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A CRITICAL STUDY OF SUE MONK KIDD'S *THE SECRET LIFE OF BEES*

by

JOY A. HEBERT

Under the Direction of Pearl McHaney

ABSTRACT

Sue Monk Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees* (2002) tells the story of a motherless fourteen-year-old Lily Owens, raised by a cruel father, who desperately searches for clues to unlock her mother's past. Kidd's bildungsroman reveals the incredible power of black women, particularly a group of beekeeping sisters and a black Mary, to create a safe haven where Lily can examine her fragmented life and develop psychologically, finally becoming a self-actualized young lady. Lily's matriarchal world of influence both compares and contrasts with the patriarchal world represented in Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,* exposing the matriarchy's aptly structured ways of providing a more healing environment than is Huck Finn's. Kidd's novel also showcases the stylistic strategies of first person narrative point of view, language, dialect, and the motif of place in order to contextualize the social awareness and psychological development Lily gains through her journey.

INDEX WORDS: Sue Monk Kidd, *The Secret Life of Bees,* Bildungsroman, Lily Owens, Black women, Black Mary, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Stylistics, Race

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JOY A. HEBERT

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

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2011

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August 2011

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate my thesis to my precious parents, Miryam and Henry Hebert, whose love and support enable me to chase my dreams of teaching and impacting lives. You are the greatest teachers I have ever encountered. Thanks for your always endearing friendship and legacy.

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I would like to begin by thanking all of the incredible English teachers I have encountered along my journey that brought literature and language to life in new and exciting ways for me. I celebrate Hazel Porterfield, my fifth-grade teacher, who taught me that my English was atrocious and that I could diagram a sentence; Glenda Hagan, my middle-school English teacher, whose teaching of grammar was most instructive and whose reading of *Enoch* still gives me chills; Mrs. London in high school, who brought Shakespeare to life through poetry recitation and plays; and Connie Douglas in college, who convinced me that I would miss half my life if I did not pursue the London Overseas Semester. In my masters program at Georgia State, I thank Tom McHaney for bringing Faulkner to life for me and inviting me into his dark Southern Gothic. Thank you Pearl McHaney for exposing me to the brilliant poetry of Natasha Tretheway and other great Southern poets and for encouraging me to explore a virtually unanalyzed yet brilliant Southern novel, *The Secret Life of Bees*. Thank you for believing in the merit of Sue Monk Kidd's rhetoric and my ideas on it. And thank you for all the long hours of reading and revision you completed to see this project through. Your positive, genuine spirit provides inspiration. I would also like to thank the incredible Southern women, black and white alike, who create environments where the young Lilys of the world can sort through their psychological upheavals and find rest and strength. Finally, I want to thank my Heavenly Father, whose grace and mercy through this writing process has allowed focus, clarity, and perseverance.

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INTRODUCTION

Translated into more than twenty-three languages and enthusiastically received by critics, Sue Monk Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees* (2002) tells the story of a motherless fourteen-year-old, raised by a cruel father, who desperately searches for clues to unlock her mother's past, knowledge that she believes will help create her own identity. Similar to America's classic bildungsroman, Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Secret Life of Bees* portrays a young, naïve protagonist who begins her journey to self-hood in the company of a sympathetic but also threatened black caregiver. What they find on the doorsteps of three black bee-keeping sisters serves as the catalyst for the white girl's growth. As Twain addressed many of the social indictments of his time through Huckleberry Finn's experiences with Jim, so, too, does Kidd identify parallel struggles through her main character Lily Owens and her accomplice and traveling companion Rosaleen. Yet, Kidd moves beyond the patriarchal world of Huck Finn to reveal that what Lily Owens requires to be self-actualized, unlike Huck Finn, is not an accepting surrogate father but a community of strong black women typified by Rosaleen and August, the oldest and wisest bee-keeping sister, both surrogate mothers. These women create an environment of nurture and safety that frees Lily to examine her fragmented life and begin to achieve self-hood.

Born and raised in the tiny town of Sylvester, Georgia, Sue Monk Kidd credits her "father's imaginative stories" as the fuel for her writing passion (Biography 2007). During her teenage years, Kidd began writing stories and keeping journals after much encouragement from English teachers, but it was Thoreau's *Walden* and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* that profoundly impacted her ideology. After success writing inspirational articles for *Guideposts* during her thirties, Kidd began to experience an "intellectual and spiritual flowering," studying

classics of Western spirituality and philosophy, particularly becoming influenced by monk and poet Thomas Merton and Swiss psychiatrist C. G. Jung (Biography 2007). In her forties, having written three books of spiritual memoir, Kidd was inspired to try her hand at fiction. *The Secret Life of Bees* was the result, and what a success it has been.

Since its publication in 2002, *Bees* has sold over six million copies and lasted more than two and a half years on the *New York Times* bestseller list (Biography 2011). Additionally, it has been published in thirty-five countries and received the 2004 Book Sense Paperback Book of the Year award. Among other nominations, it received the prestigious Orange Prize in England, and it was chosen as Good Morning America's Read This! Book Club pick. Popular in high school and college classrooms across the country, *The Secret Life of Bees* was recently produced on stage in New York and adapted into a major motion picture (Biography 2011).

And while most of the literary criticism of *Bees* has been positive, some has not. Racial conflict—one of Kidd's most important issues—is certainly the reason for the physical and emotional pain damaging the lives of her major characters. Early in the novel, Lily's caregiver Rosaleen is beaten by three racists; for this reason, Rosaleen becomes the girl's companion in running away. Later, Zack—the "hired beehive helper" and the godson of the matriarch August—is "beaten by white men" and unjustly arrested (183). We also find out that the beekeeper May's condition is caused by her twin's suicide, a desperate act prompted by racial discrimination. Racial conflict causes not only physical pain but emotional turmoil, and Lily is forced to examine her own ideas about race when she finds herself become attracted to Zack while living in the home with four black women.

Within the body of criticism about *The Secret Life of Bees*, all of the major symbols have been addressed extensively, but little has been written about the function and effect of the first

person narrative point of view and how this point of view shapes interpretations of the novel. Also, critics attribute Lily's emotional and spiritual transformation largely to the black matriarch August and to the influence of the Black Madonna figure that looms large as an image in the novel. But little useful criticism has taken up the positive effects upon Lily inspired by the crucial issue of race. In fact, some critics have regarded this as a negative aspect of the book's structure.

Laurie Grobman, professor of English and Women's Studies at Penn State Berks, in fact claims that Kidd's "use of black characters, literature, and culture… amounts to cultural theft" (10). One of Grobman's first indictments supporting her cultural theft theory is about Kidd's failure to use dialect. She believes that Lily's nanny Rosaleen and the other black women of the novel are "whitened through language" in an attempt to gratify the needs of a "potential white mass audience" (Grobman 13). Kidd's fourteen-year-old white narrator tells the majority of the story from her perspective "erasing almost all traces of African American Vernacular English (AAVE)," writes Grobman (14). I believe, however, that this omission is intentional. If Kidd where trying to "whiten" her black characters as Grobman suggests, why would she grant them critical roles as heroines of the novel. Because the novel is told from the perspective of fourteen-year-old Lily, it is by nature going to be self-centered and naive. In other words, Lily either does not hear dialect or is going to translate into more or less her own kind of English the dialect of her surrogate mothers as she is telling the story. I maintain that is not to minimize the authenticity of these royal black women but to emphasize the possibility of cross-racial communication.

If we compare *The Secret Life of Bees* with *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*—in which Twain claims to use seven distinct dialects—Twain's book may be the greater success, but it

remains far more difficult to navigate by high school and some college students because of the generally unfamiliar dialects (Southard 630). Having taught American Literature for fourteen years, I have witnessed the paralyzing effects that Twain's dialects have had even on my sixteen-year-old students—most of whom are of predominantly African American descent—who struggle to read the dialect and prefer me, their white teacher, to read it to them. Wishing the novel to be read, Kidd may have wanted to minimize confusion, keeping the focus on the significant contexts of the novel. But more likely, she could be suggesting that Lily views the bee sisters and Rosaleen as equals, or in many cases her superiors, and therefore does not notice a difference in their dialect. In Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, the speech of black characters is not written as dialect when they are speaking among themselves; they speak and hear a common language. When they are "heard" by whites, the speech is written in dialect, a marvelous and clever device that Walker seems to have invented.

Another suggestion regarding Kidd's literary choices for the language of her characters is that because August and June are college-educated, they may not speak with the same dialect as do many of their black, less-educated female counter-parts. For example, Rosaleen's dialect is quite different than August's when she tells T-Ray that "there is worse things in this house than chicken shit" in defense of Lily's violet-colored baby chick (*Bees* 11). This lack of subject-verb agreement is typical of an AAVE dialect—something we never hear August speak. However, August has not only been trained to become a teacher, she is also a successful business woman, dealing with blacks and whites alike in Tiburon and would have been expected to speak Standard American English in public.

In contrast to Grobman, Tracy Stephenson Shaffer, Associate Professor of Performance Studies at Southern Illinois University, claims that one of the main attractions of *The Secret Life*

of Bees is the "colloquial sound of Kidd's prose" (49). Shaffer, whose parents grew up in the rural South at the same time as the novel is set, was so moved by the novel that she wrote and planned a one-person adaptation of the novel which she later performed as part of the 2004-2005 HopKins Black Box season at Louisiana State University (49). While colloquialisms are simply a part of a regional dialect, it is clear that Kidd uses, even on a smaller scale, several different dialects.

Grobman also accuses Kidd of "[reinforcing] stereotypes of black women and [desexualizing] them" by portraying both Rosaleen and August as the "archetypal Mammy" (11-12). Grobman defines a Mammy as the "faithful, devoted family servant who is asexual because she is a surrogate mother to the white family's children" (12). She then describes the physical attributes of a Mammy: a large-busted, dark-skinned woman, wearing a brightly-colored do-rag on her head (12). While Rosaleen fits Grobman's physical description of a Mammy to a certain extent with her bosoms as "big… as couch pillows," neither she nor August fit the stereotype. Both Rosaleen and August care for Lily and function as surrogate mothers, but neither are servants. Rosaleen is hired and paid as a worker to "cook, clean, and be [Lily's] stand-in mother," but not at the sacrifice of her own wishes and desires, nor at the cost of caring for children of her own (*Bees* 2). She had been married, something mammies rarely did, revealing her desire for her own family, but after only three short years, she had kicked the husband out, unwilling to suffer his womanizing. We see this same independent spirit at the start of the novel when Rosaleen heads to get her voter registration card, another mark of her unwillingness to remain servile.

August, educated at the Negro teachers college, works as a housekeeper only because racism at the time "prevented her from getting a teaching job" (Grobman 12). While August's

nurturing care of Lily's mother, Deborah, seems to resemble the Mammy stereotype because Deborah becomes heavily reliant on August for emotional support, August does not fit the Mammy stereotype for several reasons. A savvy entrepreneur, August builds her own business of honey-gathering, spanning several counties, instead of continuing to nanny after Deborah grows up. She exercises her feminine independence in not dating or marrying a man because she does not want to be denied her feminine freedoms. She leads a group of black women, including her two sisters, in a matriarchal worship of a Black Madonna. She remains the voice of reason for her emotionally cold sister June and her emotionally disturbed sister May. And finally, to infer that August chooses to be a Mammy figure to Lily is erroneous because, while she allows Lily to stay in the honey house to sort out her emotional chaos and eventually encourages the white girl to live in the safety of the bee sister hive, it is Lily who pursues a relationship with August.

Grobman's final quarrel with Kidd comes when the author uses "blackness—specifically, the image of the black Madonna—to heal Lily both emotionally and spiritually, stealing from black culture" and once again "perpetuat[es] the Mammy stereotype" (14). Grobman explains that not until Lily meets the black Mary does her "deeply felt loss of her mother [begin] to heal," and she further explains the circumstances where Lily prays to Mary, asking her to fill the motherless void in her heart (14). So, instead of honoring "blackness," by observing that the main character begins the healing process in her life by the inspiration of a black feminine divine, Grobman chooses to call out the author for stealing. If we look at Christianity as a parallel structure, it would be considered both racist and intolerable if one race of people said that the only people who would benefit from a relationship with Christ are his own racial descendants. Yet, Grobman believes Kidd "exploits the black feminine divine" by having her

"white protagonist… construct a new identity" by praying to the black Mary (15). Though her relationship with the black Mary statue certainly serves as a catalyst for self-actualization, it is the relationships with Rosaleen and the bee sisters, particularly August, that really seem to promote Lily's metamorphasis.

