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# *The Secret Life of Bees*

by

**Sue Monk Kidd**

**2002**



MonkeyNotes by Laurie Lahey

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## KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

### SETTING

The novel is set in South Carolina during the turbulent time frame of 1964. The civil rights movement.....

### CHARACTER LIST

#### Major Characters

**Lily Melissa Owens** - Fourteen-year-old Lily Owens is the main character and protagonist of this novel. Lily has lived alone with her cruel father since her mother's mysterious death ten years ago. Lily's.....

#### Minor Characters

**Rosaleen** - Rosaleen becomes the Owens family's housekeeper after Lily's mother dies. She is.....

**T. Ray Owens** - T. Ray is Lily's father, whom she calls "T. Ray." He is the novel's antagonist, or the.....

**Deborah Owens** - Deborah is Lily's mother, who died when Lily was only four years old. Lily thinks.....

**Mrs. Henry** - Mrs. Henry is Lily's teacher who tells her that she is very smart. Mrs. Henry tells Lily that.....

**August Boatwright** - August is a beekeeper who lives in a bright pink house in Tiburon, SC. She is....

**May Boatwright** - May is August's very emotional sister. May's twin sister, April, killed herself when.....

**June Boatwright** - June is August's other sister, who is not happy to have Lily staying in their.....

**Zach** - Zach works for August. Zach is African American and Lily develops a crush on him, even .....

**Neil** - Neil loves June and asks her to marry him constantly. June always turns Neil down, until .....

**Queenie, Violet, Lunelle, Mabalee and Cressie** - These women are all a part of the religious devotions to....

**Otis and Sugar Girl** - Otis and Sugar Girl also take part in the devotions to the.....

### CONFLICT

The conflict of a plot is the major problem experienced by the protagonist. In *The Secret Life of Bees* Lily must learn about her dead mother in order to understand her own life.

#### Protagonist

The protagonist of a story is the main character who traditionally undergoes some sort of change. He or she must usually overcome some opposing force. In this story, Lily must overcome the oppressive .....

#### Antagonist

The antagonist of a story is the force that provides an obstacle for the protagonist. In this novel, T. Ray makes Lily believe she is worthless. He also makes Lily.....

#### Climax

The climax of a plot is the major turning point that allows the protagonist to resolve the conflict. The climax of *The Secret Life of Bees* is when Lily finally confronts T. Ray and learns that she shot her mother.

## **Outcome**

The outcome, resolution, or denouement occurs in the final chapters when Lily figures out who she.....

## **SHORT PLOT/CHAPTER SUMMARY (Synopsis)**

Fourteen-year-old Lily Owens lives on a peach farm with her father, T. Ray. Lily's mother, Deborah, died in a mysterious accident involving a gun when Lily was four-years old. Since then, Lily thinks about her mother constantly and wishes she were there to take her away from T. Ray, who is cruel and distant.

Rosaleen, an African-American woman, is the family's housekeeper and a mother-figure for Lily. One day Rosaleen and Lily go to town so Rosaleen can register to vote. In town a group of white men taunt Rosaleen and she spills the contents of her snuff jar on their feet. The men beat Rosaleen until the police come and take Rosaleen to jail. At the jail, the men beat her some more. T. Ray comes to the jail to take Lily home. Back on the farm, Lily and T. Ray get into an argument, in which he tells Lily that Deborah was going to leave her when she died. Lily gets so angry that she runs away. Lily frees Rosaleen from the hospital, where she was sent after her second beating. Rosaleen and Lily go to Tiburon, South Carolina because Deborah had a picture of a black Madonna on the back of which she wrote "Tiburon, SC." Lily figures this town must have been important to Deborah. In a store, Lily sees jars of honey with pictures of the same black Madonna as their labels. Lily .....

## **THEMES**

### **Major Theme**

**Secret Lives** - The major theme of this novel is expressed in its title, which comes from a statement made by August: "Most people don't have any idea about all the complicated life going on inside a hive. Bees have...."

### **Minor Themes**

**Fortunate Coincidences and Signs** - Throughout the novel, Lily seeks and finds signs and is propelled by a series of fortunate coincidences. Lily frequently asks for signs and often believes things that come to her are signs. Lily believes it was a sign that her room was infested with bees and now she is .....

**Mothers** - Lily is driven by her need to know about her mother so that she may learn more .....

**Race** - This novel treats the contentious issue of race in the 1960's south as well as in the everyday.....

## **MOOD**

Serious/ Inspirational. The mood of this novel is frequently serious because it treats a series of.....

## **BACKGROUND INFORMATION - BIOGRAPHY**

Sue Monk Kidd was born and raised in Sylvester, Georgia, on a plot of land settled by her great-grandparents some 200 years ago. While Sue had always wanted to be a writer, she decided to become a nurse because of the cultural climate of the 1960s, as well as her own fears of failure. Sue went to Texas Christian University (TCU), where she received a Nursing degree in 1970. She worked as a registered nurse throughout her twenties. She married Sanford (Sandy) Kidd and had two children, Bob and Ann.

