The Secret Life of Bees

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF SUE MONK KIDD

Sue Monk Kidd grew up in Georgia, where she was raised to be a devout Christian, and she studied nursing at Texas Christian University. In her late 20s, she was inspired to become a writer after reading the books of Thomas Merton, the Catholic philosopher and essayist. Kidd took writing classes at Emory University, and later published a series of short essays in magazines like *Reader's Digest* and *Guideposts*. She wrote three books on her conflicted relationship with Christianity and feminism, and in 2001, she published her first novel, *The Secret Life of Bees*, which was a major bestseller. In 2005, she published a second novel, *The Mermaid Chair*, and in 2014 she published her third novel, *The Invention of Wings*. Kidd currently resides in Florida with her husband.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The most important historical event to which Kidd's novel alludes is the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, a monumental piece of legislation that protected the rights of African-Americans to enter public places, enroll in schools, and avoid discrimination from the white community. Although the Civil Rights Act strengthened the black community and protected them from many of the worst kinds of racism in America, it provoked a fierce and often bloodthirsty backlash. In the South, blacks were bullied and in some cases murdered for exercising their new freedoms. Many of the antagonists of Kidd's novel are racist whites angered by the new strength and courage of the black community. Kidd also alludes to another milestone of the 60s: Kennedy's support for the "Space Race," which resulted in the program that eventually sent American astronauts to the surface of the moon in 1969.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The Secret Life of Bees specifically mentions many literary works, including *Jane Eyre* (which, like Kidd's novel, is about a runaway girl looking for surrogate parents). In addition, the plot of the novel resembles that of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, another coming-of-age novel about a white Southern child who's friends with a black person. The critic Leslie Fiedler argued that the homoerotic black-white friendship was one of the key motifs of American literature, evident in *Moby Dick*, *Huck Finn*, and many other great novels—including, perhaps, Kidd's. (For a fascinating discussion of this issue, see Fiedler's essay, "Come Back to the Raft Ag'in, Huck Honey!")

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Secret Life of Bees
- **Where Written:** Georgia, South Carolina
- **When Published:** November 8, 2001
- **Literary Period:** Third-wave feminism fiction
- **Genre:** Coming-of-age story (*Bildungsroman*), historical fiction
- **Setting:** Sylvan, South Carolina, 1964
- **Climax:** August Boatwright reveals that she knew Lily's mother
- **Antagonist:** T. Ray Owens / racism in America
- **Point of View:** First person (Lily Owens)

EXTRA CREDIT

The movie, of course: In 2008, *The Secret Life of Bees* was adapted for the big screen. The film, which starred Queen Latifah and Dakota Fanning, was a modest box-office success, but didn't get particularly good reviews.

High school classic: If you went to middle school or high school in the last decade, you were probably assigned *The Secret Life of Bees* for your English class. A recent survey found that Kidd's novel is one of the ten most commonly taught high school English texts in America, just a notch below *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *1984*.

PLOT SUMMARY

At the end of 1964, a 14-year-old white girl named Lily Owens thinks back on the eventful summer she's had.

The narrative then jumps back to the start of the summer. Lily lives with her father, a cruel man named T. Ray Owens, in the town of Sylvan, South Carolina. Lily has vivid memories of the death of her mother, Deborah Fontanel Owens: when Lily was 4 years old, she remembers her mother packing a suitcase and arguing with her father. The next part of her memory is blurry, but she recalls holding a gun, followed by a loud explosion. Lily blames herself for Deborah's death. She keeps a small box full of her mother's old things, including a photograph of her, a pair of gloves, and a picture of the **Virgin Mary** depicted as a black woman. The words, "Tiburon, South Carolina," are scrawled on the back of the picture of the Virgin Mary, though Lily doesn't know why.

In July 1964, Lily's maid, a black woman named Rosaleen, tells Lily she's going to go into town to register to vote, since the

Civil Rights Act has just been passed. Lily, who's very close with Rosaleen, decides to go with her. As they walk into the center of town, Rosaleen gets in a fight with a trio of racist white men, who attack her and hit her in the head. Rosaleen is sent to jail for assault.

Lily rushes back to her home, where she has a fight with her father. T. Ray tells Lily that her mother never loved her, and was planning to leave them both on the day she died. He also tells Lily that Rosaleen's life is in danger, since the trio of racists who attacked her will want to fight again. Furious, Lily decides to run away from home. She writes T. Ray a letter in which she tells him she doesn't believe what he said about her mother. Then she goes to the hospital where Rosaleen's injuries are being treated, and helps Rosaleen sneak out. Lily tells Rosaleen they're going to Tiburon to find out more about Deborah, and Rosaleen reluctantly agrees, since she knows she's in danger if she stays in Sylvan.

Rosaleen and Lily hitchhike to Tiburon. They stop at a general store, where Lily notices jars of honey with the same image of the black Virgin Mary on them. She learns that a local black family, the Boatwrights, makes and sells this honey, and she and Rosaleen go to their house, hoping to learn more about Deborah.

Rosaleen and Lily find that the Boatwrights are a trio of sisters: August (the oldest), June (a schoolteacher), and May (the youngest, and very "strange"). Lily lies and tells the Boatwrights that her parents are both dead, and that she and Rosaleen, her maid, are going to Virginia. August immediately tells Lily and Rosaleen that they're welcome to stay with them. Rosaleen and Lily quickly learn that August's life revolves around **bees**: she keeps a huge number of beehives, which she uses to make honey, candles, and other things. Lily also notices that the three Boatwright sisters keep a statue of the Virgin Mary, depicted as a black woman, which they call Our Lady of Chains. Finally, Lily learns that May had a twin sister named April, who shot herself. Ever since then, May has been odd and lonely—whenever she hears about something sad, she writes down a description of the event and slips it in a **stone wall** by the house.

Lily becomes acquainted with Zachary Taylor, a black teenager who works for August. "Zach" is handsome and intelligent, and Lily finds herself developing a crush on him—something she'd always believed impossible. Lily also bonds with August, who's very wise and understanding. August tells Lily a story about a nun who runs away from her nunnery, and returns, years later, to find that the Virgin Mary has been "covering for her" all these years. Lily isn't sure what this story is supposed to mean.

Lily learns that the Boatwright sisters hold weekly gatherings for a group called the Daughters of Mary—a makeshift religion that mixes aspects of Catholicism and African-American history. The Daughters pray before the statue of the Virgin Mary, which they claim was sent to the black people of America by God himself.

Lily and Zach go to visit a friend of Zach's, the prominent white attorney Clayton Forrest. While in Forrest's office, Lily decides to place a phone call to T. Ray. T. Ray demands to know where Lily is, but Lily only asks him, 'What's my favorite color?" T. Ray ignores the question and threatens to beat Lily if she doesn't return—Lily hangs up the phone in tears.

One day Lily makes a surprising discovery. She notices that May feeds marshmallows to cockroaches—something that Lily remembers Deborah doing years ago. Lily asks May if she ever knew a woman named Deborah, and May immediately replies that Deborah stayed with them years ago. Amazed, Lily decides to show August the photograph of her mother. Her plans are delayed, however, when Zach is suddenly arrested for allegedly participating in a fight with a trio of white men. Zach spends the next few nights in jail. When May hears about Zach's arrest, she's so devastated that she drowns herself in a nearby river. June and August are devastated by May's sudden death. When Zach returns from prison, having been freed by Clayton Forrest, the remaining Boatwrights hold a vigil for May. After the vigil, Lily asks Zach if he'd date her. Zach replies that he can't date a white woman—although he likes Lily, he wants to become a lawyer and change racist laws first.

Lily finally confronts August about Deborah. She shows August the photograph of Deborah, and August immediately tells Lily the truth: August was Deborah's maid years before, when Deborah was only a child. August allowed Lily and Rosaleen to stay with them because she immediately recognized that Lily was Deborah's child. As August confesses this, Lily confesses that she's been lying to August: her father is still alive, and she and Rosaleen left Sylvan to keep Rosaleen out of jail. August tells Lily that Deborah was very depressed during her marriage to T. Ray, although she loved Lily dearly. When Lily was a small child, Deborah abandoned her family to stay with August in Tiburon. She came back to Sylvan to take Lily with her, and during this visit, she died. Lily is devastated by the news that Deborah abandoned her, as T. Ray said, despite the fact that Deborah was coming back to take her to Tiburon. August tells Lily that she must forgive Deborah. The best way for Lily to forgive Deborah, August explains, is to begin by accepting that Lily is loved. Although Lily struggles with this, she comes to accept that August, June, Rosaleen, and Zach love her dearly. In the coming weeks, she slowly begins to forgive Deborah.

One day at the end of the summer, T. Ray shows up at the Boatwright house and demands that Lily come with him—he's traced Lily's whereabouts using the phone call she made to him from Forrest's office. Instead of fighting back, Lily calls T. Ray "daddy," and apologizes to him for running away from home. T. Ray begins to cry, and whispers that Lily looks just like Deborah. Lily tells T. Ray that she refuses to come back to Sylvan with him. As she says this, the Daughters of Mary enter the room, daring T. Ray to try to take Lily away. Angrily, T. Ray leaves the house. Before he drives off, Lily asks him if it's true that she

killed Deborah. T. Ray replies that it is: although it was an accident, Lily shot her mother.

In the following weeks, Lily and Rosaleen accept that they'll live with the Boatwrights from now on. Lily slowly forgives T. Ray and Deborah for how they've treated her. Meanwhile, she enrolls in the local high school with Zach. Lily concludes that she's extremely lucky: she has so many loving mothers, including Rosaleen, August, and the Virgin Mary.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Lily Owens – *The Secret Life of Bees* is the story of how Lily, a 14-year-old girl from South Carolina, struggles to make sense of her relationship with her mother and father, the black community, and the people she meets in the course of her adventures. Impulsive and adventurous, Lily runs away from her cruel, abusive father (T. Ray Owens), and journeys to the town of Tiburon to find information about her dead mother, Deborah Fontanel Owens. During the course of her time in Tiburon, Lily truly comes of age. She overcomes her feelings of awkwardness and hostility to the black community, and also starts to embrace the values of Christianity. Much of Kidd's novel is concerned with Lily coming to terms with her mother, Deborah. Although at first Lily idolizes her mother, she's shocked to learn that Deborah abandoned her when Lily was a small child. Lily also struggles with the possibility that she may have accidentally killed Deborah as a child. With the help of August Boatwright and other inhabitants of Tiburon, Lily matures as a human being by forgiving her mother, forgiving herself, and accepting that no one is perfect. As the novel ends, Lily has come to accept August's Christian teachings: she learns to love others and love herself, overcoming her conflicted feelings about her parents.

August Boatwright – The head of the Boatwright house in Tiburon, South Carolina, August Boatwright is a strong, charismatic, and enormously wise woman. August raises bees and runs her own business selling honey and beeswax products, and she also acts as a surrogate mother to Lily Owens for much of the novel. Unbeknownst to Lily, August worked as a maid for Deborah Fontanel Owens years before, and considers it her duty to take care of Lily when she shows up in Tiburon. August teaches Lily important lessons about patience, love, and forgiveness. She also introduces Lily to the religion she practices with her sisters: an amalgam of Catholicism and African-American history. Although August Boatwright isn't a dynamic character, her calm leadership is an important source of wisdom for Lily as she comes to terms with her family. August teaches Lily to forgive herself for her imperfections, and to forgive others, as well—a lesson that proves invaluable in Lily's coming-of-age.

Rosaleen – Rosaleen is a proud, middle-aged woman who works as a maid for T. Ray and Lily Owens in Sylvan, South Carolina. Shortly after Lyndon B. Johnson signs the Civil Rights Act, Rosaleen goes into town to register to vote, setting in motion the events of the novel. Rosaleen is an extremely strong, confident woman, and her refusal to "back down" when confronted by racist whites causes her to go to jail, and eventually run away from Sylvan with Lily. Lily is extremely close with Rosaleen: in the absence of a mother, she regards Rosaleen as a maternal figure. Critics have pointed out that Rosaleen recedes from view in the second half of *The Secret Life of Bees*—while she's present for most of the key events in these chapters, it's hard to think of a single thing she *does*. Nevertheless, Rosaleen is an important influence on Lily in the novel: when Lily doubts herself, or feels afraid, she can always turn to Rosaleen for love and support.

Deborah Fontanel Owens – Deborah Owens is T. Ray Owens's wife and Lily Owens's mother. She's arguably the most complex character in the novel: because she died years before the time when the novel is set, she's available to the other characters only through memories and old possessions. For most of the book, Lily regards her mother as a kind, loving woman. Toward the end, however, we learn that the truth is more complicated: while Deborah loved Lily dearly, she abandoned Lily for three months to live with August in Tiburon, South Carolina. When Deborah returned to her family, intending to take Lily with her and away from T. Ray, there was a horrible accident, resulting in Lily accidentally shooting her mother. Overall, Deborah is a woman of contradictions: loving yet shockingly neglectful. As such, she's a perfect example of August's wise statement, "We all have flaws."

T. Ray Owens – T. Ray Owens is Lily Owens's father, a harsh, cruel man. Although T. Ray was once kinder and gentler, the sudden death of his wife, Deborah Fontanel Owens, throws him into depression and self-hatred, which he takes out on his daughter. Throughout the novel, Kidd shows T. Ray to be a petty, vindictive man, and she contrasts his small-mindedness with Lily's constantly evolving outlook on life. In the end, Lily's impressions of T. Ray haven't changed greatly: she still regards him as a foolish, mean old man. Nevertheless, Lily comes to feel sorry for T. Ray for his misfortunes in life—a clear sign of her maturation.

May Boatwright – The youngest and strangest of the Boatwright sisters, May is an odd, mentally disturbed woman who becomes deeply depressed whenever anything tragic happens to anyone. Whenever a tragedy occurs, May writes it down on a piece of paper and slips the paper into a **stone wall** near her house. In addition to being enormously sensitive, May is highly observant. In the end, she commits suicide by drowning herself in a nearby stream, unable to cope with Zach's arrest and imprisonment. Her suicide could be said to represent the psychological toll that racism has taken on the

black community in America.

Zachary Taylor / Zach – A handsome, intelligent teenager who works for the Boatwrights. Zach is ambitious, and he plans to become a successful lawyer one day (even though he's black, and so has many more obstacles to face in achieving this goal). He wants to use his legal training to fight racism in the U.S. During the course of the book, Zach and Lily fall for one another, though as Zach explains, they can't be boyfriend and girlfriend yet, for fear that they'll be attacked by the racist townspeople.

June Boatwright – The sister of May, August, and April Boatwright. Like August, June is an intelligent, educated woman, but where August welcomes Lily into their home with open arms, June is suspicious and contemptuous of Lily—partly because Lily is white, and she is black. During the novel, June refuses marriage to Neil several times before accepting. In the end, June comes to accept Lily as her friend, and apologizes for her rudeness.

MINOR CHARACTERS

April Boatwright – The twin sister of May Boatwright, who killed herself at the age of 15.

Clayton Forrest – A prominent lawyer in Tiburon, South Carolina, who gives help and advice to Zachary Taylor and the Boatwrights.

Mrs. Henry – A dedicated teacher who encourages Lily Owens to go to college.

Brother Gerald – A priest in Sylvan, South Carolina, who's shown to be uncomfortable and even contemptuous around African Americans.

Avery Gaston – The police officer who arrests Rosaleen for "fighting" with the trio of racist white men.

Franklin Posey – A racist white man who fights with Rosaleen, and, it's suggested, plans to kill her.

Neil – A tall, handsome man who repeatedly tries and fails to marry June Boatwright.

Willifred Marchant – A (fictional) famous author, born in Tiburon, South Carolina.

Jack Palance – A (historical) famous movie star of the 50s and 60s, celebrated in the black community for having a black girlfriend.

Eddie Hazelwurst – The jailer in Tiburon, South Carolina.

Aristaeus – A legendary Greek keeper of **bees** who inspired the practice of burying the dead in beehive-shaped tombs.

Becca – The daughter of Clayton Forrest.

Jackson – A friend of Zachary Taylor.

Sugar Girl – One of the Daughters of Mary.

Obadiah – A mythical black slave who, according to the Daughters of Mary, was inspired to break free from his chains after finding a statue of the **Virgin Mary**.

Lyndon B. Johnson – The President of the United States from 1963 to 1969, responsible for signing into law the Civil Rights Acts, which protected the rights of African Americans.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

RACE, AMERICA, AND THE 1960S

The Secret Life of Bees takes place in 1964, immediately after the signing of the Civil Rights Act by President Lyndon B. Johnson. The Civil Rights Act is often regarded as having ushered in a new era of American history. With it the U.S. government finally defended African Americans' legal and societal rights: black people could eat in restaurants, use public bathrooms, vote, and drive without fear of legal discrimination. But as Kidd makes very clear, black people's problems didn't end in 1964. On the contrary, after the Civil Rights Act, racist whites in many parts of the United States regarded it as their duty to continue harassing and excluding black people. Black people were beaten and murdered for registering to vote, bullied for eating in "all-white" restaurants, and sent to jail by racist sheriffs for trivial offenses. In her novel, Kidd examines the racism of the 60s America from the perspective of a white teenager, Lily Owens (partly because the novel is based on Kidd's own adolescence). It's important to understand some of the advantages and disadvantages of this narrative approach.

As Lily sees it, African Americans are the victims of an endless series of tragedies. In the course of the book, black characters are arrested without grounds, beaten by the police, harassed by racist townspeople, etc. It's important to note that whenever black characters try to fight back against this injustice, they make their lives markedly worse (for example, when Rosaleen stands up to a group of bullying townspeople, she ends up in the hospital and charged with a crime). In the absence of any clear "solution" to their problems, most of the black characters in the novel turn to prayer and religion in an effort to find happiness. They can't eliminate the sources of racism, so they pray for a day when racism will end.

If there is an antidote to racism in *The Secret Life of Bees*, it is understanding—specifically, the understanding of whites. The protagonist of the book is a young white woman who initially exemplifies many of the white community's prejudices about black people. Initially, Lily assumes that black people are lazy,

foolish, and dishonest. But during the course of her adventures in Tiburon, South Carolina, she realizes how lazy her own stereotypes are: the wisest, most competent people she meets in the book are black. The implication is that if white people could come to experience black culture and community for themselves, racism would eventually fade away.

At the same time, *The Secret Life of Bees* has been criticized in some circles for depicting the challenges of race and racism in America only from the point of view of a white character rather than a black one. One major limitation of this decision is that it seems to give the impression that racism would end if white people would just "try out" black culture for a few weeks—i.e., the problem is cultural and individual, more than political, historical, or economic. This is a narrow view of a large and complicated issue, but it's also a view that makes for an easier-to-handle story. Despite this limited perspective, Kidd does make a good point by telling her story from Lily's point of view: racism begins early on, sometimes in insidious, undetectable ways—and it's up to each individual to acknowledge their own prejudices and work to change them. By addressing one's racial prejudices early on, as Lily does, it's possible to become a better, more open-minded person.

MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS

From the first chapter, Sue Monk Kidd makes it clear that she's writing a novel about the relationships between different kinds of women. Because the protagonist of her book is a young teenager who's lost her mother, and the majority of the other female characters are adult women, the most important kind of woman-to-woman relationship for the novel is that between the mother and the daughter. Lily travels to Tiburon, South Carolina, in search of information about her dead mother, Deborah, and she also admits to be looking for a maternal figure—a metaphorical mother—to replace Deborah. How does Kidd depict the mother-daughter relationship, and what are the strengths and weaknesses of this relationship?

