

Teacher Guide

Grades 9–12

The Secret Life of Bees

Sue Monk Kidd

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THE SECRET LIFE OF BEES

by
Sue Monk Kidd

Teacher Guide

Written by
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Note

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Please note: This novel deals with sensitive, mature issues. Parts may contain profanity, sexual references, and/or descriptions of violence. Please assess the appropriateness of this book for the age level and maturity of your students prior to reading and discussing it with them.

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Skills and Strategies

Comprehension

Predicting, inferring,
cause/effect, conflict

Literary Elements

Metaphor, simile, symbolism,
irony, allusion, genre,
characterization, theme,
plot development, setting,

Vocabulary

Target words, definitions,
applications

Thinking

Brainstorming, analysis,
compare/contrast

Listening/Speaking

Discussion, monologue,
oral presentation

Writing

Poetry, point of view, sequel,
time line, essay

Across the Curriculum

Art—collage, montage;
Drama—script; Music—
ballad, appropriate
selections; Current Events—
articles, research

Chapters 4–5

After reaching Tiburon, Lily and Rosaleen find refuge and work in the home of August Boatwright and her sisters. Lily invents a tale to explain why they are in Tiburon. The Boatwright sisters introduce them to their religion, which revolves around the black Virgin Mary.

Vocabulary

pith
sixth sense
corrugated
paranoid
meander
consolation
ambrosia
naive
bona fide
vigilant
grotesque
theatrical
spectacle

Discussion Questions

1. Discuss Lily and Rosaleen's arrival at the Boatwright home, and compare/contrast their reactions. (*They first see August working with her bees and look for like an "African bride." Both Lily and Rosaleen are temporarily mute—Lily because of the sight of August and Rosaleen because her mouth is sealed with snuff. Lily realizes August is the woman who makes the Black Madonna Honey and believes she has found a key to her mother's past. Lily feels they have come to the right place; Rosaleen is skeptical and wonders what they are doing there. June and May Boatwright respond to Lily's knock on the door and think they have come to buy honey. Lily interrupts Rosaleen when she tries to explain about the picture of the black Madonna and later convinces her not to say anything about the picture or her family to her. Lily is not yet ready to talk to August about her background. She is enjoying the peaceful refuge of the Boatwright home and wants time to win Aunt Bernice over, so she will not be sent back to Sylvan.*)
2. Examine information about the Black Madonna statue and analyze Lily's reaction. (*Lily sees the carving of a woman in the corner of the Boatwrights' parlor. The statue is nearly three feet tall and is totally black. Her right arm is raised, and her fingers are closed in a fist. The statue is not dressed like the Madonna on the honey label, but Lily realizes that this is the figure in the picture. She feels drawn to the statue and believes that Black Mary knows all about her but still protects her. Answers will vary, but this scene reveals Lily's self-analysis: a lying, cunning, hateful person who hates herself for killing her mother. However, the statue also gives her hope that she has inner goodness and beauty. The statue causes Lily both to love and to hate herself.*)
3. Discuss the Boatwright women and the correlation between them and the epigraph's depiction of a black colony. (*Answers will vary. June, the loving Boatwright women comprise a "colony." August is the matriarch, i.e., the queen bee; June and May provide the support. June teaches at the high school for black students and plays the cello for dying people in their homes and at the hospital. May does the cooking and housework.*)
4. Discuss Lily's explanation of August and Rosaleen's arrival in Tiburon, and analyze the Boatwrights' individual reactions. (*Her explanation mixes a little truth and many lies. She tells the truth when she says that her mother died when she was little and that Rosaleen was their housekeeper. On the other hand, what Lily says about the Black Madonna the way Rosaleen incurred her injuries, her father's death in a tractor accident that never happened, the authorities' plan to send her to a home, her plan to find her Aunt Bernice in Virginia, and the need for money for the trip are lies. August knows she is lying from the start, and May knows that Rosaleen has been beaten. June confronts August about Lily's lies and she decides to report the authorities about the "runaway girl." June resents Lily because she is white and does not believe that they owe her anything. August wants to give Lily time to confide in them and believes they can help her.*)
5. Examine how Rosaleen and Lily adapt to life in the Boatwright home. (*Lily feels as if she belongs with the Boatwrights [though she resents June's hostile attitude], but living with them makes her self-conscious about her whiteness and causes her to recognize her own prejudice.*)

