The Secret Life of Bees
Concept/Vocabulary Analysis

Literary Text: The Secret Life of Bees by Sue Monk Kidd

Organizational Patterns:
This book is narrated by Lily Owens, a fourteen year old who lives with her abusive father, T. Ray. The book unfolds through fourteen untitled chapters, each of which is headed by a biological commentary about the nature of bees. The shortest chapter contains 9 pages while most are 20 to 30 pages in length. Lily’s retelling focuses on the summer of 1964 from July to the beginning of the next school year.

Issues Related to this Study of Literature

Themes:
Bildungsroman – Through the events that shape her summer, Lily comes to age as a young woman surrounded by a strong community of maternal figures. Lily grows into being able to face-up to her past and forms the direction of her future. She discovers things about herself and learns respect for the decisions of others.

Love – Specifically, this book deals with maternal relationships and how influential that relationship is in life. Instead of finding the maternal figure in her mother that she desired, Lily is led to the pink house where August and the Daughters welcome her into their love. Lily explores with her first romantic love with Zach and develops relationships of friendship with June, Rosaleen, and later, Becca.

Equality – This book takes place in the summer of 1964 which was when the Civil Rights Act was ratified. The tension over racial issues gives way to Lily’s escape from home and attributes to May’s suicide later on in the book. Lily is a white girl living under the roof of the Boatwright sisters who are black.

Coping – All of the characters are given hard situations to deal with and different methods of coping are shown. As in the case of T. Ray and April, negative responses lead to abusive relationships and suicide. August and June show a more positive way to cope with problems by taking time to let things settle and then adding passion to their lives. Zack and Lily grow as they experiment with different coping methods with their experiences about the cruelties of life.

Setting:
The book begins in the home of T. Ray Owens in the fictional town of Sylvan, South Carolina, where he has a peach orchard. The predomantly Baptist town of Sylvan is situated a couple of hours away from Tiburon, South Carolina, which is the site of the Boatwright home where a personalized style of Catholicism is practiced. The pink house
of the Boatwright sisters is located next to a small river and has beehives in the surrounding acres and outskirts of the town that are cared for by August.

**Foreshadowing:**

“Looking back at it now, I want to say the bees were sent to me. I want to say they showed up like the angel Gabriel appearing to the Virgin Mary, setting events in motion I could never have guessed. . . . Right now it’s enough to say that despite everything that happened that summer, I remain tender toward the bees” (pg. 2).

Most of the foreshadowing in the book comes from the mouth of Lily who is recounting the events. In her retelling, she draws connections between events in her home in Sylvan and results as she journeys towards finding out about her mother.

“The truth is, your sorry mother ran off and left you. The day she died, she’d come back to get her things, that’s all. You can hate me all you want, but she’s the one who left you” (pg. 39).

Foreshadowing comes through in the dialogue between the characters such as when T. Ray told Lily about how her mother had left her.

“A queenless colony is a pitiful and melancholy community; there may be a mournful wail or lament from within. . . . Without intervention, the colony will die. But introduce a new queen and the most extravagant change takes place” (pg. 277).

The headings of each chapter are construed to foreshadow the events that will take place within the chapter.

**Point of View, Narrative Voice:**

The story is told from Lily Owen’s point of view. She is a fourteen year old girl whose mother was killed in a horrible accident when she was four. Living under the roof of an abusive father, T. Ray, and under the care of a black hired maid, Rosaleen, Lily struggles to come to grips with the mysterious past surrounding her mother. Upon finding a clue to her mother’s story, Lily takes advantage of Rosaleen’s problems with the authorities to run away from Sylvan and toward Tiburon, the link to her mother. Lily is the protagonist of the story as she learns to accept the past and recognize her own worth.

**Tone:**

The tone is straightforward so that you get the feeling that Lily is narrating all of the details rather than keeping some of it hidden. Lily tells her story with lots of description using expressions that thrill the reader as the young adolescent voice comes through. Care is taken to recall every detail of the days within the pink house as sort of a saving grace for the tragedy behind Lily’s mother’s death.
Irony:
Irony comes through strongly as Lily finds that her mother was not the imagined maternal figure she always dreamed about. She has to learn to come to grips with the truth and realize what makes life fulfilling. It is ironic that Lily journeys out to find her lost mother; however upon discovering that she wasn’t who Lily believed her to be, Lily opens her eyes to the hive-full of mothers who care deeply for her.

