

“A scared little girl, all alone with a scared woman:” Clover’s (Not)Telling Secrets

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ABSTRACT

This paper uses Leslie W. Lewis’ concept of secret telling and Alicia Otano’s theory of child perspective to discuss Dori Sanders’ novel *Clover* (1990). In choosing a black child protagonist to narrate her story of having to live with a white stepmother, Sanders successfully negotiates cultural differences to foster cross-racial understanding. This paper demonstrates how the child serves as a mediator between cultures, bridging the gaps that separate them by choosing to tell or withhold family secrets.

KEYWORDS

African American fiction, child perspective, *Clover*, cultural differences, Dori Sanders, racial differences, secret (telling), the South

I guess I’m going to have to hold all those things that happened here of late inside for a while.¹

In her seminal book, *Telling Narratives: Secrets in African American Literature* (2007), Leslie W. Lewis develops a new theory of reading African American texts in which secrets and, in particular, secret telling play crucial roles. Lewis argues that: “[S]ecrets shape the structure of African American narratives—of what gets said to whom and how. Secret telling, which might be best characterized as that kind of telling that depends upon a third party who hears, and implies a second party who does not, becomes a recognizable structure within African American narrative literature.”² Using this definition to discuss key moments in David Bradley’s novel *Chaneysville’s Incident*, Lewis demonstrates how “the formal structure of secret telling and listening” can work as a “model for cross-racial understanding” and create “the emphatic possibility of shifting personalities, so that listener-response, and reader-response, might become unmoored from fixed race and gender identities.”³

In this paper I employ Lewis’ concept of secret telling to explore how Dori Sanders negotiates cultural and racial differences to foster cross-racial understanding in *Clover* (1990), a novel featuring a white stepmother raising a black child in a tightly-knit

1 Dori Sanders, *Clover* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 1990), 165.

2 Leslie W. Lewis, *Telling Narratives: Secrets in African American Literature* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 3. Lewis acknowledges that secret telling in relation to African American literature has been addressed by other scholars as well. For example, Patricia Hill Collins makes an explicit connection between secrets and black women in her article “Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought,” in *Beyond Methodology: Feminist Scholarship As Lived Research*, eds. Mary Margaret Fonow and Judith A. Cook (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991, 35-59), in which she argues that “Afro-American women have long been privy to some of the most intimate secrets of white society” (35). Also of significance is how, in his *Remembering Generations: Race and Family in Contemporary African American Fiction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), Ashraf Rushdy argues that “slavery is the family secret of America” and that telling this secret has developed into a narrative mode of production (2).

3 Lewis, *Telling Secrets*, 4.

black rural community.⁴ Given that the story is narrated from the point of view of a child, I also use Alicia Otano’s theory of child perspective, in which “issues of personal, ethnic and national positioning” are shaped by narrative points of view.⁵

Once required reading in many schools across the United States, *Clover* has, for long, been considered a suitable choice for high school and college students.⁶ Originally marketed for adults, the novel highlights the values of cultural heritage, family, community, and the Southern farmer’s love of the land while offering useful lessons in humanity.⁷ Set in the rural South Carolina in the late 1980s, it explores issues of parental death and racial and cultural stereotypes through the eyes of Clover, a ten-year old black girl being raised by her white stepmother, thus effectively addressing black and white readers alike. The novel employs a child’s perspective to comment on multifarious issues; Otano argues that “The child’s vision, transmitted by its peculiar voice, endows a narrative with a strength which compels the reader to think about [...] ambivalent aspects of an idealized society.”⁸

Sanders introduces both the narrator and the key conflict in the opening paragraphs of the novel. Clover comments on the clothes she is forced to wear to her father’s memorial service:

They dressed me in white for my daddy’s funeral. White from my head to my toes. I had the black skirt I bought at the six-dollar store all laid out to wear. I’d even pulled the black grosgrain bows off my black patent leather shoes to wear in my hair. But they won’t let me wear black.

