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Multiple Critical Perspectives™

Teaching Sue Monk Kidd's

The Secret Life of Bees

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General Introduction to the Work

Genre

THE *SECRET LIFE OF BEES* is a Bildungsroman. This is a German term for a novel about the growth of the leading character's personality from youth to adulthood. Such stories also are called "coming-of-age" or "education" novels. The narrative follows the protagonist's intellectual, moral, and psychological development to maturity. Mistakes and challenges in pursuit of a goal form this person's identity or sense of self in relation to society.

In *The Secret Life of Bees*, fourteen-year-old Lily Melissa Owens grows from a child to a young adult without help from her parents. Lily faces the usual challenges of adolescence: a maturing body, relationships with the opposite sex, independence, identifying talents, choosing a career, and adjusting responsibly to community life. In addition, she is haunted by her mother's death in a gun accident. Her father is bitter and uncommunicative.

Lily lives in a rural South Carolina town in 1964, a period when women and black people faced social restrictions. Lily confronts injustice when the Owenses' black housekeeper, Rosaleen, goes to register to vote and is beaten by racists.

As is typical in such novels, Lily leaves home to discover the truth about herself, her family, and her place in society. She and Rosaleen find refuge with the Boatwright sisters, who are black as well as feminists. Lily overcomes challenges by using her own abilities, with aid from influential characters she encounters. By the end of the novel, Lily has answered her essential questions about her parents and herself and found a new home, better relationships and adult goals.

The Secret Life of Bees is structured as an extended flashback from the first-person point of view of Lily, the protagonist and narrator. In effect, she looks back over the summer of 1964 to compare and contrast who she was as a child to who she became as a young adult.

A first-person viewpoint involves the narrator as a character in her or his own story. It can be identified by use of "I" or "we" in the telling. This creates intimacy and concentrates on the protagonist's motives, goals, and reactions.

However, the first-person narrator may be unreliable. This principal character could be withholding or misjudging information out of ignorance, faulty memory, bias or a need for self-protection.

In *The Secret Life of Bees*, Lily Owens is an unreliable narrator for all these reasons. Lily was only four years old when her mother died, so she cannot remember the fatal accident clearly. Lily is biased against her temperamental father, and she refuses to believe that her mother might have abandoned her. For most of the novel, Lily protects herself from learning the truth about her imperfect mother and her parents' unhappy marriage.

Formalism Applied to *The Secret Life of Bees*



Notes on the Formalist Approach

THE FORMALIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE was developed at the beginning of the 20th century and remained popular until the 1970s, when other literary theories began to gain popularity. Today, formalism is generally regarded as a rigid and inaccessible means of reading literature, used in Ivy League classrooms and as the subject of scorn in rebellious coming-of-age films. It is an approach that is concerned primarily with *form*, as its name suggests, and thus places the greatest emphasis on *how* something is said, rather than *what* is said. Formalists believe that a work is a separate entity—not at all dependent upon the author's life or the culture in which the work is created. No paraphrase is used in a formalist examination, and no reader reaction is discussed.

Originally, formalism was a new and unique idea. The formalists were called “New Critics,” and their approach to literature became the standard academic approach. Like classical artists such as da Vinci and Michaelangelo, the formalists concentrated more on the form of the art rather than the content. They studied the recurrences, the repetitions, the relationships, and the motifs in a work in order to understand what the work was about. The formalists viewed the tiny details of a work as nothing more than parts of the whole. In the formalist approach, even a lack of form indicates something. Absurdity is in itself a form—one used to convey a specific meaning (even if the meaning is a lack of meaning).

The formalists also looked at smaller parts of a work to understand the meaning. Details like diction, punctuation, and syntax all give clues.



Activity One

Examining flashbacks and interruptions to chronological order in *The Secret Life of Bees*

NOTE: While completing Activity One does not necessitate the class's also completing Activity Two, Activity One is a prerequisite for Activity Two.

1. Copy and distribute the handouts: Charting Lily's Plotline and *The Secret Life of Bees*: Main Plot and Subplot Graphic.
2. Have students work individually, in pairs, or small groups of three or four.
3. Have students follow the instructions on the *Charting Lily's plotline* handout and complete a graphic of the main plotline.
4. Have students note instances in which the narrative structure of the main plot places key narrative elements *out of their usual order*:
 - exposition
 - introduction of conflict
 - rising action (including complications)
 - climax
 - falling action
 - denouement
5. Reconvene the class and have students share their results.
6. Discuss any serious discrepancies in
 - student accounts of chronology
 - student interpretation of narrative elements

NOTE: Students do not need to agree or come to consensus, but it is important to clear up any factual errors in the chronology.

7. Discuss the effects of flashbacks and other disruptions to chronological order in the main plot.
 - How does the fact that the story is narrated by an adult looking back on her adolescence affect your understanding of her character? Sympathy for her?
 - How does the narrative structure affect your enjoyment of the plot (e.g., suspense, humor, satisfaction with the resolution, etc.)? Why?
 - How does the narrative structure affect your understanding of the theme? In what way(s)?

Feminist Theory Applied to *The Secret Life of Bees*

Notes on the Feminist Theory

FEMINISM IS AN EVOLVING PHILOSOPHY, and its application in literature is a relatively new area of study. The basis of the movement, both in literature and society, is that the Western world is fundamentally patriarchal (i.e., created by men, ruled by men, viewed through the eyes of men, and judged by men).