Ironically, later in her essay Grobman contradicts her ideas about Kidd "[exploiting] the black feminine divine," suggesting that the author is using the black Madonna "in an attempt to honor the strength of black women" (16). Grobman also points out that in spite of her major objections to Kidd's portrayal of black women stripped of their dialect and being portrayed as Mammies, she still teaches *The Secret Life of Bees* to her students in order to help "provide a roadmap for all students who struggle to engage respectfully with cultures other than their own" (16).

Critic Catherine B. Emmanuel also explores Kidd's use of the Black Madonna and in contrast to Grobman believes it to be one of the driving forces in Lily's coming of age story, offering "solace and spirituality" along the way (115). Emmanuel believes that in Lily's search for a mother, her "quest for psychological identity" is expanded to a "quest for a religion that offers some reflection of herself" (115). And this religion is found through the black Madonna, an archetypal mother who enables Lily and all the women of the novel to find the "mother, or God-force within them" (118). Emmanuel argues further that the black Madonna serves as a "psychological archetype of an indomitable spirit" because it represents a "soul not defeated by the persecutions of slavery," or in Lily's time, by a white patriarchal society that often oppressed women and black Americans (118). And finally, Emmanuel examines the introspection Lily begins by worshipping the black Madonna. This "inward divinity… involves coping with

imperfection," so that as Lily comes to realize that her mother was imperfect, she begins to realistically deal with her mother's loss (120).

Judith Hebb examines the great power of two other symbols in the novel. Her essay "Conflict and Closure: Bees and Honey as Metaphors for Healing in *The Secret Life of Bees*" addresses the great "insight into our own personal conflicts and the hope for spiritual healing" that bees offer both Lily and Rosaleen in the home of the bee-keeping sisters (179). Under the calming influence of the symbolic queen bee—August or the black Madonna—Lily is able to finally "shed her old life and begin anew" (180). As August physically takes Lily through the process of learning to care for a hive, Lily begins to understand the great importance of the bee's matriarchal structure. This matriarchal structure—both in bee world and in the pink house—offer freedom and redemption from the troubled worlds from which Lily and Rosaleen have come.

Because honey, too, has healing powers, according to Hebb, it serves as the "elixir of physical, emotional, and spiritual healing" for all of the characters in *Bees* (180). Honey is used in so many ways in the pink house, from the women getting up in the morning for a spoonful to healing cuts and scrapes, to sweetening food, and to offering a coat of protection of the black Madonna statue during the May Day rituals. When Lily and Rosaleen first arrive in Tiburon, they are encouraged to stay in the honey house, which offers them a figurative spiritual safety as they come to grips with their inner conflicts. Rosaleen more quickly than Lily is healed by the honey house's assuaging effects and is able to move into the pink house shortly after arriving. Lily's transformation in the honey house takes much longer because of the depth of scarring she has experienced, and yet, after she decides to live with the "bee" sisters, she finds she "no longer [needs] the spiritual protection of the honey house (181).

In her criticism, Hebb also addresses the three types of conflicts Lily and some of the other characters face. First, she addresses physical conflict and how Lily must deal with her father's bizarre punishment of making her kneel on Martha White grits when she breaks one of his arbitrary rules (181). Luckily, Hebb argues, Lily finds motivation from the bees she collects in a jar in order to strike out for freedom like they do when she leaves the lid open. In great contrast to the abuse and traumatic experiences in her father's home that weaken her, Lily thrives physically under the nurturing care of the bee sisters and the healing properties of honey that she ingests every day in several forms which serve to "plump out" her "skinny arms and legs"(182). Rosaleen undergoes even more severe physical abuse from the three town racists who liberally beat her, yet like Lily, she finds solace and healing in the bee house from this abuse (182).

In chapter one of my thesis, I focus predominantly on the contributing factors of Lily's coming of age from psychological and spiritual standpoints, paying particular attention to the influence of the women in Lily's life—namely Rosaleen, August, June, May and their spiritual mother, black Mary—and exploring the significance of their "blackness." This chapter addresses how each woman leaves an indelible mark on Lily's development and identifies the woman who is most influential. I examine the significance of gender in the novel as well as to what extent males play a role in Lily's journey to self, focusing on the abusive relationship with her father, her friendship with Zack, and her interactions with Attorney Clayton Forrest.

In chapter two, I compare Lily's matriarchal world of influence with the patriarchal world represented in *Huck Finn.* By comparing Lily Owen's mentors to Huck Finn's, I hope to reveal to what extent psychological advancements have been made by adults in helping teens overcome family trauma and identity issues. Additionally, I investigate the change in social commentary, spanning 100 years, from Huck Finn's slave era to the 1960s Civil Rights Movement.

The final chapter of my thesis will deal with Kidd's stylistics, focusing on the narrative point of view, dialect, language, and motif of place. Is Lily Owens a reliable narrator, and does her telling of the story limit the authenticity of the black characters or even "whiten" them as one critic suggests? I address to what extent Kidd's use of dialect reflects an authentic rendering of language in a 1960s South, and to what degree this influences the believability and realism of the story. I explore Lily's poetic and emotive language as well as her humor as another dimension of Kidd's rhetorical talent. Because the pink house becomes an emblem of safety and restoration for all of the major characters, I also discuss the motif of place in emotional and spiritual transformation.

Chapter 1: Lily's Coming of Age

She was all I wanted. And I took her away (Kidd, *Bees* 8).

At the core of Lily Owen's fourteen-year-old life is the haunting memory of the day she accidentally took the life of her mother while attempting to protect her in a fight with her abusive father. From the early age of four, Lily not only struggles with this entrenched guilt, but she also attempts to cope with a motherless life and a cruel father. She wants answers about why her mother left her, answers to her mother's identity, justice for her mother's death, and the love from a mother figure. But in order to find these answers, she must leave the abusive environment of her father's home in search of a safe haven. With the aid of her black nanny, Rosaleen, Lily embarks on a journey to Tiburon, South Carolina, landing finally at the same safe haven her mother had visited ten years earlier, the home of the beekeeping Boatwright sisters. August, the eldest and wisest of these calendar sisters, and a host of other spectacular black women help create an atmosphere that promotes Lily's psychological development. Lily's coming of age is a slow and often painful process, replete with teenage angst and regression, but by the novel's end, she progresses from an abused, emotionally confused teen to a self-actualized young lady.

By fourteen, Lily's motherless existence led to several unpleasant ramifications in the matter of her appearance. Her clothes, often made in home economics class, were usually nothing more than "cotton print shirtwaists with crooked zippers" and skirts that were very long like the "Pentecostal girls" wore (Kidd, *Bees* 8). Her curly black hair was a "nest of cowlicks," and she worried about not having "much of a chin" (9). Despite her lovely eyes and developing breasts, Lily confesses that even the hard up boys gave her no attention, especially when she was forced to wear "long britches under [her] Pentecostal dresses" during the winter months (9). Her

appearance causes her such anxiety that Lily takes to "picking scabs off [her] body" and chewing the flesh around her fingernails until she literally [becomes] a "bleeding wreck" (9). She is so consumed with how she looks and whether she is behaving appropriately that she often feels like she is "impersonating a girl" instead of actually being one (9).

The final insult to Lily's motherless status is that she is denied entrance into charm school—a move she was certain would improve her appearance and manners—because she did not have a "mother, a grandmother, or even a measly aunt" to present her a "white rose at the closing ceremony" (9). Lily is insecure and lonely, states which are only protracted by the lack of attention and abuse received by her father.

T. Ray. This is what Lily calls her father "because 'Daddy' never fit him" (Kidd, *Bees* 2). Still bitter about his wife's untimely death, T. Ray quite literally detests his daughter and avoids her by working from sun up to sun down in the peach orchard, resulting in his "orneriness year-round" (3). He refuses to buy her rollers to fix her hair; he refuses to take her to football games or any social function; and he is unconcerned that she makes her own clothes and refuses to allow her to wear more fashionable clothes. When she requests a silver charm bracelet for her fourteenth birthday, silence is his answer. He responds to questions she asks about her mother with anger and violence, once smashing a jar of blackberry preserves into the cabinet, leaving blue stains (13).

His attempt at kindness in telling Lily the real story of what happened to her mother the day before first grade quickly turns from kind awkwardness to anger when she tells him she remembers that they were arguing. "Goddamn it, you were four years old," he yells, complaining that she cannot possibly remember the details of that day (Kidd, *Bees* 18). Later, he softens when he tells her that she "didn't mean to do it," but this is as much kindness as Lily can

expect (19). Despite Lily's overwhelming need for love and affirmation in the years following her mother's death, T. Ray is an emotionally absent father but consistently verbally abusive in all of their interactions.

When Lily, excited by the bees swarming in her room one night, wakes him to show him this phenomenon, he angrily says "Goddamn it, Lily, this ain't funny" when he sees no bees and threatens physical punishment (Kidd *Bees* 4). Unfortunately, she had grown accustomed to this sort of verbal abuse. Two nights before her fourteenth birthday, she is in the peach orchard—holding close to her chest some precious keepsakes of her mother's in order to feel closer to her—when T. Ray finds her in the middle of the night buttoning up her shirt. Believing her to have been with a boy, his menacing anger erupts as he tells her "you act no better than a slut" (24). This time, he follows through with physical punishment by making Lily kneel on Martha White grits. Though she had been accustomed to this brutality since she was six, Lily never really grows used to the "powdered-glass feeling" beneath her skin or the "swollen red welts" and "pinprick bruises that would grow into a blue stubble" caused by the grit torture (24-25). The next morning, waking up a bit late, Lily is finally convinced that any love T. Ray has for her is gone when he takes her slice of buttered bread, throws it in the dog's bowl, and insults her about starting work late.

In addition to T. Ray's verbal and physical abuse, he also relishes in subjecting Lily to psychological abuse when he refuses to let her read while she works *alone* all day in the peach stand. Afraid it would "stir up ideas of college… a waste of money" for females, even though she had scored "the highest number a human being can get on their verbal aptitude test," T. Ray makes sure Lily has a healthy fear of him (15). He "half kill[s]" her once when she sneaks a copy of *Lost Horizon* to the peach stand under her shirt, and a neighbor bragged on her at church

for reading, exposing her guilt (15). Ironically, T. Ray's "only kindness was for Snout, his bird dog, who slept in his bed and got her stomach scratched anytime she rolled onto her wiry back," claims Lily, who had also seen T. Ray not even bat an eye when the dog had peed on his boots (3). Treating his dog with much greater affection than his own daughter, T. Ray continually devalues Lily, making her feel unloved.

According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, Lily's physiological needs are being met for the most part. She is getting food, water, and sleep sometimes, but she does not always feel safe. Maslow believes that in order for someone to function effectively and move on to the next level of development, she must be in a safe, secure environment (Feldman 326). Broken, abused, and desperately seeking the affections and safety of a sympathetic adult, Lily turns to her black nanny, Rosaleen. Rosaleen, whom her father had pulled from the peach orchard to cook and clean and be a "stand-in mother" after Lily's mother died, was a large woman with a "big round face" and was "so black that night seemed to seep from her skin" (2). She had no children of her own, so for the past ten years, Lily had "been her pet guinea pig" (2). Though Rosaleen pretends not to care whether or not Lily gets stung by one of the bees in her room, Lily has figured out that Rosaleen's heart is "more tender than a flower skin" when she buys Lily an Easter chick dyed purple. When T. Ray gives Lily a hard time about bird droppings on the floor, Lily realizes Rosaleen must love her "beyond reason" when she stands up to T. Ray and defends Lily's pet (11).

At the beginning of the novel, Lily perceives Rosaleen as a protector—someone who is willing to create a safer environment—something Lily needs desperately for her emotional growth. When Rosaleen comes to the house the day before Lily's birthday and finds Lily's knees red and swollen from kneeling on grits, she is visibly upset and consoles Lily, "Look what

he's done to you" (25). Having someone recognize T. Ray's physical abuse as inappropriate begins to validate Lily's feelings of self-worth and her anger and resentment with T. Ray. This is the first step towards Lily's freedom. The next comes the following day as she accompanies Rosaleen to register to vote in town. After Rosaleen is verbally insulted by three local racists and brutally beaten for pouring her snuff on their shoes, she is unjustly arrested. Despite Rosaleen's fear about further injustices that await her at jail, she reveals her inner strength by comforting Lily on their ride to jail in the police car.

