

# Racial biases in the secret life of bees and "i, too, sing america"

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The civil rights movement was an era of much needed change in America. For centuries, an African American was of lesser value than a caucasian person. African Americans were oppressed, entrapped beneath a blanket of injustice, their “ god-given rights” failing to protect them from the caustic judgements they faced everyday. They were humiliated by Jim Crow, judged by their pigment, treated as less than humans because of a social construct. It was said that all men were created equal, yet a black man was brought into the world a slave, a white man his owner. In the historical novel, *The Secret Life Of Bees* by Sue Monk Kidd, a budding white teenager, Lily, explores the topic of race as she lodges with an African American family during the civil rights era. Likewise, the poem, “ I, Too, Sing America” by Langston Hughes documents an African American’s struggle for the rights he deserves, and his hopes and dreams for a world he wants to live in. “ I, Too, Sing America” was Langston Hughes response to the infamous “ I Hear America Singing” by Walt Whitman. After careful analysis, it has become clear that *The Secret Life Of Bees* and “ I, Too, Sing America” are more contrasting than similar. The two texts are similar, being that they explore the same theme of all people, no matter their color, being equal; however, they differ in approach to the theme, as both texts are told by completely contrasting perspectives, in this case a white teenage girl and a middle-aged black man.

In addition, *The Secret Life Of Bees* takes longer to develop a theme, as it is told in the form of a narrative, while “ I, Too, Sing America” is told as an extended metaphor, using symbolism to approach the main theme of racial equality. Similarly, *The Secret Life Of Bees* and “ I, Too, Sing America” both

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share the view that freedom should be available to all, no matter their race. In addition, they both discuss the way minorities were treated before civil rights laws were passed. In *The Secret Life Of Bees*, the theme of colorlessness reoccurs in the novel. As Lily begins to discover that African Americans are not any less capable or less intelligent than her, like here, when it says, “ Up until then I’d thought that white people and colored people getting along was the big aim, but after that I decided everybody being colorless together was a better plan.

“(209) It is important to notice the word “ colorless”, which means that Lily is aware that racial biases will never be abolished, therefore she feels that the best way to achieve civil rights is to subtract race as a whole. She believes being colorless is the only way for all to be treated equal. When Langston Hughes published “ I, Too, Sing America” in 1945, which sparked a much-needed inspiration for social reform in the civil rights era in 1954, just 9 years later. This substantiates that Hughes was one of the first advocates for civil rights. He saw the era of social reform before his eyes, and used the powerful themes in his poems to grasp it. Significantly, *The Secret Life Of Bees* is set in the civil rights era, as more and more laws are passed for African Americans’ rights.

It is as if Hughes began the dream of civil rights, and Sue Monk Kidd shows how it was achieved. In addition, Langston Hughes wrote his poem “ I, Too, Sing America” in response to Walt Whitman’s “ I Hear America Singing”. Whitman wrote “ I Hear America Singing” in 1867 as a catalogue poem, showing the ideal America, the land he was proud to live in. He lists all the

people and workers “singing America.” “I, Too, Sing America” was written in 1945, as a response to Whitman’s famous poem, that showed the “perfect” America. Langston Hughes used his poem to include himself.

The speaker proclaims his ambition to assert his legitimacy as an American citizen and as a man. Having contrasting perspectives, *The Secret Life Of Bees* and “I, Too, Sing America” discuss the same theme, but tell it from completely different perspectives. *The Secret Life Of Bees* is told from the outside looking in, as Lily, a white teenage girl, begins to see civil rights through a new lens, as she discovers what equality really means. On the other hand, “I, Too, Sing America” is told by an African American man, who is trapped inside the barriers society has set for him. After reading both of these texts, the two differing perspectives give the reader a unique understanding of the topic, from both sides. For example, in “I, Too, Sing America”, when Hughes says, “I am the darker brother”.

When he refers to himself as “the darker brother”, he uses the word “brother” to show the white men that he is equal. His goal in saying this is to prove the difference is only skin deep, because they share the same brain, body, and mind on the inside. On the other hand, in *The Secret Life Of Bees*, Lily often feels as if she is on the outside looking in, because she feels isolated from the African-American women. In the beginning of the book while she is living amongst African Americans, Lily says, “I am not one of you, I thought.” However, near the end of the book, Lily begins to realize she is no different, and that African Americans are the same people as her and her family, like in the quote, “Not one person in the room said, Sugar-Girl,

really, talking about white people like that and we have a white person present. They didn't think of me as being different.

" (209) This quote shows how Lily developed throughout the book, as she now realizes that they not only don't think of her as different, but she realizes that she isn't different. This is a turning point for Lily in the story, where she begins to recognize the flaws in her thinking, and work to overcome the racial biases she has been taught. Langston writes, " They send me to eat in the kitchen / When company comes," (3-4) When he says he must " eat in the kitchen", he is alluding to slavery, when slaves were confined to their quarters when others were in the house. Although slavery had ended before Hughes' time, he lived during a period of immense segregation, where an African American was considered inferior, which is why most of his poems address civil rights. This relates to a quote in *The Secret Life Of Bees*, when a policeman makes an offensive comment about race towards Lily in this quote, "[The people you're living with] are colored people here... I'm just saying it's not natural, that you shouldn't be... well, lowering yourself." (198) This quote shows the racial inequality at the time, and shows the shocking level of racism among authoritative figures.

Lily resents the words " lowering yourself", after she has been with August and discovered how " intelligent" and " cultured" she is. (78) This resentment proves that Lily now has fully developed, and she has realized the flaws in her previous thinking. This is a turning point in the book, when Lily feels a deep connection with August, and when she fully grasps the idea that everyone, no matter their color, is as much of a human being as her.

Given these points, we can gather the fact that the novel *The Secret Life Of Bees* by Sue Monk Kidd and “*I, Too, Sing America*” by Langston Hughes are more different than they are alike. They are similar in their main theme, that all people should be treated equally, and both texts share the goal of abolishing racial inequality. However, they contrast in their approach to this theme, as *The Secret Life Of Bees* uses a feminist lense as the novel is told by a young, white teenager, while “*I, Too, Sing America*” is told through the eyes of a middle-aged African American man.

In addition, the theme is approached much faster as an extended metaphor, “*I, Too, Sing America*”, than it is in the historical fiction novel, *The Secret Life Of Bees*. Sue Monk Kidd and Langston Hughes’ powerful theme of racial bias will always be apparent, even if we don’t live in pre-civil rights America. These authors have shaped the world as we know it, and as we continue striving to abolish racial stereotypes; we will always remember them as the sculptors of the new America. The millennial generation stands on the shoulders of authors like Hughes and Sue Monk Kidd. They began the story.

We continue the story. “If I have seen further than others, it is by standing upon the shoulders of giants.” - Isaac Newton