

The Secret Life of Bees: The Coming of Perception

Our experiences shape our perception. In her novel *The Secret Life of Bees*, author Sue Monk Kidd embarks the reader on a journey as a white 14-year-old Lily Owens leaves her home to find the truth about her late mother. On her journey three black bee keeper sisters provide her a safe haven, offering love, faith, knowledge, and the opportunity to mature into the young woman her destiny holds. While critics claim the narrative creates a lack of black voice and steals from the black culture, Lily's first person narrative embarks her journey to selfhood. Kidd's use of Lily's narrative illustrates her innocence, connection to black culture, and complex relationships with the three sisters, overall contributing to her coming of age.

Lily's narrative reveals her innocence and inability to understand the principles of racism. Laurie Grobman argues in her essay that Lily's perspective "eras[es] almost all traces of African American Vernacular English" (AAVE) and whitens the black characters in the novel (Grobman). However, Lily's perspective exist for other intentions. Her lack of perspective reveals her that she sees everyone exactly the same. By not including AAVE, she doesn't whiten the black characters, but equalizes them and creates a possibility of cross-racial communication. In her sense, Lily does not see the difference between her and African Americans. Her innocence blocks her from grasping the racial prejudice and oppression her African American friends face. When Rosaline almost dies after a beating by three white men and given unjust charges of "assault, theft, and disturbing the peace," Lily leaves the scene horrified and shocked (Kidd, 33). Lily's innocence to racism magnifies as she Rosaline's arrest leaves her confused. However her coming of age slightly emerges as she breaks Rosaline out of jail and becomes a fugitive. Kidd's

use of narrative explores Lily's innocence as she must grow to recognize that not everyone sees black people the way she does.

Lily's inability to decipher a racial system naturally develops into a problem as she finds herself confused and offended when someone brings her skin color up, and fails to see her white privilege. When Lily and her housekeeper Rosaline arrive on the Boatwright sisters porch, all three sisters welcome them, except June. When Lily discovers June does not want her at their house "because of her skin color" she goes to bed shocked (Kidd, 87). Lily does not understand her living in a house of black women could create suspicion amongst the town people. Her narrative embodies her innocence as she admits she didn't know someone could "reject people for being white" (Kidd, 87). In her essay Joy Hebert criticizes Lily's thoughts as subtle racism, claiming that Lily never acknowledges her own racial intolerance. However Lily's thoughts represent her bewilderment of racism. She fails to realize her skin color systematically calls attention and power, and the danger she puts the Boatwright sisters in. Unaware of her privilege, Lily's "egotistic" narrative exhibits her innocence and misunderstandings of racism.

As she fights the social constructs of her world, Lily's narrative presents her innocence but also reveals a slight coming of age. While residing with the Boatwright sisters, she begins developing romantic feelings for an African-American boy, Zachary Taylor. Although Lily acts oblivious to the racial system, she somehow knows her and Zach "who [is] an impossibility" can not date together (Kidd, 133). Her internal struggle to fight what she knows and chase what she feels reveals an opportunity to come of age as she shifts to a rebellious state of mind towards standard ideals. She knew she faced the conflict of "attracted to what [she] couldn't have," but realizes how "foolish to think some things were beyond happening" (Kidd, 126). Lily's

innocence displays as she considers pursuing a relationship with an African American, unaware of the dangers she puts both of them in. Her innocence paradoxes with her coming of age, as Kidd presents Lily fighting social barriers. Through Lily's narrative, the audience sees her innocence shape her path onto selfhood.

Portrayed through her narrative, Lily's exposure to the black culture offers her comfort and spirituality as she discovers her true self. In the novel, The Boatwright sisters and a religious group called Our Daughters pray and worship a black Mary statue. At first hesitant to pray to black Mary, through Lily's narrative she soon develops a relationship with the religious figure. Black Mary plays not only as a higher power, but as a surrogate mother to Lily. Catherine B. Emmanuel in her journal sees black Mary as a driving force that offers "solace and spirituality" throughout Lily's journey (Emmanuel, 115). She explains how Mary serves as a "psychological archetype of an indomitable spirit" as she survived years of people trying to destroy her for being a figure of strength and hope for women (Emmanuel, 115). She forces Lily to question herself, and within that inquiry, find healing for the absence of her mother and the abuse of her father. Mary provokes a search, as Lily describes "I loved myself and I hated myself. That's what the black Mary did to me, made me feel my glory and my shame at the same time" (Kidd, 71). Grobman admits in her essay, although she felt the use of black Mary in the novel appropriated black culture, she asserts it still "provides a roadmap for all young people who struggle to engage respectfully with cultures other than their own" (Grobman). Lily's relationship to black Mary in her narrative does not depict cultural theft, but a symbolism of how black culture shapes her coming of age.

