into a knot of disbelief and tears." Then, in a well-written essay, explain how the speaker conveys his complex attitude toward the Black Panthers and the Black Power movement in general. Be sure to reference the text in your answer, but avoid plot summary.

### PRACTICE FREE-RESPONSE QUESTION 3

Carefully read the passage, from Chapter 6 of *The Color of Water*, that begins, "I'm crying 'cause I'm happy ..." and ends, "... Mommy tried and tried to make him go back, but he wouldn't." Then, write an essay in which you identify the main conflict in the passage, analyze the sources of this conflict, and explain how this conflict contributes to the meaning of the work. Avoid mere plot summary.

### PRACTICE FREE-RESPONSE QUESTION 4

Carefully read the passage, from Chapter 10 of *The Color of Water*, that begins, "In this pre-busing era ..." and ends, "... She got up and went back to cooking, while I wandered away, bewildered." Then, in a thoughtful, well-organized essay, explain how the author illuminates the source of the narrator's confusion. Avoid plot summary.

### PRACTICE FREE-RESPONSE QUESTION 5

Carefully read the passage, from Chapter 21 of *The Color of Water*, that begins, "I stuck around Suffolk awhile longer ..." and ends, "Birdie, birdie, fly away." Then, analyze the primary symbol in the passage and explain what this symbol contributes to character development. Avoid plot summary.

# The Color of Water

## Chapters 1 and 2

1. The memoir begins with a supposed interview in which the author’s mother talks about her family history. Explain the irony of her first statement, “I’m dead.”

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2. Who is the narrator of Chapter 1? Who is she addressing?

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3. What does the narrator’s diction reveal about her attitude toward the interview?

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4. How does the narrator characterize her father in this chapter?

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5. Who is the narrator of Chapter 2?

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**Chapters 7 and 8**

1. Why is Tateh’s attitude toward his black customers ironic?

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2. Read the following quotation from Chapter 7 and explain how the ideas it presents contributed to McBride’s mother’s personal development:

Tateh hated black people. He’d call the little children bad names in Yiddish and make fun of their parents, too. “Look at them laughing,” he’d say in Yiddish. “They don’t have a dime in their pocket and they’re always laughing.” But he had plenty of money and we were all miserable.

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3. In Chapter 8, how does the author create humor in the paragraph about his brother Dennis?

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## Chapters 19 and 20

1. What does the antiphrasis in the following quotation from Chapter 19 convey about Ruth's attitude toward both her father and prevailing societal practices?

The way Tateh treated her, they'd call her an "abused woman" today. Back then they just called you "wife."

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2. Explain why Ruth's promise to Dee-Dee in Chapter 19 is appropriate in terms of Ruth's characterization.

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3. Explain the irony of Ruth's hostility to James's girlfriend Karone in Chapter 20.

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4. Explain the meaning of the term "sugar days" in the context of the paragraph in which it appears.

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5. How does James's conversation with Eddie Thompson indicate that Ruth McBride-Jordan is likely a reliable narrator?

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6. What can you infer from the fact that Eddie Thompson points to the ground in response to James's declaration that he would like to find his grandfather?

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