

Sample Student

Teacher Name

English 9: 6th Hour

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The Secret Life of Bees Buzzes Historical Truth

"Changes were coming – even to South Carolina – you could practically smell them in the air" (Kidd 231). Those changes are indeed dramatic for protagonist Lily Owens. Set during the Civil Rights Movement in the South Carolina during 1964, Lily, a 14 year-old white girl and her African American housekeeper, Rosaleen, flee from Lily's home and learn much about love and equality in their adventure. [Thesis/Claim →] Sue Monk Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees* correctly represents racism in the U.S. [Body paragraph #1] as Rosaleen is beaten and jailed, [2]Lily cannot date her African American friend, and [3]August and June were not allowed to be teachers in their youths.

One part of major shame in U.S. history is refusing to let African Americans to vote, even as recently as the 1960's. Rosaleen, Lily's nanny and stand-in mother, is thrown in jail when she tries to register to vote. On her way to town, three racist men taunt her, and when she pours tobacco spit on their shoes, they call the police (Kidd 14). Later when Lily goes to rescue Rosaleen, she finds her in the hospital, badly beaten because the three men were allowed into the jail to beat her because she wouldn't apologize for dirtying their shoes (Kidd 20). This type of violence was very common in the U.S. when President Truman signed the Civil Rights Act in 1964, the same year in which this book is set (Civil Rights 101). In fact, a year later when there was a march to support voting rights in Alabama, racists, "many of them mounted on horses and

swinging clubs and firing tear gas,” attacked the marchers, earning the day the title of “Bloody Sunday” (Civil Rights 101). Obviously, the attack on Rosaleen for wanting to vote is not exaggerated.

Other aspects of racism also appear readily in the novel. When Lily and Rosaleen settle into the household of the African American sisters, August, June, and May Boatwright, August offers Lily the chance to work with her bees (Kidd 101). August already employs a handsome and intelligent teenage boy, Zach, who happens to be African American. In working together, Zach and Lily grow to love each other, but Zach knows they can’t be together. The white community will not stand for it. In fact, it wasn’t even legal for blacks and whites to marry because an “amendment, outlawing interracial marriage, remained a part of the North Carolina Constitution until 1971” (Blythe). What a shame that people who cared deeply for each other had to deny their feelings.

A final example of racism, although there are many more, is the fact that August and June Boatwright were not initially allowed to become teachers when they were younger even though they had their degrees. In fact, both women and African Americans suffered inequality in their goals to become teachers and have equal pay to white men (“Teaching Timeline”). A lawsuit in Charleston, South Carolina, brought by Viola Duval Stewart in the 1940’s, succeeded in gaining equal pay in her district (“Teaching Timeline”). Unfortunately, progress was slow to spread, and integration of schools was just beginning in the 1960’s when the novel is set.

The Secret Life of Bees shows both the best and worst of humankind. Through the abuse of Lily at the hands of her father, the racism and violence exerted on the African American characters, and pain of growing up feeling unloved, one does not feel positive

about the human race. However, redemption comes. Lily and the Boatwright sisters, white and black, form an ineffable, familial bond, and Lily's abusive father eventually surrenders custody to the African American sisters.