I know deep down in my heart you’re supposed to wear black to a funeral. I guess the reason my stepmother is not totally dressed in black is because she just plain doesn’t know any better.⁹

The narrator is a girl-child who must obey the wishes of “they,” her closest community, presumably her extended family. We learn of the death of the narrator’s father as well as of the three parties involved in the conflict: the community/family, the girl, and the

4 Remaining largely unfamiliar to European readers, *Clover* has been translated into several languages. The novel has reached its 14th hardback and 18th paperback editions, and was produced as a movie by Hallmark Productions in 1997. More importantly, in that same year, the novel won the Lillian Smith Award, which honors authors whose works advocate social justice. See Anastasia Howard’s “Dori Sanders: A Harvest of Human Kindness,” www.DiscoverSouth.Carolina.com and Chandra Wells’ entry on Dori Sanders in *Encyclopedia of African American Women Writers*, Vol. 1., ed. by Yolanda Williams Page (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2007, 503-507), respectively.

5 Alicia Otano, *Speaking the Past: Child Perspective in the Asian American Bildungsroman* (Munster: LitVerlag, 2005), 9.

6 Howard, “Dori Sanders,” <http://www.DiscoverSouthCarolina.com>.

7 For information on how the novel has been marketed, see Laura M. Zaidman’s “A Sense of Place in Dori Sanders’ *Clover*,” *The ALAN Review* 22.3 (Spring 1995), <http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/spring95/Zaidman.html>. Zaidman reads *Clover* as a “story of the new South, using Eudora Welty’s characteristic of “a sense of belonging somewhere,” pointing out that “Sanders’ authentic voice ... demonstrates the Southern farmer’s love of the land.”

8 Otano, *Speaking the Past*, 9.

9 Sanders, *Clover*, 1. White is the traditional color of mourning for most African cultures, and some African Americans have retained this custom; it is also true that children are often made to wear white at funerals because it is deemed inappropriate for the innocent to be dressed in black. On dress etiquette in relation to funerals see for example Robert Habenstein and William Lamers: *Funeral Customs the World Over* (Milwaukee: National Funeral Directors Association, 1995, c. 1960). For specific information on African American funerals and mourning, see for example Karla F.C. Holloway’s *Passed on: African American Mourning Stories: A Memorial* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

girl's stepmother. Although nothing is explicitly mentioned about race, the color contrast used in the description of the funeral attire can be read as symbolic coding, or as Laura Zaidman sees it, a "symbolic clash of black and white," the particulars of which unfold as Clover comes to tell more of her story.¹⁰

Having lost first her mother and then her grandfather, who had raised her in lieu of her late mother, little Clover is too soon faced with yet another loss and challenge. When her father Gaten marries a white woman Sara Kate, and he dies on the day of their wedding as a result of a car accident, Clover must accept the reality of having to live with her white stepmother, a total stranger whom she had only met once. Sara Kate had promised Clover's father that she would take care of his daughter, and the anxiety felt by Clover at this prospect is implicitly conveyed through her irritation with the white dress she is forced to wear, which, as Zaidman notes, "suggests the deeper anger at being thrust into the care of a white stranger who does not have the good sense to know proper attire for a funeral."¹¹

A closer reading of the opening paragraphs, however, reveals that Clover is conveying more to the reader. Firstly, by prefacing her words with the phrase "I guess," she expresses the possibility of not being entirely sure about her stepmother's (lack of) knowledge of the funeral dress code, and admits that her estimation might not be accurate. Indeed, Sara Kate might have chosen not to wear full black for other reasons, for example as an act of rebellion against prescribed norms and conventions (not unlike her interracial marriage). But Clover does not want to entertain such thoughts, for as a strategy to cope with the uncomfortable situation she is forced to accept, she focuses her attention on the imperfections of her stepmother. In this light, her estimation of Sara Kate's actions can also be seen as part of her larger misreading of Sara Kate, whom she sees initially not as an individual, but only as a member of a different race: "vanilla cream between dark chocolate cookies."¹² Secondly, Clover's choice to use the present tense in her commentary on Sara Kate—a shift from the past tense used at the beginning of the quoted passage—not only suggests the immediacy of the described conflict but also in some ways anticipates the progression of the plot of the novel: the development of Clover's feelings toward Sara Kate.