In the 1960s, the feminist movement began to form a new approach to literary criticism. Of course, women had already been writing and publishing for centuries, but the 1960s saw the rise of a feminist literary theory. Until then, the works of female writers (or works about females) were examined by the same standards as those by male writers (and about men). Women were thought to be less intelligent than men, at least in part because they generally received less formal education, and many women accepted that judgment. It was not until the feminist movement was well under way that women began examining old texts, reevaluating the portrayal of women in literature, and writing new works to fit the developing concept of the “modern woman.”

The feminist approach is based on finding and exposing suggestions of misogyny (negative attitudes toward women) in literature. Feminists are interested in exposing the undervaluing of women in literature that has long been accepted as the norm by both men and women. They have even dissected many words in Western languages that reflect a patriarchal worldview. Arguing that the past millennia in the West have been dominated by men—whether the politicians in power or the historians recording it all—feminist critics believe that Western literature reflects a masculine bias, and, consequently, represents an inaccurate and potentially harmful image of women. In order to repair this image and achieve balance, they insist that works by and about women be added to the literary canon and read from a feminist perspective.

Activity One

Comparing character traits with expectations of gender in *The Secret Life of Bees*

1. Copy and distribute the handout: Comparing Character Traits and Expectations.
 2. Divide the class into three groups or a number of groups divisible by three. Try to have both male and female representation in each group.
 3. Have the groups divide the following six primary characters and six secondary characters so that each group member has two, and each group will discuss all twelve characters.
 4. Have students examine the book for exposition and incidents that reveal character traits and gender expectations for their characters.
 - Lily Owens
 - Rosaleen Daise
 - Deborah Owens
 - T. Ray Owens
 - Brother Gerald
 - Officer Avery Gaston
 - August Boatwright
 - June Boatwright
 - May Boatwright
 - Neil
 - Zachary Taylor
 - Clayton Forrest
 5. Have students list traits and qualities that their characters expect and value in women.
 6. Have students list traits and qualities that their characters expect and value in men.
 7. Have groups identify characters with similar personalities and outlooks.
 8. Have groups identify pairs of characters with contrasting personalities and outlooks.
- NOTE: These complements and contrasts might be female-female, male-male, or female-male.*
9. Have students discuss positive and negative connotations of character traits as represented in the novel.
 10. Reconvene the class and allow each group to present its findings.

Mythological/Archetypal Approach Applied to *The Secret Life of Bees*



Notes on the Mythological/Archetypal Approach

MYTHOLOGICAL, ARCHETYPAL, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CRITICISM are all closely related. This is because Freud formulated many theories around the idea of the social archetype, and his pupil, Carl Jung, expanded and refined Freud's theories into a more cross-cultural philosophy.

Critics who examine texts from a mythological/archetypal standpoint are looking for symbols. Jung said that an archetype is “a figure...that repeats itself in the course of history wherever creative fantasy is fully manifested.” He believed that human beings were born with an innate knowledge of certain archetypes. The evidence of this, Jung claimed, lies in the fact that some myths are repeated throughout history in cultures and eras that could not possibly have had any contact with one another. Many stories in Greek and Roman mythology have counterparts in Chinese and Celtic mythology, long before the Greek and Roman Empires spread to Asia and northern Europe. Most of the myths and symbols represent ideas that human beings could not otherwise explain (the origins of life, what happens after death, etc.). Every culture has a creation story, a life-after-death belief, and a reason for human failings, and these stories—when studied comparatively—are far more similar than different.

When looking for archetypes or myths, critics take note of general themes, characters, and situations that recur in literature and myth. In modern times, traditional literary and mythological archetypes are successfully translated to film. For example, Jane Austen's *Emma* was adapted into the popular Hollywood film *Clueless*. By drawing on those feelings, thoughts, concerns, and issues that have been a part of the human condition in every generation, modern authors allow readers to feel that they know the characters in a work with very little background information. Imagine how cluttered stories would be if the author had to give every detail about every single minor character that entered the work!



3. Archetypal Situations

- the QUEST: the hero's endeavor to establish his or her identity or fulfill his or her destiny.

Variations on the QUEST can include:

- the Faustian bargain: the selling of one's soul to the devil (metaphorically representing the notion that one would "give anything" in order to...) in exchange for unlimited power, knowledge, wealth, etc. Examples include King Midas.
- the pursuit of revenge for a real or perceived wrong, as exemplified by Captain Ahab's quest in *Moby Dick*.
- the descent into the underworld. (Note that this is usually one part of the quest rather than the entire quest itself.)
- the RENEWAL OF LIFE: death and rebirth, resurrection as seen in the cycle of the seasons, the phases of the day, sleeping and waking. Examples are "Sleeping Beauty," "The Secret Garden," etc.
- INITIATION: coming of age, rites of passage. Some examples include the first hunt, weddings, teenage angst films.
- THE FALL: any event that marks a loss of innocence, a devolution from a paradisaical life or viewpoint to a tainted one.
- REDEMPTIVE SACRIFICE: any voluntary loss, especially a loss of life, that results in another's gaining or regaining a desired state.
- the CATALOG OF DIFFICULT TASKS: (labors of Hercules, Cinderella's treatment by her stepmother and stepsisters, etc.).
- the END OF THE WORLD: usually apocalyptic, involving warfare, a huge battle, a metaphoric final battle between good and evil.