

Re-writing the “Master” Narrative: Sue Monk Kidd’s Journey to the Black Madonna

by Kathleen Carico

It is hard to imagine that anyone who loves books in America has not heard of *The Secret Life of Bees* (2002), by Sue Monk Kidd. It made the New York Times bestseller list, and its professional reviews are glowing. Book clubs for adolescents have chosen it as have book clubs for adults. The movie version was recently released, to the delight of its fans, myself included. Numerous reasons make it compelling: the characters are unforgettable, the drama is real and historic, and the language, particularly main character Lily’s narration, is lyrical.

However, even though I joined the millions of readers who love this book, I was vaguely irritated by one feature: the religious aspect as depicted in the worship of Black Mary, a statue that another of the main characters, August Boatwright, kept in her living room. I would have been happy with a psychological approach to a story that showed the power of love and connectedness, but I was not as happy with what I could see only as a religious solution to the main character’s problems.

Having spent too many years oppressed by fundamentalist Christian doctrine, I initially thought the book slightly marred by the devotion to the Black Madonna. I knew that her message (delivered through August to Lily Owens) represented the fullness of each one of us, our goodness, and our strength. However, I thought she also represented a tradition I had rejected and was still struggling to recover from, and I wondered why she had to be included.

Then I read Sue Monk Kidd’s *Dance of the Dissident Daughter: A Woman’s Journey from Christian Tradition to the Sacred Feminine* (1996). As a result, I came to understand much more clearly, I believe, what Mary was intended to represent, and I knew certainly that her presence in the novel was

essential and even desirable. In Mary, Sue Monk Kidd was re-writing a master narrative, one she herself struggled to recognize and deconstruct in her memoir, *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter*. In this article, I take a brief look at this master narrative and the two people who lived it, first, Sue Monk Kidd and then Lily Owens, the fourteen-year-old protagonist of *The Secret Life of Bees*.

The Master Narrative

Originally stemming from the work of Jean-Francois Lyotard, the meta- or grand narrative (what is commonly referred to as the master narrative) is “the supposedly transcendent and universal truths that serve to justify and legitimate Western culture” (Bertens, 2002, p. 246). Rosen (2003) sees it as the one story that “generates all the other stories” (Paragraph 1). His application of the master narrative to his own profession, journalism, provides a current example of how this might work:

In standard coverage of political campaigns . . . the master narrative for a long time has been winning—who’s going to win, who seems to be winning, what the candidates are doing to win, how much money it takes to win. . . . Winning, then, is the story that produces all (or almost all) the other stories, and when you figure in it you are likely to become news. (Paragraph 3)

Lyotard’s examples of metanarratives, first discussed in 1984, include his arguments regarding the societal outcomes of a political metanarrative versus a philosophical one (Bertens, 2002). Since then, many authors have identified the existence of master narratives within their own domains: Rosen’s most recent example in journalism; Aldridge’s (2006)

examination of history textbooks, particularly in their representation of Martin Luther King; Aguirre's (2005) consideration of academe, especially as it limits personal narrative; Lawless's (2003) exploration of a transformed master narrative in religion as women "shift the religious subject"; and Richardson's (1997) analysis of modern literary theory and its restrictive master narratives, to name only a few.

It is Lawless's look at the master narrative in religion that is most directly relevant to the journey Sue¹ takes in *Dissident Daughter*. Lawless restricts her discussion primarily to Western culture and the Christian faith, and uses the term "religious master narrative" to describe a narrative "in which males are privileged by culture, society, and the church" (p. 61). Her study of women in the pulpit suggests that women can disrupt the narrative "by their presence, voice, and experience" (p. 62). It is both reminiscent of and perhaps a fulfillment of the implied promises in two groundbreaking works on women's issues. First, Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule's *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind* (1986) shows a study of women, who are very much like Sue Monk Kidd, whose natural thinking and learning processes have been negated by a master narrative that does not include them. Second, Gilligan and Mikel Brown's *Meeting at the Crossroads* (1992) shows adolescent girls, who are very much like Lily Owens, who have learned to exchange natural discourses for those that are "approved." Neither text mentions a master narrative, but both the younger and older women of each one live under its oppression.

