

Cognitive Analysis Sue Monk Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees*

Dr. P. Kiruthika,
Assistant Professor,
Department of English,
Periyar University PG Extension Centre,
Dharmapuri, Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract

Making sense of one's experiences is the most important aspect of learning and the study of Bildungsroman novels help in this by providing maps of simulated human experiences. In recent times, researchers in literature have shown keen interest in interdisciplinary frameworks and methodologies thereby giving scope for identifying characteristics of effective learning and thinking. Cognitive studies involving narratives bring out models of thinking and behaviour. This paper focuses how a teen age girl struggles on her own to find answer for her traumatic life. Also in the journey of her life she learns and emerges to be a matured person at the end of the novel.

Keywords: sensation, perception, development, cognition

Introduction

The Secret Life of Bees, the first novel of Sue Monk Kidd and published in 2002, has been recognized by reviewers as a significant contribution and one of the most famous works. It has drawn mostly favourable responses. Kidd's fiction focuses on women dissociating themselves from their problematic relationships with men which mark their embarking upon journeys of self-discovery. The most notable feature is that the female characters learn about themselves during the course of time thus developing a newfound sense of psychological and spiritual fortitude. The focus is on the psychological development of Lily.

Lily's way of perceiving and interpreting things can be explained by the two basic mental functions defined by Carl Jung – sensing and intuition.

Sensing Perception – The process of collecting concrete data using our five senses

INTuitive Perception (INTuition) – The process by which we make connections and infer meanings beyond sensory data

(<http://uir.unisa.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10500/2045/03chapter2.pdf>)

Sensing is the absorption of concrete details and intuition is about how effectively we combine and regenerate the absorbed things. It is true that all of us use sensing and intuition in our lives but it varies according to degrees of effectiveness and comfort levels. Jung suggests that the two mental functions are involved in perception or information processing. There are a lot of difficulties one has to face in order to move from the stage of sensing perception to intuitive perception. *The Secret Life of Bees* is considered as a coming of age novel as it marks Lily's gradual growth to maturity. Lily has been presented as a character, the fabric of whose life is knit with confusions and sorrows. The novel is about how Lily overcomes the miseries of her life and how she manages to take on life by accepting reality. Lily has been exposed to various physical and psychological troubles from the beginning but towards the end she gets answers to the long troubling questions, affection, family and a sense of belongingness. All her pains vanish on knowing the truth about her mother's love for her. From the life of bees she learns important lessons and emerges as a psychologically mature and strong person. Lily realizes the power of her __self and she is able to take a balanced view towards life. Longing for self-actualization and personal freedom, Lily progresses from her small world into the real big world with an enlarged perspective.

The fourteen year old protagonist Lily Owens' progress can be explained in Jungian terms. Hers is a movement from an extraverted sensation, that prompts her to think that she killed her mother, to an introverted intuition that clears her from the guilt. Her final liberation is enabled by the realization of the immensity and depth of a mother's love. In between these two stages, Lily has to face a lot of difficulties before coming to know the truth about her mother and herself. Lily suspects that she may be partially responsible for her mother's death and the ensuing guilt and longing for parental love form the emotional axis of the novel. As the title suggests, the life of Lily is a secretive one. One of the basic themes of the novel is emotional attachment and its role in the emotional development of the protagonist.

Lily goes away from home in search of the truth about her mother and to become her own person. The search takes an archetypal turn as Lily starts battling her guilt about her mother's death. Lily's journey is towards attaining emotional maturity. Wundt considers "emotions as unconscious steps of decision-making that were implied in all processes of conscious thought" (qtd. in Wassmann 213). Hence the emotional nature we see in Lily anticipates her balanced and fuller understanding at the end. It is true that people's lives are much more complicated than they appear. It takes time to get a feel of it all and deal with them in a way that they make sense ultimately. Lily represents the troubled adolescent mind

in common. The environment and the people she comes across contextualize the growing awareness in Lily.

The first chapter of the novel brings out the distressed memory of Lily. From the early age of four, Lily has not only struggled with this entrenched guilt, but has also attempted to cope with a motherless life and a cruel father. Loss of mother, betrayal, guilt and forgiveness entwine in a story that leads Lily to the single most thing her heart longs for, freedom – freedom from guilt, from male dominance and freedom to choose her life. Honey bees have strong symbolic significance and help in understanding the characters and their lives. The life of bees is a metaphor for human life.

Lily is told by Rosaleen that the “bees swarm before death”. Normally any girl of Lily’s age would become apprehensive at such a remark but she takes a matter-of-fact attitude. She is able to accept death as an essential and inevitable aspect of life. Her observation is quite revealing – “People who think dying is the worst thing don’t know a thing about life” (3). Lily’s philosophical bent of mind comes to the fore. Her willingness and ability to reflect upon life is evident here and the reader is prepared to be with a quester with great potential.