Unfortunately, once the jailor allows these three racists to beat Rosaleen further in jail—gashing her head open—the roles for Lily and her reverse. Incensed by her father, who not only calls her a "little bitch" for her behavior, but who also tells Lily that her "sorry mother ran off and left [her]," Lily decides she and Rosaleen must flee Sylvan (Kidd *Bees* 39). Now the protector, Lily springs Rosaleen free from the hospital in an attempt to avoid further abuse, and they hitch a ride with a kind farmer to Tiburon, South Carolina, a place she had found written on the back of one of her mother's prized keepsakes, a black Madonna picture. Lily wants to protect Rosaleen from these racists, one of whom T.Ray believes is actually crazy enough to try to kill her. But Rosaleen realizes that a black woman with a stitched head, traveling with a young white girl looks very suspicious, and out of fear for their safety, she questions Lily's motives. Rosaleen insists that the *real* reason they left Sylvan was so Lily could escape her abusive, lying father. Lily, who had just risked her life to rescue Rosaleen, does not appreciate being called self-centered and tells Rosaleen that she can "find her own way from now on" (54). Lily's childlike response of storming off across the river after Rosaleen's insult contrasts the role of protector she had just assumed. And yet, in her willingness to stand up to Rosaleen, she

reveals a transformation from a reticent, submissive teen to one willing to verbalize her opinion and defend her choice.

Up to this point in the novel, Rosaleen pushes Lily to recognize the mistreatment of her father so that she is willing to stand up for herself. Ultimately, Rosaleen is the reason Lily is willing to forego all that is familiar, albeit cruel and neglectful, to search for her mother's identity. The confidence she gains from helping to protect Rosaleen fuels her desire for a healthier environment for both of them. Yet, Lily is still largely dependent on Rosaleen as a surrogate mother. We see her desperately searching for Rosaleen after their fight at the creek, praying to God that she not be gone, telling herself "Mother, forgive," much like she did when she thought of a reunion with own mother (Kidd *Bees* 54).

Rosaleen and Lily's reunion in the creek takes Lily a step further in her coming of age. Without artifice and in the dark water of the creek, naked, they are the same: two people, hurting, desperately needing the love and forgiveness of the other. Rosaleen's willingness to forgive Lily's hurtful comment reminds Lily that forgiveness is an important part of a growing relationship. Rosaleen's love for Lily creates a deep, abiding loyalty in Lily; she wants to protect and honor her.

On many occasions in the novel, Rosaleen is the voice of reason in Lily's not all-together reality-driven world. She questions how Lily will continue to endure her father's abusive treatment. While at the hospital, Rosaleen questions the outcome if they do not escape the guard. She questions lodging and eating requirements as they head to Tiburon in a racially-charged environment. Later, she questions Lily's long-term plan of finding refuge in the pink house. Despite the initial frustration these precautions cause Lily, Rosaleen's reality checks are crucial

in her coming to terms with the reality of her mother's identity and death and the reality of her future relationships with her father, Zack, and the calendar sisters.

Rosaleen's influence prompts Lily to recognize her self-worth and stand up for herself, stand up for Rosaleen and protect her, and face her father's abuses and physically relocate to a safer environment. Rosaleen helps Lily arrive at safety, Maslow's second level of development. Yet, as Lily arrives on the doorstep of the pink house, she struggles with three weighty issues with which Rosaleen has been unable to help her cope: guilt over killing her mother, desire for a mother's love, and now the uncertainty over whether her mother abandoned her. While Rosaleen continues to remain an important part of Lily's journey to self-hood through her guidance and friendship, she figuratively hands the torch to August and the black Mary for the next and final stages of Lily's development. August's sisters, June and May, although not as significant a part of Lily's coming of age as Rosaleen and August, are still unique black women who help Lily discover important aspects of her identity.

As the door to the pink house opens by June, a stern and brooding woman with a cello's bow under her arm, Lily must have thought she knocked on the wrong door. Not only was this woman not the "African bride" Lily had seen as she walked up to the pink house (Kidd, *Bees* 67), this woman was dressed in red and appeared to be ready to use her bow as a riding whip on Lily and Rosaleen (68). June, the only abrasive bee sister, reveals a keen disapproval of Lily from the moment she crosses the pink house's threshold. Though no one believes Lily's lies about Rosaleen and her background, June is the only one to show an outright disbelief, and she is further astounded that August would offer them refuge in the honey house. June's disapproval of Lily at first seems to be an extension of her personality, but we later find that June knew Lily's mother, Deborah, and she disapproved of August ever choosing to take care of her. Believing

nannying to be beneath August's college-educated background, June is concerned that August is going to play a similar role in Lily's life as she did for Deborah.

In several ways, June represents the society that Lily had grown accustomed to back in Sylvan. She disapproves of Lily from the moment she meets her for no seemingly good reason other than her own disagreeable nature. Soon after Lily's arrival, June corners her and begins to interrogate her about her plan to stay. "So," she said, "you've been here—what? Two weeks now?" (Kidd, *Bees* 121). August rescues Lily just in time, but she chooses not to intervene nine days later when Lily and June engage in a more physical fight over the water hose. Lily and August had joined Rosaleen and May in the yard playing with the water hose to cool down, and Lily—who "must have been drunk with water and air and dancing"—decides to hose down a rather heated June (169). After a few minutes of an all-out war over the hose, Lily refusing to "let June Boatright win," both collapse in hysterical laughter, and June finally softens towards Lily (169). This episode reveals an inner strength in Lily that we have not seen up to this point; she is willing to stare adversity in the face and not give up. Her desire for love and belonging, even by someone who has strongly disapproved of her, pushes her to embrace an otherwise uncomfortable and possibly disastrous situation. June later apologizes and teaches Lily two important lessons: people can change, and she is loveable.

May Boatright, June and August's younger sister, also teaches Lily some important lessons about life. Described as "not an altogether normal person" with an "odd grin" when Lily first meets her, May shows Lily how to find pleasure in the smallest of things like singing the honey song and how to mourn loss at her wailing wall (Kidd, *Bees* 69). Lily loves to sing the honey song with May because of its silliness and because it makes Lily "feel like a regular person again" (83). May is clearly not a regular person because of the way she handles loss and

dissension; anytime someone brings up an unpleasant topic like an argument between June and Neil or Rosaleen's awful head injury, May begins humming "Oh! Susanna." If this does not work, she heads out to her make-shift wailing wall, writes the source of the problem on a sheet of paper, and places it in the wall.

May teaches Lily that the way one handles negative emotion is to combat it with positive thinking and singing. She also teaches her that physically writing down a problem to physically process it is a healthy way to cope with negative experiences. Lily follows suit one night, writing down her mother's name, "Deborah Owens," and placing it in May's wall (Kidd, *Bees* 100). When Lily discovers May trying to lead roaches out of the house with graham crackers and marshmallows, May reveals that Lily's mother had lived in the honey house, too, and had shown May this strategy. This affirms Lily's motives for remaining there and trying to cope with her mother's loss.

Even May's suicide teaches Lily a lesson. Doctors had never been able to find a formal diagnosis for May's condition, and yet everyone knew she did not handle bad news the same way normal people did. August explains to Lily one day that May felt "all the suffering out there" as if it is actually "happening to her" because she lacked the "built-in protection" around her heart that the rest of them had (Kidd, *Bees* 95). May's inability to deal with Zach's arrest causes her to follow her twin sister April's example of taking her life. Though May has a special condition when it comes to handling negative experiences, her decision to end her life prematurely reveals what happens when a person chooses to be overwhelmed by a situation rather than constructively dealing with it. Once Lily sees the enormous pain this causes May's sisters, she is further determined to reveal her guilt feelings about her mother's death to August.

August. She is the oldest and wisest of the three calendar sisters. Kidd describes her as "tall, dressed in white, wearing a pith helmet with veils that floated across her face" when Lily first sees her, looking like an "African bride" (Kidd, *Bees* 67). August is the perfect prescription for Lily's hurting heart. This angelic creature, first seen collecting honey from hives, mystifies Lily as she disappears into "fogged billows" and then reappears like a "dream rising up from the bottom of the night" (67). August, whose name means "marked by majestic dignity or grandeur" would certainly prove to live up to her name and help Lily deal with her darkest secrets and insecurities (*Merriam*-Web). Safe in the honey house with Rosaleen and a stone's throw from the pink house with the majestic August, Lily can pursue the next level of Maslow's hierarchy of needs: love and belongingness (Feldman 326). Though Rosaleen had begun to provide love and a sense of belonging in Sylvan, August—with the aid of black Mary--offers the warmth and nurturing Lily requires to achieve this stage and move one step closer to self-actualization.

August lives up to her name as the "Mistress of Bees" and the "portal into [Lily's] mother's life" in the first moments she welcomes Lily and Rosaleen into her home and offers them refuge in the honey house (Kidd, *Bees* 68). Though August is not fooled by Lily's outlandish story of how she and Rosaleen arrived on their doorstep, she wastes no time accepting them both, buying Rosaleen clothing from the Amen Dollar Store and teaching Lily how to "[make] the honey, doing whatever needs doing" (77). And she is quite successful; after only a few hours, Lily feels that somehow she belongs there (78).

In this safe environment, August ushers in the next of Maslow's stages of development: esteem—the need to develop a sense of self-worth by knowing that others are aware of one's competence and value (Feldman 326). Under August's tutelage, Lily quickly picks up the skills associated with honey-making; she "run[s] a steam-heated knife along the super, slicing the wax

cap off the combs," and "load[s] them just so into the spinner" (Kidd, *Bees* 84). Paying close attention to detail, Lily learns the trade so quickly that August compliments her one day, saying she "was a marvel" (84). This is the first of many times August recognizes Lily's value and boosts her esteem. August understands that Lily is in some kind of trouble, but in order for her to talk about it, she must feel not only safe and comfortable, but she must also feel strongly about herself. This is one of the reasons August introduces Lily to the black Mary who can offer an immediate source of refuge and comfort to Lily.

Lily was first introduced to the black Mary as she went through precious keepsakes of her mother's things found in the attic. Black Mary's picture looks like it had been cut from a book, glued on a sanded piece of wood, and then varnished (14). On the back of the wooden picture, someone had written "Tiburon, S.C." which gives Lily the idea to head there in search of answers to her mother's identity. Lily is then thrilled to find herself face to face with identical black Mary pictures on jars of honey in the Frogmore Stew General Store. Lily's first introduction to a statue of the black Mary was her first day in the pink house when she sees it—three feet tall, looking like a masthead from some ship, with her right arm raised as if she were "pointing the way, except her fingers were closed in a fist" (Kidd, *Bees* 70). Despite her appearance that is different from the black Mary on the honey jars, Lily recognizes her immediately and has a "magnetic" longing for her that is so strong "it ache[d] like the moon had entered [her] chest and filled it up" (70). From Lily's first interaction with the black Mary, she feels like she knows her "down to the core" and that she can make Lily feel her "glory" and her "shame" at the same time (71).

August encourages Lily to build a relationship with the iconic black Mary, saying that "if you ask Mary's help, she'll give it" after one of the Daughters of Mary meetings that she was

leading (Kidd, *Bees* 90). After August tells Lily the story of Beatrix the Nun, and how black Mary had been standing in for Beatrix when she ran away, Lily figures that August must mean black Mary would be standing in for her back in Sylvan (91). Not until much later does August explain that she intended for Lily to understand that black Mary could stand in for Lily's mother. Lily's fascination with the statue of black Mary is immediate; she feels she can be honest with her and pray to her about anything. The Daughters have a tradition of dancing around black Mary and touching her red heart, and Lily believes that if she can touch black Mary's heart, she can finally gather the courage to tell August about her mother.