The first thing we notice about mother-daughter relationships in *The Secret Life of Bees* is that they're incredibly loving and nurturing. This is especially clear in the first chapters of the book, when Kidd contrasts Lily's relationship with her cruel, mean-spirited father, T. Ray, with Lily's fond memories of Deborah. Even more telling is the relationship between Lily and her black maid, Rosaleen: Rosaleen acts like a mother, baking Lily a birthday cake (T. Ray ignores her birthday altogether), and gives Lily comfort and support whenever she needs it. The metaphorical mother-daughter bond between Rosaleen and Lily is even stronger than the literal, biological bond between Lily and T. Ray—indeed, this bond is so strong that it breaks the "color line." Like Rosaleen, many of the women in the novel feel an instinctive need to love and protect children, especially girls. During the course of her time in South Carolina, then, Lily moves back and forth smoothly between many mother figures: Rosaleen, August Boatwright, May Boatwright, and even the **Virgin Mary**. All of these women provide Lily with different versions of the same things: love, support, affection, and wisdom. As Lily notes, "I have many mothers."

The biggest strength of the mother-daughter relationship is also its greatest weakness, however. Because Lily can move back and forth between so many outstanding mother-*figures*, she keeps returning to her literal mother's neglectfulness. Indeed, it's Lily's most important mother-figure, August, who tells Lily the truth about Deborah: Deborah abandoned Lily for three months because of her depression. Even though Deborah tried to take Lily away from T. Ray after the depression subsided, Lily finds it almost impossible to come to terms with her mother's behavior: she's come to expect so much of her mothers that it's a genuine struggle for her to accept that her biological mother was anything less than perfect.

For all the limitations of the maternal bond, Lily becomes a stronger, wiser person because of the influence of mother-figures like Rosaleen and August. Moreover, she's still learning from her mothers as the book ends. Unlike many of the canonical coming-of-age novels about a boy (for example, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, or *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*), *The Secret Life of Bees* doesn't end with the child "going out into the world" and cutting off ties with his or her parents. Lily continues to live with Rosaleen and August and celebrate the importance of the mothers in her life.

RELIGION, GUILT, AND FORGIVENESS

It's easy to see that *The Secret Life of Bees* is a religious novel, even an explicitly Christian novel. The characters gain wisdom and happiness by gathering together to worship Christian figures like the **Virgin Mary**, and Lily Owens, the protagonist, has some of her most important insights while she's praying. And yet none of the characters have much respect for churches (indeed, the only priest in the book is portrayed as being foolish at best and racist at worst). This points to the fact that the characters believe in building a personal relationship with the Virgin Mary and the transcendent, outside of the tenets of organized religion. Most importantly, the characters use their religious faith to confront their own guilt, and learn how to forgive themselves and each other.

The Secret Life of Bees begins with a quintessential Christian concept: sin. Lily hates herself because she believes that she was responsible for accidentally killing her own mother, Deborah. For most of the novel, Lily has a conflicted relationship with her mother: she wants to know more about her, but she's also terrified of what she might learn (for example, that she really did kill her mother). With August

Boatwright's help, Lily learns about specific religious rituals and ceremonies (see the Ceremony and Ritual theme), but even more importantly, she learns how to use religion to address her own sense of guilt.

August teaches Lily to accept tragedy and imperfection, both in herself and in other people. For Lily, this process must begin with accepting the love of other people. In an emotional scene, Lily repeats, "I am unlovable," only to hear August correct her: everyone loves her. By accepting that she's loved, Lily learns to love herself, including her own sins and mistakes. With this knowledge, Lily gains the courage to accept other people's sins. The big test of Lily's moral progress comes at the end of the book, when T. Ray comes to the Boatwright house to take Lily home. Instead of yelling or fighting back, Lily calmly apologizes to her father for running away, and feels sorry for him. Thanks to August's help, Lily has learned to be sympathetic, even to highly unsympathetic people: because she forgives herself for her own sins, she can forgive other people, too.

Ultimately, sin, guilt, and forgiveness are parts of an ongoing process. Perhaps August's most important lesson for Lily is also her most explicitly Christian: although we'll never be perfect, the Virgin Mary is "inside" us all, helping us come to grips with our own mistakes. Faith and religion don't provide a one-time solution to Lily's problems—rather, they help her understand the complexities of life as she grows up.

LYING, STORYTELLING, AND CONFESSION

One of the first things we learn about Lily Owens, the protagonist of *The Secret Life of Bees*, is that she's a gifted storyteller. Lily enjoys writing stories; moreover, she's good at inventing "stories"—in other words, lies—to get herself out of trouble. At several points, Lily's ability to concoct a convincing story saves her from jail (and moves the plot of the novel forward). But storytelling in *The Secret Life of Bees* is more than a plot device or an aspect of the protagonist's personality. There are many several kinds of storytelling in the novel, and by telling different kinds of stories, some fictional and some true, Lily makes sense of her life and matures as a person.

In the first half of the book, Lily becomes an adult by telling stories, most of which are lies. She's forced to lie quickly and cleverly in order to keep Rosaleen out of jail. As she lies to her father, to police officers, and to nurses, Lily has a strange, "out of body" experience—she can't believe she's telling these lies so easily. The experience Lily describes is an important part of her development: although she's spent her entire life up to this point being yelled at by others (mostly her father), she realizes that she can fight back by crafting her own stories and presenting them as the truth. In the second half of the book, Lily switches from telling lies to telling true stories, reflecting her greater maturity and wisdom. After her friend Zach buys her a notebook and tells her to fill it with stories, Lily writes about her experiences in Tiburon, South Carolina: when there's a tragedy in her life, she takes control of the tragedy by turning it into a story. In these chapters, Lily experiences an epiphany that's familiar to any writer: she realizes that she can come to terms with the truth simply by writing it down.

The crux of Lily's realization is that there's a fundamental difference between experiencing something and telling a "story" about it: by telling the truth about her pain, she can move past it. This idea is exemplified by May Boatwright, who has the practice of writing down any tragic thing she hears or experiences and putting the piece of paper into a **stone wall**. Another poignant example of this principle comes at the end of the novel, when Lily tells August Boatwright the story of her life: how she's always felt guilty for killing her mother; how she hates her father; how she's aspired to get out of Sylvan and explore the world. In this scene, Lily experiments with a new kind of storytelling: confession. Even though Lily thinks about her mother's death constantly, it's genuinely difficult for her to confess her feelings to another person. This demonstrates the value of confession: by telling (not just thinking about) the truth, Lily takes the crucial first steps in moving past her own guilt and anguish. By admitting her guilt, Lily begins to take control of it, much as she took control of other tragedies in her life through the act of writing about them. By the end of the novel, Lily has been through a great deal, but she's learned how to take control of her own feelings with the help of storytelling.

CEREMONY AND RITUAL

Some of the longest and most vivid passages in *The Secret Life of Bees* are about the elaborate religious ceremonies and rituals that take place at the Boatwright house. The three Boatwright sisters subscribe to a religion they've developed themselves, blending aspects of Catholicism and African-American history.

The Secret Life of Bees makes it clear that rituals and ceremonies are bent and shaped according to the needs of the people who practice them. The Boatwrights, together with the so-called Daughters of Mary, practice a religion in which they worship the **Virgin Mary**, whom they depict as a black woman. Every week, the Daughters assemble around a small statue of the Virgin and pray to it. August Boatwright's explanation for the Daughters' ritual is that African-Americans need a religion that reflects their own culture, history, and even their appearance. According to the "history" of the Boatwrights' religion, the statue of the Virgin Mary was given to a slave (Obadiah) by Mary herself, inspiring the slave to break free from his chains. In this tradition, the black Daughters of Mary—who, quite rightly, believe that they're still the victims of white racism and oppression—obey a set of rituals that are designed to respect their own unique history and culture.

This leads to one of Kidd's most important points about ritual: it's designed to build a strong community and sense of identity. By assembling in the same place every week, and worshipping a statue that explicitly represents black history, the Daughters of Mary aren't just reminding themselves of the importance of prayer and worship—they're reminding themselves that they are strong, and that they are a group bound together by their common history and heritage. Ceremony and ritual don't just reflect a community—they nurture it.

One natural question, then, is whether or not the Daughters believe in the literal truth of their rituals. The answer is complicated. While the Daughters have great respect for the statue of Mary, and pray before it with a sense of awed reverence, they're also fully aware that the statue isn't *literally* a relic of the slave era, passed down from the Virgin Mary. August makes this clear when she tells Lily that the statue is actually a figurehead snapped off an old ship. The Daughters don't worship the statue because of its deep holiness—on the contrary, they *give* it this holiness in the act of worshipping it. (To emphasize this point, Kidd shows us that casual observers such as T. Ray find the statue of Mary ugly and worthless.) This points to the fact that ceremonies are meant to nurture a sense of holiness that's already within worshippers' souls. As August tells Lily, the Virgin Mary isn't a statue on a table—she's inside Lily already. Lily's goal when praying before the statue shouldn't be to find enlightenment in the statue itself. It should be to find this sense of enlightenment already within herself.

Ultimately, Kidd suggests that rituals are designed to help worshippers find their own wisdom, not tell them what wisdom is. The best proof of this is the fact that Lily—a white teenager surrounded by middle-aged black women—is welcomed into the Daughters of Mary. Although worshipping a black Virgin Mary is designed to instill a sense of community in the Daughters, its ultimate purpose is also to help people be at peace with themselves. Lily isn't black, and hasn't gone through the same experiences as the Daughters, but because she's sincere in her desire to be enlightened and happy, she becomes one of the Daughters.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

BEES

The most obvious symbols in *The Secret Life of Bees* are the bees themselves. Kidd makes it clear from the start that she's drawing an analogy between the behavior of bees and the behavior of human beings: every chapter begins with an epigraph from a book about bees, and we gradually realize that each one has some thematic significance for the events of that chapter. Specifically, the bees in their beehives symbolize the women in the novel, sheltered in their tiny house in Tiburon, South Carolina. Like bees, the women develop an extremely close, nurturing relationship with each other. At the same time, the sheltered nature of their lives is a constant challenge: like queen bees in a hive, Lily Owens and the Boatwright family are surrounded by "darkness"; i.e., the moral uncertainty they face as they try to decide how to move forward in the face of tragedy.

THE BLACK VIRGIN MARY

One of the most evocative symbols in *The Secret Life of Bees* is the picture (and later the statue) of the black Virgin Mary that the Boatwright family idolizes. As August Boatwright explains, there's a long tradition of depicting the Virgin Mary as a black woman, despite the fact that most of the pictures Lily Owens has seen show Mary as white. August's point is that it's important to develop religious icons that "fit" their intended community, and thus a black community will naturally gravitate toward a Black Virgin Mary. The Black Virgin Mary takes on another meaning toward the end of the novel, when August reveals that the statue of Mary isn't really a gift from God—on the contrary, it's an old ship ornament, nothing more. August uses this fact to show that the value of the Virgin Mary imagery isn't related to its literal appearance; rather, the statue and image are designed to instill a sense of dignity and religious passion *within* worshippers. In the end, then, the Black Virgin Mary is a symbol of the power of religious community, and of humans' potential to find knowledge and peace within themselves.

THE COLOR BLUE

At several points, Kidd reminds us that Lily Owen's favorite color is blue—in fact, when she calls her father, she makes a point of asking him about this. It's no coincidence that Lily likes blue, considering the novel's Christian themes: in Christian iconography, blue is the traditional color of the **Virgin Mary**. Thus, Lily's love for blue symbolizes her desire for a strong maternal figure. Because of the departure of her biological mother, Lily looks for mother figures wherever she goes: like Rosaleen, August, and the Virgin Mary herself.

THE STONE WALL

Whenever May Boatwright hears about something tragic in the world, she writes it down on a piece of paper and slips the paper into the cracks of a stone wall near her house. It's clear that the stone wall symbolizes the slow, sad accumulation of pain in May's mind, and indeed the potential for suffering to build up in anyone's psychology. Since most of

the tragedies May responds to are race-related (the imprisonment of Zach, for example), the stone wall also takes on a more specific symbolic meaning: it stands for the horrors of the African-American experience in America.

THE MOON

Traditionally, the moon has been associated with women, and Kidd recognizes this throughout the book, as the moon is one of the most conspicuous symbols of femininity. At one point, we're told that President Kennedy is going to send a rocket to the moon—an action that August fears will destroy the moon's mystique. Kidd uses this historical detail to convey the purity and mystery of being a woman—a purity that deteriorates whenever women come into contact with men (symbolized by a threatening, phallic rocket).

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin Books edition of *The Secret Life of Bees* published in 2003.

Chapter 1 Quotes

Time folded in on itself then. What is left lies in clear yet disjointed pieces in my head. The gun shining like a toy in her hand, how he snatched it away and waved it around, The gun on the floor. Bending to pick it up. The noise that exploded around us. This is what I know about myself. She was all I wanted. And I took her away.

Related Characters: Lily Owens (speaker), Deborah Fontanel Owens

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

In this flashback scene, Lily Owens, the novel's protagonist, recalls an episode from her childhood that's haunted her ever since. As a young girl, Lily witnessed her parents fighting. Lily's father, T. Ray Owens (who still takes care of her) yelled at Lily's mother, Deborah, and Deborah waves gun at T. Ray. Lily can't really recall what happens next, but she believes that she picked up the gun and accidentally fired it at Deborah.

Lily has spent most of her life living in guilt for killing her mother. She can't recall exactly what happened (she was only a small child), but she doesn't especially *try* to recall—she's afraid of what she'll learn. It seems unhealthy for anyone to feel guilty for what they did at the age of four. But because Lily has no one to talk to--T. Ray seems to despise her--her guilt and anxiety accumulates over the years. Lily's guilt at killing her mother might also represent a kind of "original sin." Sue Monk Kidd fills her novels with Christian themes, and Lily's "sin"--the murder of her mother, for which, as we'll see, she both is and isn't guilty--symbolizes the state of sin that (at least according to Christianity) all human beings are born into.

I used to have daydreams in which she was white and married T. Ray, and became my real mother. Other times I was a Negro orphan she found in a cornfield and adopted.

Related Characters: Lily Owens (speaker), T. Ray Owens, Rosaleen

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

Lily has a lonely life with her father, T. Ray. In her imagination, she fantasizes about escaping her home and "starting over." For Lily, Rosaleen--the black woman who usually takes care of her--represents a path to escape. As far as Lily can tell, Rosaleen is a proud, confident woman--practically a role model for Lily, who seems neither proud nor confident.

The quotation is important because it suggests Lily's deep need for a maternal figure--a need that trumps the racial mores of the era. Despite the fact that blacks were still treated as second-class citizens in the South during the 1960s (the era in which the novel is set), Lily gravitates to Rosaleen without hesitation. Her need for a mother is so great that she ignores the racist sentiments of her father and friends (although Lily still has a racist worldview at this point). Lily's fantasies of becoming a "negro orphan" also foreshadow the plot of the novel. As we'll see, Lily will run away and join a family of black women.

Chapter 2 Quotes

"Well, if you ain't noticed, she's colored," said Rosaleen, and I could tell it was having an effect on her by the way she kept gazing at it with her mouth parted. I could read her thought: *If Jesus' mother is black, how come we only know about the white Mary?*

Related Characters: Lily Owens, Rosaleen (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

Lily and Rosaleen are "on the run" from the police (Rosaleen has been unfairly arrested for defending herself from a group of racist white men). They decide to travel to the city of Tiburon, based on a picture of the Virgin Mary depicted as a black woman, which Lily finds among her dead mother's possessions. Rosaleen is reluctant to travel so far based on nothing but Lily's hunch, but she's also interested in tracking down the people who would depict such an important Biblical character as black.

In a way, Lily's quest to track down the "Virgin Mary" is a quest to find a maternal figure: without ever saying so, Lily seems to want to go to Tiburon to learn more about her mother, and perhaps even find solace in the religious mother-figure of Mary. Rosaleen's interest in going to Tiburon is a little different, as the passage makes clear. Rosaleen seems to be most curious about meeting people who share her religious convictions but don't exclude African Americans from religious practice (unlike the racist white preachers we've met in Chapter 1). In a nutshell, Lily seems most interested in the maternal implications of the Virgin Mary picture, while Rosaleen seems more interested in the racial implications. The picture speaks to both women, but in different ways.

> "You act like you're my keeper. Like I'm some dumb nigger you gonna save."

Related Characters: Rosaleen (speaker), Lily Owens

Related Themes:

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

In this quotation, Lily and Rosaleen are still on the road, fleeing from the police. They've agreed to journey to Tiburon, a town that's many miles away. Along the way, Rosaleen begins to get fed up with Lily. It was Lily's idea to go to Tiburon in the first place, and lately, Lily has been acting like the "leader" of the duo, despite the fact that Rosaleen is a much older woman, and has been taking care of Lily for many years. Rosaleen calls out Lily for her condescending attitude--an attitude that's rooted in racial prejudice as much as anything else.

Although Lily has generally been presented as an intelligent, fair-minded young woman, Kidd doesn't deny the fact that she still has the racist worldview of her time and place. Lily would never hurt Rosaleen, but she's been trained to think of Rosaleen--and all African Americans--as being "below" whites in every way. The quotation is important, then, because it establishes a problem--Lily's cluelessness around African Americans--that will slowly be solved over the course of the novel.

> I opened my mouth. I wanted something. Something, I didn't know what. *Mother, forgive.* That's all I could feel. That old longing spread under me like a great lap, holding me tight.

Related Characters: Lily Owens (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 55

Explanation and Analysis

At the tail-end of Chapter Two, Lily and Rosaleen reconcile. They've been arguing over who's the "leader" of the duo, and whether or not Lily is being racially insensitive. But here, Lily's desire for a mother figure overcomes any disagreement between her and Rosaleen. Even if her upbringing in the South has trained her to think of blacks as second-class, her deep longing for a mother (something she's felt ever since the death of her biological mother years before) pushes her to cast aside her racist preconceptions and embrace Rosaleen.

The passage also has a strong religious element. Lily is overcoming her anger and frustration in the simplest and gentlest way: by asking for forgiveness. As the quotation suggests, the mere act of begging for forgiveness (a quintessential element of Christianity) is enough to diffuse all the tensions--racial and otherwise--between Lily and Rosaleen. The echoes of Christianity in the passage further suggest that Lily's "longing" isn't just a longing for a mother-figure; Lily seems to long for some kind of religious solace as well.

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ According to Brother Gerald, hell was nothing but a bonfire for Catholics.

Related Characters: Lily Owens (speaker), Brother Gerald

Related Themes:

Page Number: 58

Explanation and Analysis

For most of the novel, Lily will make friends with black Catholic women--a veritable trifecta of oppressed citizenship in the South. (Blacks are perceived as inferior to whites; Catholics as inferior to Protestants; women as inferior to men.) As this quotation makes clear, the church in the South is deeply unfriendly to the Catholic religion; preachers even suggest that all Catholics go to hell.

The quotation further implies that the Christian institutions of the South, in spite of their claims to teach love, mercy, and faith, are often just used to justify hatred. As we've already seen, the church in Lily's town is deeply prejudiced against black people; it's not surprising that it's similarly intolerant to Catholics. As the novel progresses, Lily finds a form of Christianity that--unlike the one she grew up with--is loving and accepting of all people, including and especially the people that society disdains.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ The lips on the statue had a beautiful, bossy half smile, the sight of which caused me to move both my hands up to my throat. Everything about that smile said, *Lily Owens, I know you down to the core.*

Related Characters: Lily Owens (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 71

Explanation and Analysis

When Lily arrives in the Boatwrights' house, she's surprised to see a small black statue of the Virgin Mary. The statue makes an impression on her because--as the quote makes very clear--it seems to "understand" her; i.e., it seems to know all about her secret fears and anxieties (her guilt about her mother's death, for example).

