David’s Early Life and Relationship with Henrietta

Posted on September 21, 2018

View this essay online:
https://academic-master.com/davids-early-life-and-relationship-with-henrietta/

Introduction

David “Day” Lacks is a complicated figure in Rebecca Skloot’s *The Immortal Life of* Henrietta Lacks. He was Henrietta’s husband, first cousin, childhood companion, and the father of her five children, and his life connects the book’s family story with its larger themes of poverty, racial inequality, grief, medical mistrust, and research ethics. Skloot does not present David as either a completely devoted husband and father or a wholly uncaring man. He worked hard to support his family through physically demanding industrial labor, yet he was emotionally reserved, unfaithful to Henrietta, and unable to protect his children adequately after her death. These contradictions matter because reducing him to one moral label would obscure both his personal responsibility and the social conditions surrounding his choices. His limited education, economic insecurity, experience of segregation, and distrust of powerful institutions shaped how he understood illness, family responsibility, and the later discovery that Henrietta’s cells had become scientifically important throughout the world (Skloot, 2010).

Shared Childhood, Marriage, and Industrial Life

David and Henrietta grew up together in Clover, Virginia, within the same extended family and agricultural environment. Their relationship began when they were young, and they eventually married in 1941 after already becoming parents. The family later moved to Maryland as part of a wider search among African American families for industrial employment and more stable wages. David found work at Bethlehem Steel’s Sparrows Point plant, where difficult and potentially hazardous labor provided income that tobacco farming could not reliably offer. His willingness to undertake that work shows an important side of his character: he accepted the conventional provider role and contributed materially to the household. Yet financial provision did not guarantee emotional security or an equal marriage. Skloot describes David’s infidelity and the strain it placed on Henrietta, revealing a relationship shaped by affection, familiarity, unequal gender expectations, and serious personal failures. His life as a husband therefore demonstrates that economic responsibility and emotional responsibility are related but distinct forms of care.

Fatherhood, Grief, and the Limits of Simple Judgment

Henrietta's death in 1951 left David responsible for five children while he continued working in a demanding industrial job. He needed help, but the arrangements that followed exposed some of the children to severe mistreatment. Relatives who participated in their care subjected them to abuse, including sexual abuse of Deborah, and David failed to recognize or stop the danger adequately (Skloot, 2010). This is one of the most serious failures in his role as a father. Poverty, grief, limited childcare options, and exhausting work help explain why he depended on relatives, but they do not erase the harm experienced by the children. Lawrence assumed adult responsibilities early, while Deborah and her siblings grew up with unresolved grief and incomplete knowledge about their mother. David's emotional reserve contributed to this silence. A balanced interpretation therefore has to hold two truths together: he was a widowed laborer facing limited resources and structural disadvantage, and he still carried parental responsibility for protection, communication, and the consequences of decisions that left his children vulnerable.

HeLa Cells and the Development of Medical Mistrust

David's importance to the HeLa story becomes especially clear when the family eventually learns that Henrietta's cancer cells had been collected, cultured, and distributed without her knowledge. More than two decades after her death, researchers contacted family members for blood samples but did not initially explain their purpose clearly enough, and some relatives believed they were being tested for cancer. David's confusion about the continued existence of Henrietta's cells illustrates the gap between professional scientific knowledge and the language available to patients and families. His suspicion of Johns Hopkins and medical researchers was not technically accurate in every detail, but it cannot be dismissed as irrational ignorance. He knew that his wife's cells had become extraordinarily important while the family remained poor, medically underserved, and largely excluded from information about what had happened. Medical mistrust can develop when institutions demand confidence without providing understandable communication, transparency, or meaningful respect. David's response shows how secrecy and unequal power can transform scientific progress into a source of fear for the people most closely connected to it.

Ethical Meaning Within Skloot's Narrative

Henrietta's tissue was collected in 1951, before the modern federal framework for human-subject research and informed consent had been developed, so the ethical problem should not be described as a straightforward violation of regulations that did not yet exist. The National Research Act was

enacted in 1974, and the Belmont Report later articulated respect for persons, beneficence, and justice as core principles of research ethics. Judged through those contemporary principles, Henrietta lacked meaningful knowledge or choice about the research use of her tissue. David's own legal position was different because Henrietta was an adult and the decision should have belonged to her rather than to her husband. Nevertheless, the later handling of family blood samples and genomic information created separate questions about communication, privacy, and familial interests. Skloot uses these events to demonstrate that ethical research is not only about whether a specimen can be scientifically useful. It also concerns how institutions explain their actions, recognize the people behind biological material, and respond when scientific information has consequences for living relatives.

Conclusion

David Lacks matters in *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* because he prevents the family story from becoming morally simple. He was hardworking yet emotionally distant, financially responsible yet unable to protect his children fully, suspicious of medicine yet shaped by experiences that gave him reasons to distrust powerful institutions. His failures affected Henrietta and their children, and historical context should explain rather than erase those consequences. At the same time, his confusion and anger over HeLa cells reveal what happens when medical and research institutions communicate poorly with people who possess less education, authority, and access to scientific knowledge. Through David, Skloot connects family grief with structural inequality and shows that trust cannot be demanded merely because research produces social benefit. It must be built through understandable communication, respect, accountability, and inclusion. His character therefore contributes to the book's central ethical argument: scientific achievement and human dignity should not be treated as competing concerns, because responsible progress depends on acknowledging both the value of discovery and the people whose lives make that discovery possible.

References

National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research. (1979). *The Belmont Report*.

Skloot, R. (2010). *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*. Crown.

Tervalon, M., & Murray-García, J. (1998). Cultural humility versus cultural competence. *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved, 9*(2), 117–125.