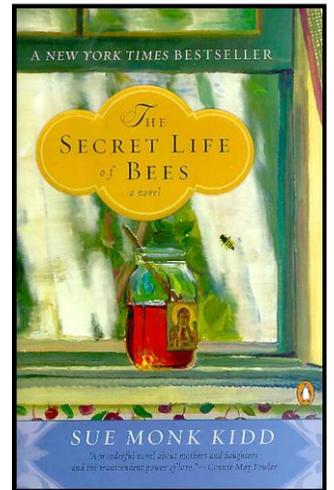


Allusion is the literary device of referencing famous people, places, things, or other works--such as a novel, poem, play, song, or piece of art—with the expectation that the reader will understand the reference. While readers may have to educate themselves in order to understand the full meaning of allusions made in texts written in previous eras, it is assumed that contemporaries of the author would be able to discern such references. The use of allusion is particularly important in **historical fiction**, such as *The Secret Life of Bees*, in which a modern author chooses a particular historical time period as the setting of a novel, for either educational or entertainment purposes.



Great literature is typically considered as such because it has universal themes that transcend generations, or even centuries. But historical fiction begs its readers not only to learn from these universal themes, but also to immerse themselves in the chosen time period. Why? What could we possibly learn from a storyline set in a time period so foreign to us? Why is it important that the story of Lily Owens be set in 1964, or that the first page of the novel begins the week of the passing of the Voting Rights Act? And if it is important, how does Sue Monk Kidd so effectively make her readers feel as if they too were walking around in that sweltering South Carolina summer that occurred more than forty five years ago?



Author Sue Monk Kidd

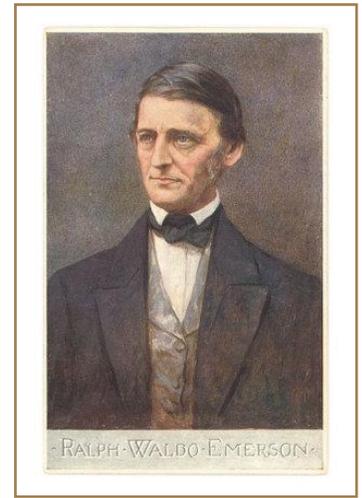
The answer, of course, is allusion. Kidd writes with such conscientious attention to the detail of her setting that readers are practically teleported to the time period. We can see it in the description of the landscape—both natural and manmade. We feel it in the oppressive heat experienced by characters cooling themselves with paper fans decades before air conditioning became a common household convenience. We taste the foods of both the era and the region, as Kidd weaves specific product names into vivid descriptions of southern culinary traditions. We can hear the sounds of the sixties—from loud automobiles to the television shows people are watching and the music that streams from their radios. We can even smell the particular perfumes, colognes, and soaps that Lily refers to when she describes people!

As we explore this novel through a variety of lenses, pay attention to the types of allusions Kidd employs and how they influence your reading of the story. How do they make us understand certain characters, specific themes, or social contexts? When you come across a particular reference with which you are familiar, ask yourself why it specifically was included. What impact would an alternate choice have had on the reader's understanding of the scene or the implicit **character development** occurring? Pay attention also to the types of allusions utilized in this novel. I will survey some of them here, but it will be your responsibility to determine the significance and historical context of those allusions as you read. Remember: good readers take the time to research and fully understand the topics addressed and alluded to in a work. A friend of mine once told me that if you don't read,

you miss half the jokes in life. In the same light, if you don't read *carefully*, you risk missing the overall meaning of a story.