The passage is an excellent example of how ceremony and ritual play an important part in religion. Lily knows nothing about the specific rituals associated with the statue. But the mere presence of the statue is enough to inspire feelings of honesty and conviction in her: the statue's beautiful shape and important place in the Boatwrights' house signals that it's an important object, around which Lily should be respectful.

It's also interesting to consider that the Boatwrights are associated with Catholicism at various points in the novel; Catholicism usually being considered a more ritualistic, ceremonial form of Christianity than the Protestantism on which Lily was raised. As the quotation makes clear, rituals and ceremonies are crucial for "drawing out" feelings of faith and purity in Lily.

It should be noted that the statue also has some awkward racial undertones, specifically in the word "bossy," as Kidd presents the Black Mary as the kind of archetypal wise, outspoken black mother-figure for Lily—characteristics that are certainly complimentary, but highlight how all the black figures mostly exist to guide and teach Lily, rather than existing in their own right.

❝ I walked the length of the fence, and it was the same all the way, hundreds of these bits of paper. I pulled one out and opened it, but the writing was too blurred from rain to make out. I dug another one. *Birmingham, Sept 15, four little angels dead.*

Related Characters: Lily Owens (speaker), May Boatwright

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 80

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Lily follows May Boatwright--the strange, quiet Boatwright sibling--to the stone wall near the Boatwright house. There, Lily finds hundreds of slips of paper, crammed into the cracks of the wall. One of these slips of paper mentions four "angels" killed in Birmingham--a clear allusion to the four black girls who were murdered when the Ku Klux Klan bombed a black church that had been supportive of the Civil Rights Movement.

May is deeply saddened by the racism and intolerance in the United States; whenever a new tragedy occurs, she writes it down and slips the note into the wall. May is a vessel for the

racial tragedies of her country; moreover, she herself has become so overwhelmed with tragedy that she's turned to the stone wall to help her "carry the weight." May's actions have a ceremonial, performative quality. As with the other ceremonial acts in the novel, May's behavior doesn't literally accomplish anything, but the symbolic act of filing away papers helps May feel stronger and more in control.

Chapter 5 Quotes

"Mary smiled at Beatrix, then led her back to her room and gave her back her nun outfit. You see, Lily, all that time Mary had been standing in for her."

Related Characters: August Boatwright (speaker), Lily Owens

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 91

Explanation and Analysis

August Boatwright tells Lily--now living in her home--a mysterious parable. In the story, a young nun runs away from her convent and spends miserable years on the road. When the nun returns to her home, she's amazed to find that the Virgin Mary was "covering for her," taking her place so that none of the other nuns would notice her absence. As with any parable, August's story is designed to provoke careful thought and meditation. It's worth listing a few of the possible interpretations of the story:

1) As Lily initially believes (wrongly), August is suggesting that Lily return to her home with T. Ray--just as Beatrix the nun was able to return to her home without a problem, so too could Lily return to her father without fear.

2) The story suggests that we all have a mother-figure who watches over us. Such a message is especially relevant to Lily, who longs for a mother to take care of her, and--during the course of the novel--moves between several different "mothers," including Rosaleen and August herself.

3) The parable's ultimate suggestion, as verified by August herself, is that Mary, "the Lady of Chains," could act as a stand-in for Lily's biological mother, Deborah. This is a reminder that Lily's story isn't just the story of her search for the truth about her mother; it's also about her struggle to find religious faith. Over the course of this struggle, Lily often thinks that she's unlovable--that God hates her because of her "crimes." The purpose of August's story, then, is to suggest that everyone--even Beatrix the disobedient nun--gets love and help from the Lord.

Chapter 6 Quotes

"The people called her Our Lady of Chains. They called her that not because she *wore* chains..."

"*Not because she wore chains*," the Daughters chanted.

"They called her Our Lady of Chains because she *broke them*."

Related Characters: August Boatwright (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 110

Explanation and Analysis

In this quotation, we see the Daughters--a group of black women who worship the statue of the Lady of Chains / Virgin Mary--uniting together in ritualistic celebration. The passage makes several important points about the nature of the Daughters' religious practice.

First, the passage suggests the way that ritual is used to reinforce religious faith and create a sense of community. Everyone in the scene already knows the story of the Lady of Chains (they've been saying the chant for years). But the Daughters continue to perform the chant to remind themselves of the beautiful story on which their religion is founded: a story in which a prisoner attains freedom and dignity through the strength of her faith. Moreover, the chant builds cooperation and unity between the Daughters: the Daughters are a close-knit group, and their religious rituals keep it so.

Additionally, the passage shows some of the racial components of the Daughters' religion. By choosing to worship a prisoner, the Daughters (all of whom are black) clearly allude to African Americans' traumatic history as slaves for white Americans. "Chains" might also suggest the racist laws and practices that keep black people poor and segregated, even 100 years after slavery was banned. By celebrating the story of the Lady of Chains, the Daughters are suggesting that even the most racially persecuted members of society can find happiness and empowerment by embracing God.

Chapter 7 Quotes

At my school they made fun of colored people's lips and noses. I myself had laughed at these jokes, hoping to fit in. Now I wished I could pen a letter to my school to be read at an opening assembly that would tell them how wrong we'd all been. You should see Zachary Taylor, I'd say.

Related Characters: Lily Owens (speaker), Zachary Taylor / Zach

Related Themes:

Page Number: 116

Explanation and Analysis

As the passage makes clear, Lily grew up mocking black people as inferior. It was common for the white students at Lily's school to make insensitive jokes about blacks--and Lily herself joined in. Now, having met a beautiful black boy, Zachary, Lily sees how wrong she was to joke about black people.

The passage makes an important point about how racism is perpetuated over time. Lily doesn't particularly dislike black people, but she joins in her friends to "fit in." For all Lily knows, nobody at her school genuinely hates black people--rather, the general "peer pressure" of racism sweeps Lily and her friends along. In addition, the passage suggests that the ultimate antidote to racism is education and experience. White people continue thinking of black people as inferior, it's implied, partly because they're ignorant of black people's lives. All it takes for Lily to renounce her racial insensitivity is to meet one black boy her own age--a testament to the isolation of prejudice.

At the same time, this is a rather oversimplified view of racism. Kidd only deals with prejudice on the individual level, and so her "lesson" that white racism could be overcome by white people just meeting more black people (and beautiful black people in particular—it's suggested that it's mostly Lily's attraction to Zachary that humanizes him for her) certainly doesn't deal with other larger, more structural incarnations of bigotry and oppression.

"Lily, I like you better than any girl I've ever known, but you have to understand, there are people who would kill boys like me for even looking at girls like you."

Related Characters: Zachary Taylor / Zach (speaker), Lily Owens

Related Themes:

Page Number: 135

Explanation and Analysis

In this quotation, Zachary Taylor, the handsome black youth on whom Lily has developed a big crush, tells Lily that he's attracted to her, but can't give in to his feelings. The reason Zachary can't date Lily is that he'd be risking his life: the "color line" is so severely enforced in the South that a black boy could easily be murdered for dating a white woman. (Zachary may be alluding to Emmett Till, the black 14-year-old who was infamously lynched for allegedly whistling at a white woman.)

Zachary is far more aware of the realities of race in the South than Lily is (because Lily doesn't haveto be, and Zach does). From Lily's perspective, the only thing that matters is that she and Zachary like each other--but Zach knows better. It's highly unfair that Lily and Zach must wait to date one another, but they have little to no choice in the matter. The fact that Zachary wants to wait (even at the end of the novel) reflects the fact that the fight for black equality is far from over: even after the passage of the Voting Rights Act, there's an enormous amount of work left to do.

Chapter 8 Quotes

"Well," August said, going right on with her pasting, "you know, she's really just the figurehead off an old ship, but the people needed comfort and rescue, so when they looked at it, they saw Mary, and so the spirit of Mary took it over. Really, her spirit is everywhere, Lily, just everywhere."

Related Characters: August Boatwright (speaker), Lily Owens

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 141

Explanation and Analysis

In this quotation, August tells Lily the truth about the statue of "Our Lady of Chains." Although the Daughters worship the statue as a sacred object, the truth is that this object itself is totally ordinary--just an old figurehead that fell off a ship.

August's point is that the statue--and for that matter, all

ceremonies and rituals--is important not because of its physical shape, qualities, or history, but because of the passion it can inspire in its devotees. The very fact that so many people worship the statue *makes* the statue meaningful; not the other way around. One could even say that the least important part of worship is the literal object being worshipped; more important is the sense of faith and community centered around the object. In such a way, ritual is really a testament to the powers of the human spirit, not the magical powers of a statue.

"What I mean is that the bees weren't really *singing* the words from Luke, but still, if you have the right kind of ears, you can listen to a hive and hear the Christmas story somewhere inside yourself."

Related Characters: August Boatwright (speaker), Lily Owens

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 144

Explanation and Analysis

One day, August takes Lily out to visit her collection of beehives. Lily is stunned to see a vast collection of hives, from which comes a strong humming noise--the noise of thousands and thousands of bees. August claims that one can hear the sound of music in the hives, along with the key stories of Christianity, such as the "Christmas story."

The episode reinforces an important point: the mind and spirit are the most powerful things in the world, and they have the power to endow even ordinary things (like an old statue, or the buzzing of bees) with extraordinary meaning and power. This is Kidd once again commenting on the importance of ritual and keeping an open mind to the wonder of the world.

"Egg laying is the main thing, Lily. She's the mother of every bee in the hive, and they all depend on her to keep it going. I don't care what their job is—they know the queen is their mother. She's the mother of thousands."

Related Characters: August Boatwright (speaker), Lily Owens

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 149

Explanation and Analysis

Out by the beehives, August Boatwright explains the importance of the queen bee to Lily Owens. The queen bee, August says, is the "mother" of all the other bees in the hive. In other words, the queen has an unfathomable responsibility; a responsibility that she weathers calmly and peacefully. There are many different ways to interpret August's quote. One could argue that the queen bee represents the mother for whom Lily is still searching. Lily began her quest to Tiburon by searching for literal information about her biological mother. But over time, Lily has begun to interpret her need for a mother more and more abstractly. At first, she gravitated toward August--a kind, maternal presence. And now, prompted by August, Lily seems to be turning to the natural world itself--the world of bees, hives, etc.--for the sense of comfort and peace she was once looking for in a biological mother.The queen bee might also represent the ritual and ceremony that unites the Daughters--a group of women who come from many different walks of life. Lily has come to see how the statue of Our Lady of Chains unites the Daughters, much as the queen bee unites her bees. Thus, August seems to be suggesting that Mary herself is the "mother of thousands," and is strong and loving enough to take care of Lily too.

Have you ever written a letter you knew you could never mail but you needed to write it anyway?

Related Characters: Lily Owens (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 161

Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter, Lily Owens writes a long letter to her father, T. Ray Owens. Lily has no intention of sending this letter; her reason for writing it is more complicated. Lily wants to write a letter to her father in order to purge herself of some of the anxiety and hatred she feels for T. Ray. She thinks that by "externalizing" these feelings--i.e., writing them down on a page--she can gain some control over them, and hopefully escape them over time.

The notion that one can escape or sort through one's feelings by writing them down is a common theme in literature, and at various points in the novel Lily proves that such an escape is possible. Lily's decision to write a letter to her father anticipates the climactic scene of the novel, in which she purges herself of her guilt by means of another form of communication: direct confession.

❝ Outside, the night sky was moving over us. I was aware of it, aware of the way Clayton had said *he seemed all right*, as if we all understood he wasn't but would pretend otherwise. August closed her eyes, used her fingers to smooth out the skin on her forehead. I saw a shiny film on her eyes—the beginning of tears. Looking at her eyes, I could see a fire inside them.

Related Characters: Lily Owens (speaker), August Boatwright, Zachary Taylor / Zach, Clayton Forrest

Related Themes:

Page Number: 181

Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter, Zachary Taylor is wrongfully arrested for supposedly fighting with a group of racist whites. August and Lily learn that Zach will be forced to spend the next five nights in jail--something that August finds infuriating.

The passage reminds us of the outrageous bigotry that the African American community faced in the 1960s. Although blacks had some legal protections, these protections were poorly enforced, with the result that teenagers like Zach could be sentenced to nearly a week in jail (or worse) for essentially no reason at all. Furthermore, the passage depicts August at her strongest and most maternal. Although August has no biological connection to Zach, she considers Zach her "family"--they've known one another for many years, and she cares about him deeply. August is a "mother" to many, like the Virgin Mary herself, and she clearly considers Zach to be one of her "children"—just as she does Lily.

Chapter 10 Quotes

❝ But I will tell you this secret thing, which not one of them saw, not even August, the thing that brought me the most cause for gladness. It was how Sugar-Girl said what she did, like I was truly one of them. Not one person in the room said, *Sugar-Girl*, really, *talking about white people like that and we have a white person present*. They didn't even think of me as being different.

Related Characters: Lily Owens (speaker), August Boatwright, Sugar Girl

Related Themes:

Page Number: 208

Explanation and Analysis

In this important scene, Lily depicts a meeting of the Daughters. The Daughters joke about banks being for "white people only."Although all of the Daughters are black, they seem not to notice that Lily is white—and therefore visibly "different" from the rest of them. In short, Lily is in on the joke, even though, on the surface of things, she should be the target of the joke.

It's important to notice that this observation only comes from Lily's perspective, however—it seems highly unlikely that the Daughters no longer consider Lily to be white, simply because she is now part of their community. This also highlights Kidd's sometimes problematic views on race—as if Lily can somehow "become black" simply by overcoming her own racism and spending a few weeks with some black women. Lily has certainly faced many struggles of her own, and has found mother-figures in black women, but this doesn't mean that she isn't still ignorant of the black experience. Yet the larger point of this scene is that Lily has found a community that embraces and cares for her, and she no longer feels like an outsider in the Boatwright home.

Chapter 11 Quotes

❝ "I'm sorry for being so hard on you when you first got here..."

Related Characters: June Boatwright (speaker), Lily Owens

Related Themes:

Page Number: 226

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, June Boatwright, August Boatwright's sister, apologizes to Lily for being mean to her when Lily first arrived. June immediately treated Lily with disdain when Lily arrived at the Boatwrights' home--and it was never entirely clear why June behaved this way. In part, Lily believed that June disliked her because she was white, and therefore a representative of the social group that oppresses June and her sisters.

It's important to keep in mind that just before this

quotation, June has gotten engaged to her longtime admirer, Neil. By juxtaposing two important moments for June--her engagement and her apology--Kidd implies that the two moments are closely linked. In other words, it's suggested, June didn't hate Lily simply because of Lily's skin color; she hated Lily because of her own sadness and pain--she took out her feelings on the most convenient scapegoat available, Lily the runaway.

Chapter 12 Quotes

"It hurts, I know it does. Let it out. Just let it out."

Related Characters: August Boatwright (speaker), Lily Owens

Related Themes:

Page Number: 238

Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter, Lily confesses her darkest secret to August Boatwright: she feels responsible for the death of her mother, Deborah. August seems to understand right away that it's very hard for Lily to discuss Deborah with anyone else--it's hard enough for Lily to even *think* about her mother. And yet August insists that it's important for Lily to try to talk about the issue; thus, she encourages Lily to "let it out."

The notion of "letting it out" is important to the novel as a whole. Characters feel a powerful sense of guilt, fear, or hatred--often, their only way of getting over their own feelings is to externalize them by sharing them with other people. In this quotation, then, August is asking Lily to cleanse herself of her guilt by talking about it with another person--August herself. One could say that the scene is a version of the Catholic confessional, with Lily the confessor and August the priest. As in Catholicism, there's inherent virtue in Lily's mere act of confessing; simply to summon the courage to talk about her sins is an important part of being forgiven for her sins.

Kneeling on the floor, unable to stop shuddering, I heard it plainly. It said, *You are unlovable, Lily Owens. Unlovable. Who could love you? Who in this world could ever love you?*

Related Characters: Lily Owens (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 242

Explanation and Analysis

This quotation depicts Lily at her lowest point. She's been feeling guilt for causing the death of her mother for many years, but it's not until this point that guilt consumes her. Afraid that she's murdered a member of her own family--and shocked to learn that her mother ran out on her when Lily was only a baby--Lily jumps to the conclusion that she is unlovable: nobody could ever love a sinner like her.

There's a familiar theme in Christian works that at people's lowest point, they turn to God and find that he still loves and accepts them. In this quotation, we see Lily consumed by the belief that nobody, not even God, can muster compassion for her. From a reader's perspective, however, it's clear that Lily is wrong: on the contrary, Lily is surrounded by people who love her deeply, in spite of her sins. Perhaps it's important for Lily to reach a "rock bottom" point here: alone, angry, and self-hating, she has nowhere to go but up.

"Every person on the face of the earth makes mistakes, Lily. Every last one. We're all so human. Your mother made a terrible mistake, but she tried to fix it."

Related Characters: August Boatwright (speaker), Deborah Fontanel Owens

Related Themes:

Page Number: 256

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of Chapter 12, Lily learns that her mother, Deborah, tried to run out on Lily when Lily was only a baby. Lily is at first angry with herself--she believes that she's unlovable. Then, Lily becomes angry with her mother: she's furious that a member of her own family could treat her so badly. August tries to encourage Lily to forgive her mother for her mistakes, pointing out that everybody makes mistakes.

As simple as August's words may be, they're true--there's no such thing as a perfect human being. By the same token, there's no point in Lily continuing to be angry with her mother. Just as her mother tried to undo her sins by returning to take Lily with her, Lily should move past her anger and forgive Deborah for the "mistake" she made.

Chapter 14 Quotes

In a weird way I must have loved my little collection of hurts and wounds. They provided me with some real nice sympathy, with the feeling I was exceptional. I was the girl abandoned by her mother. I was the girl who kneeled on grits. What a special case I was.

Related Characters: Lily Owens (speaker), T. Ray Owens, Deborah Fontanel Owens

Related Themes:

Page Number: 278

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Lily thinks about her mother, Deborah, and her father, T. Ray. She also considers the way her feelings have changed with regard to her parents. Lily comes to the surprising conclusion that she partly *enjoyed* her own guilt and suffering--after a certain point, she came to relish feeling sorry for herself, because doing so made her feel special.

Lily's epiphany suggests that her pain and guilt regarding her parents is mostly self-imposed. Lily *could* feel happier if she really wanted to--but on some level she prefers to feel miserable about T. Ray hurting her and Deborah abandoning her. For Lily to realize that her pain is self-imposed is, by definition, the first step in escaping her own pain.

Drifting off to sleep, I thought about her. How nobody is perfect. How you just have to close your eyes and breathe out and let the puzzle of the human heart be what it is.

Related Characters: Lily Owens (speaker), Deborah Fontanel Owens

Related Themes:

Page Number: 285

Explanation and Analysis

As the novel reaches a conclusion, Lily seems to have reached peace with her parents. Although Lily is now fully aware that Deborah abandoned her when she was only a baby, she seems to have forgiven Deborah for her negligence, as August encouraged her to do. In the quotation, Lily is "sleeping easy"--a sign that she's moved past her own feelings of resentment and found inner peace.Lily echoes the advice August offered her in the previous chapter: "Nobody is perfect." Instead of choosing to be angry with Deborah for the rest of her life, Lily accepts that Deborah made a horrible mistake--abandoning her only child. By accepting the truth, Lily is refusing to allow Deborah's sin to cause any more damage than it already has: Lily accepts her mother's actions with grace, and forgives her.

He stood over me. "Deborah," I heard him mumble. "You're not leaving me again." His eyes looked frantic, scared. I wondered if I'd heard him right.