The Dance of the Dissident Daughter

The religious master narrative as suggested by Lawless (2003) is indeed the topic of Sue Monk

¹Convention would dictate the use of the last name, and in this article, I began by using "Monk Kidd." I was slightly uncomfortable each time, and, in the spirit of the books I am reviewing, I finally paid attention to the discomfort. "Monk Kidd" was not working, seeming at odds with the subject as well as with the spirit of the journal I replaced it with Sue, and, though it is a liberty I took, it is not meant to be less formal or less respectful than Monk Kidd. It seems more connective.

Kidd's memoir and the focus of her journey. Sue was raised in a Southern Baptist Church, and as an adult was married to a Southern Baptist minister who served as a chaplain at their local university. She taught Sunday School and, of course, attended church regularly. In her context (as well as in my former context), the term "master" narrative is a most relevant and also most tragic pun: Jesus is often referred to in the New Testament as "Master"; man is said to be the "head" (master) of the wife; man is to have dominion (mastery) over the earth and subdue it. Thus, humans, animals, and the earth are all to be governed by the male of the human species, and, to reinforce that, the governing deity is masculine. Rosen (2003) writes, "the longer [the master narrative] hangs around the more natural the thing seems" (Paragraph 10). This particular religious master narrative has been "hanging around" for approximately 2000 years, time enough to perfect a framework that answers almost any life question or concern with a response that derives "naturally" from its structure.

The Dissident Daughter chronicles Sue's process as she re-writes this narrative, and she maps the journey in four stages, shown here only in the most cursory of summaries: the recognition of a "feminine wound" and her struggle to conceive a "feminine self" (Part One: Awakening); her introduction to the "feminine divine" through her exploration of myths and dreams (Part Two, Initiation); her conscientious study of the Divine Feminine through researching "Goddess" in ancient history (Part Three: Grounding); and her exercise of and experiences with the new power that her journey opened up to her (Part Four: Empowerment). Parts Two and Three are most relevant to the later discussion of Black Mary from *The Secret Life of Bees*, so here I will elaborate briefly on them.

Dreams, Images, Messages, and Visitations

Although the focus is on Parts Two and Three, I dip back into Part One to begin a discussion of dreams that will continue throughout the book. Sue writes that even before starting her journey toward the "Sacred Feminine" she had made a habit of writing down her dreams, "believing . . . that one of the purest sources of knowledge about our lives comes from the symbols

and images deep within” (p. 11). It is through a dream that her feminist awakening begins, a dream in which she sees herself pregnant with, then giving birth to herself. Clearly always a thinker and learner, she muses on her dream, wondering what kind of person the baby girl would grow up to be. In anticipation of the events to occur following her “birth,” she buys a new journal—a pink one.

Sue’s dreams continue. In one, she is standing outside her church, where an old woman appears to her, holding a walking stick with a snake wound around it. She admonishes Sue to consider where her church is taking her. The old woman would appear often in later dreams. On other occasions, Sue dreams of red snakes (another recurring image); of labyrinths; of a figure she called the “Bishop,” whom she recognizes as an authority figure who wishes to keep her in submission to male authority; and of Nefertiti, the long-necked, Egyptian queen, a symbol to Sue that she is “sticking her neck out” quite precariously in this new venture. Sue begins to research her dreams in earnest, visiting libraries, bookstores, and museums, and she enters Jungian analysis to receive clinical help in understanding their meaning for her.

Dreams can reveal the power and intelligence of our subconscious and of humans’ connectedness to each other—even across the centuries. Sue’s intelligent subconscious showed her the Bishop, who symbolized her anxiety over leaving behind the religious tradition she had been steeped in her whole life. Bringing it out into the open helped her face it and release it. Her subconscious also showed her images and symbols of the sacred feminine that would connect her eventually to the Feminine Divine. She even found an artistic rendering of the red snakes of her dream in a picture of two statues, one holding a red snake over her head and the other with a snake wound about her arm. The statues were from the Minoan culture, and this discovery led her to a study of Greek myths, particularly the myth of Ariadne, which would connect with her labyrinth images and provide her with a metaphor to guide her journey in steady and reliable, yet miraculous ways.

The Feminine in Christian Tradition

A next major step for Sue was an effort to trace the feminine in historical accounts of the Christian tradition. It began with her study of the Goddess as the female deity: “I began to discover that for many thousands of years before the rise of the Hebrew religion, in virtually every culture of the world, people worshiped the Supreme Being in the form of a female deity—the Great Goddess” (p. 134). At some point during this time of exploration, the idea of female sacredness and power—of Goddess—began to feel real to her, and the reality was manifested to her as a deep feeling of love.