Lying alone in her bed Lily remembers the last day of her mother in Sylvan. The manner in which she describes her mother informs the depth of her love for her mother. Even after a lapse of ten years, Lily is able to remember the fragrance of the perfume her mother wore thus revealing her sharp memory. In an effort to relive her mother’s presence, she tries to get the same perfume in the hope that it would help. But she cannot get it from anywhere. In this instance we can see the link between sensation and consciousness. It is the relationship between Odour-Evoked Memory and Emotion. The phenomenon in which a certain smell evokes a specific memory is known as the Proust phenomenon. Herz and his colleagues recently characterized odor-evoked autobiographic memories to be more emotional than those evoked by other sensory stimuli because of the direct communication between the olfactory system and the amygdala which is crucial in the expression of emotions (qtd. in Matsunaga 115).

The scent of the perfume takes her back to earlier days providing consolation for her grief. Experimental psychology suggests that olfaction is one of the primary gateways to perception and it appears to play a role in social relationships especially in mother-infant bonding (Yantis and Pashler 691). This sensation triggers in Lily memory of her mother and the associated emotions. The scent of the perfume preserves the bonding between her and her mother. Lily’s strong olfactory sense emerges again when she identifies the perfume on her fifth grade teacher who denies it claiming it is just cold cream. This incident is apparently

trivial but reminds us of the strong capacity for olfactory sensation and its emotional consequences.

Once out in the world, Lily behaves with a maturity that is beyond her age. Jung has argued that decision making is based on two different sets of criteria – thinking and feeling. He explains that when one makes decisions based on logic and reason they are operating in the thinking mode. On the contrary, if the decision is made based on belief the mode shifts to that of feeling (qtd. in Coetzee 66). The way Lily manages situations shows her ease at operating in both the modes. The decisions Lily makes are a product of reason as well as of gut feeling. Based on the data gathered from the information gathering functions (sensing and intuition) Lily makes her decision to go to Tiburon, South Carolina. The following passage taken from *Bees of the World* throws light on how Lily's journey of life is shaped by the life of bees.

On leaving the old nest, the swarm normally flies only a few metres and settles. Scout bees look for a suitable place to start the new colony. Eventually, one location wins favor and the whole swarm takes to the air. (43)

There is a link between scout bees locating a new place and Lily finding a new life in a new place. Like the bees that travel only a few metres to relocate, Lily too finds from the map that Tiburon is just three miles from her town. Lily decides on Tiburon because the name is inscribed on the picture of Mary, one of the mother's belongings. She is certain that once at Tiburon she will be able to get information and details about her mother. It is an intuitive urge that propels her to move to Tiburon. Her gumption will become true at the end.

The most important aspect that Lily has to know about the secrets of her mother involves the picture of Mary with the inscription "Tiburon, S." This picture is what becomes the navigating mechanism for Lily and Rosaleen once they flee the town. The significance of the picture will be revealed only after they reach the Boatwright house. The personalities of Lily and Rosaleen undergo change as they become part of the home of the beekeepers. The search for a new identity assumes archetypal dimensions as both undergo psychological changes and the boundary between the inner self and the external world begins to dissolve. As the Jungian psychologist Marion Woodman points out, "if we leave our father's house, we have to make ourselves self-reliant. Otherwise, we just fall into another father's house" (<http://www.aadl.org>). Lily and Rosaleen find their way to self-awareness guided by the Boatwright sisters.

Generally, childhood memories are a source of happiness and comfort. But Lily's unhappy childhood offers her only sorrowful memories. So, unlike most other such characters, Lily does not relish remembering her past. Lily's psychological development is a slow and often painful process, replete with teenage angst and regression, but towards the

novel's end she has progressed from an abused, emotionally confused teen to a self-actualized young lady.

Conclusion

Lily has developed emotionally and spiritually and she in a way has attained self-actualization, the final stage in Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Lily, after reaching August's house, feels "a consolation and pure relief" and experiences a spiritual awakening in the presence of the Mary statue. Living with August, Lily emerges as a mature, self-actualized girl possessing qualities of emotional coping and self-regulatory capability.

Works Cited:

- Kidd, Sue Monk. *The Secret Life of Bees*. London: Headline Review, 2008. Print.
- Coetzee, Melinde, et al. "The relationship between personality preferences, self-esteem and emotional competence." *SA Journal of Industrial Psychology* 32.2 (2006): 64-73. Web. 29 May 2013.
- Matsunaga, Masahiro, Kaori Yamakawa, Yoko Kawanishi, Hirohito Tsuboi, Hiroshi Kaneko, Norihiro Sadato, Akiko Oshida, Atsushi Katayama, Mitsuyoshi Kashiwagi, Hideki Ohira. "Psychological and physiological responses to odor evoked autobiographic memory." *Activitas Nervosa Superior Rediviva*, 53.3 (2011): 14-120. Web. 25 January 2013.
- Redfield, Marc. *Phantom Formations: Aesthetic Ideology and the Bildungsroman*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1996. Print.
- Wassmann, Claudia. "Physiological Optics, Cognition and Emotion: A Novel Look at the Early Work of Wilhelm Wundt." *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 64. 2. (April, 2009): 213-249. Project Muse. Web. 4 September 2012
- Yantis, Steven, and Hal Pashler. *Stevens' Handbook of Experimental Psychology*. 3rd ed. Volume 1: Sensation and Perception. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2002. 691. PDF File.
- <http://uir.unisa.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10500/2045/03chapter2.pdf>
- http://www.aadl.org/files/bctg/bctg_guide-secret_life_of_bees.txt.