Related Characters: Lily Owens, T. Ray Owens (speaker), Deborah Fontanel Owens

Related Themes:

Page Number: 294

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of the novel, T. Ray arrives at the Boatwrights' house and tries to forcibly take his daughter, Lily, back to his home, miles away. As T. Ray and Lily wrestle with each other, he speaks Deborah's name and insists that she'll never leave him again. Lily is confused--T. Ray knows perfectly well that Deborah, his wife, is dead and gone.

As Lily comes to realize, T. Ray sees Deborah's "spirit" in Lily--he 's already been abandoned by his wife, and therefore can't stand to be abandoned by his daughter, too. Lily's abrupt departure from T. Ray's life (she ran away) has reminded T. Ray of the feelings of abandonment he had to deal with when Deborah walked out on him. He tracks down Lily and tries to drag her home in a desperate attempt to alleviate his own suffering.

Surprisingly, T. Ray comes across as a sympathetic character in this quotation. He's certainly not a kind, loving man, but he's clearly been going through a lot of sadness--perhaps his anger at Deborah's departure helps explain why he was always so mean to Lily (without excusing his actions). Moreover, T. Ray's behavior shows how dangerous sin can be. T. Ray has allowed Deborah's sin to twist him into a bitter old man. Lily, fortunately has now refused to allow the same thing to happen to her--instead of remaining angry with her mother, Lily forgives her. In an equal act of forgiveness, she forgives T. Ray for his own cruelty, too.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

The chapter begins with a quote from a book about **bees**: when a queen bee is taken from a hive, the other bees notice her absence immediately, and begin to act "queenly" themselves.

Kidd will start each chapter of her book with a bee-related "proverb"—a bee fact (from an imaginary book) that relates to the chapter that follows it.

The year is 1964. An unnamed narrator sits in bed and watches **bees** flying around the room. The narrator, a 14-year-old girl, thinks back on everything that's happened to her that summer. She compares the bees in her room to angels, coming to Earth to right the world's wrongs. She concludes that, in spite of everything, she remains "tender toward the bees."

We begin at the end, as Kidd makes it clear that she'll tell this story in a flashback. The narrator seems to be happy and secure at this point, but it's also clear that she's experienced some tragedy.

It's July 1, 1964 (a flashback from the previous scene). The narrator sits in bed. Rosaleen, the family maid, has worked for the narrator's family since the narrator's mother's death. Because Rosaleen has no children of her own, she thinks of the narrator as her child. The narrator's father is T. Ray—she never calls him "Daddy."

We now see the relationship between the chapter and the epigraph about bees. In the absence of a biological mother, the narrator turns to mother-figures like Rosaleen. The narrator's relationship with her father, by contrast, is cold and distant, as evidenced by her refusal to call him "Daddy."

The narrator's mother died when she was 4 years old, supposedly because of an "accident." The narrator thinks about being reunited with her mother in Heaven one day. She also thinks about the misery of living with her father, T. Ray—a mean, bitter man. Although he loved his wife, he hasn't been the same since her death.

From early on, Kidd makes it clear that this is a religious novel, in the sense that the main character takes for granted the existence of Heaven and, presumably, a God. Kidd also uses this section to give us some information about T. Ray's character. Although he's mean now, his meanness seems tied to his grief at his wife's death, making him more sympathetic.

The narrator sees a swarm of **bees** entering her room, and she runs to wake her father. When T. Ray surveys the narrator's room, he finds no bees, and angrily tells the narrator—whose name, we learn, is Lily Owens—"this isn't funny."

T. Ray is presented to us as an angry, impatient man, who has no idea how to interact with a girl, even if the girl is his own child. In a novel that already privileges the importance of bees, it's an obvious sign of ignorance and shortsightedness not to notice the bees' existence.

Lily's only memory of her mother (Deborah, as we learn later) concerns the day of her death, December 3, 1954. Her mother was walking through the house, packing a suitcase, when T. Ray walked in and began arguing with her. Lily overheard their yelling, but can't remember what the argument was about, exactly. Suddenly, Lily's mother ran to Lily and held her in her arms—then, T. Ray pulled her mother away. Lily remembers her mother waving a gun at T. Ray, and then T. Ray snatching the gun. Lily remembers picking up the gun when her father dropped it, and then a loud gunshot, and then silence. Lily sometimes imagines that she is responsible for her mother's death.

This is one of the most important moments in the book: the scene to which Kidd (and Lily) will return again and again. Although Lily was obviously too young to be morally responsible for her actions, it's possible, based on this description, that Lily accidentally shot her own mother. Through Lily, Kidd conveys the concept that human beings are capable of doing evil things, even before they're aware of what *they're doing.*

Lily and T. Ray live in the town of Sylvan, South Carolina. Lily is an unpopular child, partly because she's shy and partly because T. Ray refuses to take her to football games or other town events. She tried to attend the town's Charm School, but because she had no mother to present her with the traditional white rose, she wasn't admitted. Rosaleen had wanted to give her the rose, but because Rosaleen is black, this wasn't allowed.

This is an important passage because it establishes that the novel is set in a time when racism was still openly accepted throughout the country. Blacks couldn't participate in many social actions—like here, with the Charm School ceremony. The novel focuses on Lily and her quest to love herself and find a mother, but Kidd also deals with racism quite often (and sometimes problematically), particularly as it affects the black "secondary" characters.

The morning after she wakes T. Ray, Lily tries to catch a **bee** to prove that she wasn't lying last night. She shows Rosaleen the jar she's found, and Rosaleen warns her that she'll be stung. Lily nods, thinking to herself that Rosaleen—in spite of her tough attitude—loves her very much. Rosaleen left her husband because he drank and "caroused" too much, and though she has many siblings, she never sees them. Lily often fantasizes about Rosaleen becoming white and becoming her "real" mother, or else imagines herself becoming a "Negro orphan" and being adopted by Rosaleen.

Lily changes a lot during the novel, and it's important to understand what kind of person she is before she embarks on her adventures. Lily is young and fairly immature—in this scene, Rosaleen treats her like a small child, not a teenager. More importantly, though, she's been brought up in a society that treats black people as second-class citizens—as a result, she thinks that only a white woman could replace her mother. This is illogical (a replacement mother could be any woman), but it reflects Lily's racially biased thinking.

Lily's mother was named Deborah, she recalls. Deborah—whose name T. Ray refuses to say anymore—was born in Virginia. Growing up without a mother, Lily had to rely on Rosaleen for "mother's advice" about things like her period, trying out for the cheerleading team, etc. Lily keeps some of her mother's old things in a tin box: her gloves, a photograph of her that Lily found in the attic, and a picture of the **Virgin Mary**, depicted as a black woman, with the words "Tiburon, South Carolina" scribbled on the back. Nobody knows about the box, not even Rosaleen. Lily keeps it buried beneath a tree.

Lily still has a close, personal relationship with Deborah's memory, despite the fact that Deborah herself is dead. Lily is protective of her intimate relationship with her mother—she doesn't want anyone to know about it, perhaps because some part of her understands that it's based on a fantasy, not the truth.

Lily spends her afternoon selling the peaches her father picks. This is her summer job—an extremely lonely job, since it requires her to sit in a roadside hut alone for long hours every day. She tries to read books during her job, but T. Ray sometimes sees her reading, and becomes so angry that she's forced to spend her time doing nothing. In spite of this, Lily loves reading. One of her schoolteachers, Mrs. Henry, made her fall in love with Shakespeare, and encouraged her to become a professor a writer. Although T. Ray doesn't support Lily's writing, and even mocks her for wanting to study writing in college, Lily hopes that Mrs. Henry will be able to find a way to send her to college on scholarship.

The overarching characteristic of Lily's community in South Carolina is that everyone should know their place. Thus, blacks should accept that they're second-class citizens, Lily should do her job instead of reading and trying to go to college, etc. Kidd shows how the community in Sylvan beats these lessons into people's heads as they grow up. It's inspiring that Lily continues to feel a strong ambition to get out of Sylvan and study writing, considering that almost everyone around her wants her to give up this dream.

Lily remembers the day when she was 6, and T. Ray found her sticking a nail in his peaches. To Lily's surprise, T. Ray didn't punish her. Instead, he sat her down and told her about Deborah. Lily vividly remembers the day her mother died—she even blames herself for the death, since she remembers holding the gun at one point.

Kidd has already implied that Lily blames herself for Deborah's death, but by repeating this information, she reminds us of Lily's guilt. Lily thinks about Deborah's death all the time; in fact, her love for her mother is inseparable from her own sense of guilt.

Lily tells T. Ray she remembers the day her mother died. Angry and surprised, T. Ray tells Lily to tell him everything she remembers. Lily explains that she remembers a gun, an argument, a loud explosion, and—at one point—picking up the gun. T. Ray nods and tells Lily that the gun went off when Lily picked it up. As he told the police, it was a horrible accident that led to Deborah's death: Lily accidently aimed the gun at her mother. With this, T. Ray leaves Lily alone.

Because we don't know very much about T. Ray, we don't know if he's lying or telling the truth about Lily's manslaughter. One thing is sure, though: T. Ray is a bad father. He doesn't make any effort to comfort or console his daughter after delivering this crushing news. Instead, he just leaves her to wallow in her guilt and unhappiness.

At 6 pm on the hot July day, Lily walks back to the house. She finds Rosaleen in the living room, watching the television set. Lyndon B. Johnson has just signed the Civil Rights Act, protecting the rights of African Americans in the U.S. Rosaleen says "Hallelujah" when she hears this news, but Lily is worried—she wonders how the people of Sylvan will react.

Here Kidd explicitly places her story in its historical setting. The Civil Rights Act was seen as a great legal and civic victory for African Americans, but the reality was that many racist white Americans clung to the status quo and refused to accept this ruling, even threatening the safety of any blacks who attempted to exercise their rights.

At dinner that evening, Lily brings up her birthday to T. Ray. She tells him she'd like to have a silver bracelet as a present, but T. Ray doesn't reply. That night, she waits for her father to fall asleep, and then sneaks outside to watch the full **moon**. She goes to a tree and digs up the tin box that contains her mother's possessions. She looks at the photograph and strokes Deborah's gloves. Suddenly Lily hears T. Ray running toward her with a flashlight, and she quickly covers the tin with dirt. T. Ray angrily calls Lily a "slut" for sneaking out, and he punishes her by making her "kneel on grits" (ground-up corn).

This scene conveys T. Ray's refusal to understand his daughter's inner life. Despite the fact that Lily is going outside to be close to her dead mother—not a bad thing by any means—T. Ray automatically assumes the worst of her, and accuses her of being sexually licentious. T. Ray's punishment also seems especially petty and sadistic, emphasizing the injustice of it.

The next morning, T. Ray orders Lily to go to the peach stand and "do some work." Lily nods, but secretly decides to leave T. Ray as soon as possible. In the afternoon, she catches a few **bees** in her jar.

The parallel between Lily's life and the "lives of bees" is clear here: Lily is trapped in a tiny, community and unhappy home situation, just as the bees are trapped in their jar.

In the evening, Rosaleen tells Lily that she'll be in town tomorrow, rather than coming in to clean the house. Lily notices that Rosaleen has been practicing writing her own name. Rosaleen explains that there's a voter's rally on the 4th of July to celebrate the new Civil Rights Act: Rosaleen is going to register to vote. Lily, who remembers the news of the blacks in Mississippi who were murdered for registering, asks Rosaleen if T. Ray knows where she'll be. Rosaleen replies, "T. Ray don't know nothing."

During the 1960s, many black people in the U.S. were bullied or even murdered for registering to vote—one of the most famous cases of this occurred in Mississippi in the summer of 1964. Rosaleen knows that she is risking her safety with this act. Clearly Rosaleen has no love for T. Ray either, and she and Lily seem to bond over their desire to "rebel" against him.

When her father gets home, Lily tells him that she's going to walk into town with Rosaleen to "buy some sanitary supplies." T. Ray nods, disgusted, as he assumes Lily is talking about "female puberty." That night, Lily decides to let the **bees** out of her jar. To her surprise, the bees stay in the jar even after she removes the lid.

Kidd shows T. Ray's meanness through his disgust for femininity: he clearly has no interest in his daughter's life, seems misogynistic in general too. The bees' decision to stay in the jar could symbolize the human reluctance to take chances and risks—a cage or prison can grow familiar, so that it's hard to leave even when one is offered freedom.

In the morning, Rosaleen presents Lily with a cake for her birthday. Lily gratefully eats some of the cake, and then she and Rosaleen walk into town, as planned. They walk past the town's Baptist Church. Lily's knees still hurt from T. Ray's punishment, and so they decide to rest in the church for a moment. Inside, Lily notices the church's milky-colored windows, out of which she's stared almost every Sunday since she was born. Lily notes that Rosaleen doesn't go to church: she has her own religion, based on a combination of ancestor and nature worship. T. Ray finds this religion absurd, but Lily is intrigued by it.

T. Ray's indifference to Lily's birthday contrasts markedly with Rosaleen's warmth and love on this day. Rosaleen is the first mother-figure in Lily's life (after Deborah herself). Throughout the book, Kidd generally portrays adult women as naturally kind and nurturing (as opposed to male characters like T. Ray). There's another important contrast in this section between organized religion and "personal," self-created religion.

A priest named Brother Gerald greets Lily, but looks uncomfortable around Rosaleen, who, as a black woman, isn't allowed in the church. Gerald has previously told Lily that he loves black people, but thinks they should "have their own places." Rosaleen asks Gerald for a fan for Lily, since it's her birthday, but Gerald refuses, saying there aren't enough to go around. Lily and Rosaleen leave the church, and outside, Rosaleen shows Lily that she's stolen two fans.

Kidd's critique of the church in the South is apparent here. Although Christianity is based on the principle that all people are equal before God, it's clear that this church doesn't practice what it preaches: Brother Gerald believes in the doctrine of "separate but equal," showing him as a supporter of segregation. Rosaleen is shown to have her own moral code: although she's stealing in this scene, her crime seems almost justifiable, since Gerald refused Rosaleen a fan seemingly because of his racist dislike for black people.

Lily and Rosaleen proceed to the "bad part" of Sylvan. They see a group of rough-looking men playing cards and shouting. One of the men calls Rosaleen a "nigger," to which Rosaleen proudly replies that she's come to Sylvan to register to vote. Although Lily whispers that they should keep moving, Rosaleen stays put. The men approach Rosaleen, ask her where she got her fan: she says she stole the fans from a church, and then she empties her snuffbox onto the men's shoes. Furious, the men order her to clean their shoes, but she refuses. They push her, and a fight breaks out. Lily feels herself "caught up in a current." She sees Rosaleen lying on the ground, bleeding.

Here Rosaleen comes face-to-face with the racism of the town of Sylvan. White people insult black people freely, and can essentially act however they want without fear of punishment. Rosaleen is proud and even aggressive with her three tormentors: instead of ignoring them, as Lily wants, Rosaleen confronts them and fights back. As we've already seen, Rosaleen is brave and confident, even when she knows that she's going to get hurt.

The police arrive, and inform Rosaleen that she's under arrest for "assault, theft, and disturbing the peace."

Racism is such a huge problem because it's not just about violence and insults, but also about the way an entire society is structured—if justice were truly "blind," then the white men would be the ones under arrest, but instead Rosaleen is powerless and the men are immune from punishment.

CHAPTER 2

The epigraph for this chapter, again from a book about **bees**, explains that when a swarm of bees leaves an old hive, a few "scout bees" look for a new colony, and eventually the entire hive settles.

Kidd's symbolism becomes more obvious. The "scout bees" that we read about here seem to predict that Rosaleen and Lily will soon go exploring for a new place to live.

Immediately after the events of the previous chapter, the police drive Lily and Rosaleen to the police station. The police officer who drives them is Avery Gaston, nicknamed "Shoe." Behind the police car, the three men who insulted Rosaleen drive their own car to the station. Rosaleen seems calm as she sits next to Lily.

Rosaleen's calmness during the car ride is all the more impressive when one considers that nobody (apart from Lily) is on her side: the sheriff thinks she's a criminal, and the three men who attacked her are right behind her, threatening her with their very presence. Instead of relying on others to feel safe, Rosaleen projects an inner calmness.

At the station, Rosaleen refuses to walk with Gaston and the other police officers. The three men pull up to the station in their car, and watch as Rosaleen refuses to comply. Suddenly, one of the men walks up to Rosaleen and smashes her face with a heavy flashlight. Gaston coolly tells the man, whom he calls Franklin, that "Now's not the time."

This is a wrenching scene, both because it depicts Rosaleen getting hurt and because it reveals the extent of the injustice of the town. Even Gaston, the police officer, is on the racists' side: in fact, he knows them by name, and treats them as friends. "Now" is not the time for violence—but Gaston seems to have no problem with them attacking Rosaleen later.

Inside the jail, the police officers force Lily and Rosaleen to sit in a cell. Lily is sure that T. Ray will get both of them out. After a time, Gaston tells Lily to come out—T. Ray is there to pick her up. Lily is uncertain about leaving Rosaleen in the cell, but Rosaleen tells Lily to leave. Outside, T. Ray orders Lily into the car. As they drive home, he furiously tells her that Rosaleen picked a fight with Franklin Posey, the "meanest nigger hater" in the town.

Much like Lily, T. Ray doesn't hate *black people, but he still has the deeply ingrained racist tendency to blame them for their own oppression. Here, for example, he's implying that Rosaleen, not Posey, is to blame for her injuries.*

Back at home, T. Ray orders Lily not to leave her room. Quietly, Lily replies, "You don't scare me." T. Ray tries to hit her, but she ducks, and he misses. Lily screams that her mother will protect her, and her father replies, "You think that goddamn woman gave a shit about you?" T. Ray tells Lily that Deborah was planning to leave both of them on the day she died—she'd come back to the house to collect her things. With these words, he leaves Lily alone.

Once again, we don't know how to interpret T. Ray's words. He's clearly not thinking clearly, since he's just tried to punch his own daughter in the face. And yet we don't know of any reason why T. Ray would be lying to Lily. This uncertainty reflects the fact that, for all her love, Lily doesn't really know anything about her mother.

Lily sits in her room, struggling to understand what she's just heard. She wonders if it's possible that her mother could have been so cruel, and then it occurs to her that T. Ray could be lying to her. This possibility makes her feel better. Suddenly she hears a voice in her head, saying, "Your jar is open." She decides that she can't live with her father anymore. She packs clothes, money she's earned by selling peaches, and other basic items. She leaves a note for her father, in which she tells him to "rot in hell" for lying about Deborah.

Kidd adds some more bee symbolism as Lily realizes that she has no reason to stay in Sylvan—she's just kept living in her oppressive "jar" because that's what was familiar and expected of her. It's important to recognize that Lily is running away from her mother *as well as her father: deep down, she can't stand the possibility that T. Ray might be telling the truth about Deborah.*

Lily walks along the road to the center of the town. As she walks, she decides to join Rosaleen, and then go to Tiburon, South Carolina, the town scribbled on the back of Deborah's picture of the **Virgin Mary**. As she reaches this decision, Brother Gerald drives by. When Lily explains that she's headed to the jailhouse, Gerald offers to drive her: he's headed there, too. In the car, Gerald says that he's pressing charges against Rosaleen for stealing the two fans, which he describes as a "sin." Lily lies and says that Rosaleen didn't understand that she was stealing the fans. She adds that Rosaleen had gotten in a fight with the three men because they'd insulted her for singing a church hymn. Lily can sense that she's changing Gerald's mind about pressing charges.