Otano contends that "the first few lines of a novel or short story can very often set the tone for the entire work," and that a careful study of the language employed by the narrator might help us detect "that elusive quality of perspective."¹³ I want to argue that the opening paragraphs in *Clover* set a distinct critical tone in which judgments about Sara Kate and, by extension, about the white race are "softened" by the child's cognitive limitations (as illustrated by her introductory phrase "I guess." Clover's conflicting emotions of sadness, anger and fear are reflected, along with certain "irrational modes of being"¹⁴ often ascribed to children such as sensual awareness—Clover's interest in

color—and her instinct—her knowing "deep down in [her] heart."¹⁵ Sanders is very careful to use language appropriate for a young girl to reflect a child's simplicity, curiosity, and honesty, and to capture the emotional whirlwind of a small person struggling to make sense of issues, for example of race, belonging to the world of grown-ups.

While it may be instinct that makes her know "deep down in my heart" that people are supposed to wear black to funerals, Clover consciously avoids disclosing information about the color her extended family choose for their attire. A careful reading of the next few pages reveals that they are most likely not dressed in "full black" either: the women who take flowers off the coffin are in white dresses; there is a little boy in blue suit and a red-checked bowtie; and Gaten's cousin Lucille is dressed in purple.¹⁶ Clover's withholding of this seemingly unimportant piece of information has several implications. It reveals that despite her age, Clover knows how to use words and when to keep secrets, and is thus able to manipulate the readers by way of engaging them in working out the truth. This strategy, as I will demonstrate further in the paper, will prove essential in fostering cross-cultural understanding. In addition, it makes Clover more credible and authentic by showing her as naturally partial to her extended family, who are part of her immediate surroundings

As Otano observes in the introduction to her seminal book on child perspective,

The disappearance of a parent figure through death [...] becomes an impetus for the seeking out of other mentor figures or surrogate parent figures. [The late] parent figure [...] represents the "home" culture. This former world's culture is considered a haven for the child who finds refuge there. The outside world is very often the country the family has immigrated to or will soon leave for. [A] mentor figure, more often than not, is part of the new culture they have been thrust into. The [...] child struggle[s] to live between these cultures.¹⁷

Although, as Suzanne W. Jones points out, it is often the case that the African Americans integrate into the "outside world" represented by white culture, in *Clover* Sanders reverses the scenario by making a white person dwell in the black community.¹⁸ Thus, Clover does not have to cope with a departure for a new country; she remains in her own world, which is intruded upon by her stepmother, her new parent/mentor figure from a foreign culture. In this scenario, "the former world's culture" is still available to Clover in terms of her surroundings and her extended family. Her struggle lies in the fact that her physical home which she must share with her stepmother who comes from the "outside world" has become a place of two intersecting cultures, a hybrid, interracial setting within the geographical territory of her "home" culture.

Since Clover is not familiar with the "outside world" that Sara Kate represents,¹⁹ her initial reaction to the new living arrangement is understandably that of fear. As she

10 Zaidman, "A Sense of Place." <http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/spring95/Zaidman.html>.

11 Zaidman, "A Sense of Place." <http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/spring95/Zaidman.html><http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/spring95/Zaidman.html>.

12 Sanders, *Clover*, 22.

13 Otano, *Speaking the Past*, 21.

14 As the novel unfolds, Clover employs other "irrational modes of being," such as fantasy as well. The most prominent, however, remains her sensual awareness: she is particularly authentic in her descriptions of the Southern rural countryside and food. For a more detailed discussion of "irrational modes of being" ascribed to children, see Otano, *Speaking the Past*, 30.

15 It may be of interest here to note that Sanders wrote the novel "after seeing two funeral processions pass by one day while working at her peach stand on her family's farm. The young African-American girl who waved to her became Clover, the lead character in the novel. A white woman sitting in a car, crying into her handkerchief, became the basis for Clover's white stepmother, Sara Kate." See Carol Sears Botsch, "Doris Sanders," <http://www.usca.edu/aasc/dorisanders.htm>.

16 Sanders, *Clover*, 24, 26, 53.

17 Otano, *Speaking the Past*, 31.

18 Susan W. Jones, *Race Mixing: Southern Fiction Since the Sixties* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 63.