In the meantime, while August patiently waits for Lily to gather the courage to discuss her past, she continues to encourage Lily, asking her one day what she loves. August realizes that Lily's self-esteem must be much higher than it is before she will be ready to share her true identity. Realizing that no one has ever asked her this, Lily tells August her favorite snack of salted peanuts in a coke and her favorite color, blue, which also happens to be August's favorite color. August and Lily spend much time together collecting honey, and August continues to teach Lily life lessons like the decision she made to paint the house Caribbean Pink because May wanted that color. She explains that often people "*know* what matters, but they don't *choose* it," later telling Lily that she knew what a boost it would be for May even though they would be ridiculed (Kidd, *Bees* 147). Affirming Lily's secret that she is still unwilling to share, August tells Lily that "bees have a secret life we don't know anything about" (148). This is a confirmation for Lily that keeping secrets is a natural behavior; even bees do it. August also explains to Lily that the black Mary is really just the "figurehead off an old ship" but that her spirit, a spirit of "comfort and rescue," is ubiquitous (141). Lily finally touches black Mary's heart one evening and prays for her to "Fix me, please fix me" (164). She concludes her prayer

to black Mary that "[she lives] in a hive of darkness, and you are my mother" in an attempt to come to terms with her dark past and fill the mortherless void (164).

But it takes May's death, June's apology, and Zach's profession of love for Lily to finally be ready to speak with August about her mother. This follows Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Lily has been transported from an abusive home to a safe home. She is surrounded by people who love her and respect her, so she feels that sense of belongingness. And with August's help, she starts to believe herself quite valuable; her self-esteem is quite high. As Lily tells August about accidentally killing her mother, she is so relieved to hear August list all the people who love her, including June. August finishes with, "I love you. Just like I loved your mother" (Kidd, *Bees* 243). Despite Lily's relief about being loved by so many people after her confession of such a horrible act, Lily does not discover the idealized Deborah Owens she had so long embraced. She finds out that her mother *had* left both her and her father because she was unable to cope with T. Ray anymore. This knowledge angers Lily to the point that she quite literally has a meltdown in the honey house later on, smashing jars of honey against the walls and injuring her arm.

Interestingly enough, though Lily has made so much progression in her development, this one detail that her mother had abandoned her, levels her. The knowledge means that T. Ray was right. This means both of her parents ultimately rejected her. This means Lily can no longer entertain the smug delusion that her life would have been much better if her mother were still alive. This means that she will have to forgive her mother if she wants to continue moving forward. After talking with Rosaleen about her mother's leaving, Lily feels a little release when she realizes that Rosaleen knew this but never told Lily in order to protect her. When August discovers a hat box filled with Lily's mother's things, she heads to the honey house and goes

through the contents with a very hesitant Lily. When August takes out Deborah's hairbrush, Lily sees a piece of her mother's hair, "a genuine part of her body" (Kidd, *Bees* 273). Despite her former disappointment with her mother, Lily realizes that "no matter how many jars of honey you threw, no matter how much you thought you could leave your mother behind, she would never disappear from the tender places in you" (273).

The hair is a good reminder that her mother was human and thus fallible; this is the first step towards Lily's forgiveness of her mother. August then retrieves a book of English poetry she had given Deborah during her final stay. As Lily leafs through the book, she finds doodling and pencil marks in the margins, her "mother's private miseries," when she comes to the William Blake poem "O Rose, thou art sick!" (Kidd, *Bees* 274). After reading the poem, Lily realizes that *she* was one of the reasons her mother had not been well. Her mother had not planned to marry T. Ray, but when she became pregnant with Lily, she decided to marry him. Lily desperately wants to apologize to her mother for being one of the "invisible worms that flew in the night," making her mother ill (275). The final item from the hat box eases Lily's feeling of abandonment; her mother had framed a picture of herself feeding Lily in a high chair. Lily explains that now she "didn't care about anything on this earth except the way her face was tipped toward mine, our noses just touching, how wide and gorgeous her smile was, like sparklers going off" (275). The picture is actual proof that Deborah Owens had loved her daughter, and finally, Lily feels loved by her mother.

Now that she had all the facts, Lily has only to forgive her mother for leaving her. That is all. But at the start of the final chapter of the novel, Lily, under the scorching August sun, feels her heart "like an ice sculpture" in the center of her chest (Kidd, *Bees* 277). Lily realizes she is being stubborn by not forgiving her mother, but thinks that, in general, most people would

"rather die than forgive. It's *that* hard" (277). While she tucks her mother's things away back into the hat box and pushes it under her cot, she finds a "tiny pile of mouse bones" under it and begins carrying them with her every day, associating them with Deborah (278). This physical representation of her mother in her pocket seems to protract the amount of emotional energy Lily spends replaying all the details of her mother's life in her head. Lily is grateful that everyone lets her grieve, but even she is starting to get frustrated with her inability to forgive her mother. In a cleaning frenzy one day, Lily is able to tie up the mouse bones with a red ribbon and put them with the rest of her mother's things, symbolically letting her go. Drifting off to sleep that afternoon, she kept thinking how "nobody is perfect" and that you just have to "let the puzzle of the human heart be what it is" (285). So, whether or not she completely understands her mother's decision to leave, she is ready to forgive her.

One day while tending to the bees, August and Lily find a queenless colony. This parallel to Lily's motherless life reminds August to tell Lily of her real intention when she told the story of Beatrix the Nun. August tells Lily that black Mary was serving as a stand-in mom during the three months that Deborah ran away from her and T. Ray. August explains that black Mary is not "some magical being out there," but she is "something *inside* of you" (Kidd, *Bees* 288). Black Mary is divine feminine wisdom and strength that already enables Lily to deal with her father's abusive treatment and guilt over her mother's death. August tells Lily that "you have to find a mother inside yourself" whether you have a mother or not (288). Ultimately, August wants Lily to understand that she does not have to physically touch black Mary's heart to get "strength and consolation and rescue" because Lily possesses these qualities within her own heart (288). August tells Lily that when she starts to feel small and doubtful, she must listen to black Mary's voice commanding her to "get up from there and live like the glorious girl [she is]"

(289). Finally, August reminds Lily that black Mary "sits in [her] heart all day" and that Lily never needs to feel afraid or alone because she is enough to satisfy any of her fears, saying "I am enough. We are enough" (289). Lily finally realizes that Mary's spirit within her is enough to help her overcome any fear or dread, especially the seemingly insurmountable task of forgiving her mother's abandonment.

August's discussion of black Mary living within is quickly put to the test as Lily opens the door to a triumphant-looking T. Ray in the final dramatic scene of the novel. T. Ray, who had searched for his daughter all summer long, is none too pleased to pretend all is well and accept Lily's invitation to come into the pink house and have a civil discussion. Despite the raging emotions charging through her chest, Lily quietly asks T. Ray how he finally located her and is surprised when she realizes that her collect phone call home to him was the missing piece. As T. Ray's chin quivers when he sees Deborah's whale pin on Lily's shirt, Lily sees for the first time how much her father must have loved her mother, "how it had split him open when she left" (Kidd, *Bees* 293). Lily had spent so much time considering the devastating effects of her own motherlessness that she had never considered "what he'd lost or how it might've changed him" (293). The months of nurturing at the pink house allows her to see beyond her own suffering.

But seeing the pin confuses T. Ray. He thinks his daughter is Deborah, his wife, so he slaps Lily's face hard and calls her a "goddamn bitch" (Kidd, *Bees* 295). As T. Ray waves a knife in front of her face, Lily remembers August's advice about Mary's spirit within; "I am enough. We are enough" (295). The encouragement strengthens her to yell "Daddy!" and T. Ray snaps out of his fog. And the damn breaks; T. Ray's weakness is exposed. He is no longer the bitter, abusive father who makes Lily kneel on grits. He is a broken man trying to face the fact that he had caused both his wife and his daughter to run away from him.

By the time the fight finishes between T. Ray and Lily, over half the Daughters of Mary have joined August and Rosaleen in the parlor with T. Ray and Lily. With an army of loving black women behind her, August promises Mr. Owens that he would be doing them a favor by leaving Lily at the pink house. August tells him that Lily is her "apprentice beekeeper," and she has learned the business quite well (Kidd, *Bees* 298). Furthermore, August says that "we love Lily," promising that "we'll take care of her," enrolling her in school the very next term (298). Once T. Ray relinquishes custody and walks out, Lily turns back to the porch to see Rosaleen, August, and the Daughters waiting. "All these women, all this love, waiting" makes her feel like she has ten thousand mothers (299). These powerful, talented, nurturing, protective, intelligent, entertaining black women have brought Lily from a point of running away from her problems to dealing with them directly.

The fact that all of Lily's surrogate mothers are black is a fact that often goes unacknowledged, yet their blackness is significant. In her book *Fierce Angels*, Sheri Parks writes that "*The New York Times* still described the book as a coming-of-age story, without saying that [Lily] comes of age with the help and guidance of black women" (105). The *Times* was most likely trying to avoid racial markers, but in our culture as a corrective to always associating race with negative actions, we sometimes overlook the opportunity to identify race with positive actions. Thus, the significant roles of black women in this novel go unnoticed by many reviewers. Toni Morrison writes in *Playing in the Dark* that "black people ignite critical moments of discovery or change or emphasis in literature not written by them," and Kidd agrees with Morrison as illustrated in the novel via her decisions to have Lily rescued first by a black Nanny, then by three black bee-keeping sisters, then by a black Mary, and finally by the black Daughters of Mary (viii).

Critic Beverly Greene writes that African American women are born into social environments that are "rich but also treacherous" because their lives are "inextricably linked to a history of racist and sexist oppression that institutionalizes the devaluation of African American women as it idealizes their White counterparts" (10). Historically, an African American woman's value as a slave was directly linked with her breeding capacity, and she was often raped by both African male slaves and white slavemasters in order to produce a free slave, a child that was often ripped from her care and sold quickly (Greene 11). Despite this disruption to natural maternal instincts and possibly even because of it, African American culture believes family to be "an extended kinship network rather than as the nuclear unit central to White cultural value" (13). Fast forward a century from slave days, and we see this solidarity among African American women in the pink house with the Boatwright sisters and the Daughters of Mary willingly taking in Lily and Rosaleen.

Even a century after slavery ended in 1865, African American women's rights were only slowly beginning to change. In 1964 when the novel takes place, Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act, enabling the federal government to prosecute any discriminatory act relating to employment, voting, and education ("Civil Rights"). We find out just how necessary this law is as we hear August tell Lily that both she and June had initially been passed over for teaching positions because of their race. During this time period, if black women attended school, it would most likely have been a segregated school with inferior facilities and learning tools since in many states, Jim Crow Laws prohibited blacks and whites from attending the same school ("Jim Crow"). If they graduated from high school, they would most likely be employed in a laboring job like a nanny, housekeeper, or cook. Who better to understand the gravity of Lily's guilt, motherlessness, and abusive home situation than a group of women who collectively also

had been under-valued all of their lives? When Kidd was questioned about the sisterhood of women in the story, she wrote that "when women bond together in a community in such a way that 'sisterhood' is created, it gives them an accepting and intimate forum to tell their stories and have them heard and validated by others" ("Penguin Readers" 8). This sisterhood, so common in African American culture where "non-blood relations who have close affectional ties with family members may be treated and experienced as family," strengthens these undervalued women as they cope with racial discrimination and inequality (Greene 13-14). This sisterhood of calendar sisters and Daughters of Mary are prepared and willing to nurture and protect Lily and Rosaleen.

Kidd writes that even back in 1964 during that racially charged time that she would "find a kind of redemption" for all the black women and men she watched being mistreated ("Penguin Readers" 4). Kidd's protagonist is rescued by such women in an effort to bring to light the incredible compassion, intelligence, and spirituality in the black community. Beverly Greene writes that many African American women in families play "major roles in the raising of children who are not their biological children, but who are the children of 'kin'" (14). But Lily is not "kin," and she struggles with her acceptance of these grand women when she first stays in the honey house because of this. She explains that she feels she belongs, but she kids herself that she could have "been in the Congo," staying in a "colored house with colored women, eating off their dishes, lying on their sheets" for how unfamiliar it all was to her (Kidd, *Bees* 78). Lily gets an education on a seldom seen or understood black culture.

Though Kidd published *The Secret Life of Bees* in 2002, long after the Civil Rights Movement, she still seems to want to rehabilitate the ideas about black women in the 1960s. Lily marvels that August runs such a successful honey business, that she has basically created a religion with a "God who looks like them" (Kidd, *Bees* 141), and that she knows random facts

like “thirty-two names for love in one of the Eskimo languages” (140). June teaches History and English and plays the cello for dying people. And Lunelle, one of the colorful Daughters of Mary, was a hatmaker “without the least bit of shyness” (106). Lily questions how “colored women had become the lowest ones on the totem pole” when all someone had to do was “look at them” to see how special and how like “hidden royalty” they were (209).