11. Analyze Lily's statement, "My chest hurt from feeling things" (p. 98), and note her solution. *(She is unable to go to sleep and begins to wonder if T. Ray is concerned about her and if he realizes how badly he treated her, even though she actually believes he is thinking up ways to kill her. An intense yearning for her mother consumes her. She pictures herself climbing into bed with her mother and putting her hand on her heart as they exchange loving words. Rosaleen interrupts her "dream" world and tells her she must accept her mother's death because she is not coming back. Lily replies that she can feel her mother at the Boatwrights' and knows she has been there. Rosaleen, who is not sure whether Lily's mother left her, hopes that Lily might find out something she does not want to know. As a solution to her headache, Lily "gives" her mother to May's wailing wall by writing her name, Deborah Owens, on a piece of paper and placing it in a crevice in the wall.)*

12. **Prediction:** What will Lily learn about her mother?

Supplementary Activities

1. Sketch one of the following: (a) the Boatwrights' house (b) one of the sisters (c) the statue of the black Mary.
2. Working in a small group, research the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem and present an oral report to the class.
3. Continue to add to your Metaphor and Similes chart. **Similes**—"(August) looked like an African bride" (p. 67); "night some like an inkblot" (p. 101); **Metaphors**—"tops of beehives: postage stamps on which she" (p. 79); June's mouth: "a hot potato hole" (p. 83)

Chapter 6

Lily meets June's boyfriend Neil and the Daughters of Mary. She learns the story of the wooden statue of Mary, k.a. Our Lady of Chains, and observes the Daughters' religious service. Lily and Zach, a black teenager employed by August, form a close working and personal relationship. June and Neil have a falling-out.

Vocabulary	
ingenious	
premises	
solace	
cloister	
bordello	
consignment	
mites	
deciduous	

Discussion Questions

1. Discuss Neil, his relationship with June, and his interaction with Lily and Rosaleen. Neil is principal at the school where June teaches. Though he has been June's boyfriend for years, she refuses to marry him. A heated argument between Neil and June culminates in Neil accusing June of being afraid of marriage. As Neil is leaving, June tells him that he will never come back. After Neil is introduced to Lily and Rosaleen, he asks them where they are from and how long they plan to stay. Lily provides only a couple of flimsy answers before leaving the house to evade further questions.
2. Examine the story of "Our Lady of Chains" and its significance to the Daughters of Mary. (August says that in the days of slavery, slaves prayed all night for deliverance. A slave named Obadiah found the wooden figure of a black woman with a lifted arm and clenched fist, washed up on the riverbank. He believed the statue was sent by God and took it to the slaves' praise house. An old slave named Pearl proclaimed the statue to be the mother of Jesus. The slaves believed she understood their suffering, and they painted a red heart on her breast so the people would have something to touch. Their belief in Our Lady of Chains filled them with fearlessness and defiance.)