At thirty-years old Sue became a freelance writer, working on non-fiction pieces about her.....

## **LITERARY / HISTORICAL INFORMATION**

This novel is set against the backdrop of the Civil Rights Movement in the particularly tumultuous summer of 1964. The movement for civil rights, though always important, came to a political head during this period in

American history. At this time, the rights of minorities were called into question with regard to "equal rights" under the U.S. Constitution.

Many groups of minorities in America, especially blacks (African-Americans) believed that they had been denied the basic human rights provided for other American citizens (namely white people) under.....

## **GENRE**

Fiction

## **CHAPTER SUMMARIES AND NOTES**

### **CHAPTER 1**

#### **Summary**

It is the summer of 1964 and Lily Owens is lying in her bed watching bees squeeze in and out of cracks in her walls. She is fourteen this summer. Lily thinks about her mother, who died when Lily was a child. She also thinks about Rosaleen, who has taken care of her since her mother's death and her father, T. Ray, who is gruff and distant. When the bees begin to swarm around Lily, she wakes T. Ray to show him the sight. When T. Ray enters her room, the bees have gone. He threatens to make her kneel in the Martha Whites (grits) if she wakes him again. Lily decides she will catch some bees in a jar to prove she was not making up the story

Lily thinks about the day her mother, Deborah, died. She remembers that her mother was packing in a hurry. T. Ray came home and he and Deborah started fighting. Lily does not remember everything, but she remembers that there was a gun. Lily remembers picking up the gun and an explosion.

Lily and T. Ray live on a peach farm. He does not let her do things other girls do, like have slumber parties. Lily knows little about fashion and is not popular at school. She thinks she has nice eyes, but that's about it. No boys at school find her attractive.

Lily starts catching bees in the jar. Even though Rosaleen tells Lily that she is not going to care if Lily comes crying to her about getting stung, Lily knows Rosaleen loves her. Lily thinks about the time Rosaleen bought her a baby chick and argued with T. Ray to let her keep it. Rosaleen has no family. She has lost track of her brothers and sisters and separated from her husband.

T. Ray won't talk to Lily about her mother, but Lily has managed to collect some information. Lily even has a few items that belonged to Deborah, which she has buried outside.

T. Ray does not like when Lily reads books. Lily thought she would go to beauty school until her teacher, Mrs. Henry, told her how smart she is. Mrs. Henry let Lily borrow her books. T. Ray does not let Lily read when she is selling peaches, so Lily writes poems in her head.

Before Lily started school T. Ray said he wanted to explain what happened to her mother so she would hear it from him and not people gossiping. When Lily tells T. Ray that she remembers the incident, he becomes angry. He tells her that she picked up the gun. She says she remembers picking up the gun, but nothing after that. T. Ray tells her that when she picked up the gun it went off and killed Deborah.

One night Lily goes outside in the orchard and lies down with her mother's things. T. Ray catches her outside and, thinking she was with a boy, makes her kneel on the Martha Whites. Rosaleen is upset the next day when she sees Lily's battered knees. Rosaleen tells Lily that she will not be coming the following day because she is

going to town. Lily begs to come with her. The next day is Lily's birthday and she wants to get out of the house. T. Ray does not celebrate her birthday.

The next morning Rosaleen brings Lily a birthday cake, which they eat before they go into town. Rosaleen intends to register to vote—a decision inspired by the recent Civil Rights Amendment. On the way to town, Lily suggests they rest inside her church. Brother Gerald comes into the church and asks Lily why they are there. It is clear that he is not happy Rosaleen is in his church. Rosaleen asks if they can borrow the fans they are using for the rest of their walk. When Brother Gerald says no, Lily tells him Rosaleen was only kidding.

When they get into town Lily and Rosaleen encounter a group of white men who taunt Rosaleen. Rosaleen, who has taken the fans anyway, tells the men she stole them from a church. Rosaleen pours the spit from her snuff jug over the tops of the men's shoes. The men attack Rosaleen and call the police. The police arrest Rosaleen and tell Lily that they will let her daddy handle her.

## Notes

This chapter is a classic exposition. The exposition is the section of a novel in which the main characters and main conflict are introduced. Any relevant background information is also given in this section. Here we learn that the protagonist, Lily, leads a miserable life with her father T. Ray. Her life became miserable when her mother, Deborah, mysteriously died. Lily blames herself for Deborah's death, although she is not sure if she can believe T. Ray's accusation that it was her fault. Another important conflict that emerges in this chapter is the issue of race in the Civil Rights South. In 1964 Congress passed the Civil Rights Amendment of 1964. The original purpose of the

Amendment was to provide protection for black men from discrimination. However, at the last minute in an attempt to kill the Bill, it was expanded to protect women from discrimination as well. Under this Amendment, Jim Crow laws were abolished and segregation was forced to end. However, as illustrated in this chapter (as well as the rest of the story), many whites were angered by the Amendment and continued to treat African Americans cruelly.

