

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

The Secret Life of Bees

by Sue Monk Kidd

written by Susan Wachtman

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The Secret Life of Bees

Notes

All references come from the Penguin Books edition of *The Secret Life of Bees*, Copyright 2002.

SHORT BACKGROUND

Sue Monk Kidd grew up in Sylvester, Georgia. She experienced the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, events which are central to *The Secret Life of Bees*. Like the protagonist, Lily, Kidd had a black nanny and attended a high school at the very start of integration. Kidd wrote stories while a child, inspired by her father's reading to her. As an adult, however, she chose to get a nursing degree. She returned to writing when she began a spiritual journey, and her first three books are nonfiction, spiritual memoirs. *The Secret Life of Bees* is her first novel.

NOTE TO TEACHER

Teachers should be aware that there is some objectionable language in this book, in addition to some mild sexual references and some about bodily functions. There also may be controversy about the religious practices in the pink house, which may be offensive to some more traditional Christians, "communion service" centered on the Mary statue.

Objectives

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

1. define the term *coming of age* and explain how the novel is a coming of age novel for the protagonist
2. define the term *simile* and identify similes in the text
3. identify the need for a mother as a major theme of the novel, find examples from the text that illustrate this, and discuss how the protagonist comes to terms with her mother's death
4. define the term *allusion* and identify allusions in the text and their relevance to the plot
5. discuss how the motif of bees is central to the story by giving examples of where they are discussed and explain their relevance to the plot, theme, and title.
6. discuss the symbolism of the river and find examples from the text illustrating its relevance to Lily's coming of age.
7. examine the setting of the novel and explain how place and time is integral to Lily's story.
8. discuss the problem of race in the novel and explain Lily's growth in relation to her understanding of prejudice in her society.
9. identify the use of foreshadowing in the novel and discuss its purpose.
10. identify the themes of guilt, forgiveness, and redemption and give examples from the text involving Lily's struggle with these issues.
11. examine Lily's mother figures and identify how she feels about each and the impact each has had on her life.
12. characterize the role religion plays in the novel.
13. identify uses of comic relief in the text and explain their purpose.
14. explain how June is a foil to August and explain the purpose of a foil to the plot.

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Sue Monk Kidd has said that she and Lily share the same sense of humor. What examples of Lily's humor can you find? What examples of Kidd's humor can you find? How is the narrator's humor distinctive from the author's? What would the book be like without this humorous touch?
2. *The Secret Life of Bees* is considered a coming of age novel because Lily matures during the course of the story. Describe some of the scenes which illustrate Lily's maturation.
3. Describe the various issues Lily has with T. Ray. What is the source of their problems? Lily spends her time looking for her mother. Why does she not feel the lack of a loving father as strongly?
4. Compare and contrast Lily's two primary mother figures: Rosaleen and August. How has each affected Lily?
5. Explain the title of the novel in the context of the major themes of the story.
6. How is the setting of the deep South in the 1960s important to the story. Could it be the same story in any other place or time? Why or why not?
7. Sue Monk Kidd has said that there were bees living in the wall of her house when she was a child. How do you think most children would feel about that? How does Lily feel? Why is she different? Later she sees the bees as a "visitation" and a "plague." What does she mean?
8. Rivers are often said to represent the great flow of life. How is that expressed in the novel?
9. The moon is connected with divine mothers (in Greek mythology, called Selene). The last line of the book emphasizes this. Identify some of the passages where the book refers to the moon, or the phases of the moon, and explain their symbolism.
10. Sue Monk Kidd has explained that her high school was the first to integrate in her hometown in Georgia, and the description of Zach being hit by wadded paper balls is something she remembers. She also remembers the dignity of the black students under such harassment. Why do you think Kidd chose to include this incident in the story?
11. Lily has felt guilty for years for the death of her mother. When she finds out her mother left her in Sylvan, she feels betrayed. How does Lily come to terms with these feelings of loss and betrayal?
12. Lily finds a "hive" of new mothers and learns to love the great universal mother. How does this help her? How is it still not enough?

2. Who is the narrator of the story?

3. The narrator makes an allusion about the bees in Chapter One. What does she allude to and why?

4. Lily says that the bees could have stung her until she died, and it would not have been the worst thing to happen. What do you learn about her from this?

5. What does Lily hope would happen in Paradise?

6. Lily describes her mother's death. She does not directly say so, but she implies that she caused her mother's death. How did that happen?

7. Why does Lily "smell every perfume bottle they had?"

Chapter Five

VOCABULARY

ambrosia – a drink of the gods
bona fide – genuine
bristled – angry
consolation – comfort
dabs – puts, places
eclectic – many and different
etiquette – proper manners
immunity – could not be hurt
inkblot – a type of psychiatric test
integration – combining white and black
orthodox – traditional
outlandish – strange
revelation – a sudden knowledge, usually from a spiritual source
ricocheted – echoed
righteous indignation – anger in a good cause
sedative – a sleeping pill
serenade – to sing a song for
swabbed – cleaned
vigilante – self-appointed police
wailing – crying
willies – shivers

1. Why does May begin to sing “Oh! Susanna” again?

2. How does the “honey song” say “everything” about living in the pink house?

Chapter Eight

VOCABULARY

caress – pet
gawky – awkward
groggy – sleepy
high-caliber – high quality
intensity – close attention
intrude – break in on
isolate – separate
mortician – one who takes care of dead bodies
peculiar – strange
pigment – color
plagues – horrible inflictions

1. What did August most want to do during her special month?

2. What does Lily want to say to the bees?

3. Why had Lily kept the Coca-Cola bottle from Massachusetts?

4. Why does August tell Lily about the thirty-two words for love in the Eskimo language?

5. August says, “You see, everybody needs a God who looks like them, Lily.” Why is it a little ironic for her to say this to Lily?

Chapter Twelve

VOCABULARY

amnesiac – unable to remember
bolstered – propped
cooed – baby talked
despite – in spite of
genuinely – truly
institution – hospital for mentally ill
monogrammed – sewn on initials
specimen – example
taunting – hassling
unruffled – unbothered

1. Why is Lily waiting in August’s room?

2. What does Lily say is a “big shock” when she looks at the pictures of Mary?

3. Why had August not told Lily that she knew who Lily was when she arrived?

4. How did August first get to know Deborah?