Brother Gerald's racism takes the guise of organized religion: he sanctimoniously preaches about sin, even though it's pretty unlikely that he'd be pressing charges if it had been a white woman who "stole" the fans. And yet Gerald isn't a completely bad guy: he's capable of feeling some sympathy. Lily is good at manipulating Gerald—she knows that he respects religion (and doesn't want to be caught being hypocritical), and she uses this information to turn him against the white men who attacked Rosaleen. Lily is adept at making up "stories" (lies, essentially) to get what she wants in situations where she would otherwise be powerless.

At the police station, Brother Gerald and Lily learn from Gaston that Rosaleen has been sent to the hospital because of her injuries—after Lily left, she "took a fall." Gaston warns Lily to stay away from the hospital, or he'll call her father again.

In another horrifying scene, we see just how callously the white police allow blatant racist violence to continue even right in front of them.

Despite Gaston's warning, Lily goes to the "colored wing" of the hospital. She's able to sneak by a nurse, since the nurse is flirting with a police officer, and find Rosaleen. Rosaleen, who's weak and in pain, tells Lily that the three men continued to hit her after Lily left, apparently with Gaston's approval. Although a part of her wants to tell Rosaleen that she should have apologized to the men in order to avoid the beating, Lily tells Rosaleen that they need to escape the hospital immediately. She explains that Rosaleen will be in danger here—Franklin Posey and his friends will probably try to kill her soon. Reluctantly, Rosaleen agrees that Lily is right.

Although Lily has shown signs of being cautious and timid, she's brave and determined here (and, tellingly, resists her urge to "blame the victim"). Rosaleen seems rather unrealistically naïve here, as surely she would know the reality of her situation better than a fourteen-year-old white girl. Kidd focuses on Lily, however, and the incident with Rosaleen mostly provides an impetus for the two escaping town.

While Rosaleen rests, Lily finds a pay phone, and uses it to call the nurse in the colored wing of the hospital. Pretending to be the wife of a jailer, she tells the nurse to tell the police officers in the hospital to go back to the station at once. To her surprise, the nurse sighs and agrees to spread the word.

In this scene, Lily becomes more mature and confident by lying. Lily is clearly a smart, creative girl—here, she surprises herself by using her talent as a "storyteller" to bend the universe to her will.

Shortly after her phone call, Lily tells Rosaleen that it's time to leave: the officers have left. Rosaleen walks with Lily, pretending to be a visitor instead of a patient. Outside, Lily tells Rosaleen that they're going to Tiburon, South Carolina. Rosaleen agrees that they should try to get out of town. They stand by the side of the highway, and before too long, a black man driving a truck stops and lets them in. After Lily explains where they're headed, the man says he can drop them three miles outside of Tiburon.

Lisa and Rosaleen have a surprisingly easy time getting out of Sylvan: they're not seen as they leave the hospital, and within an hour they find someone willing to drive them to Tiburon. While it's possible that Kidd is just rushing through this section of the book to get to the "good stuff," there also may be something more interesting going on. In a novel that often relies upon divine providence, Kidd gives the sense that Lily is being guided on her quest—it's as if there's a divine presence leading her to Tiburon.

Lily and Rosaleen ride with the man for 90 miles, and when he lets them out, they see from a sign that they're close to Tiburon. It's late at night, and they walk slowly along the highway toward the town. As they walk, Rosaleen asks Lily why she chose to go to Tiburon, of all places. Lily explains the writing on the back of the picture—a reason that Rosaleen doesn't find very convincing, since the city's name could have been written by anyone at any time. Nevertheless, when Lily shows Rosaleen the picture, Rosaleen is intrigued by the fact that the **Virgin Mary** is black.

We see everything from Lily's point of view, so she naturally assumes that she's the leader in his "adventure"—because she's more enthusiastic, because she's white, and because Rosaleen technically works for her. Rosaleen acts as more of a skeptic here, but we also don't see much of her point of view.

Lily tells Rosaleen what T. Ray told her about Deborah. Rosaleen agrees with Lily that it's possible that T. Ray lied. Nevertheless, she's disappointed that Lily plans to track down information about her mother in Tiburon, as this will be extremely difficult. Lily grows frustrated with Rosaleen's cynicism and tells her to stop criticizing her. Rosaleen angrily explains that Lily has been acting like she's Rosaleen's "keeper." Lily replies that Rosaleen *needs* a keeper—she shouldn't have picked a fight with three white men. Lily angrily walks away from Rosaleen, toward the thick trees by the highway, and goes to sleep under a tree.

Rosaleen finally points out the obvious fact that Lily has been treating her like a servant, an assistant, or even a child. Lily even dares to say that Rosaleen shouldn't have talked back to the white men—essentially implying that Rosaleen should have meekly let the racists do whatever they wanted to her. Quite understandably, Rosaleen refuses to hear this racist talk from Lily.

When Lily wakes up, Rosaleen is nowhere to be seen. She feels regret for yelling at Rosaleen, and wanders through the forest. To her surprise, she finds Rosaleen bathing naked in a creek, her shoulders covered in tiny, milky beads of water. Transfixed, Lily removes her clothes and goes to bathe with Rosaleen, imagining herself licking the beads of water off of Rosaleen's shoulders. Rosaleen laughs at the sight of Lily naked, and together they bathe contentedly in the cool water.

This is a surprising way to end the chapter, and there's a lot of symbolism going on here: the Lily is "baptized" and "born again" in the water, hopefully shedding some of her racist preconceptions. Furthermore, Lily returns to regarding Rosaleen as a mother figure, even imagining herself licking milky water off of Rosaleen (a clear symbol for breastfeeding).

CHAPTER 3

The epigraph from the **bee** book discusses how the best way to find a queen is to find its "circle of attendants."

If Lily and Rosaleen are the "bees," then this epigraph suggests that they're going to meet some new characters.

Lily gains new respect for nature after she bathes in the stream with Rosaleen. She imagines that Mother Nature looks like Eleanor Roosevelt, and the next morning, she tells herself that today is the first day of a new life. Because Rosaleen is still sleeping, Lily passes the time by imagining a reason why Deborah owned a picture of a black **Virgin Mary**. Lily remembers that only Catholics carry pictures of Mary. There are no Catholics living in Sylvan, and in fact, the people of Sylvan regard Catholics as dangerous and destined to burn in Hell.

Rosaleen and Lily's bathing session was a kind of baptism after all, and now they're ready to start a new phase of their lives. Kidd establishes the religious tension between Protestants and Catholics in the South at the time. Notably, the positive characters in the novel (like Rosaleen) don't practice this kind of religious rigidity and intolerance; i.e., instead of dismissing other religions, they create their own amalgam of religion and culture.

Rosaleen wakes up, and murmurs that she dreamed about Martin Luther King, Jr. The two of them set off for Tiburon, walking past barns and cows. They're both extremely hungry, and their stomachs growl. Lily realizes that it's Sunday, meaning that all the stores in Tiburon will be closed. Rosaleen notes darkly that she'll be turned away from every motel or hotel in town, since she's black.

One reason that Lily is the one providing the initiative in this quest is that it's easier for her to be optimistic about what she's going to experience. Rosaleen can't share Lily's hopefulness because she knows she's just as likely to encounter racism and oppression in Tiburon as she was in Sylvan.

Rosaleen and Lily arrive at a general store, which is open, even though it's Sunday. While Rosaleen waits outside, Lily orders two Sunday-plate specials of barbecue pork. The storeowner asks Lily where she's headed, and Lily lies, saying she's there to visit her grandmother. When the storeowner asks Lily if her grandmother's name is Rose Campbell, Lily impulsively nods. Suddenly, she notices a jar of honey bearing a picture of a black **Virgin Mary**—the same picture she's carrying with her! The storeowner explains that the seller of the honey jars is a black woman named August Boatwright, who lives in a house on Main Street. Outside, Lily tells Rosaleen that they have to go to August's house. Rosaleen is skeptical—it's possible that Deborah never met August, she says—but she agrees to walk to the house, anyway.

We've already seen that Lily is a talented, quick-thinking liar, and Kidd reminds us of this here. But the most important aspect of this section is the big, improbable coincidence that Lily immediately finds the honey jars with the same picture of the black Virgin Mary. It's because of this coincidence that Lily and Rosaleen are able to meet August Boatwright, who'll be an important character for the rest of the novel. Once again, Kidd suggests that there's a divine providence guiding Lily on her quest, pointing her in the right direction when she has no idea how to proceed. This also makes the plot flow more smoothly and simply.

Rosaleen and Lily walk toward August's house. Lily stops at the post office to check if there are any Wanted posters with Rosaleen's face, or stories in the newspaper about an escaped black woman. She finds none, and feels grateful.

From here on out, there won't be any more information about the police's attempt to track down Rosaleen for escaping from jail (and in fact, Rosaleen will largely recede from view). Kidd now takes the novel in a new direction, as the big "escape" was essentially just a way of getting Lily to August's house.

CHAPTER 4

Another selection from the **bee** book explains that honeybees are mostly female—males are born and raised, but only when their presence is required.

So far the novel has included very few male characters, and this trend continues throughout, as Kidd focuses mostly on women and the female perspective.

Rosaleen and Lily have come to August Boatwright's house. They watch a black woman, presumably August, walking outside the house and then going back inside. After a moment of hesitation, Lily and Rosaleen decide to approach the house. At the door, a woman named June Boatwright (August's sister) greets them and invites them in. Inside, Lily and Rosaleen meet May Boatwright, August's other sister. Rosaleen explains that they've come for August's honey. Lily notices that the Boatwrights' house is full of elaborate carvings of women. One statue, about 3 feet tall, catches Lily's attention—it seems to say, "Lily Owens, I know you down to the core."

Our first impressions of the Boatwright house are of a boisterous, self-sustaining community (like a beehive). There are only women living in the Boatwright house (supporting the gist of the epigraph for this chapter), suggesting that Lily will find more maternal figures like Rosaleen. There are various points in the novel when Lily hears a voice in her head. Here the voice seems to come from a statue, though of course, it's really coming from Lily's own imagination. This distinction (between internal and external) will become important in the final chapters.

August Boatwright enters the room and greets Rosaleen and Lily. August notices that Rosaleen has been hurt recently, and before anyone can say anything, she tells Rosaleen and Lily that they'll stay in the house that night. Lily thanks August, and then makes up a lie: she and Rosaleen, she claims, are looking for work so that they can earn enough money to go to visit Lily's aunt in Virginia. Her parents have died in tragic accidents, she adds. August nods, but Lily senses that she can see through the lie.

Previously, we've seen that Lily's ability to lie under pressure is an important part of her coming-of-age, because it shows that she's brave and self-confident. But following this scene, in which August clearly sees through Lily's lies, the emphasis of the book will change. Lily will now continue her education by confronting the truth *about herself, instead of making up lies about herself.*

In the afternoon, August takes Lily and Rosaleen to the "honey house," where August makes and bottles her honey. Inside, Lily finds elaborate honey-making equipment. August shows Lily and Rosaleen how to use some of the equipment, and explains that her grandfather left her a huge **bee** farm. August tells Lily that her usual assistant, a teenager named Zach, is on vacation. When Zach returns, August, Lily, and Zach will work together to make the honey. As Lily listens, she realizes that, in spite of herself, she's always thought of black people as less intelligent than white people. Now, she can see how foolish she was to believe this: August is obviously an intelligent, capable woman. August leaves Rosaleen and Lily to sleep in the honey house. When they're alone, Lily urges Rosaleen not to say anything about Lily's picture of **Mary**.

It doesn't take long for Lily to see that her preconceptions about black people are racist and condescending. The cure for this, Kidd suggests, is understanding: Lily hasn't spent more than half an hour among the Boatwrights before she realizes, as if for the first time, how wrong she was to look down on black people. (It's unclear why she wouldn't have come to this realization before with Rosaleen, if she really considers Rosaleen a mother-figure.) This is also one of the problematic aspects of the novel, however, as Kidd's portrayal of the issue is rather simplistic, implying that if white people would just "try out" black culture for a bit, racism would be cured. Kidd chooses to deal with things on an individual level, which is important in its own way (especially for young people like Lily), and she chooses not to touch issues of structural and systemic racism. Instead the theme of racism is a side issue to Lily's coming-of-age.

The next morning, Lily goes for a walk around August's house. She finds a **stone wall** with hundreds of small bits of paper sticking in the cracks. Lily takes one of the pieces of paper and reads the message written on it: "Birmingham, Sept. 15, four little angels dead." After reading this, Lily keeps walking, and comes to a small creek, similar to the one where she and Rosaleen bathed. She finds the creek very peaceful, and wishes she could stay there for the rest of her life.

The chapter ends (and, for that matter, began) with a big, ambiguous symbol: a stone wall with pieces of paper sticking out of it. There's also another creek near the Boatwright house, suggesting that Lily is going to be "born again" during her time with August. The "four little angels" refer to the four black girls killed at church by a white terrorist's bomb.

CHAPTER 5

A book on **bees** explains that the biggest difference between a human's life and a bee's is the constant darkness of the hive.

The "darkness" of this chapter could refer to Lily's ignorance, but also to the isolated, "hive-like" community of the Boatwrights' house.

The chapter is focused on Lily and Rosaleen's first week with August and her sisters. During this time, Lily is in a state of bliss: she's free from her father, and August never asks her about her supposedly dead parents. August takes care of Rosaleen, saying that Lily and Rosaleen can earn their stay later by working in the honey room. May teaches Lily a song about **bees**, which Lily enjoys singing. Lily quickly learns that life among the Boatwrights revolves around honey. They eat it with every meal, use it as a medicine, and, of course, make it all day long. Lily makes beeswax into candles and shoe polish, earning her keep.

In this expository section, we see how the Boatwright house works. August makes honey all day long, and because she owns her own beehives, she has a steady source of income, and isn't dependent on anyone else in the world. This financial freedom allows her to dictate the terms of her own life and remain relatively aloof from the racist society she lives in. It's unclear (for now) why August automatically invites Lily and Rosaleen to stay with her, except that she seems naturally hospitable and generous.

Rosaleen befriends May, who's very simpleminded. She spends much of her time catching spiders and eating bananas. June teaches English in a local black high school. One night, Lily overhears June and August talking about her: June says she knows Lily is lying about her dead parents. August agrees, but says that they should take care of them, anyway. June is frustrated with August, but she agrees to allow Lily and Rosaleen to stay for a little while longer. She tells August, "But she's *white*." Lily is shocked when she hears this—August and June are judging her for her skin color, something she's not used to.

The two other Boatwright sisters contribute to the independence and happiness of the Boatwright house in their own ways. The fact that Lily is horrified at being "judged" for her skin color shows just how naïve she is. She has just seen white men beat Rosaleen almost to death with the approval of the police, and yet can't seem to understand why a black woman might be naturally distrustful of a white person. These instances of Lily putting herself in a black person's "shoes" are small and rather feeble, but they show her personal growth as she gains more understanding and empathy.

Every evening, Lily and Rosaleen eat dinner with the Boatwrights while watching the news on TV. They learn that blacks are being murdered across the country for registering to vote and protesting racism. One night, after watching a news story about a black man who was shot in Georgia, May goes to the bathtub to cry, and her sisters comfort her gently.

May soaks up the tragedies she experiences like a sponge: whether she has a personal connection to the tragedy or not, she weeps. Whatever her mental troubles are, it seems that she lacks the "filter" most people have in deciding what to care about and what not to care about. Many of the tragedies May weeps for are connected to racism in America—her sadness is like a personification of the tragedy of the black experience in America.

At night, everyone kneels before the 3-foot statue—a statue of the **Virgin Mary**—and prays. Lily is confused when the Boatwrights call the statue, "Our Lady of Chains." August explains that she and her sisters have made their own religion, combining Catholicism with elements of their own beliefs.

Once again, Kidd suggests that the "good" characters in her novel make their own religions, rather than adhering to a strict, dogmatic church. The black Virgin Mary wasn't just a sign leading Lily to the Boatwrights—she is at the center of life in the Boatwright house.

One evening, August tells Lily a story. In the story, a young nun decides to leave her convent to explore the world. Right away, Lily can tell that the story is supposed to be about her. August continues: the nun spends years wandering the world, and is always miserable and lonely. Then, at the end of her life, she returns to her convent, where she is shocked to find that the **Virgin Mary** has been "standing in" for her. Lily doesn't understand what this story is supposed to mean. She guesses that August wants to convince her to go back to her home.

This book is full of parables: ambiguous stories, often with a religious bent, which one must contemplate to understand. At this point in the novel, Lily (wrongly) guesses that August is using her parable to urge Lily to return to her home. The fact that Lily interprets an ambiguous parable in this way suggests that Lily herself may be having second thoughts about her decision to run away—she's a little guilty for abandoning her father.

A week has passed since Lily and Rosaleen came to the Boatwrights' house. That evening, August shows Lily how the queen **bees** lay their eggs. August "introduces" Lily to the queen bee, and shows her the honey the queen helps to produce. As they laugh and talk, Lily thinks to herself that she wants to convince August to let her live there forever.

Lily seems to adjust easily to her life with the Boatwrights. Because she didn't have a mother growing up, she's never been an environment where women dominate: essentially, she's gone from having no mother to having three or four mothers at once.

Lily asks August about the **stone wall** with the pieces of paper, and August explains that May pushes a piece of paper into the wall whenever a tragedy occurs. August explains that May's twin sister, April, died at the age of 15. She shot herself with her father's shotgun after learning that she'd never be able to have a normal life in her racist South Carolina town. Afterwards, May become "strange."

The more we learn about the Boatwright house, the less idyllic it becomes—or rather, the more impressive it becomes that August and her sisters can support themselves. Like May, April was extremely sensitive to other people's tragedies, and to the huge collective tragedy of racism.

Lily goes to bed in the honey house, and thinks about her parents, especially her mother. Rosaleen, who's sleeping in the honey house as well, asks Lily if she's all right. When Lily doesn't reply, Rosaleen tells her that Deborah is dead, and is never coming back. She adds that she doesn't want to see Lily get herself hurt. Lily gets up and finds a piece of paper. She writes her mother's name on the paper and slips it into the **stone wall**. Lily wonders what she should do next, and decides to find out as much as she can about Deborah before T. Ray or the police find her.

As the chapter ends, we get a better sense for what the stone wall symbolizes: it represents the accumulation of all the suffering and tragedy in the world, and also a way of dealing with that suffering. Lily tries to come to terms with her own guilt and sadness over her mother's death by imitating May and slipping a note into a crack in the wall. This is a symbolic way for May and Lily to "let go" of their problems—but it doesn't make them go away.

CHAPTER 6

In a book on **bees**, we learn that the queen controls the worker bees in the hive by feeding them a substance that excites and energizes them.

The "substance" that August "feeds" Lily and Rosaleen, as we'll see, is self-confidence combined with religious passion.

The next morning, Lily wakes up and finds a tall black man working outside the Boatwright house. She goes into the house and asks the Boatwrights who the man is. They explain that it's Neil, a man who's "sweet on June." June likes Neil, but refuses to marry him. Lily realizes, for the first time, how odd it is for three unmarried sisters to be living together. May seems especially sad about Neil. Lily suggests she go to the **stone wall**, and May does so.

June's reluctance to marry Neil brings up an important point: the Boatwright sisters seem to feel no urgent need to get married. They're so secure and content in their self-contained female world that they don't want to bring a man into the fold. And yet there's also a sense that June may be denying herself happiness by sticking to her familiar way of life. This helps explain why May is saddened by June's refusal to marry Neil.

June and Neil walk inside, and June asks what's upset May. Impulsively Lily answers that May's upset that June and Neil won't get married. Neil laughs and introduces himself to Lily.

Lily isn't a shy girl by any means—she says what's on her mind, even if good manners would dictate otherwise.

