

Advanced Placement in
English Literature and Composition

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

The Secret Life of Bees

by Sue Monk Kidd

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The Secret Life of Bees

Objectives

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

1. analyze conflict in the narrative arc of character, setting, plot and theme.
2. identify the genre of Bildungsroman and analyze the development of the protagonist from childhood to mature understanding.
3. analyze the first-person and unreliable narrator compared with other points of view.
4. identify and analyze literary elements such as allusion, antagonist, diction, epigraph, imagery, impressions, personification, parable, pace, suspense, symbolism, persona, tone and voice.
5. analyze themes of identity, parenthood, civil rights, faith, feminism and nature.
6. offer a close reading of *The Secret Life of Bees* and support interpretations and assertions using evidence from the text and knowledge of cultural and literary allusions and social history.
7. respond to multiple-choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition Exam.
8. respond to writing prompts similar to those on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition Exam.

Lecture

I. CONFLICT

Conflict is essential to narrative. A story requires action; that's plot. 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 the structure of 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
- character vs. technology, pitting a human against a mechanical or technological threat
- character vs. fate, when a person's will and choices are overpowered by a predetermined destiny

In *The Secret Life of Bees*, novelist Sue Monk Kidd weaves multiple conflicts around 14-year-old protagonist Lily Melissa Owens. Lily is haunted by neediness and guilt since the accidental shooting death of her mother, whom she barely remembers. Lily's sense of shame, lovelessness, and lack of guidance represent a character vs. self conflict.

Lily's father, T. Ray Owens, compounds Lily's problems because he has been unkind and uncommunicative since his wife's death. He shocks Lily by revealing that her mother had abandoned her. T. Ray is Lily's antagonist in a character vs. character struggle. Lily realizes she hates her father and he hates her. She runs away from home, setting the plot in motion.

The novel's setting in South Carolina in 1964 involves social conflict during the era of racial segregation and black Americans' struggle for civil rights. Lily confronts injustice when the Owens' housekeeper, Rosaleen, goes to register to vote and is beaten by racists. Lily and Rosaleen find a refuge with the Boatwright sisters, who are black as well as feminists.

Lily's idealization of her dead mother, Deborah, could also be a character vs. supernatural conflict. The Boatwright sisters' devotion to the Virgin Mary as a source of spiritual strength provides a model for Lily to confront her shame and see her mother realistically.

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. To what extent does the protagonist's story transcend gender, time period or place?
2. Are the characters inspired to change by social leaders and visionaries, or do their aspirations rise from themselves?
3. In what ways do narrative fiction and journalism differ in their approaches to historic events?

The Secret Life of Bees

Chapter 1

1. What is Lily longing for? What obstacles prevent Lily from getting what she desires? What are her conflicts?

2. What words and figurative images indicate the strength of Lily’s feelings?

3. Explain the allusion to the angel Gabriel and the Virgin Mary.

4. Compare Lily’s ideas about the bees to the angel. Identify how the bees and the angel serve as literary devices.

5. Compare Rosaleen’s reaction to the bees to Lily’s beliefs.

Chapter 5

1. The names of the “calendar sisters” have a connection more significant than the summer months. Briefly explain the meaning of the names May, June and August to identify this theme.

2. What character traits distinguish May, June and August Boatwright?

3. Why does August Boatwright agree to shelter Lily and Rosaleen? What conflict does this decision create?

4. What is the effect of watching the television news in the Boatwright house? How does the TV news function as a literary device in the narrative?

Chapter 10

1. What images foreshadow the discovery of May?

2. Lily compares May's drowning to the legend of Our Lady of Chains pulled from the river in Charleston. What other characteristics did May have that resemble the statue?

3. After May's tragic death, what is the tone of the incidents that follow in this chapter?