Part of this royalty emanates from their worship of black Mary. Kidd was drawn to a Mary at a Trappist monastery and realized that she “was Lily’s mother, a powerful symbolic essence that could take up residence inside of her and become catalytic in her transformation” (“Penguin Readers” 10). Kidd makes the bee sisters’ spiritual worship focus on black Mary because “in Poland and Central America [statues of black Mary] have been the rallying images for oppressed peoples struggling against persecution” representing “images of startling strength and authority” (“Penguin Readers” 9). In 1964, these women needed a spiritual connection with someone that could relate to the oppression they experienced daily.

Though the black women and Mary serve as the greatest catalysts for change in Lily’s life, for her psychological development, she is also affected by her relationships with Zachary Taylor and Mr. Forrest. Zach, August’s godson, who serves as her right hand man before Lily arrives and is a handsome, intelligent, and athletic young man. Through Lily’s interactions with Zach, she comes to terms with her own racism, develops a strong friendship and attraction with Zach, and is challenged by him to become a writer when he gives her the gift of a green notebook. He tells her that she has to “imagine what’s never been” in defense of him becoming a Negro lawyer and her becoming a writer (Kidd, *Bees* 121). When Zach explains to Lily how much he cares for her, he boosts Lily’s esteem and makes her feel like she is worthy of love. Lily meets Attorney Clayton Forrest through Zach; he is what Lily envisions every dad should be

as reflected in a picture with his daughter at a beach. He often encourages Zach to study law and pulls him aside to give him hands-on experience. He helps get Zach out of jail when he is unjustly arrested. By the end of the novel, he is pursuing justice for Rosaleen and punishment for her attackers and visiting Lily once a week. Basically, Mr. Forrest is a gentle sort of stand-in father in T. Ray's absence.

With the help of Rosaleen, August, May, and June in addition to the black Mary, the Daughters of Mary, Zach, Mr. Forrest, and even Ms. Henry—Lily's English teacher, Lily transforms from a reticent girl, suffering the verbal and physical abuse of her father, haunted by guilt, to a confident young woman who willingly stands up for herself and explains that she does not plan to live with her father anymore. She has come to terms with her mother's accidental death. She has learned that people, including both of her parents, are human and make mistakes. She has learned that forgiveness is one of the hardest and most freeing choices she can make. She has learned that thanks to the incredible black women in her life, particularly August, she is loved and has a future. And she has learned—thanks to black Mary's spirit—to find the mother within when she is facing fear and doubt.

Fourteen-year-old Lily has matured emotionally and spiritually and is on course toward "self-actualization" defined by Maslow as a "state of self-fulfillment in which people realize their highest potential" (Feldman 327). By the story's end, Lily has become an official member of the Daughters of Mary with an "old-fashioned beehive" hat made just for her by Lunelle (Kidd, *Bees* 300). She and Clayton Forrest's daughter, Becca, sit with Zach in the lunch room at the white high school despite the fact that they are referred to as "nigger lovers" and are hit by balled-up notebook paper thrown by racist students. Her mother is "perpetually smiling" on her from the frame next to her bed, and she has forgiven both her mother and herself (301). Because

her heart never stops, she has become the wall-keeper, keeping it "fed with prayers and fresh rocks" (302). She visits black Mary every day to be reminded of the "muscle of love" and inner strength she represents (302). And she constantly reminds herself of the day T. Ray left and when she turned around to see them: "All these mothers… more mothers than any eight girls off the street" (302). For a fourteen-year-old high school student who has learned to forgive her imperfect parents, ignore the expectations of her white majority, and embrace the love of a host of incredible black women, Lily Owens is remarkably self-actualized.

Chapter 2: Lily Owens v. Huckleberry Finn

Though more than 125 years span the distance between the publications of Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and Sue Monk Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees*, the novels are remarkably similar in content and themes. Both novels address racial discrimination in a racially-charged Southern landscape, allowing the world to be seen through the eyes of their respective thirteen and fourteen-year-old narrators. Both protagonists have had to cope with the loss of their mothers at an early age, and both Huckleberry Finn and Lily Owens have fathers that are so abusive, the youths run away to a safer environment in order to avoid "being half-killed" or killed altogether (Kidd, *Bees* 239). These white protagonists and narrators in the formative stages of identity transformation are both largely impacted by the wisdom and nurturing of black mentors, Jim and August, that forever changes how the youths view society and themselves. Finally, in their coming of age stories, both Huck and Lily must enter a world with which they are unfamiliar in order to grasp a more realistic picture of society and its haunts and redemptions. For Lily, this is the world of black bee-keeping women led by August at the pink house in Tiburon, South Carolina, a place that will challenge her ideas of black people, her mother, race relations, spirituality, and her identity. For Huck Finn, this is the world of "sivilized" society, a place that illustrates the injustices of the slave system and racial discrimination, gullibility of people, hypocrisy of Christians, inanity of senseless violence, the absurdity of Southern aristocracy, and a surprising new take on family.

Yet, upon reading both novels, one rather conspicuous difference becomes clear: *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is told from a young male's voice, living in a predominantly patriarchal structure while *The Secret Life of Bees* is narrated by a young female, who also lives in a patriarchal structure, but who escapes to the matriarchal world of the pink house. Although

each novel has members of the opposite sex that play somewhat important roles in each protagonist's coming of age story—T. Ray for Lily and the Widow Douglas and Miss Watson for Huck Finn, both main characters are most significantly impacted by same-gendered adults. And it seems to work for both Twain and Kidd; each novel successfully examines the social indictments of its time, focusing on racial discrimination, and highlights the power of minority mentors to transform identity and challenge societal norms. The women in *Bees*, particularly August Boatright—Lily's primary mentor—successfully challenge her preconceived notions about race and identity construction. And the men in *Huck Finn*, particularly the slave Jim—Huck's primary mentor—seem to also challenge his ideas about race and identity. Lily is able to pattern her decisions and identity transformations after August and the other women's positive examples in her life. Huck, influenced by Jim's honesty, examples of trust and friendship, and responsibility to his family, realizes that it is best to follow his heart and conscience and not society's often hypocritical and racist ways.

In the opening scenes of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Pap—Huck's father—has already become a powerful influence on Huck's decision making in this novel's patriarchal structure. Because Huck has no mother and has been abandoned by his father, the Widow Douglas has taken him in to be her son. Huck is appreciative but unaccustomed to how "dismal regular and decent the widow [is] in all her ways," so he quickly revolts and runs away (Twain 71). Lured back to the Widow's by Tom Sawyer, who promises Huck to enlist him in his gang of robbers if he returns, Huck appears to be on the straight and narrow when Pap re-emerges.

Pap, whose colorless face is so "white to make a body's flesh crawl," is scary and everything a father should not be, showing up unannounced in Huck's room to demand Huck's fortune and threaten him about attending school and learning to read (85). Unable to get

immediate custody of Huck, Pap kidnaps him and takes him to a cabin in the woods not far from the river, where he can keep him under lock and key and show the Widow Douglas who is boss. Before long, Huck becomes accustomed to the lazy, unstructured lifestyle of his father for a couple of months where he can "[lay] off comfortable all day, smoking and fishing, and no books nor study" to be bothered with (90). But when his father gets "too handy with his hick'ry," and Huck gets tired of suffering with "all over welts" and being chased by his drunken father, who is threatening to kill him with a clasp knife, he manages to escape. What Huck cannot escape are the harsh realities his father instills. Pap teaches Huck that fathers beat and kidnap their children, that fathers use their children as pawns for their own means, that drinking to excess and stealing is normal, that white people are entitled privileges like money and rights that they do not work for, that "govment" that allows "a free nigger" to vote is no government at all, and that education is a bad thing (92).

Similarly, in *The Secret Life of Bees,* Lily Owens is subjected to the harsh treatment of her father T. Ray, who holds Lily accountable for his miserable state because she inadvertently killed her mother and his wife, Deborah. Unlike Huck, Lily experiences limited abuse from her father, for the majority of T.Ray's abuse is verbal and psychological. T. Ray does not have an addiction to alcohol like Pap, so he does not go off on the physical and vocal tirades that Pap does. T. Ray has a deep emotional pain that manifests itself in resentment towards Lily. T. Ray's resentment builds as he works in the peach orchards all day in the summer. With no mother and no friends except her nanny Rosaleen, Lily deeply longs for a relationship with T. Ray, but she is always disappointed when he returns home and seemingly pretends she does not exist. T. Ray refuses to buy Lily any products to help maintain her appearance, including hair rollers and new clothes, and he also refuses to take her anywhere that she may interact socially with kids her own

age. T. Ray, like Pap, discourages Lily's educational advancement by prohibiting her reading all day while she works in the peach stand. When she wakes him one night to show him the bees flying in her bedroom, and they disappear by the time he arrives, he curses her vigorously. Any time Lily questions T. Ray about her mother, he curses her violently. Otherwise, T. Ray is absent emotionally, ignoring birthday requests and ordering the same four things for Lily every year for Christmas: sweater, socks, pajamas, and sack of oranges. Lily arranges these four items in a "vertical line, a square, a diagonal line, any kind of configuration to help [her] feel like they [are] a picture of love," but she knows T. Ray's only tenderness is for his bird dog, Snout (Kidd, *Bees* 274). Like Huck, when Lily finally decides to leave home, it is because she fears T. Ray will severely beat her physically for accompanying Rosaleen to town and ending up in jail with her; Lily also grows weary of T. Ray's verbal and psychological abuse.

The physical, verbal, and psychological abuse Huck experiences from Pap prompt him to turn to Judge Thatcher as an example for upright living. Judge Thatcher invests the robber's money that Huck and Tom Sawyer found, which fetches Huck "a dollar a day" and is "more than a body [can] tell what to do with" (Twain, *Huck Finn* 70). Judge Thatcher and the Widow Douglas attempt to get custody of Huck, but a new judge refuses to "take a child away from his father" (87). Judge Thatcher proves naïve when he attempts to reform Pap and his drinking by dressing "him up clean and nice" and giving him a room in his own home just to find him drunk with a broken arm the next morning "most froze to death" (88). Though Judge Thatcher tries to protect Huck from his father by getting custody of him and raising him in a safe environment replete with education, the patriarchal structure of Huck Finn's day favors tradition over reason, so Huck must stay in the custody of his abusive father.

Like Huck, Lily experiences a similar arbiter of justice, or rather identity, in her English teacher Ms. Henry, an important woman in Sylvan who grants Lily the ability to see beyond her limited dreams of becoming a hair dresser. Unlike T. Ray, who does not allow Lily to read in the peach stand and who seems unconcerned about her academic future, Ms. Henry tells Lily that she is "insulting [her] fine intelligence" to confine her career goals to beauty school (Kidd, *Bees* 16). Lily had always dreaded the question of what she would become when she grew up, but after Ms. Henry tells her she could be "a professor or a writer," Lily volunteers the information to total strangers without being prompted (16). Ms. Henry becomes a formative voice in Lily's transformation from an insecure young lady to one with an academic future.

In the patriarchal world of the 1840s, Huck Finn finds few men that he can admire since Twain seems to use the majority of them to illustrate his moral indictments about Southern society. Colonel Grangerford "was a gentleman, you see" only in title: he owned slaves, he lead his male progeny in senseless fatal feuds against the Shepherdsons, he carried a gun to church with him and listened to sermons on brotherly love (Twain, *Huck Finn* 167). Twain uses the Grangerford/Shepherdson feud to illustrate the social ills of senseless violence and religious hypocrisy. Colonel Sherburn shoots the drunken Boggs dead for disturbing the peace and then, angered by the subsequent mob that forms, attacks the cowardice of crowd mentality, failing to underscore his own cowardice of killing a helpless drunk in cold blood. Down the Mississippi, the fraudulent king and duke attempt to make fools of Huck and Jim with their new identities, so they can control Huck and Jim's benevolence towards them. Feigning identities from reformed missionaries to Shakespearean actors, the king and duke exploit the gullibility of townspeople in all sorts of shenanigans like the Royal Nonesuch for which "ladies and children" were "not admitted" (206). And the king and duke's willingness to manipulate the grieving Peter Wilks's

daughters by pretending to be his brothers and inheriting their fortune is "enough to make a body ashamed of the human race," Huck believes, as they take the Wilks's girls money, sell their land, and separate and sell their slaves (216). Twain's king and duke expose the greediness and gullibility of the Mississippi River's frontier townspeople. Huck "learns" from this patriarchal structure that senseless murder is sometimes necessary, that perceived respectability supersedes gullibility, and that treating slaves as property and as inferior because of race is acceptable behavior.