On Sunday, the Boatwright sisters don't go to church: instead, they hold their own ceremony, and neighbors come to their house to join in. The group is called the Daughters of Mary, and is made up of black women dressed in bright yellow skirts. When the Daughters have arrived at the house, August begins the ceremony by praising "Our Lady of Chains." She tells a long story about how the slaves used to pray for their freedom. Once there was a slave named Obadiah, and he found a wooden figure in a river. Obadiah showed the statue to his friends, who were other slaves, and they agreed that the figure was that of the **Virgin Mary**.

We get a sense for the religion that the Boatwrights have designed for themselves and their community. This religion is meant to appeal to its audience; that is, it alludes to African-American history, specifically the history of slavery, and it places femininity in a central role. It makes sense that the Boatwrights' religion be proudly and unapologetically black and feminine—a celebration of everything looked down upon by the white, patriarchal society the Daughters of Mary are forced to survive in.

August continues with her story. The figure of the **Virgin Mary** inspired the slaves to break free from their masters and escape. Ever since then, the slaves' descendants have celebrated this statue of Mary. They call it Our Lady of Chains, not because she wears chains, but because she helps others break them. The Daughters of Mary cheer as August finishes the story—clearly they've heard it many times before.

Storytelling, sympathy, and affirmation are at the heart of this religion, which essentially says that with the help of the Virgin Mary, the black community can overcome its adversity. It's telling that the Daughters continue to identify with their slave ancestors, 100 years after the end of slavery—not much has changed in terms of ending racism in America.

After the ceremony, the Daughters of Mary sing and dance together. One by one, they leave the house and return to their lives. Lily is intimidated by what she's seen—she senses that she doesn't belong here at all. Suddenly, she feels herself going faint. She wakes up hours later in August's bed, with a washcloth on her forehead. For the rest of the evening, the Boatwrights fuss over Lily, giving her food and letting her watch the news. August and Lily watch a news report about how President Kennedy will send a rocket to the **moon** soon. August whispers to Lily that she's seeing "the end of something." August explains that when men land on the moon, the moon will lose its mystery. Later that night, Lily decides to show August the picture of Deborah soon.

Lily experiences feminine nurturing to an extent she's never known before. Yet she also feels out of place, and indeed, she finally is—as she's now in a community that affirms and supports blackness and a history of suffering, and no longer in a society where people like her are the norm, and minorities are made to feel "other." It's important that the chapter ends with the image of the moon—a classic feminine symbol—being "attacked" by a rocket—a masculine, phallic symbol. The implication is that femininity will lose its mystery and, perhaps, its power, when it's violated by masculinity. And based on what we've seen of the places that are dominated by men—Lily's house, the jail, the police station—it's hard to disagree.

CHAPTER 7

In a book about **bees**, we learn that it's a misconception that bees are constantly having sex—on the contrary, bees have no sex lives whatsoever.

Kidd sets the tone for a chapter about Lily's sexual maturation, but also about withholding one's desires.

It's July 13, and Zach, August's assistant, has returned from his vacation. He introduces himself to Lily as Zachary Taylor. He's a few years older than Lily, and wears a dogtag with his name written on it. At first, Lily is reluctant to befriend Zach—she'd been getting close with August, and regards Zach as a nuisance. Zach tells Lily he hadn't expected to see a white girl in the Boatwrights' house. Lily finds Zach handsome. She remembers going to school and laughing at jokes about black people's noses, and feels guilty for doing so.

Lily hasn't had much contact with black people her own age—even the positive black role models in her life aren't exactly her friends. For this reason, Lily's first meeting with Zach is a milestone for her. Again, Kidd implies that the "antidote" for racism is understanding and friendship—within minutes of meeting a black teenager, Lily starts to rethink her position on race. This again is a rather oversimplified view, although it's important for Lily's personal development. The trend also seems to be that all the black characters in the book exist mostly just to teach lessons to Lily.

Because August is checking on hives at another farm, Zach and Lily proceed with making honey. Zach tells Lily about his love for Miles Davis, and they joke about music and football. Zach tells Lily that he's a good student and a good athlete—he might even be able to go to college in the North on scholarship. Lily senses that they're going to be good friends.

We know that Lily aspires to go to college and study writing, and Zach seems similarly set on getting a college education. Zach and Lily refuse to embrace small-town Southern life: they reject the roles their communities assign them.

Lily, August, and Zach soon settle into a routine. They spend the day extracting and mixing honey: catching beeswax, filtering pollen, etc. In the evenings, Lily makes awkward conversation with June, who, she knows, doesn't like her at all. Lily's favorite time of day is her lunch with Zach. Zach tells Lily about his dreams of becoming a lawyer. When Lily points out that she's never heard of a black lawyer, Zach confidently says he'll be the first.

It's made more clear that June doesn't like Lily very much (something we'd already guessed), but we also see that Lily and Zach have a real rapport. Zach seems not to fault Lily for voicing her preconceptions about what blacks can and should do—he appears to be very confident, but also rather naïve.

It's been two weeks since Lily arrived with Rosaleen. One day, June approaches Lily and asks her how much longer she's going to stay. Lily lies and says that she'll write her aunt for bus fare, adding that she'd hoped to stay around for longer to make some more money. June seems to find this reply satisfying—she says, insincerely, that nobody wants Lily to go away. Lily feels an urge to ask June about her mother's picture of the black **Virgin Mary**, but she doesn't out of caution.

From the reader's perspective, Lily seems to have spent much longer than two weeks with the Boatwrights: this reflects the fact that Lily has changed enormously in a short time. But as time goes on, it becomes increasingly apparent that Lily can't stay here in this "hive" of learning and growing forever. She needs to reach some closure regarding Deborah, after which she'll have no further reason to stay in Tiburon.

One night, Neil comes to the Boatwrights' house and has a hushed conversation with June. Lily eavesdrops on the conversation, and overhears Neil saying he's not going to "wait forever." Suddenly Neil leaves the room, walking right past Lily, and leaving June to cry.

Although Neil is talking about "waiting" to marry June, his words could apply equally well to Lily. Lily seems to be biding her time before she confronts August about Deborah and the picture, but she can't wait forever.

August sends Zach and Lily out to harvest some beehives. Zach drives a honey cart along the road while Lily daydreams about building a snow cave with him. She imagines sleeping next to Zach, whose body, she thinks, must be very warm. Zach notices that Lily looks odd, and asks her if she's all right. As the day goes on, Lily sees Zach with his shirt off in the hot sun, and realizes that she's attracted to a black boy—something she'd always assumed could never happen to her. In the afternoon, Zach shows Lily some honey, and lets her lick honey off his finger. To Lily's surprise, Zach doesn't kiss Lily—instead, he moves on to the next hive.

Clearly, Lily is sexually attracted to Zach. This is a milestone for Lily, not only because she's experiencing an important part of coming of age, but also because she's never been attracted to a black boy before. Although it seems that Zach shares Lily's feelings, there's a wall between the two of them, preventing either one from expressing their desires—and that wall is the huge, seemingly invincible power of society. Lily understands that black-white relationships are frowned upon, but seems ignorant of how dangerous such a relationship would be for Zach, who could easily be killed by racist white men "protecting their women."

After their near-kiss, Zach and Lily drive the honey wagon back to the house. During the ride, Zach points out a sign saying that Tiburon is the home of Willifred Marchant—supposedly a famous Pulitzer Prize-winning author. Zach asks Lily, a little dismissively, about her ambitions of becoming a writer. This makes Lily think about her plans to earn a scholarship for college. She wonders if she'll ever be able to do so, now that she's on the run with Rosaleen. Lily begins to cry: at first because of her future, but then because of her romantic feelings for Zach. Zach gently touches Lily and tells her she's going to be a great writer one day.

Kidd makes it clear that Zach is more than just a "pretty face." He doesn't just flirt with Lily; he supports her and encourages her to believe in her dreams and continue writing. This is an important scene, because it represents one of the first times in the book when a man gives Lily love and support (contrast Zach's encouragement with T. Ray's indifference!). While most of the loving characters in this book are women, Kidd isn't trying to suggest that only *women are capable of loving.*

Lily and Zach return to the Boatwright house, where she finds that Rosaleen is moving from the honey house to May's room—she claims that the cot in the honey house is bad for her back. Lily is upset to be on her own in the honey house, and remembers how much she cares about Rosaleen.

Lily is on her own, figuratively and literally: for the rest of the book, she'll have to grapple with her relationship with Deborah. Although she has help and support from others, at the end of the day she has to reach her own decisions.

Lily sees August reading a book outside. August asks Lily if she's okay with the new sleeping arrangements. Lily says, "I guess so," and August explains that May will sleep better with another person in the room. She shows Lily the book she's reading, *Jane Eyre*, which, she explains, is about an orphan who runs away.

August's explanation for why Rosaleen must move to May's room isn't entirely convincing (why does May need a roommate now, *specifically?). It's possible that May's depression is worsening, or that August feels that Lily should be on her own. August continues to be a wise, guiding figure (and thus almost a stereotype) helping Lily to mature and grow.*

Lily and August hear a fight on the other side of the house. Lily sees Neil arguing with June: he tells her she's a "selfish bitch" and storms off. June yells, "Don't ever come back." May, who witnesses all this, writes, "June and Neil" on a piece of paper and slips it in the **stone wall**.

May steadily accumulates tragedies, both personal and public. The obvious question is, what happens to May when she can't "take" any more tragedy? What happens when there are no more cracks left in the wall?

Lily can't stop thinking about Zach. That night, she can't fall asleep—partly because she's alone for the first time, and partly because she's thinking about Zach. She has a dream in which she dreams about Zach, and then her mother. The next day, Zach arrives for work with a beautiful green notebook, which he gives to Lily, saying it'll help her begin her career as a writer. Zach tells Lily that he likes her a lot, but that he needs to be careful: there are people who'd kill him for kissing a white girl. Lily nods. For the next few days, she writes stories in her notebook and reads all of them to Zach.

Zach does like Lily, but he knows that he can't give into his desires for fear of being bullied or even murdered. (Bans on interracial marriage were some of the last relics of the South's racist past to be struck down—actually, South Carolina forbid blacks and whites from intermarrying until 1967.) Although Zach and Lily have ambitions to change the world in the future, they reluctantly agree to play by society's rules for now. Lily's devotion to writing seems to correspond to her new introspectiveness and loneliness in the honey house.

CHAPTER 8

According to a book about **bees**, honeybees need social companionship to survive.

Lily is sleeping by herself in the honey house, symbolizing her growth and independence. But, Kidd implies, she still needs friends.

July comes to an end, and Lily and Rosaleen are still living with the Boatwrights. Lily imagines naming herself after a month (like the Boatwright sisters are). After some thought, she chooses October, since it would make her initials "O.O." Lily finds herself settling into the routine of life in the Boatwright house. She also learns that August makes a lot of money selling honey: enough money to buy a much nicer, bigger house.

As Lily spends more time with the Boatwrights, she feels a desire to become one of them. Thus, she wants to cast aside her old name and "become" a month; i.e., another Boatwright sister. Of course, this once again underlines the naïveté of Lily's worldview (and perhaps Kidd's as well), as she assumes that the only things necessary for her to be a Boatwright sister are to have a few empathetic experiences and change her name. She has no idea of the lifetime of oppression and dehumanization they have faced as black women, and only a limited perspective on the community they have created for themselves.

One day, August tells Lily to glue images of the black **Virgin Mary** to the honey jars. As Lily looks at these images, she imagines what her life would look like if she hadn't found this image in the Tiburon general store. As she works, August tells Lily that black Virgin Maries aren't unusual around the world. August asks Lily, quite unexpectedly, what she "loves." Lily answers that she loves writing and reading, the color **blue**, Rosaleen, and Coca-Cola.

This is the first time that August has asked Lily such deep, personal questions. As Kidd indicated in the previous chapter, the time has come for Lily to do some soul-searching, and as August's question reveals, a big part of this soul-searching will be coming to terms with different kinds of love. Lily's love for the color blue—the traditional Christian color of the Virgin Mary—is no coincidence: she's still hungry for a mother-figure.

August tells Lily a secret. The black statue in her house isn't really the **Virgin Mary** at all; it's just a figurehead from an old ship. The figurehead has been in the Boatwright family for many generations—when the Boatwright sisters were younger, their own grandmother would show them the figurehead and tell them the story of Obadiah. August explains that the people of Tiburon need something to believe in, so August gives them an image of a black Mary: a god who looks like them.

August's point is that rituals and ceremonies, like those the Daughters of Mary practice, aren't important because of their literal characteristics (or the literal truth of their history or supernatural power), but rather because they provide a sense of comfort and validation to worshippers, and also inspire *worshippers to feel like they are part of something larger than themselves. People can gain strength and even religious ecstasy from this, and also (especially because the Daughters of Mary are black women living in a racist, patriarchal society) have their own dignity, value, and holiness affirmed.*

August tells Lily more about her grandmother: she taught August how to take care of **bees**. Her grandmother claimed that bees hummed the music of Jesus Christ. August clarifies that this isn't literally true: some things, she explains, are true, but not literally true. August also tells Lily about her parents. Her mother met her father, a dentist, because she had a toothache.

August clarifies the point she made in the previous section by distinguishing between literal and figurative truth. Even if it's not literally true that the Virgin Mary statue came from a slave, for example, the idea has a kind of spiritual truth—an ability to inspire worshippers.

August continues to tell Lily about her life. She and June studied at a teachers' college in Maryland, but they never got teaching jobs. August then worked as a housekeeper, and then—after her grandmother died—as a beekeeper. She's had many offers to marry, but she's always turned them down, explaining that her life is good enough without a man. Once, she claims, she was in love with a man, but she didn't marry him, since she loved her freedom even more.

August draws another distinction between freedom and marriage. So far, we've seen that August lives in (and has essentially created) a community where women have a lot of freedom and power, and dominate the social scene. August believes that she'd destroy this community by bringing men into it.

August and Lily go out to inspect the hives (just as Lily and Zach did a few weeks before). Out on the **bee** farm, August tells Lily to close her eyes and listen to the sound of the bees humming. August tells Lily that bees have a secret life: inside the hive, there are many different kinds of bees, all of whom work hard to make the hive successful. There are queen bees, field bees, mortician bees, worker bees, etc. As Lily thinks about the lives of bees, she falls into a strange trance-state. She imagines the queen bee: the center of the hive, and the "mother of thousands." Suddenly, Lily hears August's voice—she's been calling to Lily. August asks Lily if she's all right, and Lily doesn't know how to answer. August tells Lily that they need to have a talk, soon.

Kidd reveals the meaning of her novel's title in this crucial scene, as Lily experiences a kind of spiritual awakening. Just as bees have a "secret life"—a life inside their hive that people never see—humans have their own secret inner life. This could refer either to the tiny, self-contained community of women at the Boatwright house, or to the self-contemplation and soul-searching that all people must experience to truly grow and be happy.

In the afternoon, Lily and August return to the house for a late lunch. June and May are preparing a delicious feast, and May proudly claims that she hasn't put any paper in the **stone wall** for the last five days. Zach joins the meal. He announces that he's heard some exciting news: the movie star Jack Palance is coming to Tiburon, and he's bringing his black girlfriend. August dismisses this news—it's unlikely that a movie star would come to such a small town. Zach insists that he's right. The group finishes the meal, and afterwards Zach announces that he's off to deliver some honey. Lily asks to go with Zach. At first August says this is a silly idea, but after Lily asks again, she allows it.

Although most of the news of the country outside the Boatwright house is pretty depressing, especially for black people, Zach gives us one (however small) sign that the country is changing its attitude on race for the better: a prominent white movie star has a black girlfriend. It's also suggested that August probably knows that Lily is attracted to Zach—from the way she tries to deter Lily from following Zach, then gives in, we can guess that she understands their sexual tension (especially when it's juxtaposed with the mention of Jack Palance and his black girlfriend).

Zach and Lily walk down Main Street toward the house of a prominent attorney named Clayton Forrest. Outside, Zach greets Forrest's secretary and announces that he's brought honey. The secretary greets Lily, and asks her who she is. Lily says that she's been working and sleeping at August's house. The secretary finds this shocking, and Lily senses that she'll be spreading this piece of gossip around the town.

Just as not all men are cruel and mean, not all of Kidd's women are kind and nurturing—the secretary's sense of superiority to black people outweighs whatever sympathies she might have for Lily.

Mr. Forrest emerges from his office and invites Lily and Zach inside. He introduces himself to Lily, and tells her that August is a good friend of his. Then he tells Zach that he has an interesting legal case for him to look at. While Forrest and Zach look at the case Lily waits outside Forrest's office, inspecting the advanced university degrees hanging on his wall.

Mr. Forrest, a white man, doesn't seem to look down on Zach, unlike his secretary—on the contrary, he treats Zach as a promising student who could make a great lawyer one day. While there's a huge divide between black and white societies in this book, there are a few like Forrest who bridge the divide with support and understanding.

While Lily waits, she has an idea. She goes to the telephone outside Forrest's office and uses it to place a call to T. Ray. T. Ray answers the phone and realizes that he's speaking to his daughter. He asks her where she is, and tells her that she's in big trouble for helping Rosaleen escape. Lily only asks T. Ray one thing: does he know what her favorite color is? T. Ray doesn't even bother to answer this: he says he's going to tear her to pieces. Lily hangs up the phone, crying at her father's indifference.

Lily's conversation with T. Ray reminds us how different Kidd's novel has become: what seemed like an adventure story about a runaway prisoner has become a book about soul-searching and religious enlightenment. This is reflected in the question Lily asks her father: she doesn't want to know about the police investigation; she just wants to know if T. Ray loves her and wants to understand her. It would seem that he doesn't.

Zach and Forrest emerge from Forrest's office. Zach is carrying a heavy legal book, which Forrest has instructed him to study well. Forrest greets Lily and begins to ask her questions about her parents. Before she can be caught in a lie, Lily tells Forrest that she has to be going.

We're reminded that Lily's reasons for being in Tiburon are pretty flimsy—they couldn't stand up for five minutes in front of Mr. Forrest. Lily's a good liar, but she knows better than to try and lie to a trained lawyer. This makes us wonder how much longer she can stay in Tiburon before she's found out.

Lily goes home and writes a letter to T. Ray, even though she knows she could never send it. In the letter, she tells her father she's "sick to death" of his yelling. She berates him for not remembering her favorite color, and reminds him of the beautiful Father's Day card she made for him at the age of 9—a card that he ignored. She ends the letter by saying that she doesn't believe that Deborah was going to leave her. After writing the letter, Lily rips it to pieces. She contemplates writing another letter to her father, in which she says, "I'm sorry."

The letter Lily writes her father is an important reminder that Lily relies on storytelling and writing to make sense of her own feelings. She never sends the letter, but there's value in writing it, anyway: it helps her clarify how she feels about her father, separating out her conflicted emotions (just like May with her stone wall). While Lily clearly has some love for her father (hence the second letter she imagines), she also recognizes that he's a mean man and a bad parent.

Late at night, Lily wanders through the Boatwright house. She sees the statue of the **Virgin Mary** and observes that it looks very different at night: older and more mysterious. She faces the statue and prays that she and Rosaleen won't be arrested or hurt. She touches the statue with her palm, and thinks, "You are the mother of thousands."

Lily seems to be embracing August's religion, she still isn't conceiving of it in personal terms: Lily still thinks of the Virgin Mary as being outside of her, a supernatural force represented by the statue, rather than something within her. Here Kidd also explicitly connects the theme of mothers and daughters to the Virgin Mary herself, as Mary is the mother-figure even for the novel's other mother-figures (like August and Rosaleen).