19 Clover has, in fact, some experience with whites. Being a child of the 1980s, she has never known, for example, school segregation. But most of the folks in her rural hometown are blacks or poor whites, not white middle class people.

tells the reader, exposing the rather unnatural quality of the household she and Sara Kate come to share: "I guess you would call me a scared little girl, all alone with a scared woman ... Together, yet apart ... like peaches. Peaches picked from the same tree, but put in separate baskets."²⁰ While they legally belong to the same family (the same peach tree), they are divided by racial categories (baskets), which separate them by forcing a space between them. This metaphorical space is manifested by a silence reflective of their inability to speak to each other, further reinforcing their alienation.

We are two strangers in a house. I think of all the things I'd like to say to her. Think of all the things I think she'd like to say to me. I do believe if we could bring ourselves to say those things it would close the wide gap between us and draw us closer together. Yet the thoughts stay in my head—stay tied up on my tongue. . . . Maybe my stepmother has the same fear I have, a fear of not being accepted.²¹

The natural fear of not being accepted is heightened by what Clover perceives to be the "differences" that would make them belong in separate baskets.²² Yet, as Sanders believes and works hard to demonstrate throughout the novel, those differences are minor, because what matters more is that both Clover and Sara Kate are of the same tree, which serves as a metaphor not only for a family but also, and more importantly, for a common humanity. Clover comes close to realizing this as she ruminates about how she and her stepmother could overcome their differences:

If Sara Kate and I ever forget *who we are*, and sometimes we do, then we are at ease with each other and we have a pretty good little time together. Sometimes we even laugh.

Just maybe we could learn something from each other. Especially Sara Kate since she's the one new to the house...

On the other hand, I'm sure there are things I can learn from Sara Kate. ... I just might learn that in spite of her curious ways, she might want to be my friend—that in some small way, she might even like me.²³

Like many children who are faced with the challenge of having to live with a stepparent, Clover longs to be accepted and loved. She misses the natural child-parent intimacy which allows playing games, such as the "I'm looking for my little girl" game she used to play with her father Gaten, or the "Guess who?" game her cousin Daniel plays with her Aunt Everleen.²⁴ Developing such intimacy with Sara Kate is hindered by the fact that she does not *know* her. Even at her age of ten Clover understands that "It takes time to learn a person."²⁵ But Clover is willing "to give it a time" because, although she certainly "didn't want a stepmother," she is "trying to please [her] dead daddy."²⁶ In some ways, by thinking of Gaten, Clover does retreat to her "former world culture," using it not as

20 Sanders, *Clover*, 100. What is also conveyed through Clover's observation is the fact that both women have to deal with the fear of the unknown. While Clover's fear is compounded by the power-dynamics within the household for as a child she is expected to respect her stepmother's authority, Sara Kate finds herself having to live in a different culture *and* to raise a ten-year old child, something she has no experience with.

21 Sanders, *Clover*, 101.

22 Besides racial differences, there are of course other differences that might separate them as well, for example differences in class and age.

23 Sanders, *Clover*, 101, emphasis mine.

24 Sanders, *Clover*, 66.

25 Sanders, *Clover*, 13.

26 Sanders, *Clover*, 33,67.

a refuge but rather as a tool to help her make some sense of her new stepmother. Thus, figuring that her father "would have counted on" her "to help" Sara Kate out, and that she "couldn't let Gaten down," Clover sets out to explore the "surprise" that her daddy had brought home to her instead of the purple bicycle she had expected.²⁷

At first, in her observations of Sara Kate, Clover naturally uses the only "interpretative code" she is familiar with, thus comparing her stepmother's ways to the ways of her "home culture," i.e. the culture of a black Southern rural community.²⁸ As sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant have argued, "[e]verybody learns some combination, some version, of the rules of racial classification, and of their own racial identity, often without obvious teaching or conscious inculcation. 'Race' becomes 'common sense'—a way of comprehending, explaining, and acting in the world."²⁹ Taking her own experience as the only right way, Clover comes to the stunning conclusion that "Sara Kate is very proper and truly smart. [...] Even so, there are things she doesn't know."³⁰ Besides Sara Kate not knowing about proper funeral attire, Clover discovers that her stepmother does not know how to cook grits, make fried pies, or cook turnips in bacon grease. Sara Kate does not know what mountain oysters are, has never seen hair with corn-rows, and cannot fix Clover's hair. Moreover, she buys cookies "that don't taste worth a dime," teas that no one in the black community has ever tasted, and food for animals that no person in Round Hill would ever purchase.³¹ Given her findings, it is only natural that Clover comes to see her stepmother as "strange, strange."³²

