

Pervasive racism in the secret life of bees



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Within the historic world created in *The Secret Life of Bees* by Sue Monk Kidd, one of the many underlying influences in *Sylvan* is that of prejudice and bigotry. Many figures within society are not what they seem. The established church gives the message of hope to everybody—that is, if one is not African American. Likewise, the police protect the rights of the people—unless the people happen to be African American. Even the innocence and goodness of a child can be sullied by what the society values. In *The Secret Life of Bees*, the society depicted proves that racism is not only prevalent, but also lurking in the places one would least expect.

When the word “fair” comes to mind, the associated people are usually those that enforce justice; after all, justice is supposed to be blind. Although the justice system has the best intentions in the world of the novel, it seems as though the system has become corrupted; the chief enforcers of the law, the police, are seen to be infected with racism. This is demonstrated clearly when Rosaleen is allowed to be senselessly beaten by the racists in the jail cell: “After you left, that policeman called, let those men come in for their apology...two of them held me by the arms while the other one hit me” (Kidd 46). Another example arises when Zach is arrested. Although he did nothing wrong, and the real culprit could have been anybody, the police decide not to survey everybody but to round up all the blacks and send them off to jail. While justice must be served objectively, there is no objectivity in this Southern society. Rather, the bias against African Americans is so strong and prevalent that it completely clouds the judgment of the enforcers of the law. The men who are supposed to make sure that the scales of justice are equilibrated deliberately throw justice off balance.

While the term justice is associated with the police, innocence is quickly associated with children; there is nothing more innocent than the unknowing nature of a growing child. That goodness, however, can be touched, and sometimes even overtaken, by subtle pervasive behaviors that gradually seep into the mind. Lily finds out about these negative underlying factors as she first meets August: “ All I could think was August is so intelligent, so cultured, and I was surprised by this. That’s what let me know I had some prejudice buried inside me” (78). Lily, who does not consider herself to be racist, always attempts to keep an open mind about others; she was even raised by Rosaleen, who is African-American. Even with these factors, Lily still harbored prejudiced thoughts about a group of people she had contact with since the death of her mother. Within Southern society, the ones who are believed to be clean of prejudices are not; they merely seem that way because everybody else is much worse. In this vision of society, there truly was no way to escape the pervasive nature of racism.

The Church is considered a clean sanctuary from secular events. Everybody is equal in the eyes of God, and because God’s love is open for everybody, the Church is the place to go for equal opportunity. However, the pervasive nature of racism contorts this message of equality into that of bigotry. Lily explains the status quo: “ Every time a rumor got going about a group of Negroes coming to worship with us on Sunday morning, the deacons stood locked-arms across the church steps to turn them away” (Kidd 30). Although the Bible is supposed to be interpreted objectively and directly from the text itself, the “ men of God” at the time take the interpretations into their own hands and change the very meaning of what equality in the eyes of God is. It

seems that racism is so pervasive that even the men who swear that they will uphold the law of God and thus are men of biblical conduct fail.

Kidd's novel uses examples such as these to show that our ideas of how certain aspects of society function may not be accurate. The truth, in fact, may be more problematic. Although we as humans can be good, even the most kindhearted unfortunately harbor some darkness; that is simply the human part of the continuing growth of society. It seems that the sooner we recognize this inherent darkness and aim to minimize it, the more we can aim to shut down the pervasive thoughts, whether they be of racism or hatred, from entering the conscious mind.