CHAPTER 9

According to a book on **bees**, a honeybee relies on careful communication with other bees.

Lily needs to communicate with other people in order to better understand herself.

It's July 28, a "day for the record books," Lily claims. It's an especially hot day, but everyone goes about the house, making honey as usual. Lily and August go to put more sugar water in the hives, as the hot weather has probably evaporated the water already inside. While Lily replaces a lid on a hive box, a bee stings her. August explains that the hot weather makes the **bees** "out of sorts." Lily asks August if she thinks she could be a beekeeper one day. August tells Lily that if she loves beekeeping, she'll find a way to do it.

The suggestion that the bees are "out of sorts" foreshadows the violence and tragedy that's going to occur in this chapter. August's advice to Lily about beekeeping might as well apply to Lily's ambitions to go to college and become a writer: if she sets her mind to it and works hard, she'll succeed. August gives Lily the life lessons that Deborah and T. Ray should have given her.

Lily and August come back from the hives to eat lunch. After their meal, Rosaleen finds a hose and sprays it at her friends. They laugh together, and August wrestles Lily for control of the hose, giggling about the absurdity of roughhousing with a girl less than half her age.

In this amusing scene, Lily and August seem more like equals and friends than a student and a mentor. This scene of happiness and silliness also seems positioned to foreshadow the end of Lily's idyllic times with the Boatwrights.

In the afternoon it gets even hotter. Lily rests in the honey house and thinks about her call to T. Ray. She wants to tell Rosaleen about it, but decides against doing so, since this would involve admitting to someone else that she cares about her father.

It'd be much easier if Lily despised T. Ray completely. He's still her father, however, and they've experienced a shared tragedy in the loss of Deborah, so Lily still has some compassion for him, and thus she remains deeply conflicted.

Lily goes into the house for a drink of water, and finds May sitting in the floor. May says that she's seen a roach on the ground—she's busy making a trail of marshmallows on the ground to lure the bug into the open. Lily remembers that her mother used to do exactly the same thing: she remembers T. Ray telling her that her mother would lure roaches with marshmallows. She can't help but wonder if May learned the trick from her mother. Lily asks May if she ever knew a woman named Deborah Fontanel (Deborah's maiden name). May immediately replies, "She stayed out there in the honey house." Lily is amazed to hear this: she can sense that May wouldn't lie about this. Stunned, Lily leaves the house and returns to the hone house without saying anything else to May. She falls asleep, and has a vivid dream about making a trail of honey to lure her mother back home.

May Boatwright is one of the most ambiguous characters in the book, and in this section, we can see why. Although May is supposedly simpleminded, she's also straightforward and sweet in a way that suggests a kind of wisdom. Perhaps the biggest takeaway from this scene is that Lily could have asked May, point-blank, about Deborah at any time and gotten a straight answer: only Lily's own reticence and cowardice have kept her in the dark this whole time. As long as Lily wants *to find out more about her mother's past, she'll be able to do so. The problem is that she's been afraid of learning the truth for so long.*

The next morning, Lily goes into the house and greets the Boatwrights. They can tell that something is off with Lily, but Lily refuses to explain herself. She wants to ask August about Deborah and demand to know why August didn't tell Lily she knew Deborah. In the end, however, Lily decides against this: a part of her *doesn't* want to know the answer.

In a way, we already knew that Lily felt conflicted feelings for Deborah. As much as Lily talks about finding out "the truth" about her mother, there was always a part of her that was afraid of this as well, because she felt guilty about her mother's death.

On Friday afternoon, Lily takes the photograph of her mother and goes to talk to August about Deborah. As she's about to walk into the house, Zach calls her—apparently, August is in the house talking with customers. To pass the time, Zach invites Lily to go to the store with him. As they drive the honey wagon to the store, Lily and Zach see an unusually big crowd in the street. Lily realizes that the people have come out to see Jack Palance. Zach tells Lily to wait in the honey wagon while he goes into the store to buy a radiator. Lily senses that something will go wrong.

Just as Lily is about to talk to August about Deborah, something gets in the way (again). This increases the suspense, as Kidd has been building up to the moment when August and Lily talk about Deborah for so many long. Lily's feeling now explicitly foreshadows tragedy to come.

Lily watches as Zach crosses the street to go to the store. He greets a trio of his friends, one of whom shouts that Jack Palance isn't coming to Tiburon at all. A group of white men, one of whom is carrying a shovel, hears this, and walks toward Zach and his friends. One member of the trio—a boy named Jackson, Lily later learns—hits one of the white men with his soda bottle. An even bigger group of white men rushes over to Zach and his friends, demanding to know who used the bottle as a weapon. None of the boys speak, even though the group promises to let the other three go if they reveal the perpetrator.

This scene is an interesting variation on the scene from Chapter 2 in which Rosaleen stands up to the three white bullies. Here, Zach and his friends refuse to incriminate each other: even though it's in their self-interest to give up Jackson (who technically was the aggressor here), they have such a strong sense of loyalty that they stand in solidarity together.

Lily watches as the police arrest Zach and his friends. Horrified, Lily runs back to the Boatwright house (Zach had the keys to the honey wagon) and finds August, Neil, Clayton Forrest, and Rosaleen gathered together: Zach has used his one phone call to alert Forrest to his arrest, and Forrest has spread the word. Forrest explains that the judge is out of town, meaning that Zach has no choice but to spend the next five days in jail. August's eyes have a "fire inside them."

Zach, no less than Rosaleen, is the victim of an unjust law system. Although the police are technically just doing their job—arresting a group of people who were involved in a violent act—they're actually just upholding the racist status quo. They treat Zach and his friends unnecessarily harshly, holding them in jail for almost a week, and make no effort to bring in the white bullies who antagonized Jackson.

Lily goes to the jailhouse, along with August. August tells the jailer, a man named Eddie Hazelwurst, that she's Zach's godmother. He allows August and Lily to see Zach for five minutes. In his cell, Lily finds that Zach looks frightened and uncertain. August tries to calm him by telling him about the **bees** on the farm. Zach asks Lily if she's been writing in her notebook. Lily wants to touch Zach's face, but knows that she must not. Instead, she tells Zach that she'll put his experience in a story.

This scene is an apt metaphor for the relationship between Zach and Lily: although they like each other, there are "bars" between them, symbolizing the racist beliefs of Southern society at the time. As a result, Lily knows that she can't give into her feelings for Zach, or else she'd be endangering his life.

For the next few days, the Boatwright house is desperate for any news about Zach. Nobody tells May what's happened, for fear that she'll go to the **stone wall** again. Unfortunately, she answers a phone call from Zach's mother, and learns about Zach's imprisonment. Eerily calm, May goes to the wall to put a new slip of paper in the cracks.

We've wondered what's going to happen to May when she can't contain any more tragedy, and based on this scene, May is getting close to that breaking point. The Boatwright sisters try their best to keep May happy, but in the end it's impossible to keep May sheltered from the reality of the world's evils.

CHAPTER 10

The book on **bees** informs us that a bee's life is very short—most worker bees die in less than 4 weeks.

This signals that we're reading a chapter about death—though whose we don't know.

Lily sits in the kitchen with August, June, and Rosaleen while May goes to the **stone wall**. May doesn't return for a very long time, and eventually the others go out to get her. They look for her, but she's nowhere to be found. Lily senses that something is very wrong. The group wanders farther and farther from the house, shouting May's name. June says, "The police are on their way," indicating that she's called the police. Suddenly, August calls, "Over here."

It's very telling that the Boatwright sisters immediately assume the worst about May: June doesn't hesitate to call the police, even though we've already seen that the police can't be trusted to fairly handle cases involving black people. The Boatwrights know May well enough to recognize when something is wrong, and since she's unstable and has a tragic past, they're right to assume that she's in danger.

The group rushes toward August's voice, and find August standing near a stream. They see May lying underwater with a huge river stone on her chest. The stone weighs down her body, preventing her from breathing or floating to the surface. June and August rush into the water and try to lift the stone off May's body, but they're too late: as they pull May to the shore, she doesn't move. August whispers, "We've lost her." Lily imagines May rolling the rock, holding it tight, and then jumping into the water to kill herself. June says, "It's just like April." Overwhelmed, Lily vomits.

In the end, May can't live in a world as depressing as racist America in the 1960s. Although she is happy and content with her sisters, she is incapable of filtering out the tragedies occurring outside their home, as June and August sometimes seem able to do. Instead, May absorbs all the suffering of the outside world, and dies when she can't take any more.

Lily and Rosaleen sit in the police station, being questioned by Eddie Hazelwurst. After the group discovered May's suicide, Lily explains, the police arrived and took May's body for an autopsy. Hazelwurst insisted on talking to everyone, including Lily and Rosaleen. Lily is forced to tell Hazelwurst the same lie she told August: she's an orphan trying to make it to Virginia. Hazelwurst accepts Lily's story, though he wonders why she's staying with black people, and suggests that she find a "white family." Rosaleen claims that August is her husband's cousin—Lily is impressed with Rosaleen's ability to lie under pressure.

Throughout the book, Lily is forced to repeat the lie she told August: i.e., that she's an orphan trying to get to Virginia. Every time Lily repeats this lie, she seems to come closer to admitting the truth about herself: that she's desperate for information about Deborah (as we'll see in the following section). Here we're also reminded of Southern society's fear of any "mixing" between blacks and white—segregation is still the norm, even though the Civil Rights Act has just been passed..

In the days following May's suicide, the police perform an autopsy, and August organizes a public vigil for her sister. August explains to Lily that the vigil will help May get into Heaven as quickly as possible. Leading up to the vigil, the Boatwrights bring May's body—which is pale, and dressed in **blue**—into their home. As she stares at May's lifeless body, Lily thinks that this was the woman who taught her mother how to lure roaches. Lily feels a powerful urge to confess who she really is to August, but keeps this secret hidden for now. She imagines May greeting Deborah in Heaven, and prays that May will convince Deborah to send Lily a sign that Deborah loves her.

Given what we've learned from August about the importance of ritual, it's possible to interpret May's vigil in a number of different ways. While one could say that the Daughters of Mary are literally trying to get May into Heaven, it seems more likely that they're performing their vigil to reach spiritual truth; in other words, they're celebrating May's memory to reach their own peace. One implication of this is that each person interprets May's death in a different way. For Lily, May's death is a powerful reminder of the urgency of her own quest to learn about her own mother.

The next morning, Zach comes home—he's been released from jail because a witness convinced the police that he hadn't done anything wrong. Forrest comes to the house to greet Zach and give his condolences to the Boatwrights about May. August embraces Forrest and thanks him for his concern. After Forrest leaves, August murmurs that if she'd told May about Zach's arrest upfront, May wouldn't have killed herself—a suggestion that everyone dismisses as foolish.

So far, August has seemed like a completely (and almost unrealistically) confident and calm woman, with a wise saying for every occasion. Here, however, Kidd humanizes August more by showing that she has the same feelings of guilt and self-doubt that beset Lily. It's suggested that it's healthier to confront tragedy head-on and try to work through it, rather than denying or avoiding it.

August takes Zach and Lily to "drape the hives"—cover them with a veil in honor to May. The purpose of this tradition, August explains, is to prevent the **bees** from flying away after a death in the family. She also tells Lily the story of Aristaeus, supposedly the first beekeeper. One day, all of Aristaeus's bees died—a bad sign from the Greek gods. The gods ordered Aristaeus to sacrifice a bull to apologize. Nine days after Aristaeus sacrificed the bull, a new swarm of bees flew out of the bull's carcass. As a result, the Greeks built their tombs in the shapes of beehives to symbolize resurrection.

Throughout the novel, bees come to symbolize different things. Here, for instance, they symbolize the constant "migration of souls"—the concepts of resurrection or reincarnation. More abstractly, August's story about the bees signals that Lily is about to experience a "rebirth" of her own, as she makes the decision to talk through her feelings about Deborah instead of keeping them inside her.

The Daughters of **Mary** arrive at the Boatwright house with food for May's vigil. At the vigil, a guest named Queenie jokes that May's body looks so good they should hang it in a drive-by window at the funeral home. Lily says that they could hang May's body in a bank window, and the guests reply that banks are for whites only. Later, Lily realizes how important this exchange was: it shows that she's no longer an alien "white person"—she's one of the Daughters.

This scene is important but also problematic in several ways. Kidd shows Lily symbolically becoming a Daughter of Mary through her friendship and community with the other women—but this milestone also only takes place in Lily's own mind. Lily's only basis for the fact that she's not considered a "white person" anymore is the fact that the Daughters don't feel ashamed criticizing other white people in front of her. This certainly shows how comfortable they are with Lily now, and how beloved she is in the house, but it's still a huge leap to say that because of this, Lily can now truly understand the experience of the Daughters of Mary and become one of them. A white person cannot just "try on" black culture for a few weeks and then consider themselves black (as with any two cultures, particularly those that differ so greatly in terms of historical power and oppression).

On the second morning of the vigil, August finds that May left a suicide note underneath an oak tree. In the note addressed to August and June, May apologizes for leaving, but says that she'll be with their family very soon. She ends the note, "It's my time to die, and it's your time to live." August and June take the note as a mandate to celebrate life and be happy with their time on earth. August insists that June marry Neil—she explains that June has always been afraid of love.

Here Kidd alludes to the famous verse from the Biblical Book of Ecclesiastes: "To everything there is a season … a time to live and a time to die …" By honoring and even celebrating death, the Daughters learn how to embrace life, too. Life is short, meaning that people should make the most of their time and "seize the day."

The vigil goes on for 4 days. At the end of this time, the funeral home comes to pick up May's body to be buried, and Lily goes outside to listen to the sound of the **bees** humming in their hives. She thinks that they sound like "souls flying away."

Lily demonstrates the principle that August described: even if the bees don't literally sound like souls (what does a soul sound like, anyway?), there is a spiritual truth to this concept, because Lily privately associates the bees with May's soul going to Heaven.

CHAPTER 11

After May is buried, August stops making honey, and she and June eat their meals alone in their rooms. Lily feels a strong need to talk to August, but can't find the courage to do so. Instead, she spends all her time writing in her notebook.

The irony of the novel is that after 200 pages of supposedly searching for information about Deborah, Lily now can't pluck up the courage to directly ask August about Deborah. Finding and facing the truth is difficult.

Neil now comes to the Boatwright house all the time, and June and Neil go for car rides together. Zach visits, and on one visit Lily asks him if they'd be dating if she were a black girl. Zach replies that since Lily can't change the color of her skin, they'll have to "change the world" instead. He tells Lily about the Malcolm X supporters arming themselves with guns across the U.S., fighting back against the Ku Klux Klan.

This scene is Zach's optimism in a nutshell. Instead of becoming weighed down by the pain and persecution of racism (as May was), Zach has enough youthful hope to "rise above" adversity. Even if it's impossible to defeat racism here and now, Zach wants to fight it with gradual, prolonged change.

One day, Lily finds Rosaleen in the kitchen setting the table for four. Lily is pleased, since this means that the group is going to have a meal together. The meal is fun and lively, and when it's over everyone goes to the parlor to pray to the **Virgin Mary**. Afterwards, August touches the statue and sighs, "Well that's that."

Instead of repressing or denying their sadness, the Boatwright sisters acknowledge and even celebrate their own feelings. This is the healthiest way to deal with grief—eventually, everyone succeeds in moving on with their lives.

Although Lily has been staying in May's old room with Rosaleen, she decides to sleep in the honey house that night. That night in the honey house, Lily decides she's going to show August the picture of her mother.

Although Lily never says this, it's implied that August's response to May's death inspires Lily to talk to August. If August can "work through" May's death, then perhaps Lily can work through Deborah's death with August's help.

The next morning, Lily wakes up and goes downstairs, where June tells her that today is August 15—the Feast of Assumption (a Catholic holiday celebrating the **Virgin Mary** and her ascension to Heaven). Lily explains that at her usual church, "we don't really allow Mary." June says that the Feast of Assumption is "Mary Day" in the Boatwright House: the day the sisters celebrate Our Lady of Chains.

Based on what we've seen, "we don't really allow Mary" is a pretty apt critique of Lily's church: i.e., Lily's church represses any explicit celebration of femininity, blackness, or motherhood. It's especially fitting that "Mary Day" comes so soon after May's death, allowing the Daughters a chance to reaffirm their own beliefs and lives in the wake of tragedy.

There's a knock on the door—it's Neil. June asks Neil what he's doing here: she can tell that he's feeling nervous. Neil says that he's come to ask June to marry him, "for the 100th time." June is taken aback that Neil is asking her in front of other people. But after a moment of silence, she replies, "All right. Let's get married." Neil kisses June on the mouth and takes her to pick out a ring immediately.

Lily isn't the only one inspired by May's death. June has realized that there's no point in cutting herself off from other people: she should give into her desires for Neil, and claim happiness for herself by marrying him. The close companionship of the three sisters has now been broken, however, so there is something tragic even in the joy June and Neil experience.

The rest of the Boatwright house proceeds with work for **Mary** Day, overjoyed by June's good news. Lily makes garlands all day, and the Boatwrights offer to make Lily a hat for the festivities. Lily accepts, on the condition that it's **blue**. In the evening, Zach and the Daughters arrive at the house, and everyone celebrates Mary Day together. They eat honey cakes and retell the tale of Our Lady of Chains. June feeds Lily a honey cake and says, "I'm sorry for being so hard on you when you first got here."

There's a sense of healing and maturation in this section. June and Lily put aside their differences—indeed, it's implied that June's dislike with Lily partly reflected her own insecurities and personal problems. Moreover, Lily gets her own hat, another symbol of her maturation and her acceptance into the Daughters of Mary (something important but also problematic, as discussed in the previous chapter). And of course, Lily's hat is blue, the color of Mary.

In the late evening, Zach and Lily take a walk outside. They walk by a stream, and Lily thinks about taking off her clothing and bathing in the stream. She tells Zach about a day from her childhood when a group of boys mocked her and made her wear a "fish necklace." Zach admits to Lily that sometimes he's angry at the world, just as Lily was angry on that day. Lily makes Zach promise her that he'll never take out his anger on other people. Zach responds by kissing Lily on the lips. He tells her, "We can't be together," but swears that one day, they will be. He gives Lily the dogtag he wears around his neck, and she decides to wear it around her own neck from now on.

Zach and Lily's kiss promises everything—but not right now. Zach and Lily know that they need to be "strategic" with their desires: even though they like each other, they know that their lives would be harder if they were to date (Zach could even be arrested or killed). This is the opposite of the attitude Rosaleen showed when she stood up to the trio of white bullies—there was nothing "strategic" about her decision to do so. Lily adopts a different approach (probably because she doesn't have Rosaleen's understandable anger at a lifetime of oppression): she sacrifices her happiness now so that she can have a better life later. On the part of both Lily and Zach, this is a sign of maturity and restraint lacking in many teenaged romances.

CHAPTER 12

This chapter's epigraph is about how the life of a queen **bee** is very hard. She doesn't always know how to take care of her "children," and she spends her entire life in the dark.

For most of the book, Kidd has shown us strong, nurturing mother-daughter relationships. Now she's about to show us the opposite.

Lily sits in August's room, waiting to ask her about Deborah. She's only been here once before: this time, she notices that everything is **blue**. She also sees an aquarium that contains honeycomb. Lily finds a book on August's shelf, called *Mary Through the Ages*. Inside, she finds depictions of the **Virgin Mary** from various eras. One image strikes her, because it shows Mary being given a lily.

The image of Mary with the lily has obvious significance for Lily, considering her name. One interpretation of this picture would also be that Lily is finally about to confront her relationship with her mother—her own "Virgin Mary." It's also notable that everything in August's room is blue: the color of Mary, and Lily's favorite color.