Although the differences should be seen within the binaries of rural/urban, Southern/Northern, and working/middle class, i.e. in cultural, rather than racial terms, "under the tutelage of Aunt Everleen" Clover interprets them "mostly as a product of her [Sara Kate's] whiteness."³³ For it is, indeed, on the basis of her skin color³⁴ that Aunt Everleen dismisses Sara Kate's charity as a way to atone for slavery and segregation, telling Clover that "all white women give money to the animals [...] because they feel so guilty over the way their people treated us."³⁵ Similarly, Aunt Everleen's criticizes Sara Kate's inability to express emotions at Gaten's funeral in terms of racial difference: "white folks don't cry and carry on like we do when somebody dies. They don't love as hard as we do."³⁶

While Clover is trying to "learn" her stepmother, willing to see past the differences, Aunt Everleen does not trust Sara Kate, and thinks of her as an intruder into Clover's "home culture." This is also illustrated in a scene at the end of a day spent at the peach stand in which she instructs Clover about what (not) to tell Sara Kate:

27 Sanders, *Clover*, 117, 29.

28 Jones, *Race Mixing*, 64.

29 Jones, *Race Mixing*, 62.

30 Sanders, *Clover*, 142.

31 Sanders, *Clover*, 146, 114, 115.

32 Sanders, *Clover*, 166.

33 Jones, *Race Mixing*, 63.

34 In several other instances race issues are compounded with class issues, e.g. Aunt Everleen refers to Sara Kate as "Miss high class" and "Miss High-and-mighty." And it is not just Aunt Everleen who is racially prejudiced against Sara Kate. When Gaten's marriage is discussed in the family, the black women judge that something must be wrong with his white wife-to-be, causing white men to have rejected her. On the other hand the black men accuse her of exoticism and materialism.

35 Sanders, *Clover*, 68-9.

36 Sanders, *Clover*, 67. This is a reference to the African American tradition of *keening*, a dramatic expression of sorrow at black funerals. See for example www.funeralwise.com/customs/african_american.

"Now, remember Clover," she warns, "we never repeat the things we talk about here at the peach shed. This is *family* talk." Then she turns right around and says, "Now, remember Sara Kate is *family*, so be nice and tell her her cooking tastes real, real good. You know how white women are. They want you to brag on 'em all the time."³⁷

The confusing and somewhat contradictory message to Clover reveals that Everleen's racially biased construction of Sara Kate serves to reinforce the division between Clover's "home" culture and that of her stepmother. Although Sara Kate is family as Clover's legal mother and as such must be respected, by virtue of her whiteness Sara Kate is not allowed to share in the private matters of Clover's extended family, who are closely bound not only by being of a different race (and culture), but also by their tradition of peach farming. This way of life contrasts sharply with Sara Kate's urban, middle-class upbringing. Moreover, by instructing Clover to keep secrets about "family talk," Aunt Everleen engages the child in active participation in the division, making her in Lewis' terms a part of the "in-group" while relegating Sara Kate to an "out-group" of knowers.³⁸ As Lewis explains, "Secrets [...] involve a triad: one person who keeps something from someone, but at the same time tells that something to someone else."³⁹

Aunt Everleen's division puts Clover in a difficult position. Living with Sara Kate in a common household, the child finds herself observing/listening to Sara Kate from the safety of her hiding places. This makes the girl privy to "out-group" secrets -- information withheld from the black community which seems to be in conflict with Aunt Everleen's interpretations of Sara Kate. Clover confides in the readers, making them members of her "in-group," while relegating Aunt Everleen (and the black community) to the ranks of her new "out-group:" "People in Round Hill don't know it, but Sara Kate didn't really get over Gaten dying as fast as they think she did. Sara Kate was powerfully sad after my daddy died. [...] If Sara Kate had done some of all the crying she's doing now at Gaten's funeral, she wouldn't have seemed so curious. There wouldn't have been so much talk about how easy she took her husband's death, either."⁴⁰