In the same regard, Lily finds few men she can admire in the patriarchal structure of Sylvan as Kidd illustrates many of her social indictments through the male characters in *Bees*. Lily's pastor, Brother Gerald, is racially intolerant and religiously hypocritcal when Lily and Rosaleen stop by his church to rest on their way into town. Declining Rosaleen's request to borrow fans, Brother Gerald is so visibly bothered by Rosaleen's black presence in his white church that he quickly escorts her and Lily to the door. Lily describes how prior to this event when a rumor of Negroes attending the church got started, all of the deacons in the church stood "locked-arms across the church steps" to turn them away because "they loved them in the Lord," but "they had their own places" (Kidd, *Bees* 30). The three town racists that insult and then attack and beat Rosaleen for pouring her snuff juice on their shoes reveal the superiority and outright hatred some white Southerners felt for blacks during this time. Mr. Avery Gaston, the policeman that unjustly arrests Rosaleen for "assault, theft, and disturbing the peace," chooses to not only let the white racists go free with no punishment, he also allows them to enter the jail and beat Rosaleen in her cell, gashing her head wide open (33). This violent racial injustice and discrimination exists also in Tiburon, South Carolina, outside of the matriarchal pink house. Zach is unjustly arrested when one of his friends throws a glass bottle at a white man. Eddie

Hazelwurst, the policeman who interviews Lily after May's suicide, tells her "it's not natural" to be living in a house with black women, and Lily should not be "lowering [her]self" (198). From this patriarchal structure, Lily learns that religious hypocrisy is acceptable to someone of another race, and that racial discrimination and violence are acceptable and encouraged social standards in the South.

In Huck's patriarchal society, the slave Jim becomes the one redeeming man to promote Huck's growth and maturity and his navigation of a racially intolerant, religiously hypocritical, and gullible society. "There is no way" writes Toni Morrison "for Huck to mature into a moral human being *in America* without Jim" (56). Jim constantly seeks to befriend Huck and protect him throughout their journey down the Mississippi River together, and Jim's friendship more than any other factor is responsible for Huck's maturation. At Jackson's Island when Huck puts a dead rattlesnake where Jim sleeps, and the snake's mate comes and bites Jim, Huck is regretful but unwilling to acknowledge his boyish game or guilt. Later when Huck and Jim get separated in a fog, Huck decides to play another prank and pretends that Jim dreamt the entire episode. When Jim figures out that Huck is lying, Jim angrily tells Huck he had rather be dead than without him and that all Huck was thinking about was putting "dirt on de head" of his friend and "[makin'] 'em ashamed" (Twain, *Huck Finn* 142). This time, Huck apologizes after only fifteen minutes and determines he will do "no more mean tricks" to Jim because it hurts his feelings too badly (142).

This episode highlights the first step Huck Finn makes in questioning the dynamic between whites and slaves that "even the best-treated black slave stood in a servile position to all of white society" (Greene, Kremer, and Holland 21). When Jim tells Huck that the first thing he will do as a free slave is buy his wife and children, Huck believes he must turn Jim in. But as

he leaves in the canoe and Jim tells him "you's de bes' fren' Jim's ever had; en you's de *only* fren' ole Jim's got now," Huck realizes how much worse he would feel for turning in his friend than in protecting him (Twain, *Huck Finn* 155). Yet, after the king sells Jim to Silas Phelps, the societal pressure to turn Jim in weighs heavy on Huck, and he decides to write Miss Watson a letter and tell her of Jim's whereabouts. But while Huck is writing, he cannot keep from remembering all the meaningful times he and Jim have shared and how Jim would "[stand his] watch on top of his'n, stead of calling me, so I could go on sleeping," and how glad Jim was to see him after the fog, and how Jim would always call him "honey, and pet [him]," and how he told Huck that he was his best friend (257). In Huck's climactic moment of maturation, he says "All right, then I'll go to hell" and tears up the letter, foregoing eternal happiness to protect his friend (257). With Jim's more responsible influence and loving care of Huck, Huck matures rapidly from a boy who plays dangerous pranks on a slave to a young man willing to sacrifice eternal salvation to protect his friend.

Once Tom Sawyer comes back on the scene and offers to help Jim escape, Huck, "intimidated by Tom's superior knowledge of book-lore… [,falls] in line behind his friend's outlandish schemes" (Mailloux 43). Despite Huck's social regression, Jim remains the constant protective father figure even, insisting on getting a doctor's help when Tom is shot in the leg. Jim understands that this will sabotage his freedom, but his moral aptitude to do the right thing saves Tom's life, although Jim is put in chains with an angry crowd of farmers preparing to lynch him. Twain portrays Jim as a "compassionate, shrewd, thoughtful, self-sacrificing, and even wise man… [H]e give[s] excellent advice, he suffers persistent anguish over separation from his wife and children, and he even sacrifices his own sleep so that Huck may rest" (Smith 359). From the beginning of the novel when Jim protects Huck from the disfigured body of Pap

in the floating house down the Mississippi to the time he tells Huck after they are separated that he would rather be dead than live without him, Jim comprises the only true family and father figure Huck has ever known. The dearth of morally sound characters with the exception of Jim in this patriarchal society could possibly explain Huck's inability to become and *stay* self-actualized.

In stark contrast to Huck Finn's world of men, Lily Owens finds herself in the midst of a predominantly matriarchal structure once she moves beyond the confines of her father's peach orchard in Sylvan, South Carolina, to the pink house. But like Huck, Lily finds friendship in a rather unlikely source during her time, a dark-skinned and rather large peach picker named Rosaleen, whom T. Ray hires to cook and clean. Though "Rosaleen is not a smiling Mammy—she cares for Lily, but she is often cross" and has her own agenda of freeing herself by registering to vote, and she is the first of several women to grant Lily friendship and protection from an otherwise cruel father (Parks 102). Disoriented by a severe beating by several of the local town racists, Rosaleen runs away, willingly accompanying Lily on her rather hair-brained and risky journey to Tiburon, South Carolina, to find more information about her mother. Regardless of the disputes Lily and Rosaleen have about being together and the reality of the situation at the pink house and elsewhere, it is clear from Rosaleen's continual comfort of Lily when she misses her mother that Rosaleen loves Lily dearly. Rosaleen also comforts Lily after May's suicide. Rosaleen doctors Lily's arm after her temper-tantrum in the honey house and explains that she was only trying to protect Lily by not revealing the truth about her mother leaving her. And Rosaleen joins the circle of loving women who stand ready to defend and love Lily when T. Ray comes to the pink house to reclaim Lily and take her home. Considering Rosaleen's independent spirit and her greater wisdom through life experiences, it is even more

remarkable that she, as a black woman, chooses to continue to love and nurture Lily, despite Lily's obvious immaturity and unrealistic expectations as a white child. Though Rosaleen and Ms. Henry are vehicles for Lily's maturing, she still lives in a patriarchal structure where men are allowed to abuse their authority, accuse women unjustly of crimes, and beat them.

Not until Lily arrives at the pink house can she truly grasp the potential for powerful change and self-improvement in the matriarchal structure of the bee-keeping Boatwright sisters' home. Up to this point, Lily had been accustomed to living in a world where "women of color, living as they [did] in a racist social system that is also patriarchal, [were] a 'double minority'" according to Elaine Pinderhughes in *Women of Color* (xi). Thus, Lily is somewhat shocked to find in the pink house a matriarchal structure of strong, independent black women, who are educated and forward thinking, who have successful careers, and who take care of their own and others like family. Not only do women make the decisions in the pink house, the women of the pink house worship black Mary, emphasizing further this matriarchal structure where a feminine divine serves the needs of everyone as a mother to all.

The matriarchal structure is even embodied in August's career of bee-keeping. August, whose actions closely parallel Jim's mentorship of Huck, teaches Lily all there is to know about bee-keeping, and during their very first trip to the bee hives, Lily has the epiphany that "If this was a man's world, a veil took the rough beard right off it," referring to how her bee veil made everything look "softer, nicer" (Kidd, *Bees* 92-93). Lily already realizes that this matriarchal structure is a more nurturing place than the patriarchal structure she was accustomed to in Sylvan. This matriarchal structure is illustrated often in Kidd's bee keeping epigraphs such as this one:

> Honeybees are social insects and live in colonies. Each colony is a

> family unit, comprising a single, egg-laying female or queen and her many sterile daughters called workers. The works cooperate in the food-gathering, nest-building and rearing the offspring. Males are reared only at the times of year when their presence is required. (qtd. in Kidd, *Bees* 67)

Both in bee world and in the pink house, males are often viewed as peripheral. When Lily asks August if there was ever a time she almost got married, August tells her that she "was in love once," but she "loved [her] freedom more" (Kidd, *Bees* 146). Though June dates Neil, the local high school principal, it is clear from an earlier jilting that she has no plans to consider Neil's proposals seriously, until the novel's end. May does not date anyone, and Rosaleen—who had been married for three years—had quickly thrown her husband out "for carousing" (12). Only Zach, August's godson, figures rather largely into this world of women as an assistant to August and then later as a friend and love interest for Lily.

Lily is surprised how quickly the black Boatwright sisters are willing to accept her—a white orphan—into their female family, and after only a few hours of settling in, she feels a strong sense of belonging. Yet Lily is unfamiliar with the social dynamic of the "African American culture, [where] family is defined as an extended kinship network rather than as the nuclear unit central to White cultural values" (Greene 13). We see this familial structure in the creation of the Daughters of Mary: a collection of colorful black women including the Boatwright sisters and their friends, Queenie, her grown daughter Violet, Lunelle the hatmaker, Mabelee, Cressie, Otis Hill (who, as the one male, was the exception to the rule), and his wife Sugar-Girl (Kidd, *Bees* 106). The Daughters of Mary comprise a family of sisterhood that is on-call for celebrations such as Mary Day and for crises such as Zach's arrest and May's death. Despite her initial hesitation in accepting Lily into their home because of racial apprehension,

June eventually changes her heart and joins her two sisters and the Daughters in a hearty acceptance of Lily.

Much like the love and acceptance that Huck feels from Jim, which pushes him to tear up the letter to Miss Watson, Lily, too, feels the love and acceptance from this host of mothers, and it pushes her to safety where she can begin sorting through her emotional trauma and identity. August, much like Jim in *Huck Finn*, serves as the premier catalyst in Lily's coming of age story. Sharon Monteith writes in *Advancing Sisterhood?* that "white women writers more usually privilege the moral growth of their white woman protagonist through her relationship with a black friend," and in Lily's case, an older friend and surrogate mother (5). Kidd highlights the wisdom of black women in the mentorship of August to Lily, confirming Marilyn Friedman's suggestion that "when friends share the same backgrounds, it becomes less likely that they will afford each other the opportunity for radical transformation" (qtd. in Monteith 5). Lily's radical transformation from an emotionally confused child to self-aware and confident young girl does take time. August understands that "there's a fullness of time for things" before Lily is ready to share her story (Kidd, *Bees* 236).

August begins her willing mentorship of Lily by first gaining her trust, tirelessly working with Lily in the bee-keeping business and affirming her at every turn. She teaches her how parallel the world of bees are to the world of humans, describing the delicate balance that must occur in a successful hive. Echoing her matriarchal structure in a story of her grandmother Big Mama, August suggests that women make the best beekeepers because they possess the "special ability built into them to love creatures that sting" (Kidd, *Bees* 143). Since Lily is accustomed to the stinging of her father's verbal and physical abuse and her mother's abandonment, she takes great pride when August considers her a "true beekeeper" once she has been stung by a bee

(167). The esteem-builder of becoming a skilled beekeeper proves foundational in Lily's growth process. She is finally able to share her story with August, and, as described earlier, she eventually comes full circle in her ability to see her past for what it was and her future for what it can be.

In comparison with Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,* Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees* clearly elicits greater growth from its white protagonist. Huck Finn lights out on his own to unchartered territory at the end of *Huck Finn*—free of Tom Sawyer's romanticizing and civilization's inhuman hypocrisy, his journey, a kind of individual manifest destiny. Lily, however, finds freedom within the matriarchal structure of the pink house. *Bees'* matriarchal structure provides an environment for more long-lasting change for Lily than does the patriarchal structure found in any of Huck's homes. The pink house provides more opportunities for esteem building, emotional probing, spiritual growth, and a constant source of love and nurturing from its inhabitants. Thus, when Lily re-emerges into the patriarchal world of Tiburon at the local high school, she appears confident in her new-found identity and sits with Zach at lunch, despite the jeers from classmates that she is a "nigger lover" (Kidd, *Bees* 301). Huck Finn finds true friendship and humanity consistently with Jim only while on the Mississippi River. As soon as Huck leaves the river and enters the Mississippi frontier towns, he experiences the hypocrisy, gullibility, and racial intolerance of his society. While Lily is invited to literally move into the safe haven of the pink house, Huck is forced to end his journey with Jim on the safe waters of the Mississippi River.