August enters the room and finds Lily waiting for her. Lily reminds August that August wanted to have a talk with her soon, and August nods: she remembers. Lily shows August the photograph of her mother, and August replies, "Your mother was Deborah Fontanel Owens." August explains that she knew that Lily was Deborah's daughter as soon as she laid eyes on her, but never revealed the truth to Lily, because Lily wasn't ready to face the truth. Lily, stunned, tells August that May—before her suicide—told her that Deborah had stayed in the honey house.

Essentially the plot of The Secret Life of Bees *is built around an incredible coincidence. Lily happens to find her way to the house of August Boatwright, the woman who took care of Deborah years before, and August immediately recognizes the family resemblance. If there's ever a confirmation of divine providence in the book, it's now: there are so many coincidences in the book that they imply a "cosmic plan."*

August tries to tell Lily everything. Years ago, she says, she worked as a maid in Deborah's house in Richmond. Deborah was a lively child, though a bad student. Before August says anything more about Deborah, she asks Lily to tell her the truth about her own parents. Lily confesses that she's been lying: her father, T. Ray, isn't dead, as she'd claimed. She also tells August that T. Ray told her that Deborah was going to leave the family forever: this is why she decided to leave Sylvan. As she says this, Lily bursts into tears. August embraces Lily and tells her to "let it out."

Chapter 12 is constructed as a series of confessions. In part, August is confessing to Lily, but in a surprising turn of events, Lily begins to confess to August. The principle of confession—a quintessential Christian ritual—is that talking through one's pain and guilt is the best way to move past it. Thus, like a Catholic priest hearing confession, August encourages Lily to "let it out." By voicing her fears and insecurities, Lily can gain a measure of control over them, even if doing so is by no means easy.

After she's finished crying, Lily explains the rest of her story: she and Rosaleen snuck out of Sylvan after Rosaleen went to jail for trying to register to vote. As she admits this to August, she begins crying again. Lily thinks to herself that she's a bad person: a liar and a thief, full of hate for other people. Reluctantly, Lily tells August the truth: she believes herself to be responsible for her mother's death. As she says this, she says, "I am unlovable."

Lily's insistence that she's a hateful, unlovable person is a surprising non sequitur—Lily's not perfect by any means, but "hateful" doesn't really come to mind when describing her, and she's often felt entitled to love and care. Perhaps what Lily means is that she's consumed with self-hatred: she can't stand the fact that she might have been the cause of her mother's death. Her simple statement "I am unlovable," while a powerful condensation of anxiety and depression, likewise doesn't seem to fit what we know of the character.

August comforts Lily, telling her that everyone loves her—even June, who resented Deborah. Confused, Lily asks August what she means. August explains that June, who also worked as a maid in Deborah's house, resented having to work for white people. Lily feels "all this love coming to me," and realizes that she's not only loved, but loved deeply.

August utterly rejects Lily's statement, and in response "floods" Lily with the knowledge that she's a lovable person. This is one moment when the importance of maternal love really sinks in: Lily is surrounded by women who love her deeply, to the point that even she can see the irrationality of her feelings. Lily is now experiencing (although on a different scale) what the Daughters of Mary seek in their religion. Society has told the Daughters that they are unlovable, and so they find comfort and strength in the unequivocal love of the Virgin Mary.

August takes Lily outside for "a little breather." Outside, Lily gives August the "missing piece" of the story: the picture of the **Virgin Mary** that Deborah carried around. August explains that she gave Deborah the picture shortly before her death—Deborah must have written the city and state on the back as a record. August is astonished that Lily was able to find her so easily—she says, "I swear, it makes me think you were *meant* to find us."

August's suggestion for a "little breather" is almost amusing, but also calm and wise, and puts things in perspective even when Lily is experiencing great inner turmoil. Even in the depths of her pain, Lily has a sense that everything is going to be all right—there's a plan to her suffering. August's statement that Lily was meant to be here sums up the last 200 pages of the book: many times, we've gotten the sense that Lily was guided on her journey.

August explains her relationship with Deborah. She worked for Deborah's mother beginning in 1931. Deborah had an active imagination, and even had an imaginary friend. Lily points out that she and her mother aren't alike at all, but August disagrees—she points out that Deborah, like Lily, had a rebellious and adventurous streak.

Lily's kinship with Deborah is at once a source of strength and a source of weakness—something that'll become very important in the next two chapters.

When August moved to South Carolina to work as a teacher, August explains, Deborah cried like a child, even though she was 19 years old: she loved August dearly. Shortly after August left, Deborah's mother died. Deborah moved to South Carolina, telling August, "I don't have anyone left but you." Deborah moved to South Carolina, but instead of moving to Tiburon, she married T. Ray in Sylvan. Lily can't understand why Deborah would marry a man like T. Ray, but August explains that sometimes people change over time—T. Ray was a different kind of person when he married Deborah. August also tells Lily that Deborah chose to marry T. Ray because she was pregnant with Lily. Lily is horrified by this news, because it means that *she* was the reason Deborah entered an unhappy marriage—Lily was an unwanted baby. August insists that Deborah always loved Lily. When Deborah used to call August to talk, she'd always talk about Lily.

For all Lily's protests, she's quite a lot like her mother. In the absence of a strong family, both Deborah and Lily turn to black women for love and comfort (and again the criticism could be made that the black characters exist seemingly just to teach lessons to or support the white characters). August presents T. Ray as a disruptive force in Deborah's life, interfering with the nurturing relationship between Deborah and August, and yet T. Ray isn't just a stereotypical abusive father—he's presented surprisingly sympathetically. But even though Lily is learning to forgive T. Ray, she's immediately faced with a new set of challenges. Lily has always struggled with her guilt and low self-esteem, and now she only seems to be getting more evidence to reinforce those feelings.

August tells Lily that Deborah visited her in Tiburon shortly before her death. Deborah told August that she was planning to leave T. Ray soon—she'd been very depressed lately. Lily is sad to hear this about her mother: after a life spent worshipping Deborah, she tells August, she now finds that she feels only hate for her. August, shocked to hear Lily speaking like this, insists that Deborah shouldn't be blamed for what she did: she was depressed, and "depressed people do things they wouldn't ordinarily do." August explains that Deborah's plan was to divorce T. Ray and then take care of Lily. Lily realizes that on the day Deborah died, she was trying to take Lily out of Sylvan with her.

There's a delicate balance between forgiving other people and forgiving oneself, and August cleverly navigates between these two acts. August is a highly sensitive woman, and she can sense that Lily feels guilty for "locking" her mother into a loveless marriage. August urges Lily to forgive her mother for abandoning her, since nobody's perfect. The further implication of this is that Lily needs to forgive herself as well—we all make mistakes.

Lily, overwhelmed by everything she's learned, goes to bed. August kisses her forehead and tells her, "We're all so human. Your mother made a terrible mistake, but she tried to fix it."

August's words sum up everything that's happened in the chapter so far: the crux of her point is that we must forgive ourselves and forgive other people.

CHAPTER 13

In this chapter's epigraph, we learn that worker **bees**, despite their small size, can fly carrying objects that weigh more than they do.

Kidd alludes to the idea of a burden as the psychological baggage that Lily carries with her.

Alone in her room, Lily cries into her pillow. She wonders, "where do I go from here?" She decides to pray before the **Virgin Mary** statue. Downstairs, she sees the statue, glowing in red candlelight. Lily tries to tell herself not to be angry, but of course this doesn't work: she's still angry with Deborah for leaving her as a small child. Furious, Lily throws a tin bucket against the wall. Then she throws jars of honey against the wall. She wishes she could crawl inside the statue "in a secret world of consolation."

In this passage, Lily tries to use the lessons August has taught her to rid herself of anger. But of course, "rid yourself of anger" is easier said than done. Lily knows she's being childish, but this knowledge by itself doesn't do anything to make her feel better. The implicit ingredient in August's "remedy" for self-hatred is time. *As with May's death, it takes time to get over tragedy.*

The next morning, Rosaleen wakes Lily up and asks her what happened downstairs—sheepishly, Lily admits she broke some honey jars. Rosaleen points out that Lily is bleeding—she's cut herself on a jar without realizing it. Rosaleen takes Lily and repairs the cut with Mercurochrome and a Band-Aid. As Rosaleen treats the wound, Lily tells her what she's learned about August and Deborah. Rosaleen nods—she didn't know for sure that Deborah was leaving the family on the day she died, but she'd suspected as much. Rosaleen confesses that she remembers Deborah's three-month absence (the time when she stayed in the honey house, Lily recognizes). Lily demands to know why Rosaleen never told her about this. Rosaleen replies, sadly, that she didn't want to hurt Lily.

This is one of the only conversations Lily has with Rosaleen in the second half of the book. It's heartbreaking to read that Rosaleen knew about Lily's mother this entire time—she preserved the illusion that Deborah was a wonderful parent. There's a lot of wisdom in Rosaleen's decision to do so—one could even say that it illustrates the concept of "spiritual truth" once again. Thus, even if Deborah wasn't always the best parent, Rosaleen acknowledges that Lily's idea *that Deborah was a good mother has its own importance.*

In the afternoon, the Daughters of **Mary** come to the Boatwright house bearing food for the second day of the Assumption celebration. At the Daughters' potluck, Lily asks August to tell Zach about Deborah as soon as she can—August agrees. For the rest of the afternoon, everyone celebrates the Assumption. Lily is grateful for this, because it takes her mind off her mother.

It's very telling that Lily wants August to pass on the news of Deborah to Zach. This is a mark of Lily's closeness with Zach, but also a hint that she's trying to heal herself of her guilt and hatred—rather than keep the information a secret any longer, she wants to "share the load" with as many trusted friends as possible.

The Daughters gather around the **Mary** statue and bathe it in honey: each woman covers her hands in the honey and then smears the statue with it. August explains that honey is a preservative—by covering the statue with it, the Daughters are symbolically preserving it for another year. Lily enjoys dipping her hands in honey—she feels like she's wearing a pair of gloves that she can use to preserve whatever she touches.

This is a symbolically loaded moment. In a chapter that's largely about the importance of moving on and healing, Kidd makes an important distinction: moving past one's problems does not *mean forgetting about them altogether. On the contrary, it's important to remember tragedy and "preserve" it for the future, in order to learn from it and appreciate one's emotional progress.*

Later, August comes to Lily's room with the **blue** hat she's promised Lily. She also gives Lily a box containing some of Deborah's old things. There's a mirror, along with an old whale pin and a brush that still contains some of Deborah's hair. Lily decides to wear the whale pin. August also shows Lily a book of poetry that belonged to Deborah. Lily notices one poem in the book, William Blake's "The Sick Rose," and she decides that Deborah was a sick rose.

Lily's decision to wear the whale pin reflects her attempts to make an uneasy peace with her mother. The poem Kidd alludes to in this section involves a mysterious "invisible worm" that destroys a rose's happiness. If Deborah is the rose, then the worm who disrupts her "crimson joy" is perhaps T. Ray, or even Deborah's own depression.

The final item August gives Lily is a photograph of Lily—as a baby—with Deborah. Lily is awestruck by this image, because it lets her know that her mother loved her greatly. She remembers praying that May would make it to Heaven and tell Deborah to send a sign that Lily was loved. Clearly, Lily's prayers have been answered.

Kidd's novel revolves around ambiguous images, and the photograph of Lily with her mother is yet another. It doesn't eliminate Lily's fears altogether, and yet it somehow reassures Lily that she wasn't a burden to Deborah.

CHAPTER 14

The last chapter's epigraph is about a hive of **bees** without a queen. A "queen-less colony" is sad and mournful, but when a new queen is introduced, "extravagant change" occurs.

In the final epigraph of the book, Kidd suggests that Lily is letting go of a "queen"—perhaps Deborah—and accepting a new one instead.

It's August, and the days are hot. Lily finds it impossible to forgive her mother for abandoning her. She knows she's being foolish, but nothing she tells herself can sway her heart. She tries to laugh at her mother, forget her mother, etc.—but nothing works: she keeps coming back to the fact that Deborah abandoned her to go to Tiburon.

Lily has made a lot of progress in the last two chapters, but she's certainly not healed of her pain altogether. She still isn't sure if she killed her mother (although it seems that T. Ray already affirmed that she did), and she's doesn't really know what kind of woman her mother was (apparently, a woman who was capable of abandoning a child for three months).

June sets a date for her wedding: October 10. It occurs to Lily that she needs to leave Tiburon soon. She's confessed to August that she's a runaway, and she knows August is expecting her to move on soon. Meanwhile, Rosaleen tells Lily that she's going to register to vote. Lily is nervous, since Rosaleen is technically a fugitive. But eventually she decides that there's no problem with Rosaleen registering. Rosaleen goes into town, and while she's away, Lily thinks that she's extremely proud of Rosaleen.

We're coming full-circle: Rosaleen is registering to vote once again, just as she did in the first chapter of the book. In the first chapter, Lily insisted on accompanying Rosaleen, like a condescending babysitter. This time, however, Lily doesn't come with her, reflecting her greater trust and understanding of her friend.

Lily calls Zach. Zach tells her that August has told him about Lily's past, and he says he's sorry for everything. Lily admits that she'll have to go back to her father soon. Zach tells Lily he's enrolled in the white high school for next year—he'll be the first student there to break the color line. Lily realizes that both she and Zach are "doomed to misery."

Zach is helping take baby steps toward ending racism. Not coincidentally, he begins in the world of education. In the 1960s, schools were being forcibly desegregated, often at gunpoint, leading black students to study with white peers.

Rosaleen returns to the house, having registered to vote. As Rosaleen returns, Lily tells her, "I love you," without knowing why she's saying it. That night, as she falls asleep, Lily thinks about how nobody—especially not her mother—is perfect, since the human heart is a "puzzle."

Lily has gotten to the point where she can express her love for another person without thinking twice about it. Because she's been surrounded by loving women for so long now, love is second nature to her. By loving others, Lily also trains herself to forgive her mother for her bad behavior.

The next day, Lily goes to meet August by the beehives. August shows Lily a beehive that's missing a queen **bee**. As they look at the hive, August reminds Lily of the story of the runaway nun. The point of the story, August claims, was that in Deborah's absence, the Lady of Chains could be a mother for Lily. She adds that **Mary** isn't just a statue: she's something *inside* Lily. Lily doesn't understand what August means. Then, she closes her eyes, and for a few moments, feels exactly what August is talking about. When she opens her eyes again, August is gone, and she's alone with the beehives.

The strength and weakness of a parable is that it's so open to interpretation. Here, we see that the parable of the nun was really a story about the importance of the mother-daughter relationship, and the need for motherly love in one's life. August clarifies what she's been implying all along: in one aspect, religion is important because it helps people to love themselves and find a greater inner peace. Once again Lily experiences a kind of spiritual awakening among the beehives.

The next day, there's a knock at the door. Lily is surprised to find that T. Ray is standing outside. Angrily, T. Ray says that he's spent half his summer looking for Lily, and now it's time for her to go home. He notices the statue of **Mary**, and calls it "something from the junkyard." Lily quietly asks T. Ray how she found him. He explains that he was able to trace the call Lily placed from Clayton Forrest's office.

Kidd ties off the final "loose end" of the novel: T. Ray. It's significant that T. Ray compares the beloved statue of the Virgin Mary to garbage—spiritually, he's so out of the loop on religion, love, and forgiveness that the statue literally looks *different to him. Alternatively, this might also show how the reverence and love the Daughters have for Mary has transformed the statue from "trash" into "treasure."*

T. Ray asks where Rosaleen is, and Lily lies and says Rosaleen has already left the house. Then T. Ray notices the whale pin Lily is wearing. Lily, seeing his surprise, explains that Deborah used to stay in this house. T. Ray is furious, and he hits Lily. She falls to the floor. He screams, "How dare you leave me!" and then mutters, "Deborah, you're not leaving me again."

Here T. Ray appears at his most abusive, but also his most pitiable. Clearly, T. Ray's life was wrecked by Deborah's death. He's still in love with his wife, and yet he takes out his suffering on Lily, his daughter—even confusing the names of the two women.

T. Ray starts to drag Lily toward the door, calling her Deborah, much to Lily's confusion. Instead of fighting back, Lily calls T. Ray, "Daddy," and says that she's sorry for running away from home. To her surprise, T. Ray begins to cry.

Lily realizes that the best response when her father treats her aggressively is to not fight back at all. Just as Lily has been trying to forgive Deborah and forgive herself, so she forgives T. Ray—and thus breaks through his rough defenses.

T. Ray tells Lily that it's time to go home, but Lily refuses to leave—she explains that she's staying with August Boatwright, a "good woman." Right on cue, August enters the room, followed by the Daughters of **Mary**. Lily notices that they're looking aggressive, as if daring T. Ray to try to take Lily away. T. Ray mutters, "Good riddance," and walks out of the house.

The tables have turned: at the beginning of the book, T. Ray was the master of his house, and seemed like a strong, mature man to Lily. Now, Lily and her female friends are the powerful, mature ones.

T. Ray walks to his truck, which is parked outside, and prepares to drive away. Suddenly, Lily comes running out of the house and cries, "Stop!" Lily asks T. Ray, point-blank, what happened the day her mother died. T. Ray replies that it was Lily who shot Deborah. It was an accident, he knows, but Lily shot her. With these words, T. Ray drives off, slowly. Lily will always remember standing outside the house, watching him drive away.

Despite everything, Lily is still feeling guilty about the possibility that she killed her mother. Now, however, it's inspiring to see Lily ask her father, point-blank, for the truth about Deborah: it shows that Lily is ready to accept her own mistakes and forgive herself. Once again T. Ray is shown to leave his daughter immediately after delivering a "bombshell" truth.

In the months to come, Lily continues to stay with the Boatwrights. She decorates her room with **blue**, and goes to the Daughters of **Mary** meetings. Forrest tells Lily that he's "working things out" in Sylvan, so that neither Rosaleen nor Lily has to serve jail time. Lily makes friends with Forrest's daughter, Becca. Becca notices Lily's whalebone pin, and Lily senses that soon she'll be in a state of mind where she can lend the pin to Becca. Lily goes to the local high school with Zach and Becca. Although she's unpopular for spending so much time with a black boy, she doesn't mind.

Lily now seems to have gotten exactly what she wished—she isn't forced to return with T. Ray, and she has a new home, dominated by femininity (as symbolized by the predominance of the color blue). It's significant that Lily isn't quite out of the woods yet, however: she's not quite in a state of mind where she can part with her whalebone pin (and, symbolically, her complex feelings for her mother), even if Lily can tell that she will be soon. This reinforces one of Kidd's most important points: faith and forgiveness aren't programs with concrete conclusions—rather, they're part of an ongoing process.

Lily spends much of her time writing down what's happened to her. She thinks about the day T. Ray left her, and about the statue of **Mary**—a woman who lives inside her. Lily concludes that she is lucky: she has many, many mothers. She compares the mothers to "**moons** shining over me."

Lily isn't totally healed, but she can count on the love and support of the incredible group of women who live in the Boatwrights' house. Kidd brings up the moon as an image of femininity again as she concludes with this optimistic finale—essentially Lily lives "happily ever after."

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Arn, Jackson. "*The Secret Life of Bees*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 28 Mar 2016. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Arn, Jackson. "*The Secret Life of Bees*." LitCharts LLC, March 28, 2016. Retrieved April 21, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-secret-life-of-bees.

To cite any of the quotes from *The Secret Life of Bees* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Kidd, Sue Monk. The Secret Life of Bees. Penguin Books. 2003.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Kidd, Sue Monk. The Secret Life of Bees. New York: Penguin Books. 2003.