Every chapter in this novel begins with an epigraph, which captures the main theme of the chapter. Each epigraph involves bees, which Kidd uses as a metaphor for humans and their interactions with one another. In this chapter the epigraph discusses how the queen is the unifying force of the community and once she is gone, the worker bees show signs of "queenlessness." The general theme of this chapter, then, is how Lily's life has been affected by her mother's absence. Queen bees will be used as a symbol for mother or mother-figure throughout this novel, which will continue to prod the conflict of Lily's "motherlessness" and how she learns to substitute other women as mother-figures and thus, overcomes her sense of "queenlessness."

## CHAPTER 2

### Summary

The men meet Rosaleen and Lily at the police station. In front of the police officer, the men beat Rosaleen again. T. Ray comes for Lily and races home. Lily insists that he do something to get Rosaleen out of jail. He says there is nothing he can do and he would not be surprised if one of the men Rosaleen spit on kills her. When they return home T. Ray tells Lily to sit in her room and think about what she did. She tells him that he does not scare her and tells him to try to hit her. T. Ray swings and misses. When Lily says that her mother would not have let T. Ray hit her, he tells her that Deborah never cared about her and that she was.....

## OVERALL ANALYSES

### CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Lily Owens** - Lily Owens is the only true main character of this novel, in the sense that she is the only character that is developed significantly. Other characters are important, such as T. Ray, Rosaleen and August. However, these other characters only sustain their value in the way they relate to Lily. Furthermore, because the novel is told in the first person, we do not get a very clear picture of these.....

### PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

#### Exposition

The exposition is the section of a novel in which the main characters and main conflict are introduced. Any relevant background information is also given in this section. The exposition of this novel .....

#### Rising Action

Rising action is the action that will lead to the climax (or the .....

#### Climax

The climax of a plot is the major turning point that allows the protagonist to resolve the conflict. The climax of *The Secret Life of Bees* occurs in Chapter Fourteen when Lily confronts T. Ray in the pink house. Throughout the novel, Lily has been struggling with who she is in relation to her mother's death. In other words, Lily.....

#### Outcome

The outcome, resolution, or denouement of the novel occurs in the final chapter where Lily replaces her "queen" and starts over. Throughout the novel, Lily has been in search of herself as much as .....

### THEMES - THEME ANALYSIS

**Secret Lives** - The major theme of this novel is expressed in its title, which comes from a statement made by August: "Most people don't have any idea about all the complicated life going on inside a hive. Bees have a secret life we don't know anything about" (148). Throughout the novel, the reader learns how ,.....

### POINT OF VIEW

First-person, limited. The narrator of this story is Lily. We have access to her thoughts, but not .....

### IMPORTANT QUOTES - QUOTATIONS

Edition: Penguin, 2003

1. **"People who think dying is the worst thing don't know a thing about life."** Lily, p.2

Lily says this in the beginning of the novel during the exposition. This is an important quote because Lily's life has been profoundly affected by her mother's death. This statement suggests that living with someone else's death can be more painful than dying.

2. **"Please, Lily, you are insulting your fine intelligence. Do you have any idea how smart you are?"** -- Mrs. Henry, p.16

Lily's teacher says this to her when Lily mentions that she wants to be a hairdresser. This is an important quotation because it shows that Lily's self-esteem is low from living with T. Ray and that .....

## **SYMBOLISM / MOTIFS / IMAGERY / SYMBOLS**

**The Bee Hive** - Throughout the novel, Kidd builds on the hive and bees as a metaphor of .....

**Our Lady of Chains Statue** - The statue of Mary is symbolic on two levels. On one level, it is an .....

## **IMPORTANT / KEY FACTS SUMMARY**

**Title:** *The Secret Life of Bees*

**Author:** Sue Monk Kidd

**Date Published:** 2002

**Setting:** South Carolina, 1964

**Genre:** Fiction

**Tense:** Past

**Meaning of the Title:** Using bees as a metaphor for humans, Kidd shows how most of the .....

## **VOCABULARY**

**Ornery**- mean-spirited.....

## **STUDY QUESTIONS - QUIZ**

### **Multiple Choice**

1. Lily's mother died:
- A. of a mysterious disease
  - B. in a mysterious accident involving a gun in a mysterious plane crash.....

### **ANSWER KEY**

1. b .....

## **ESSAY QUESTIONS - IDEAS / BOOK REPORT TOPICS**

1. Who is the queen in this novel?
2. What does August mean when she tells Lily that everyone needs a god that looks.....

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