While critics assume Rosaline's character perpetuates the African-American "Mammy" stereotype, Rosaline is an important tool to Lily's journey to selfhood. In the 1960s, the era the novel takes place, white families often had African American maids. These maids or "mammies" had the primary duty of looking after the white children of the family, often putting the white family's needs over theirs, and ignoring the racial oppression and social barriers that came with the job (Harken, 34). While Rosaline fits the description of the Mammy stereotype, the role gives her the opportunity to have influence over Lily. Rosaline incarceration pushes Lily to away from home to save her from the abusive jail conditions, but indirectly forces Lily to leave her father's abusive household and discover her mother's identity. When Rosaline sees the wounds on Lily's knees from T-Ray's punishment, she acts erratic screaming, "Look what he's done to you" (Kidd, 25). Rosaline emotions over his actions let's Lily see how wrong and inappropriate T-Ray's abuse is to her, and starts validating her feelings about her father. Critic Joy Hebert describes Rosaline as the "ultimate reason Lily is willing to forego all that is familiar, albeit cruel and neglectful, to search for her mother's identity" (Hebert, 16). When they finally run away, Rosaline negatively accuses Lily of only saving her to escape T-Ray. Unknowingly, Rosaline's scolding helps Lily realize her first independent move in the novel. She offers Lily a voice of reason, behaving brutally honest and forcing Lily to mature and accept the truth. Rosaline pushes Lily to see the abuse from her father so she can stand up for herself, promoting confidence and self growth that contributes to her coming of age.

Lily's complex relationship with the three Boatwright sisters build her into a mature young woman, provoking her coming of age. In Lily's narrative, June acts hostile and unwelcoming towards her upon arrival. June's feelings occurred as a "revelation" to Lily, as she

didn't think humans "reject people for being white". She overhears June telling August of her suspicions, but still stays with the sisters even though June makes her uncomfortable at every opportunity. During a Daughters of Mary meeting, Lily feels so bonded and spiritually connected to Mary, reaching out her hand to touch the statue of Mary. June immediately stops playing the cello when Lily's hands reach, making Lily feel "left in silence" (Kidd, 111). June stopped playing the cello to isolate Lily from the group, and abruptly end her connection. However, June's bullying doesn't stop Lily. Her action of showing up to the next Daughters meeting, reveals her maturity and growth. She refuses to let June undermine her. June's hatred for Lily forces Lily to confront adversity and fight against hatred, as she pushes to join the Boatwright sisters community. Lily's coming of age appears within her relationship with June, as she faces her first bullying. She learns not everyone will always like her. Lily's stance against June's bullying illuminates her developing maturity and overall coming of age.

May's mental condition teaches Lily the importance of dealing with pain properly and facing the truth. Although May "is not an altogether normal person," she teaches Lily to handle negative emotions by positive thinking and her wailing wall (Kidd, 69). May's wailing wall serves as a coping tool, she would write her prayers and sufferings on a piece of paper and then place it inbetween the rocks. Later Lily writes down her mother's name and puts it in the wailing wall. Joy Hebert explains May's wall teach's Lily "physically writing down a problem to physically process it is a healthy way to cope with negative experiences" (Herbert, 19). May gives Lily skills that help her cope with the loss of her mother. When May commits suicide, Lily learns the ultimate lesson. May kills herself because felt "all the suffering" in the world and couldn't take it anymore (Kidd, 95). Despite her inspiring coping skills, May's suicide

symbolizes “what happens when a person chooses to be overwhelmed by a situation rather than constructively dealing with it,” Hebert explains (Hebert, 19). May’s coping never actually confronted the situation, it only portrayed a figurative band-aid. Through her narrative, the audience sees how the suffering and pain of the Boatwright sisters after the loss of their sister affects Lily. Witnessing and experiencing the pain of May’s suicide, Lily finally comes to terms with the truth about her mother’s death. She learns she must do more than cope with her feelings physically, she must deal with them emotionally. May’s suicide teaches Lily no matter how much you cover your feelings, true pain will always manifest itself, even if it means destruction. The suicide establishes a loss of innocence for Lily as her narrative shows her experiencing death as an adult versus the death of her mother that happened as a premature child. Lily comes of age as her relationship with May teaches her to come to terms with the truth.

