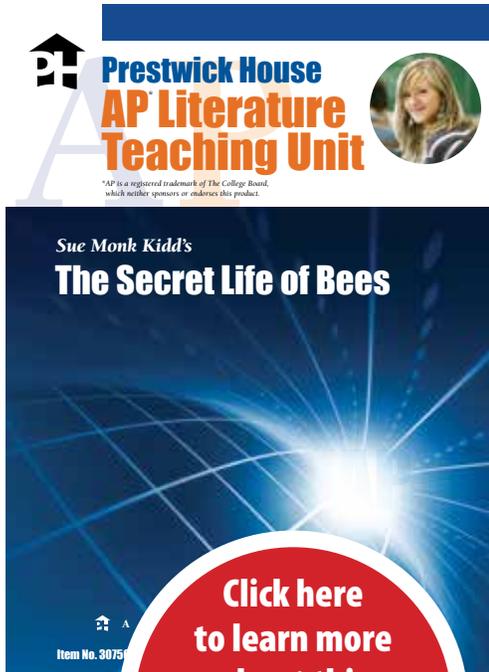




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Teaching Unit

The Secret Life of Bees

by Sue Monk Kidd

written by Rita Truschel



Prestwick House

Item No. 307570

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

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.

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 2

1. Lily doesn't understand why the men from the gas station call the policeman "Shoe." How would you explain the implications of this nickname to her?

2. Contrast Lily's expectations of the policeman to how he actually does his job. Be sure to cite examples. What kind of conflict is this?

3. What did T. Ray know about the men at the gas station that Lily and Rosaleen didn't know? What does this imply about T. Ray's character?

4. Lily's decision to leave home is a turning point. Has the author justified this transition on a rational or emotional basis?

5. August calls her religious worship Orthodox Eclectic. What do those words mean?

6. Lily interprets the parable of the nun Beatrix as being about running away from home. From your reading of the parable, in what ways could Mary help Lily?

7. When August tells Lily about May and the wailing wall, Lily wonders whether telling her sorrows would ease her hurt. What answers does August's story imply?

Chapter 12

1. What kind of mood does the author establish by describing August’s room as Lily waits to speak with her?

2. Lily realizes that her name is a symbol. Her middle name, Melissa, is also symbolic. Explain what Lily Melissa means and how these names relate to the themes of her story.

3. Summarize what Lily now knows about Deborah and T. Ray that she didn’t know when she left home. Identify motives and plot elements that are different from Lily’s point of view.

4. How does August help Lily accept the truth about her mother’s abandonment?