Literary Allusions

This novel is full of allusions to classic pieces of literature and authors established in the canon. Why are they mentioned? How can knowing what Lily Owens is reading help us understand who she is, her background, what she thinks about, and how she interprets the world around her? Lily is inspired by the writings of [Ralph Waldo Emerson](#), and she discusses how his philosophies influence her own. This has no meaning if we don't know at least a little about his work and

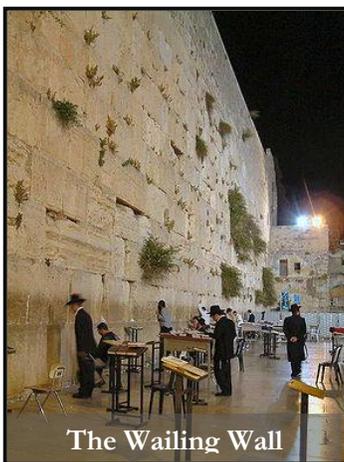


[Transcendentalism](#). She mentions her love of another Transcendentalist, [Henry David Thoreau](#), for whom her passion was only surpassed by [Shakespeare](#) (57). I doubt there are many readers who wouldn't know who Shakespeare is, but why is it important for us to know that he is Lily's favorite author? What Shakespeare plays have you read? How might those works influence Lily's life? What sonnets can you picture Lily reading or pondering while she relaxes and journals in the honey house? There is an important scene in the novel in which Lily reflects on poems by [Robert Frost](#) and [William](#)

[Blake](#) and feels a connection to her mother. When you come across the poems, look them up! Immerse yourself in Frost's imagery and imagine Lily doing the same. Reflect on the metaphors used by William Blake and what they signify in terms of Lily's feelings toward her mother. There is even humor in *The Secret Life of Bees* based on literary allusion. At one point, T. Ray makes fun of Lily calling her "Miss Emily-Big-Head-Diction" (16), an insult we can only understand if we know who [Emily Dickinson](#) is.



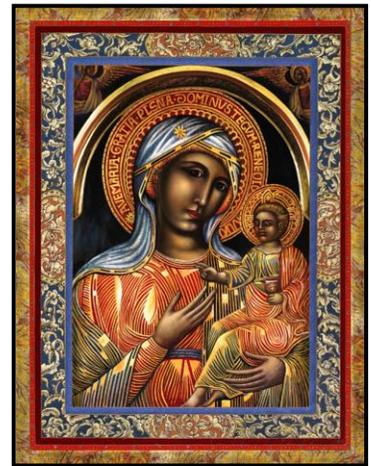
Religious Allusions



Also important in *The Secret Life of Bees* are the myriad religious allusions, both specific and general. While references to such topics as [Gabriel](#) and [Mary](#) (2), the Madonna figure, and the [Hail Mary](#) (151) are primarily Christian in nature, we also come across comparisons whose significance are rooted in an understanding of other faiths. For example, when Lily first encounters May's stone wall, she thinks of the [Wailing Wall in Jerusalem](#). What is this site and what are the implications of comparing the two? With these walls in mind, consider how allusion can be used by an author to foreshadow developing plot events. There are religious events and communities that are uniquely specific to the novel—such as the Sisters of Mary, a worship group facilitated by the Boatwright sisters—but they too have roots in other established faiths. What is the connection between

Resource Tip:
For access to free songs online, check YouTube, Yahoo Music, Rhapsody, and the Library of Congress.

“Mary Day” and the Catholic, Orthodox, and Anglican celebrations of the [Assumption of Mary](#), to which August refers when she explains the event to Lily? Taking the time to understand these connections—or lack thereof—will help us understand the significance of the event to the women of the novel. Would you categorize this ‘holiday’ as one of religious importance or historical importance? Is it about worshipping Mary or honoring freedom and equality? Pay attention also to the religious songs alluded to throughout the story and their connection to social movements of the time period. Consider taking the time to find and listen to songs like “[Go Tell in On the Mountain](#)” and “[Amazing Grace](#)”



“Black Madonna II”
by Paul Heussentamm

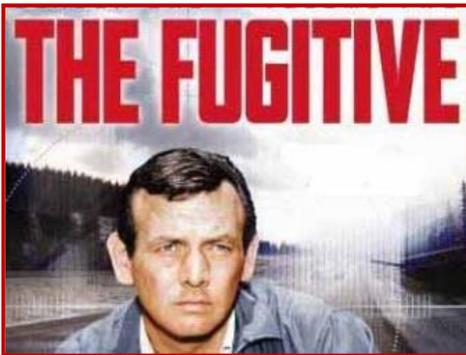
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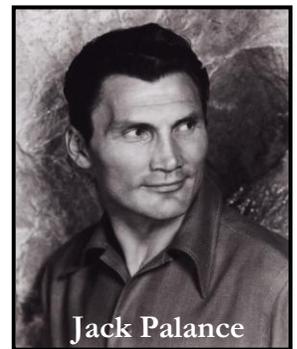
Click these icons
to hear songs