Clover has been a silent witness to what is to her an unknown and thus strange ritual of mourning: sitting alone crying with one lighted candle in the dark. While Clover is unable "to quite figure out why" because "People I know in Round Hill don't light candles when folks die,"⁴¹ she comes to realize that becoming privy to Sara Kate's "strange, strange" ways provides her with more genuine insight into their differences than all of Aunt Everleen's interpretations based on "preconceived and unsubstantiated beliefs."⁴² This realization makes Clover reconsider her own initially biased feelings toward her stepmother:

They say when two people live together, they start to look alike. Well, Sara Kate and I have been living together for a long time and there is no way we will ever look alike. But in strange little ways, we are starting to kind of act alike. [...] And little by little, a part of me is slowly beginning to change toward Sara Kate. Even the picture of her face that shed no

37 Sanders, *Clover*, emphases mine.

38 Lewis, *Secret Telling*, 3.

39 Lewis, *Secret Telling*, 3.

40 Sanders, *Clover*, 67.

41 Sanders, *Clover*, 67.

42 Jones, *Race Mixing*, 63.

tears at my daddy's funeral looks different in my mind now. Maybe it's because now I know it wasn't that Sara Kate didn't cry because she didn't care. She didn't because she couldn't.⁴³

Clover's depiction of the changing quality of her feelings toward Sara Kate is significant in two ways. The shift from Clover's initial, frequent use of the uncertain phrase "I guess," to the affirmative structure "I know" highlights her more accurate understanding of Sara Kate based on their living together. This suggests that it is precisely with close observation and first-hand experience that a real cultural understanding can be reached. Furthermore, Clover's evolving depiction indicates that it is not only cultural understanding that can thus be gained, but also a new vision. This allows her to see Sara Kate as a human being, with her own feelings and needs. Clover comes to understand that there are more important things that bind them together than legal documents. The child realizes that neither of them, for example, was able to express their love for Gaten by tears at his funeral.

Thus, slowly but surely, Clover changes her feelings toward Sara Kate, inviting the reader to trace this development as she comments on their growing relationship. Starting with the small uncertainty of "I guess" in her own way Sara Kate is not all that bad," the simple statement that "Things are shaping up pretty good between us" is followed by the full certainty that "Sara Kate's thinking is rubbing off on me *for sure*," finally to conclude that "A part of me was little by little *starting to obey and care* for Sara Kate *without my even knowing it*," a statement indicative of her natural response to Sara Kate's caring influence on Clover.⁴⁴

Indeed, Clover has been a witness to three major events by which Sara Kate proves her genuine love and concern for her stepdaughter which radically change Clover's attitude toward her stepmother. Upon overhearing Sara Kate's phone conversation with her own prejudiced mother, Clover is privy to being described as a "darling little girl." This is a depiction consistent with Sara Kate's earlier compliment to Gaten, which Clover had then dismissed in Sara Kate simply as a way of being smart enough "to say the right thing at the right time."⁴⁵ In addition, overhearing a conversation between Sara Kate and Aunt Everleen in which Sara Kate expresses her concern about Clover's health, the little girl overhears Sara Kate's defensiveness about how a white woman can be a caring mother to a black child. As W. Suzanne Jones points out, this is a reversal of the stereotypical image of a black mammy taking care of white children, an image particularly strong in Southern culture.⁴⁶ Finally, at a visit to the doctor Clover hears Sara Kate repeatedly refer to her as "her daughter."⁴⁷ This is indicative not only of the child-parent intimacy that she envied in her cousin Daniel playing "Guess Who?" with his mother, but also of the fact that Clover is not "an extra" or simply a responsibility that Sara Kate has taken on to fulfill the wish of the late Gaten.

