

# Discerning racial "color": ruth's role in the color of water



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In *The Color of Water*, Ruth, a Caucasian young woman, gravitates toward Black men because of the rejection, lack of love, paternal neglect, and sexual abuse she encountered at the hands of her own father, and because of the first love of her life Peter, was a black man. Fishel Shilsky, Ruth's father, repels his daughter by fear which he instills in her and her siblings. Fear erects barriers to the relationship. Because of fear, self-expression is inhibited and feelings of love and affection are withheld. Shilsky, a Jewish rabbi, is a rigid, pedantic, martinet who inspires terror in Ruth because he quickly gets infuriated at her blunders. She dreads the constant drill to memorize passages of scripture. She must endure the "scolding that makes you feel worse than the hitting" (62) and statements like "you're stupid., you're nothing but a fool, a sinner" (62). Ruth cowers for "he put the fear of God in her" (80). She "is afraid of Tateh and has no love for him at all" (42). The domineering attitude, the totalitarian, despotic control over his own wife and children and the utter disregard for their feelings alienate Ruth and pushes her away from her own people and white men by extension.

The sexual abuse which Ruth has to endure in silence compounds the crime against her father and widens the gap between them both. Her father even gets in to bed with her at night. His imperious, authoritative presence, and choleric forbid that Ruth disclose the secret, incestuous affair. The pedophilia estranges his daughter even more and consequently Ruth is forced into the arms of a black man, Peter, who genuinely cares for her and who shows her love, kindness, and affection. Ruth's heart and home are deprived of love and she describes herself as one "starving for love and affection" (83). Ruth never feels liked as a child therefore the isolation with which she struggles

becomes evident when the first man outside of her family who shows her kindness becomes the one into whose arms she runs and becomes the father of her first child. Child molestation undeniably cuts a deep wound in Ruth's life and drives her from her own circle.

Ruth's family dwells in a small town in the South called Portsmouth where her father runs a store in the Black district of the town. Although her father does not permit any interaction between his family and Blacks besides that of transacting business at his store, Ruth takes an objective and independent scrutiny of Blacks and what she discovers, fills her with wonder. The many injustices, the exploitation, the discrimination, lynching, the Klu Klux Klan attacks, and dire poverty that Blacks must face put them in Ruth's sympathies and endear them to her. Because Blacks are the targets and victims of such abuse, alienation, injustice and terror, Ruth feels empathy and affinity to Blacks.

Ruth realizes some admirable qualities in black people, which draw her such as their easy going nature, sense of humour, confidence, solidarity and kindness. She then compares her family to the Black family. " We were miserable" (62), Ruth has a scarred family life and childhood experience. The family unit is in shambles and its members are disunited. Ruth never speaks of any strong bond with parents or siblings so she suffers in solitude. She admires the black family so it is no surprise that she gravitates towards Blacks. She observes that " their families were together and although they were poor, they seemed happy" (61). Ruth's Jewish family disowns and disinherits her when they learn of her intentions to marry a Black man,

Andrew Dennis McBride. Ruth's Black in-laws, after Dennis' death, adopt her  
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as their own daughter and love her as such and “ that’s why (she) never veered from the black side” (247). When her family says ‘ kaddish’ and disown her, they refuse to support her and her kids even when she turns a widow. In the situation of neglect, the Blacks in the community become her family. She (stays) on the Black side because that (is) the only place (she) could stay” (232). Ruth’s second husband, Hunter Jordan is like the rest. He is a “ good, good man...without bitterness and hate” (248), and a god-fearing man. He stands by his wife and children and support the family.

At public school, whites do not accept Ruth and label her as an outsider, foreigner and immigrant. She does not feel accepted in the white circle and although she is American, she is made to feel like an alien. Pervasive rejection and maltreatment lead her to the Black circle with which she feels belonging. Because of prevailing Anti-Semitic feeling and the Jews’ own exclusiveness, Ruth’s inter-racial relationships suffer. Her white school friends never include her in their social circle and her father imposes the directive that his Jewish children cannot play or associate with “ gentiles” or non-Jews. Thus Ruth feels torn and confused yet, in black people she comes to find something essential which she lacks - love.

Black men distinguish themselves from Ruth’s father, Shilsky. Peter, the first love of her life, she describes as the “ first man other than my grandfather who ever showed me any kindness in my life” (111). Peter “ never judges” (109) her. Unlike her father, he has a sense of humour that makes her laugh all the time. No one prior to Peter shows an interest in her. His tenderness, kindness, wit and easy humour are all traits which her father sorely lacks yet which draw her to Peter. Ruth and Peter communicate unimpeded while <https://assignbuster.com/discerning-racial-color-ruths-role-in-the-color-of-water/>

Peter conveys his love for her. Likewise, the salient attractive qualities in Dennis are his kindness, easy-going nature and sense of humour. She describes Dennis as " the kindest man she has ever met to this day"(171). Furthermore, Dennis is thoughtful, solid and spiritual. He teaches her about God not like her father did. He never compels her to adopt his faith. The Black men in her life are the total antithesis of her father. The solidarity, unity, intimacy and general happiness in the home are qualities which Ruth desires in her own family and magnetize Ruth to Blacks and Black men.

The spirituality of Blacks is another enviable aspect for which Ruth longs. At the Black Baptist Church, she feels at home with the people and the liturgy which are pregnant with feeling, vigor, vitality and which connects her to Providence. The genuineness of Black religion (Christianity), dedication to church and family, and a unique, close relationship with God captivate and magnetize her to the Black circle. On the other hand, she describes Judaism as a religion filled with dry rituals which hold no meaning for her.

Memorization of scripture, the drought of fulfilling relationships, and the hypocrisy of her father as a rabbi repulse her from Judaism. Dennis teaches her of a Divine God who " lifts her up and who forgives"(247). As a youth , she becomes struck by the ceremonious attire, the importance, and the solemnity that Black folks hold concerning going to church on Sunday. Ruth observes that " every Sunday, they'd get dressed up so clean for church, (she) won't recognize them" (61).

Works Cited:

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McBride, James. *The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother*. Riverhead Books, New York. The Berkley Publishing Company 2006.