Affective Issues Related to the Work

The book is full of relationships with which every reader can relate. These relationships are explored through Lily as she deals with a variety of situations. Most of all Lily wants to find the place where she is loved and valued; the place where she can grow to be more than she ever dreamed before. In her life in Sylvan, she had no idea what to think of as a future career, but as her life is touched by many remarkable people she begins to see the value she has within herself. Students can explore their own self-perceptions and relationships as they consider the following issues:

- The issue of what makes a family: Does a family have to be blood-related? What constitutes family? Does a family have to be traditional-based on father/mother, etc.?
- The issue of coping with loss: Whether it is death or disappointment, how does one cope with feelings of loss? Are different manners of coping right or wrong? Are there manners that are more positive than others?
- The issue of self worth: What determines the worth of each person? How is that worth communicated? What role does each individual play in being responsible for living life?

These issues are easy to relate to as they are issues that touch everyone. The reader explores along with Lily the ins and outs of maturely dealing with the facts of life.

Vocabulary Issues:
Although relatively simple for most readers at a 6th or 7th grade level, the author uses lots of vocabulary that is extremely specific to the time period and southern culture. Examples are that T. Ray makes Lily knee on Martha Whites (grits pg. 24) and at the Boatwright house American Bandstand (pg.175) is the favorite TV show. Preparatory teaching should take place with black history, the Civil Right’s movement, and Catholicism to help students be prepared for the vocabulary that the book uses.

Be mindful that occasional profanity sprinkles the book. Some of the strongest words come from Lily’s rough-edged father but Lily on occasion uses mild profanity in her exploration as a young adolescent.

The teacher can help the students appreciate the beautiful mechanical devises and expressionistic writing that Kidd uses. Referring to Lily’s feelings towards her mother, she says that “The wanting-her was still in me” (pg. 171).
Background Knowledge:
To really appreciate this book, students need to have background knowledge about the 1960s. Prior exploration with the Civil Right’s Movement will help them understand the background tensions that play an important part in the plot of the book. Understanding more about bees and the production of honey will also increase the student’s abilities to understand the highly contrived metaphor that follows throughout the book. The teacher will need to be prepared to help the students make the connections that are implied by the presence of the bees. Some discussion may need to cover the made-up religion that August and the Daughters practice to help students understand the importance of the ritual for the group.

Implications for Students of Diversity

Anyone who has felt the pressure of being a part of a minority will be able to relate to Rosaleen, Lily, or Zack. The book shows prejudices coming from both society and from people within one’s own family circle. Students who come from single-parent homes or other family arrangements will have Lily as a model. Lily comes to realize that she has the support system that she has been looking forward both within herself and as a member of the sisterhood at the Boatwright’s home. She creates a family unit in the same place where she finds how far her original family has broken down.

Gender Issues:
Lily shows how a change of mindset opens avenues. In the home of her father, she was restricted from reading and was kept from having much of a future to dream about. In the home of the Boatwright sisters, Lily finds that she can have a future and is encouraged to pursue and explore aspects of her life that before were unthinkable.

The Central Question/Enduring Issue

The Story of the Search for Family, Healing, and Love: Lily fears to find out the truth behind the tragic death of her mother but can’t help but be drawn towards clues about her past. Although her fears come to be true, she does find the love and family that she has been searching for. The metaphor with the bees and their relationship within the hive leads to questions about who generates maternal love and what keeps a family unit together. The story shows how one is separated from the love and affection of the maternal figure, they struggle to identify their own self-worth. A contrast is made between Lily and T. Ray who is left to his struggle alone.

Research Issues/Project Ideas:
1. Research more about bees and how honey is taken from the hive.
2. Create a visual diagram of supporting relationships from your life.
3. Write a journal entry of a black American during the summer of 1964 after the Civil Right’s Act was written.

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4. Use the chapter headings to apply the metaphor of the bees to the actual story. Create a list of explanations for why each heading was used.

5. Write about an experience that has helped you to understand more clearly either your past or that of your family. What clues led you to know about the event? How did it unfold?

Informational/Functional Texts

A Conversation with Sue Monk Kidd: Read *A Penguin Readers Guide to The Secret Life of Bees* in small groups and have each group present on one of the questions. Kidd answers questions about her research on bees as well as expounds upon her ideas with the community of women. Students can also approach it as a future author wanting to see how other authors go about preparing to write.

Civil Right’s Act: It would be interesting for students to read through the actual amendment to get more information on the implications of the act. Have the students write on how the amendment may have affected their lives if they had been teenagers in 1964.

*Man and Insects* by L.H. Newman: This is one of the texts that Kidd uses to extract her information about bees. It would be interesting to look at the sources she used to gain more information about bees and also to see how the ideas of the author developed. Other texts that she included are: *Bees of the World* by Christopher O’Toole and Anthony Raw, *The Queen Must Die: And Other Affairs of Bees and Men* by William Longgood, *Exploring the World of Social Insects* by Hilda Simon, *The Honey Bee* by James L. Gould and Carol Grant Gould, *The Dancing Bees* by Karl Von Frisch.