These events provide sufficient evidence to Clover that despite their racial differences Sara Kate considers her a member of her "in-group," and what's more that the woman has given priority to their developing intimacy over the relationship with her own mother, who does not wish to accept a black stepchild. However, as Clover discovers when attempting to express her loyalty to Sara Kate in front of Aunt Everleen, this much-desired acceptance paradoxically complicates her situation, driving a wedge

43 Sanders, *Clover*, 130.

44 Sanders, *Clover*, 70, 131, 162, 163, emphases mine.

45 Sanders, *Clover*, 103, 51.

46 Jones, *Race Mixing*, 65.

47 Sanders, *Clover*, 160.

between herself and the black community, which feels betrayed by her growing loyalty to her stepmother:

I'm beginning to see I have to speak out for Sara Kate. My aunt and uncle simply can't go on always putting the woman down. "Sara Kate is lonely," I put in for her. "Terribly lonely." The words barely leave my lips before Everleen shoots them down. "Well, look what side our own little Clover is taking."

Yes, I am taking Sara Kate's side right now. But they can't seem to understand that just because I am, it still does not mean I am turning against them. Why can't they see that when you live with someone and they aren't mean or nothing they kind of grow on you?⁴⁸

Clover's commentary on the conflicting situation is significant on several levels. Firstly it shows that besides Otano's suggested refuge to the "former's world culture" as a solution to dealing with the clash of two cultures, Clover finds another option based on the common-sense observation that genuine love and care for a person cannot be limited by race. Besides this, Clover demonstrates that her critical voice, initially pointed toward Sara Kate and the white race, has changed directions, for it is Clover's extended family (and, by extension, the black community) that is her target now. While the voice still remains reflective of Clover's emotions (e.g. irritation) and of her cognitive limitations (as to why they can't accept Sara Kate easily) as in the opening paragraphs of the novel, there is also a different quality to it: the voice betrays a certain maturity and agency manifested outwardly in Clover's active and resolute move of standing up for Sara Kate and speaking out her affirmation, "Yes, I am taking Sara Kate's side right now."

The issue of taking sides, which can be read in Lewis' language as switching between "in-groups" and out-groups" of knowers, speaks in general terms to the sensitive issue of "racial loyalty." Through Clover's difficult position of being simultaneously part of two racial groups, Sanders not only introduces the idea that befriending another race does not mean forsaking your own⁴⁹ but also demonstrates that a careful manipulation of the "in-group" and out-group" related knowledge/secrets can enable both groups to enrich their own racial understanding. In order for this to happen, however, Clover must become a mediator between the two groups, developing a skillful way of working with the secret knowledge of both groups. And, as demonstrated earlier in the essay, to decide "what gets said to whom and how" is something Clover is quite capable of.

To be sure, while burdening Clover with this challenging task, Sanders also endows her with special qualities to help her succeed. Although a child, Clover is portrayed as very smart, excelling in both math and spelling, and scoring high on an IQ test. Yet, it is not just her high IQ (and dexterity—she learned how to drive a tractor at the age of eight) that makes her exceptionally gifted. Clover is, first and foremost, a talented observer and listener, and while she may not always understand the true meaning of words, she knows what impact words can bring on a person, as is evident in the scene where Gaten's sister used the word "one-night stand" in reference to Gaten's evening with Sara Kate:

I had no idea what my aunt meant when she said to my daddy, "Well, there is certainly nothing wrong with a one-night stand. [...] I didn't know what she meant then. I still don't know. But what I did know was, I didn't believe anyone had ever made Gaten so mad before. [...] I suppose whatever that one-night stand business was about, my aunt shouldn't

have said it, or at least not in front of me. Anyway, I know that was what caused Gaten to end up our visit a little short.⁵⁰

Following this lesson, Clover considers carefully before deciding not to admit to others that Sara Kate does not know how to say a blessing before meals. The child does not tell how did not kill a spider "on account of what Sara Kate would have thought." Clover resorts to using her aunt's strategy of secret keeping: "I guess I'm going to have to hold all those things that happened here of late inside for a while."⁵¹