Amongst all three sisters, Lily forms a very special relationship with the eldest, August Boatwright. August provides Lily with a sense of belongingness and nurture that pushes her into a realm of self discovery and actualization. When Lily arrives on August porch, August welcomes her with open arms, teaching her how to “make the honey, doing whatever needs doing” and making her feel needed (Kidd, 77). August “recognizes Lily’s value and boosts her self esteem,” serving effortlessly as a surrogate mother (Herbert, 20). She quickly realizes the impact of Lily’s mother’s death, and seeks out to give Lily a home and a motherly figure. She doesn’t just stop at herself; August introduces Lily to Black Mary, giving her a tool of spirituality and comfort. Lily develops a bond with black Mary that guides her through life and shapes her coming of age. She feels like Mary knows her “down to the core” just like any mother would (Kidd, 71). August also invites her to the Daughters of Mary circle, where she deeply bonds with

the other women in the group. August's relationship with Lily serves as one of her many mother figures, giving her important advice in life that ultimately prepare her for her coming of age. She explains to Lily the important things that matter, such as "lifting a person's heart" (Kidd, 147). August not only teaches Lily how to heal, but to use her healing to benefit others. Lily's narrative illustrates this vital part of coming of age, highlighting her new perception on life, and presenting a more mature version of Lily to the readers. August's relationship and lessons guide Lily into ultimate maturity and self actualization as she sees beyond her problems, and glances at the lives of others.

In her novel *The Secret Life of Bees*, Sue Monk Kidd takes the reader through the journey of a 14 year old girl who escapes everything she knows to pursue her mother's identity and in the process, finding her own self. Kidd's incorporation of Lily's first narrative often encounters criticism for creating a lack of perspective, but the viewpoint acts as the key to interpreting the purpose of the novel. Through Lily's narrative the reader experiences her coming of age first hand. Her experiences propel her to grow more into the young woman she unintentionally went searching for. She witnesses manners of injustice, oppression, and death that shape her coming of age into a realm of self actualization and maturity. Kidd uses Lily's narrative to make the novel even more personal, and emphasize on a young girl's entrance to adulthood.

Works Cited

- Emanuel, Catherine B. "The Archetypal Mother: The Black Madonna in Sue Monk Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees*." *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, edited by Jeffrey W. Hunter, vol. 267, Gale, 2009. *Literature Resource Center*. Accessed 26 Jan. 2017.
- Grobman, Laurie. "Teaching Cross-Racial Texts: Cultural Theft in *The Secret Life of Bees*." *College English*, vol. 71, no. 1, 2008, pp. 9-26., JSTOR. Accessed 7 Feb. 2017.
- Harken, Amy Lignitz. *Unveiling The Secret Life of Bees*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice, 2005. Print.
- Hebb, Judith. "Religious Imagery in *The Secret Life of Bees* and *The Mermaid Chair*." *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, edited by Jeffrey W. Hunter, vol. 267, Gale, 2009. *Literature Resource Center*. Accessed 26 Jan. 2017.
- Hebert, Joy A. Ms., "A Critical Study of Sue Monk Kidd's Secret Life of Bees." esis, Georgia State University, 2011.
- Johnson, Ellen. "Geographic context and ethnic context: Joel Chandler Harris and Alice Walker." *The Mississippi Quarterly*, vol. 60, no. 2, 2007, p. 235+. *Literature Resource Center*. Accessed 25 Jan. 2017.
- Kidd, Sue Monk. *The Secret Life of Bees*. London: Tinder, 2015. Print.
- Kidd, Sue Monk, and Heidi Schlumpf. "All Abuzz about the Black Madonna: An Interview with Sue Monk Kidd." *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, edited by Jeffrey W. Hunter, vol. 267, Gale, 2009. *Literature Resource Center*. Accessed 29 Jan. 2017.
- Larsen, Linda Iraggi. "The Secret Life of Bees: A One-Way Entitlement to Intimacy." *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, edited by Jeffrey W. Hunter, vol. 267, Gale, 2009. *Literature Resource Center*. Accessed 29 Jan. 2017.

- Ludwig, Kathryn. "Postsecularism and a prophetic sensibility." *Christianity and Literature*, vol. 58, no. 2, 2009, p. 226+. *Literature Resource Center*. Accessed 26 Jan. 2017.
- Morey, Ann-Janine. "The Secret Life of Bees." *The Christian Century*, vol. 120, no. 4, 2003, p. 68+. *General OneFile*, Accessed 29 Jan. 2017.
- Summer, Bob. "Monk Kidd's Monk." *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, edited by Jeffrey W. Hunter, vol. 267, Gale, 2009. *Literature Resource Center*. Accessed 29 Jan. 2017.