Pop Culture Allusions

Speaking of music, how about all of the popular songs mentioned in the novel? How might differences in characters’ music tastes imply something about their nature? When writers incorporate pop culture references into historical fiction they rarely do so haphazardly. If a specific song, book, or television show is mentioned it’s probably intended to illustrate



something. We should not gloss over such allusions simply because we are not familiar with them, especially when discovering their relevance can be as simple as a [Google](#) search. Some of the entertainment references, such as the television shows [The \\$64,000 Question](#) and [The Fugitive](#) (123) are less relevant than the allusion to [Jack Palance’s](#) controversial trip to Tiburon, but with the multitude of digital search engines at our fingertips, it



Jack Palance

becomes easier to weed out the less significant allusions. As readers, we can also use context clues to determine the importance of certain allusions. For example, [Nat King Cole’s](#) “[Unforgettable](#)” playing in the background of a scene in the kitchen one morning is nowhere near as noteworthy as May’s repeated, desperate singing of “[Oh, Susana!](#)”
None of us needs research to determine which allusion is more important to the novel’s plot and character development. When you research certain pop culture allusions, consider how alternate choices of products, songs, movies, or television shows may have changed your interpretation of a particular character or theme.

Social and Political Allusions

It’s arguable that *The Secret Life of Bees* would be regarded as a good novel with universal themes, with or without analysis of its social context and historical relevance. However,

historical fiction is by nature a commentary on some aspect of the time period in which it is set. This work has countless allusions to current events of the 1960s that help us understand both the socio-political climate of the era as well as the emotional and psychological impact of certain events on the book's characters. The 60s were marked by the [Civil Rights](#)



President Johnson shakes Martin Luther King, Jr.'s hand after signing the Civil Rights Act of 1964

[Movement](#), [the Vietnam War](#), and [the Cold War](#). In the novel there are specific allusions to events such as President Johnson's signing of the [Civil Rights Act](#), the arrest of [Martin Luther King, Jr.](#), and the assassination of [John F. Kennedy](#). There are also more general allusions to bomb drills, segregation and [Jim Crow laws](#), black voter registration, and events occurring in [Jackson, Mississippi](#). Understanding the atmosphere, mentality, belief systems, and general life experiences

of this era will help us determine and appreciate the social themes of the novel. *The Secret Life of Bees* is not just a coming-of-age story of a young, oppressed girl living in America. It is the story of a girl growing up in the segregated South in a time period when it was not as acceptable as it is today for women to be independent and outspoken; it is the story of a white girl developing friendships and maternal relationships with strong African American women, and the conflicting emotions revealed by those who witness these relationships; it is a humanization of the Civil Rights Movement and the Voting Rights Act through the story of Rosaleen; it is a love story between a young white woman and a young black man in a time period when people were assaulted, kidnapped, even murdered for their involvement in interracial relationships. If we ignore the historical setting of *The Secret Life of Bees*, we will fail to achieve a full appreciation of its important themes and we will deny ourselves the opportunity to learn from the struggles and accomplishments of our predecessors.



As we continue to explore this wonderful book, record the ways allusions are incorporated into the story and consider their significance. In what sense does allusion make the book more meaningful? In what ways can it be a stumbling block? Do historical allusions ever serve as indicators of issues in our own society? If you were to write a novel set in the present, what elements of your plot would be deemed social, political, historical, or pop cultural allusions to someone reading your novel twenty years from now? How much longer would that list be one hundred years from now? Good writers consider these selections at the onset of a project; good readers get to analyze and interpret their choices.