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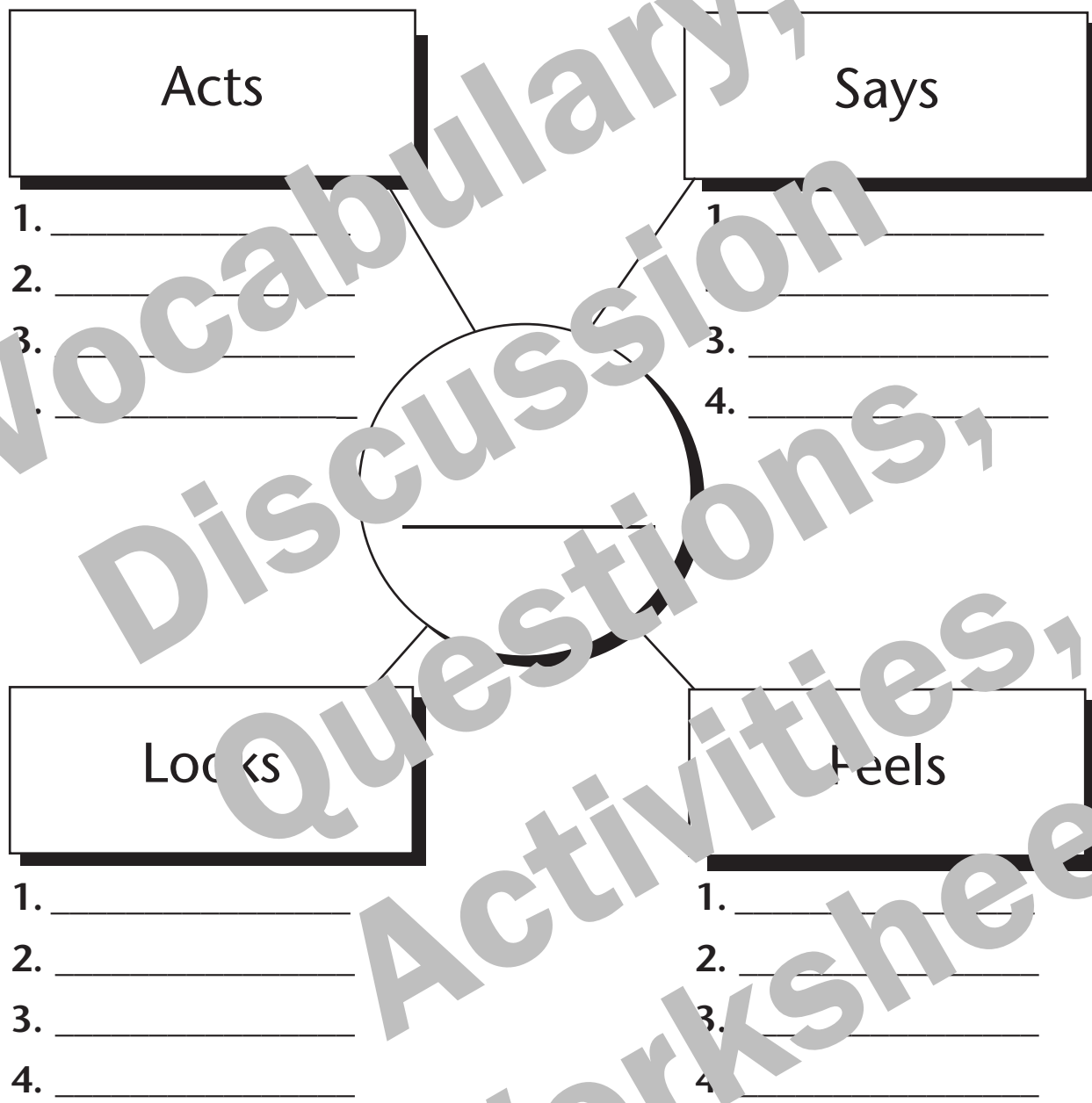
Character Chart

Directions: In the boxes across from each of the feelings, describe an incident or time in the book when each of the listed characters experienced that feeling. You may use “not applicable” if you cannot find an example.

	Lily	August	T. Ray	Rosaleen
Frustration				
Anger				
Fear				
Humiliation				
Relief				
Empathy				

Character Attribute Web

Directions: The attribute web below will help you gather clues the author provides about a character in the novel. Fill in the blanks with words and phrases that tell how the character acts and looks, as well as what the character says and feels.



The diagram is a character attribute web. It consists of a central circle with four lines radiating from it to four rectangular boxes. The boxes are labeled: 'Acts' (top-left), 'Says' (top-right), 'Looks' (bottom-left), and 'Feels' (bottom-right). Each box is connected to the central circle by a line. Below each box are four numbered lines for writing.

Acts

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

Says

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

Looks

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

Feels

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____