

“Small Things Like These” by Claire Keegan

Cultural Context

Illegitimacy

- Illegitimacy plays a huge role in the novel, affecting the main character of Bill Furlong, but also the girls that are imprisoned in the convent.
- Illegitimacy can be tied closely with religion. It is hugely looked down upon in the town of New Ross, due to the strong influence of the Catholic Church.
- From the beginning of the novel, we can see how illegitimacy has affected Bill Furlong’s life. We learn that he himself is illegitimate, meaning he was born out of wedlock.
- We are told about how his mother was extremely looked down upon by her own family. This reflects the attitude of society against illegitimate children and their mothers. The family even went to disown their own daughter - *“her people made it clear that they’d have no more to do with her”*.
- Due to this Bill was commonly referred to from others as coming *“from nothing, Less than nothing, some might say”*.
- This reflects that illegitimacy was a big deal, being a huge embarrassment to the family.
- Later on in the novel, mothers of illegitimate children are described as being let run *“wild”* by their families, and once they *“got into trouble, they turned their backs”*. Eileen also comments saying that *“It’s only people with no children that can afford to be careless”*.
- Furlong remembers when he was a child he would be called *“ugly names”* and even spat upon, some days even coming home with his back covered in spit. Furlong has faced judgement from society and even children all of his life.
- This truly affected Furlong’s development as a character, as he always knew he was different.
- When Furlong received praise from Mrs. Wilson - *“You’re a credit to yourself”*. This praise made Furlong go *“around feeling a foot taller, believing in his heart, that he mattered as much as any other child”*.
- Even in adulthood, Furlong strives for him and his family to fit in. He feels extremely proud when he sees his daughter Joan singing with the choir looking like she belonged with the rest.
- Furlong vividly remembers one Christmas as a childhood. He wrote in his Santy letter *“asking for his Daddy or else a jigsaw puzzle of a farm”*. On Christmas morning, *“neither Santa nor his Father had come”*.
- As a child he self reflected and questioned why he didn’t get what he asked for. *“He thought about the things children had said about him in school, the name he was called, and understood this to be the reason”*. Young Furlong believed that the reason he didn’t get what he asked for was because he was illegitimate.
- At an early age Furlong has come to create an internalised hatred of his illegitimacy, believing that he isn’t good enough in society, and needs to try even harder to fit in. His illegitimacy changes the way he views the world and himself as he grows up in this Catholic society.

- As an adult, Furlong continues to face this prejudice. When collecting his birth certificate from the registry office, he is judged by the clerk, once she sees the word "unknown" written in the place the father's name should be. *"The clerk's mouth had bent into an ugly smile handing it out to him over the counter"*.
- Illegitimacy does not only affect the main character of Bill Furlong, but also all of the girls that are working in the convent.
- The girls that work in the laundries are regarded as *"girls of low character"* who spend their days *"being reformed, doing penance"*. These girls are told that they should be ashamed of themselves for having a child out of wedlock/premarital sex.
- The girls experienced hard labour and *"worked from dawn till night"*. Nurses even had to be called to the convent to cure a young-girl with *"varicose veins"* from spending all her days at the wash basin.
- Many in the town referred to the convent as a *"mother-and-baby home where common, unmarried girls went into to be hidden away"*.
- The nuns treated the girls like they were worthless, because of their children being illegitimate. When Furlong visits the convent, he is instantly met with the poor treatment of the girls.
 - *"A dozen young women and girls, down on their hands and knees"*
 - *"Polishing their hearts out in circles on the floor"*
 - *"Looked like they had been scalded"*
- The girls also appeared in *"horrid type of grey-coloured shifts"*. He also sees a girl with *"an ugly sty in her eye"* and another's hair which had been *"roughly cut"*.
- The nuns had made life hell for the girls. One girl begs Furlong for him to let her leave the convent with him, expressing her desire to escape. She even elaborates by saying that she'd rather die than be there - *"all I want to do is drown meself"*.
- One morning when Furlong is making a delivery to the convent, he finds a girl *"just about fit to stand, with her hair roughly cut"* cowering in the corner of the coal shed. It appears that the girl had been there for a good amount of time, as there are even excrements on the ground.
- The girl is described as a *"small, shut-down thing"*.
- At the end of the novel, we get another example of how the girls are looked down upon, when Furlong is bringing Sarah Redmond home. A woman asks Furlong *"was she not one of those wans from the laundry?"*.
- Illegitimacy is extremely frowned upon in the world of *"Small Things Like These"*, this is perfectly illustrated by the attitudes of society towards Furlong and the girls in the convent. It is also highlighted by the mistreatment of the girls by the nuns, further displaying the looming power of the Catholic Church at the time.