Sue walked further into this reality as she looked into the Hebrew tradition and the Old and New Testaments for any signs of a Feminine Divine. She found them: Wisdom personified as a woman; Wisdom known as Sophia; Sophia becoming Christ; Christ referring to Mary as “his divine Mother, the Holy Spirit” (pp. 146-152).

The Secret Life of Bees

The entirety of *The Secret Life of Bees* is premised on the sacredness of the female, a tradition that is quite recessive in the genes of Western Christian life and thought. Western Christianity has a powerful tradition (master narrative) which requires a powerful dislodging (major revision). Sue’s dreams, sprung from her subconscious, were powerful enough to propel her on a journey to find who she was, how valuable she was, and what she wanted. Sue’s journey, though for different reasons, was also Lily’s journey. A full, functional, loved human existence for both depended on its outcome.

Lily Seeks Her Mother

The novel starts with a journey, of Lily Owens and her caretaker Rosaleen, a large, African-American woman who must flee Lily’s peach farm in Sylvan, South Carolina, because of Rosaleen’s altercation with three white racists over her attempt to register to vote. It is 1964, and the Civil Rights Act has just been passed. Even though Rosaleen now has a legal right to vote, Lily knows she will not be protected from the anger of the racists in town and that her life is truly in danger.

At the same time, Lily has had enough of her father's cruelty and decides to run away and take Rosaleen with her. Lily is led only by the name of a town, Tiburon, South Carolina, written on the back of what seems to be a decoupage picture of a Black Madonna, one of the few belongings Lily has of her mother's. Tiburon holds the only clue for Lily in her quest to discover her mother, killed ten years earlier in a horrible accident. Arriving in Tiburon, Lily stops at a store where she spots jars of honey with the same picture of the Black Madonna she used to choose her destination. The Black Madonna honey is made by beekeeper August Boatwright and her two sisters, May and June, who live together in a hot pink house outside of Tiburon. Lily and Rosaleen travel there and take refuge.

Lily is an adolescent in crisis. She has no friends and feels love from no one except Rosaleen, and the distress she feels as a constant undercurrent in her life keeps Rosaleen's love from being sufficient. Her father T. Ray is physically and verbally abusive; she is poor; and she has a great hole in her heart since her mother's death, which has also left her with many questions: Is it true, as her father says, that her mother left her a few months before her death? How did her mother die? Did Lily really accidentally kill her? Then, after she finds the Boatwright's, she has more questions to add: What will happen when they find out the truth about her? Will they still love her? What will happen to Rosaleen if the police should discover them?

Landing at the Boatwright's is almost a fairy tale for Lily. Rosaleen is safe; Lily and she find themselves useful to the three sisters and happy to be so; Lily makes a friend in the teenage boy who works for August; and both find genuine love from the Boatwright's. However, Lily still lives with the weight of her secrets—about breaking Rosaleen out of police custody, which keeps Lily from relaxing entirely in her new setting; about her mother's death; and about her great longing for her mother, which only Rosaleen has knowledge of, and about which there is little conversation. Thus, while she is growing secure in one respect, she remains heavily burdened. When one of the characters dies suddenly, Lily sends a silent message with the deceased to take to heaven:

And I wish you would look up my mother. . . .
Tell her you saw me, that I'm at least away from
T. Ray for the time being. Say this to her: "Lily
would appreciate a sign letting her know that you
love her. It doesn't have to be anything big, but
please send something." (p. 202)

Lily Seeks Black Mary

When Lily and Rosaleen arrived at the Boatwright's hot pink house, they first met June Boatwright, then her sister May, and, while June went to find August, they encountered Black Mary in the parlor. Black Mary is the figurehead from a sailing ship and who, as August would later tell, washed up on the shore in mid-19th Century Charleston, where a slave named Obadiah found her and took her to the community's praise house. After the oldest slave declared the figurehead to be Mary, the Mother of Jesus, the story took hold, and the slaves began to pray to her and draw strength from her, the strength to attempt escape and to find freedom. The story of Mary, half recited/half sung by August, went straight from August's tongue to Lily's heart: "Obadiah pulled the figure out of the water . . . and struggled to set it upright. Then he remembered how they'd asked the Lord to send them rescue. To send them consolation. To send them freedom. Obadiah knew the Lord had sent this figure . . ." (p. 108). After the Civil War, Black Mary had come into August's family, and eventually she was passed down to August and ended up in her parlor. Every night, Lily, Rosaleen, and the sisters would repeat the Rosary and then pray personally to Black Mary.