While August and Jim are both quite successful in promoting positive growth and development for their white charges, August seems to have benefitted in more ways than one from the passage of a century. August does not have the immense burden of being a run-away

slave with a bounty on her head, trying to rescue family members from separation. She is quite the opposite as a successful beekeeper with "48 hives strewn through the woods around the pink house, and another 280… parceled out on various farms" (Kidd, *Bees* 93). Also, she has more of a relationship with Deborah than Jim did with Pap, and she is able to delve more deeply into Lily's emotional circumstances because of this knowledge. Also, the dynamic between blacks and whites had changed substantially from Jim's time to August's time. The enormous divide and consequent barrier of race created by slavery did not exist to the same degree for August and Lily. Jim's slave status clearly made him inferior in Huck's society, and so his willingness to even discuss Huck's personal life was considered unsuitable. August, who still must deal with racial barriers as she breaks the Jim Crow Law of "Child Custody" in South Carolina by offering to raise Lily as her own, is an independent, educated, and well-respected black woman with her own business and home; her status provides more leverage for her willingness to take part in Lily's growth and development ("Jim Crow"). According to Simon Baron-Cohen, professor of Developmental Psychopathology at University of Cambridge, August has another advantage over Jim as the more accomplished mentor because she is female. In his book *The Essential Difference*, Baron-Cohen describes how "females spontaneously empathize to a greater degree than do males," thus August naturally has the greater ability to understand Lily's painful circumstance and help her both cope with it and grow from it than Jim has for Huck (2).

Twain and Kidd both write novels that successfully address social indictments of their time. Slavery is not the issue in *The Secret Life of Bees* for it ended a century earlier, but both authors focus principally on the destructive forces of racial discrimination. In *Adventures of Huck Finn*, we see this most evident in the treatment of slaves as property, the destruction of slave families, and the complete silence regarding a slave's death in a steamboat explosion. In

Bees, racial discrimination is highlighted in Rosaleen's beating, April and May's suicides, and Zach's unjust arrest. Both novels address the ills of civilized society through explorations of religious hypocrisy and senseless violence. While *Huck Finn* focuses more on the importance of literacy than does *Bees*, both novels encourage educational accomplishment. Finally, *Bees* concentrates on the strength of women to combat the negative forces of racism and abuse with nurturing and love.

Chapter 3: Kidd's Stylistics

Sue Monk Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees* uses the first person narrative point of view to tell her story. Similar in many regards to Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Kidd's novel allows her young white protagonist, Lily Owens, to narrate her bildungsroman, highlighting the gross racial atrocities prevalent in Lily's culture and the unlikely friendship she finds with a minority mentor. Lily's rendering of the story also emphasizes the personal pain and loss she experiences. What creates the magic in Lily's narration is another of Kidd's stylistic devices: Lily's ability to vacillate from poetic and humorous language to compelling, dramatic language while wearing the hats of orphan, fugitive, social commentator, historian, and smitten teen. Because Lily narrates the story through her own Standard American English, Laurie Grobman accuses Kidd of whitening her black characters for their lack of speaking African American English; "these women rarely sound black in the way that Southern black women in the 1960s would most likely sound" (14). Quite different from *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* where Jim and the other black characters' dialects starkly contrast Huck Finn's language, *The Secret Life of Bees* avoids using highly different black dialects to illustrate Lily's story although dialectal differences do exist. And finally, Kidd uses the motif of place to usher in emotional and spiritual renewal for her protagonist Lily and other characters such as Rosaleen and the bee sisters. These stylistic devices—first person narrative point of view, language varieties, dialect, and the motif of place—contextualize the social awareness and psychological development Lily gains through her journey.

In spite of Lily's reticent social personality, the narrative voice she assumes is commanding and insightful. This "voice" in Kidd's first novel, writes reviewer Rosellen Brown, "carr[ies] us pleasurably through her story" and lays out "implicitly, the emotional terrain she

will take us through" (11). Brown continues that by the end of the novel's very first paragraph—a description of bees coming through cracks in Lily's wall—we already have a solid idea of Lily Owens's identity. She is an accurate and empathetic observer of detail with an unavoidable air of "desperate sadness of someone with modest emotional expectations—'not even looking for a flower'—that are not being met" (11). Reviewer Lauren Bloxam agrees that "the captivating force in the novel is Lily, the young narrator" and that her "voice and her plight… drive the novel" (198).

Because the focus of the novel, a bildungsroman, is Lily's coming of age, Lily is the most apt to reveal the range of emotion in her complicated story because she is the person experiencing it firsthand. Though August proves to be a great story-teller about black Mary, bees, Big Mama (August's beekeeping grandmother), and Lily's mother Deborah, her narratives lack the vulnerability Lily reveals as she relates her own story. Lily invites sympathy, describing herself as so physically reprehensible that "clumps of whispering girls" would "get quiet when [she] passed" them at school, sending her into adolescent self-mutilation (Kidd, *Bees* 9). Readers trust this narrator who honestly describes her insecurities. The first person point of view allows readers to see how Lily processes the physical and psychological affronts to her innocence, particularly T. Ray's verbal abuse and her mother's abandonment. Lily has no one to ask about training bras, no one to drive her to junior cheerleader tryouts, and no one to whom she can show the "rose-petal stain on her panties" (13). With no mother and an abusive father, Lily experiences an emotional isolation that further perpetuates her need for the surrogate mothers she finds in Rosaleen and August. As narrator, Lily tells her story with such emotional vulnerability that even the once abrasive June softens towards her and apologizes for her behavior.

Lily's narration also dramatizes more clearly the racial discrimination replete within society depicted in the novel. Like her literary predecessor Huck Finn, Lily has been raised to view black people as inferior despite her friendship with Rosaleen, but she is literally horrified at Rosaleen's bloody beating by three local racists and the ensuing unjust charges of "assault, theft, and disturbing the peace" (Kidd, *Bees* 33). Lily is equally disturbed by Zach's arrest and May's suicide and also troubled by subtler forms of racism like June and August's under-employment. Kidd describes Lily witnessing these heinous acts of violence and reporting them because as a young child, Lily is innocent to the cruel treatment of blacks during this time and is subsequently shocked and outraged enough to break Rosaleen out of jail and run away from home. A black person as narrator, growing up in a racially-charged culture of segregation and disharmony, would perhaps have been socially conditioned to expect violent repercussions from Rosaleen's altercation and from the gross mistreatment for Zach. An adult white narrator would most likely have either sided with the racists, like the jailor and his wife, or, too, have been so socially conditioned to the mistreatment of blacks that she or he would have expected or not even noticed such behaviors.

One thing Lily does not anticipate is acknowledging her own racial intolerance. Kidd uses Lily, who seems not only tolerant but also protective of Rosaleen, as narrator to uncover the subtle, but clear racism she retains once she arrives at the pink house. When Lily overhears June complaining to August about housing Lily because she is white, Lily is shocked to realize that June may not want her there "because of her skin color" (Kidd, *Bees* 87). Lily did not realize that it was possible to "reject people for being *white*," and her response to this discrimination was "righteous indignation" (87). Kidd reveals this subtle racism that resides deep within many whites at the time through Lily's narrative voice. Though Lily has simmered about June's

racism by the time she meets Zach, she begins to feel like a minority when Zach, too, comments about her being white. Lily's racism is further revealed when she is "shocked" by Zach's "being handsome" (116) and her immense attraction to him. In a daydream one day about having an intimate encounter with Zach, Lily acknowledges that it is "foolish to think some things [are] beyond happening, even being attracted to Negroes" (125). Lily's narrative voice promotes a dramatic awakening towards racial discrimination that may not have been as evident from another character's perspective.

Lily's versatility in switching from poetic language to emotive language and from philosophical contemplation to coy lies is another of Kidd's stylistic accomplishments. In the very first paragraph in poetic language, Lily describes the bees flying for the feeling of the wind; seeing the bees is so moving that it "split[s] [her] heart down its seam" (Kidd, *Bees* 1). Lily's poetic language often describes moments of heightened emotion that paint Lily as an old soul. One really hot day when she and Zach are bringing in supers for August, she sees the roadsides covered with freshly picked cotton, which makes her wish for a blizzard to cool things off. This idea sends Lily into a daydream about having a snowball fight with Zach, "blasting each other with soft white snow cotton," then "building a snow cave," and finally "sleeping with [their] bodies twined together… like black-and-white braids" (Kidd, *Bees* 124). This last beautiful image jolts Lily's system because she realizes that she is in love with a black man, something she originally thinks impossible for her and a relationship that was forbidden in her culture.

Lily uses emotive language to describe the air that is "all scratched up" when her parents are fighting (7). And she continues this language when she portrays the disheartening actions of T. Ray at dinner one night when he has refused her birthday request with silence. "It caused a kind of sorrow to rise in me," Lily thinks, "sorrow for the sound of his fork scraping the plate,

the way it swelled in the distance between us, how I was not even in the room" (22). Even in T. Ray's non-response, Lily creates a great emptiness through her language. When she misses her mother, Lily envisions a heavenly reunion with her in emotive language: "She would kiss my skin till it grew chapped and tell me I was not to blame. She would tell me this for the first ten thousand years" (3). Kidd often italicizes Lily's emotive language, emphasizing its power and emotional tug, and she frequently has Lily repeat an important line such as the tumultuous "*Your sorry mother ran off and left you*" that T. Ray delivers right before Lily runs away (40).

Lily's language contrarily often resembles that of an insightful adult more than that of a fourteen-year-old girl. When she sees the black Madonna honey labels at the Frogmore Stew General Store and realizes the direct link to her mother, she thinks "there is nothing but mystery in the world, how it hides behind the fabric of our poor, browbeat days, shining brightly, and we don't even know it" (Kidd, *Bees* 63). The young narrator's philosophical language reflects a depth of understanding gained by her observation and the life of one who has already experienced more than she should have. And when she and Rosaleen arrive at the pink house, even Lily is surprised by the success of her deceitful language when she claims that her mother died when she was little and that her "father died in a tractor accident last month on our farm in Spartanburg County" (73). Lily's ability to fabricate stories spontaneously highlights her intelligence and creativity.

The most entertaining language of Lily's is her sense of humor, found over and over throughout the novel. Lily claims the school kids describe her dad's peach sign as the "Great Fanny" and that is "cleaning up the language" because it was a giant fleshy colored peach with a large crease down the middle (8). Lily does not care for President Johnson "because of the way he held his beagles by the ears," but she definitely admires his wife, Lady Bird, "who always

looked like she wanted nothing more than to sprout wings and fly away" (20). When Lily is telling May good-bye in her casket, she asks her to give her mother several messages, and then she "fold[s] [May's] hands together and tuck[s] them under her chin like she was thinking seriously about the future" (202). This Twain-like humor is Kidd's attempt at making death and the motherlessness that Lily faces more palatable. Lily's resourcefulness with language is "gorgeous," writes a critic from the *Nashville Scene* ("Praise for *Bees*" [ii]) and so beautiful "you'll want to tear through the pages" writes another from *Southern Living* ([i]).

Kidd's use of dialect, on the other hand, does not receive glowing reviews by critic Laurie Grobman who believes that the author erases most traces of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) so that these "women rarely sound black in the way that Southern black women in the 1960s would most likely sound" (14). I agree with Grobman to a certain extent; Rosaleen is the only black woman in the novel who does not speak Standard American English (SAE). I made the argument earlier that June and August were college-educated and thus may have spoken the dialect of Standard American English for that reason, but this does not account for May's standard dialect. The three calendar sisters' father was a dentist and may have spoken Standard American English and expected it to be spoken at home since people believed it to be the language of educated and proper people. This theory still does not apply to the rest of the Daughters of Mary, whose educational backgrounds remain a mystery, but who also speak a SAE dialect.