Setting and Social Class

- New Ross, Co. Wexford 1985 - time of recession.
 - Bill Furlong is a hard working coal merchant.
 - Life is tough - "*dole queues were getting longer*" as many began to lose their jobs - unemployment rising.
 - Emigration is rising - "*taken the boat to England*" and many were "*leaving for London and Boston, New York*".
 - Debt was increasing and many "*couldn't get a wink of sleep knowing what was owing, that the bank was coming down on them*".
 - People are struggling financially and the economy is challenged with closures and redundancies.
 - Those who remain are plunged into destitution and hunger.
 - Furlong on one occasion sees "*a young schoolboy drinking the milk out of the cat's bowl behind the priest's house*".
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- There is a general acceptance of the terrible poverty endured by those at the bottom of the social ladder.
 - Bill finds it hard to ignore the inequality, while Eileen is more pragmatic and reflects on the view point of many in the town: those who have little or nothing only have themselves to blame.
 - Eileen comments about a little boy Bill saw collecting sticks, saying "*some of these bring the hardship on themselves*". When Bill remarks that it's hardly the child's fault his father is a "*stocious*" drunk, Eileen replies stating that in life there is always someone "*that pulls the short straw*".
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- Most characters in the novel are of the same social class, but the community of New Ross is far from diverse.
 - When foreign sailors come into port they are "*a novelty going about town in their fur caps and long buttoned coats, with hardly a word of English*".
 - There is also a degree of separation between the remnants of Anglo-Irish Society, represented by the Wilsons, and the Catholic majority of the town.
 - Mrs. Wilson was a protestant meaning she was not restricted by church rules in the same way as other characters in the community. This allowed her to take in Bill's mother, when the laundry would have been the only other option for a single pregnant woman skinned by her family.
 - Mrs. Wilson was independently wealthy and "*didn't seem to care much for what judgments others passed*".
 - She treated Bill with kindness, and through her interest in him, Bill learned "*good Protestant habits*" such as rising early and drinking little.
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- Bill is in an unusual social setting. He came "*from nothing*" or as some cruelly say "*less than nothing*".
 - His illegitimacy is a reason for shame at that time, but because Bill grew up in the Wilson house, he was exposed to a more elegant and refined way of life.
 - He views Eileen's Christmas decorations as "*cheap and gaudy*" compared to the "*finer, plainer things*" he was used to - Mrs. Wilson shaped his tastes and expectations.
 - The combination of his illegitimacy and familiarity with the finer things in life means that Bill does not fit in naturally and isn't clear about his place in society.