By the time Lily met the Boatwright's, it was clear they had long ago gathered a group of adherents to Mary. These women friends (the "Daughters of Mary") came each week in colorful dresses, rhinestone clip-on earrings, and magnificent hats of feathers, fur, and fringe that Lily loved. Just as the slaves did a century earlier, the Daughters of Mary gathered in the parlor to sing and dance and to touch the red heart painted on Black Mary's chest. It was a ritual Lily desperately wanted to complete for herself. The first time she tried she was thwarted by June, whose jealousy would not allow her to welcome Lily into this most intimate of circles. She then made it a

private goal to go into the parlor one day and touch Mary's heart. And one night, she did, when the rest of the house were sleeping. As she stood in front of Mary, she prayed:

Fix me, please fix me. Help me know what to do. Forgive me. Is my mother all right up there with God? Don't let them find us. If they find us, don't let them take me back. If they find us, keep Rosaleen from being killed. Let June love me. Let T. Ray love me. Help me stop lying. Make the world better. Keep the meanness out of people's hearts. (p. 164)

Lily Finds "Herself"

After Lily finally touches the Black Mary, she looks for an opening to tell August who she really is and to find out about her mother. But the moment will be a long-time coming as one thing after another gets in the way, including a family tragedy, and all those events serve to heighten the suspense. She finally is able to tell August, and in the dramatic scene, learns some unwelcome news about her mother that makes her hurt and very, very angry. As she struggles to integrate this news into her growing consciousness of herself and of life, August tells her more about Black Mary:

August said, "Listen to me now, Lily. I'm going to tell you something I want you always to remember, all right? . . . Our Lady is not some magical being out there somewhere, like a fairy godmother. She's not the statue in the parlor. She's something inside of you. Do you understand what I'm telling you?"

"Our Lady is inside me," I repeated, not sure I did.

"You have to find a mother inside yourself. We all do. Even if we already have a mother, we still have to find this part of ourselves inside. Give me your hand." (p. 288)

August puts Lily's hand over her own heart and assures her that she needn't put it over Mary's heart to find the strength that she needs. She has it already. It will take another incident in Lily's life before she is able to apprehend the meaning of August's words and

actions. But when it happens, Lily remembers what August said and claims it finally for herself. Though I cannot say for certain that this is the same "Herself" Sue Monk Kidd dreamed about, it is close, for she writes these words for Lily at the end of *The Secret Life of Bees*:

Each day I visit the Black Mary . . . I feel her in unexpected moments, her Assumption into heaven happening in places inside me. She will suddenly rise, and when she does, she does not go up, up into the sky, but further and further inside me. August says she goes into the holes life has gouged out of us. (p. 302)

The Secret Life of Bees needs Black Mary. But it is not a Black Mary who threatens us, silences us, negates us, rules over us, or demands allegiance. That, unfortunately, is the religious "Master" narrative. Sue Monk Kidd re-wrote it and did it with such clarity and beauty that I can hear August's voice resound as she tells why Black Mary was sent to the slaves: ". . . to send them rescue. To send them consolation. To send them freedom" (p. 108). Rescue in the form of a Feminine Divine who models our own power and our brilliance. Consolation in the form of a Sacred Mother whose experiences of the body are celebrated, honored, and cherished. Freedom in the form of a Deity who shows us our own goodness.

The Master Narrative Revised

The Secret Life of Bees is a beautiful story of the power of love to heal, to knit together that which has been torn apart. It could also be considered a compelling psycho-drama of an abused and lonely young girl who looks for answers to her deepest questions about life and who is lucky enough to find them in a dangerous and turbulent era in the home of a beekeeper. It is, as some critics have written, a "coming-of-age" story, when Lily falls in love for the first time, and when she steps across a threshold into a greater understanding of her past and her future. However, it is also a master narrative re-written, the product of a woman who struggled hard and long, first to name the narrative under which she was living for what it was: denial of the feminine; next, to "ask the

hard questions” about her experience (p.146); further, to look for answers to those questions and dare to imagine a different way of being; then, to research possibilities for her new story; and, finally, to write it. She is still writing it, I’m sure.

“*The Divine Feminine is returning to collective consciousness, all right. She’s coming, and it will happen whether we’re ready or not.*” (*The Dance of the Dissident Daughter*, p. 99)

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