Using AAVE intermittently, Rosaleen explains that her mama weaving and then selling sweet-grass baskets on the roadside was "not one thing like [Lily] selling peaches" because "[Lily] ain't got seven children [she] gotta feed from it" (Kidd, *Bees* 12). Rosaleen first uses SAE and then finishes with AAVE in her comment. In *American English,* Walt Wolfram and

Natalie Schilling-Estes write that African American English (AAE), another name for AAVE, is "historically rooted in a Southern-based, rural working-class variety," (213) and the particular distinguishing feature of AAE in the second part of Rosaleen's comment is using "ain't for didn't" (215) as above when she says "ain't got" (Kidd, *Bees* 12). In other words, if Rosaleen is using this dialect in part of her comment, why is she not using it consistently, considering her status as a worker for Lily's father, and why do the other black working-class characters in the novel not also use it?

Writing in dialect consistently and correctly is particularly difficult. Twain even writes a defense of his use of dialects in the "explanatory" note before *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* begins, saying that "the shadings have not been done in a haphazard fashion, or by guess-work; but pain-stakingly, and with the trustworthy guidance and support of personal familiarity with these several forms of speech" (Twain, *Huck Finn* 69). Critic David Carkeet claims that "an apparent lack of fit between this announcement and the linguistic facts of the novel has long confounded investigators trying to decide just who speaks what dialect" (315). Critics Bruce Southard and Al Muller cite eleven linguistic studies on Twain's dialect that "prove to be conflicting and even call into question the accuracy of Twain's own assertions" (631). Though, it is easy to navigate between the more obvious dialects of Huck and Jim because Huck speaks a version of Southern American English while Jim speaks a version of African American English, it is far more difficult to differentiate between dialects of the many white characters in the novel.

This same racial dynamic exists in *The Secret Life of Bees* with Rosaleen, for example, coming from Sylvan, South Carolina, speaking an AAVE dialect differing from another black character born and raised in Tiburon, South Carolina three hours away. In the rural South, one finds dialectic differences even within a short radius, distinctions that emanate from the colonial

settlement of each particular area. Since Kidd is not a linguist, she may have allowed Lily, her white narrator, to tell the story in the language Lily heard. Lily may have translated the AAVE for her audience, or she may have not heard a difference in the dialect, considering that she had been raised by Rosaleen.

Dialect as a stylistic is merely one way to build characterization; Kidd is adept at several others including the art of conversation, the art of story-telling, and the art of description. When Lily first meets Zach, and they are getting to know one another, Zach tells her that he does not plan on teaching Lily to drive in his car "Because you look like the kind of girl who'll wreck something for sure" (Kidd, *Bees* 118). When Lily defends herself, Zach repeats, "For sure… wreck something for sure" (118). This habit of repeating a line for both emphasis and humor is a practice characteristic of black language that I have witnessed with black teens at the high school where I teach and black people in other various social settings. As Lily listens intently to August's rendition of the story of Our Lady of Chains, the Daughters of Mary join in a sort of call and response, typical in black churches: August calls out, "not because she wore chains," and the Daughters chant, "because she broke them" (110). Story-telling in the pink house, particularly by August seems to be a rich tradition of these black women. Lily's description of the Daughters of Mary makes each unique and believable. Lunelle, the bold hatmaker, arrives at Lily's first Daughters of Mary meeting in a purple felt hat "the size of a sombrero with fake fruit on the back" (106). The colorful montage of hats that follow imitates the colorful characters of their owners and the profound beauty of these royal black women. Whereas Twain uses dialect to "reveal the personalities of his characters" (Southard 631), Kidd uses description to create black women and men so believable and unique that Laura Bloxham feels both Rosaleen and the Boatwright sisters "deserve their own novel" (198). While using black dialects may have

enhanced the characters of Kidd's black women, her descriptions of their appearances and interactions with each other and Lily seem to provide an authentic rendering of black women during the 1960s.

The pink house and the colorful ladies that inhabit it and visit it represent one of Kidd's most powerful motifs: place. Kidd writes that after she wrote the scene about Lily and Rosaleen walking into Tiburon, she was not sure where the plot would go next. About that time, she came across Eudora Welty's statement that "People give pain, are callous and insensitive, empty and cruel… but place heals the hurt, soothes the outrage, fills the terrible vacuum that these human beings make" (qtd. in "Penguin Readers" 11). Kidd decides that the pink house will provide that refuge for Lily. As soon as she arrives, Lily is given shelter and food. The following day, August teaches her how to care for all things bee related, and so begins the healing. Lily wants to explain to Rosaleen, who questions her intentions of staying at the pink house, that she "just want[s] to be normal for a little while—not a refugee girl looking for her mother" (Kidd, *Bees* 79). Lily wants August and all the women in the pink house to love her, so she can continue to live in this nurturing utopia. After only a couple of weeks at the pink house and surrounded by August, June, May, Rosaleen, the black Mary, and the Daughters of Mary, Lily is so pumped full of honey, love, nurturing, and self-esteem that she is strong enough to share her powerful story and begin dealing with her demons. This place, the pink house, offers Lily an escape from society. With August's help and the support of her surrogate mothers, Lily is strong enough even to face her father in the novel's climactic ending.

The flowing and renewing waters of rivers and creeks are significant places in both *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *The Secret Life of Bees*. For Huck and Jim, the Mississippi River is an escape from their captors and the societal constraints of race. When Huck finally

escapes the Shepherdson/Grangerford feud, he and Jim reunite and continue their friendship-building on the Mississippi River, proclaiming "there warn't no home like a raft… You feel mighty free and easy and comfortable on a raft" (Twain 177). Huck goes on to describe how he and Jim would sit in the sandy bottom of the river and watch the daylight come and how they were "always naked, day and night," revealing their comfort with one another (178). This Edenic scene illustrates the growth that becomes possible between a mature black slave and a white boy, runaways both, in a culture where identity is often relegated to class or race as on the shores of the Mississippi. It is on the river where Jim first confronts Huck about his selfish prank of letting Jim believe they were separated, and it is on the river where Huck first "humble[s] [him]self to a nigger" and apologizes for his misdeeds (142). The river is therefore more than just an escape for both characters; it is a platform on which to build an unlikely, mutually rewarding friendship.

Lily and Rosaleen experience a similar escape, after running away from Sylvan, in a creek near Tiburon. This creek offers both characters drinking water, a place to bathe, and refuge from their captors that night. Lily describes the creek and surrounding forest as a "different universe… a Grimm Brothers forest" with its "flecks of moving light" on the water and "kudzu vines drap[ing] between pine trees like giant hammocks" (Kidd, *Bees* 51). In this fairy-tale creek environment, Rosaleen feels the freedom to confront Lily about the real reason they left Tiburon which results in an argument and their brief parting. When Lily is ready, the race-free environment of the creek allows for her apology. Much like Huck and Jim, Lily and Rosaleen shed their clothes in a gesture of vulnerability and trust as they reunite. The creek offers its assuaging powers to heal the hurtful comments between Lily and Rosaleen. It offers

Rosaleen a reprieve from the violent abuse of the three Tiburon racists, and it offers Lily safety from her abusive father, T. Ray.

Lily is drawn to another waterway, a little river, close to the pink house, one night when she is genuinely missing her mother. As she wades in, she is initially frightened by a turtle, but she emerges "want[ing] it to always be like this—no T. Ray, no Mr. Gaston, nobody wanting to beat Rosaleen senseless" (Kidd, *Bees* 81). In this regard, the river serves as a place of cleansing and renewal. May's death in the river could even be seen as a sort of renewal for May, relieving the burdens of her life and ushering her to a more peaceful place. Lily is so drawn to the river with its comforting power that Kidd describes her desperation for it after May's death. "I wanted the river. Its wildness. I wanted to strip naked and let the water lick my skin," Lily thinks to herself, desperate for the water's consolation for her aching heart (Kidd, *Bees* 229). Lily knows a person can die in the river, but she believes more importantly that someone can be "reborn in it, too" (229). During this trip to the river after May's death, Zach professes his love for Lily, affirming that she is loveable and giving her the strength to finally share her dark secret with August. For Huck and Lily, rivers offer rest, renewal, and rebirth.

Sue Monk Kidd's stylistics encompass a strong first person narrative voice that measures the depth of loss while accurately recording racial injustice, a language that juxtaposes humor with vulnerability, descriptions that authentically describe black women and men from 1964, and three places—the pink house, a creek, and the river—that offer solace and redemption. "This is solid writing," writes Rosellen Brown, "efficient, elegant, and poignant" of Sue Monk Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees* (12).

CONCLUSION

In her first novel *The Secret Life of Bees*, Sue Monk Kidd reveals the incredible strength of black women on Lily's coming of age. However, more extensive exploration of the role of males in the novel, particularly Zachary Taylor and Attorney Clayton Forrest and their influence on Lily's development, would reveal even further insight. Zach's arrest seems to jolt Lily out of her ego-centric shell when she realizes that black people must deal with social barriers she will never face. Zach also seems to soften the hard shell of Lily's exterior first through his friendship and then through his pursuit of Lily as a girlfriend, preparing her for her big reveal to August. Clayton Forrest is the only respected white male in Kidd's novel. He encourages Zach to pursue his dream of becoming a lawyer, and he fights for justice in Zach's and Rosaleen's unjust arrests and Rosaleen's brutal beating. Feminist Naomi Wolf addresses men like Clayton Forrest when she writes that "the world of men is dividing into egalitarians and patriarchalists—those men who are trying to learn the language and customs of the newly emerging world, and those who are determined to keep that new order from taking root" (qtd. in Kidd, *Dance* 101). He treats everyone—black and white—with dignity and respect. The degree to which Forrest's relationship with both Zach and Lily promote their respective emotional development also deserves more exploration.

The similarities between the patriarchal structures of Huck Finn and Lily Owen's world are contrasted here with the pink house's matriarchal structure. In those comparisons, I juxtaposed Male figures, possessing often inferior characteristics, with the nurturing women in the pink house. Further analysis of similarities and differences between the women of Huck Finn's world—especially the Widow Douglas and Miss Watson—and the women of the pink

house is merited. Despite the racial differences and the two different eras, the women have startling similarities.

Much like Twain accomplishes in his portrayal of Jim as a strong, moral role model for Huck Finn, Kidd rehabilitates the role of black women in *The Secret Life of Bees* as independent, strong role models for a traumatized, lonely young white girl while simultaneously addressing the destructive forces of racial discrimination in a racially charged 1960s Southern landscape. Lily's decision to free Rosaleen from jail and run away from her abusive father is a testament to the strength that even the most downtrodden, abused youth possesses within herself to escape destructive environments. Through relationships with her nanny Rosaleen and then her black mentor August, Lily is able to cope with her mother's abandonment, the haunting guilt she feels for inadvertently murdering her mother, and her father's verbal and psychological abuse. Black Mary, a feminine representation of God, offers Lily immediate solace from the loneliness and anxiety she feels, and she continues to nurture Lily's spirit as she comes to terms with the disappointments of her parents and her own identity.

Reminiscent of Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,* Kidd emphasizes the remarkable power of minority mentors as catalysts for change in a confused and insecure white child as August's love and nurturing of Lily mirrors the love and affection Jim shows Huck. Juxtaposed against the patriarchal structure of Huck Finn's Mississippi River landscape, Kidd's matriarchal structure in the pink house provides a more nurturing environment for Lily to achieve self-actualization, Mazlow's highest stage of psychological development. Unlike Huck Finn who regresses when Tom Sawyer—representing immature adolescence, romantic blindness, and the racist culture of the 1840s—returns, Lily is able to continue moving forward when faced with challenges. She confronts her outraged father when he finally finds her, convinces him to

allow her to remain in the pink house with her host of surrogate mothers, and re-emerges into the patriarchal structure of Tiburon a confident young lady with a clear purpose.

Kidd's decision for Lily to narrate the story allows readers to feel more profoundly the depth of loss, the great insecurity, and the enormous confusion her main character battles daily in her perplexing, desolate circumstance. The fluidity of Lily's many languages from emotive to poetic to philosophical reflect the layered dimensions of social indictments Kidd emphasizes in her novel. Her motif of place in the pink house, the creek, and the river offers solace and redemption to a protagonist in need of salvation. Kidd's ability to combine the heart-breaking story of a motherless and abused teenager searching for her identity with the healing power of a community of black women, amidst an atmosphere of racial intolerance, with engaging rhetoric make this a poignant, moving story that empowers women and rehabilitates the role of black women in literature.

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