By not disclosing secrets about Sara Kate's ways Clover essentially seeks to prevent her extended family and the people of Round Hill from thinking that Sara Kate is too strange. She wants to protect her stepmother from further "talk" about her "uppity" or, to the black community, nonsensical behavior. On one occasion, withholding the information that Sara Kate had thrown away plastic flowers someone had put on Gaten's grave, Clover "saves" her stepmother from being "in trouble" by advising her to tell Aunt Everleen the truth herself. On the other hand, Clover keeps the black community's secrets so as to not hurt Sara Kate's feelings. She does not tell her stepmother that "it's Eveleen's good cooking I'm always filled up with, not peaches," and that "people were starting talk that she was a stuck-up nasty white so-and-so" because she [Sara Kate] never visited them.⁵² Instead, feigning laziness, she gives Sara Kate an opportunity to disprove such speculations by simply saying: "I think you ought to take this mail to Miss Katie [...] It will give you a chance to visit. You always said you were going to on account how good she's been to us since Gate died. It would be good if you get to know folks in Round Hill better, anyway."⁵³ In doing so, serving as a mediator, Clover engages both racial groups in a dialogue, in the hopes they will learn to see past their differences.⁵⁴

The best example of Clover's bringing both groups together is, paradoxically, an event during which she does not side with either party and remains true to herself (and her taste buds). Ignoring Aunt Everleen's advice to compliment Sara Kate on her cooking, Clover speaks her mind and tells Sara Kate "that she could take her [nasty] lunch and shove it."⁵⁵ This insult provokes Sara Kate into sharing this incident with Everleen, who becomes angry at Clover for her disobedience and impolite behavior. Mindful of an earlier conversation with Sara Kate in which she [Sara Kate] had proved herself to be a caring mother, Everleen does not side with Clover but for the first time supports Sara Kate. This "shift in the alignment of relationships [...] along the generational line and across the color line"⁵⁶ marks a turning point in the relations in the triad, finally collapsing the "in-group" and "out-group" division based on race to prioritize concerns for Clover.

This prioritization is applauded by Clover, who is "glad that they both care enough for me." The new situation enables all three parties to communicate with each other "accepted and judged by the kind of person they are inside, not on the basis of the

50 Sanders, *Clover*, 46-7.

51 Sanders, *Clover*, 165.

52 Sanders, *Clover*, 61, 123.

53 Sanders, *Clover*, 123.

54 In this respect and, in particular, with regard to her home surroundings, which, as I argued earlier, is "a place of two intersecting cultures, a hybrid, interracial setting," Clover can be seen as a variation of the metaphor of "the child as the hyphen." For more information on the concept see Šárka Bubíková, "Growing Up Postmodern" in *Literary Childhoods: Growing Up in British and American Literature*, ed. Šárka Bubíková 131-144 (Pardubice: Pavel Mervart, 2008).

55 Sanders, *Clover*, 155.

56 Jones, *Race Mixing*, 66.

48 Sanders, *Clover*, 140.

49 Jones, *Race Mixing*, 65.

color of their skin."⁵⁷ Thus further events are put into action: Sara Kate's friendly visits to the peach orchard make it possible for her to save Clover's Uncle Jim Ed by giving him mouth-to-mouth resuscitation when he is stung by yellow jackets. This heroic act prompts Everleen into bragging about her sister-in-law who, in turn, "takes up for her."⁵⁸ As Clover tells the reader at the end of the novel, prompted by a memory of the late Gaten, "It's almost like old times."⁵⁹

In conclusion, let me offer another reading of Clover's and Sanders' closing sentence. While marked by Gaten's absence, from the new perspective the times are also richer. True to her name, Clover enriches the Round Hill "soil," making the lives of her stepmother Sara Kate, her extended family, and by extension, that of the whole black community more meaningful and human.⁶⁰ Indeed, Clover's strategy of (not) divulging secrets has proved effective in fostering cross-racial understanding, with the novel establishing "a paradigm of reading or interpreting race" which, as Jones argues, "illuminat[es] the ways in which racial differences are social constructions."⁶¹ And, if Lewis is right that the narrative strategy of telling secrets may also incite readers into "lean[ing] close [...] to feel perhaps exclusively, singularly, secretly beloved," this may also challenge them "into fuller humanity." When the voice taking "this leap of faith in the reader's capacity for full humanity"⁶² belongs to a child, the chances that the reader's response will be positive are so much the greater.

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57 Sanders, *Clover*, 177, 97.

58 Sanders, *Clover*, 182.

59 Sanders, *Clover*, 183.

60 Zaidman argues that "the title's image suggests organic growth." <http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/spring95/Zaidman.html>

61 Jones, *Race Mixing*, 62.

62 Lewis, *Secret Telling*, 173.

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