- As a schoolboy, Bill was bullied by other children because of his background. He was called “*ugly names*” and spat upon. His connection with the higher class Mrs. Wilson from the “*big house*” saved him from worse torment.
- The taint of Bill’s birth stays with him into adulthood. Bill recalls a time he went into the registry office for a copy of his birth certificate, and the clerk gave him an “*ugly smile*” as she handed it over, because under the space for his father’s name was “*unknown*”.
- Eileen even makes an unpleasant remark about his parentage when they are arguing about the convent. She reminds him that his mother was fortunate for Mrs. Wilson’s kindness, but the other girls who “*got into trouble*” are not as much. Eileen instantly regrets the cheap blow but Bill is deeply hurt.
- Bill is marked by the attitude of others in the community and has internalised the belief that he is not as good as those who are born to married parents.
- He is delighted that his own family is considered socially acceptable. He notices his daughter Joan looks like she belongs in the choir “*with all the others*”.
- His sense of inadequacy drives him to create the best life he can for his children.
- The situation for unmarried mothers in Ireland has not improved.
- The unfortunate girls in the convent laundry are regarded as the lowest of the low.
- Far from having sympathy for their situation, people blame them for their misfortune. Eileen shows no sympathy for the girls in the convent. She tells Bill that the girls have been allowed to run wild and find themselves in the convent because they “*haven’t a soul to care for them*”. Her concern is solely that her own daughters should never find themselves in such a situation.
- The church is so powerful that nothing can be done about whatever happens to the girls, and prefer to turn a blind eye to the situation.
- Many fear falling out with the clergy and the social ostracisation and lack of opportunity that would follow.
- The reaction of the townspeople to Bill rescuing Sarah from the convent is uniformly negative.
- One woman confronts Bill, asking if the girl was “*one of those wans from the laundry*”. Her contemptuous tone and scornful use of the word “*wans*” makes it clear which side she is on.
- Everybody completely ignores Sarah and expresses no interest whatsoever in where Bill was taking her.
- Bill will have an uphill battle at home and in the wider community as a result of his actions. The wider society shows no sign of changing its attitude.

Power

- Religion and social class are closely linked in the novel.
- The convent is described as a “*powerful looking place*” and the religious orders play a vital role in maintaining the social hierarchy in the town.
- The nuns are the most powerful figures in this social setting. The people of New Ross are influenced and controlled by them.
- The nuns and priests live in relative luxury and there is little indication that they engage in meaningful charity work, but instead reinforce the cruel inequalities and prejudice that exist in the community.

- Although the nuns take in the unmarried girls, the nuns work them to the bone and arrange lucrative adoptions for their babies, whether the mothers consent or not.
- At Christmas the nuns walk around “*supervising and talking to some of the more well-off parents*”.
- At Mass, wealthy farmers and businessmen stride up to the front of the church, confident in the belief their position in society entitles them to a better place than the rest of the congregation.
- The presence of a Magdalene Laundry is not openly discussed by the community. There is a sense of fear and secrecy.
- Furlong is worried that his daughters may lose their place in St. Margarets if he upsets the nuns. Mrs. Kehoe warns him about the dangers of challenging the nuns.
- The most powerful figure is Mother Superior, even her name demonstrates power.
- Mother Superior never admits fault and behaves with an eerie calmness, even when Furlong discovers one of the girls locked in the coal shed. She is “*just about fit to stand*”.
- Nobody challenges her. Even Furlong feels pressured to come in for a cup of tea when she insists “*you’ll come in*”.
- On the surface, she appears polite and kind but Furlong suspects that a darker character is hiding behind the facade.
- She discreetly threatens Furlong to keep the story of the girl in the coal shed to himself, adding that, “*it’s not an easy task to find a place for everyone*” at the St. Margarets.
- Bill exercises her power in the way he chooses to interact with others. He holds a quiet moral authority in his community, shaped by his integrity, kindness, and self-awareness.
- Keegan contrasts this with the hidden power structure of the Catholic Church, which wields control over women and families. Bill’s decision to confront these forces highlights the tension between personal morality and societal expectations.
- Keegan’s writing captures Bill’s internal conflicts as he navigates a world where religion holds sway over everyday decisions, often shaping the course of people’s lives in subtle yet profound.

Gender Roles

- The world of text is predominantly patriarchal.
- Women’s work is housework and child-rearing, while the men earn money to provide for their families. The majority of the women in the text do not work outside the home, but that does not mean they are not kept extremely busy.
- When Bill takes the workmen for Christmas lunch in Mrs. Kehoe’s hotel and remarks that it must be lovely to be a man and to have days off. The implication is that a woman’s work is constant and there is no holiday for those who must care for and cater their families.
- Eileen is aware of the social restriction imposed upon women because of the gender and their position in the community.

- She tells Bill that Mrs. Wilson was “*one of those few women on this earth who could do as she pleased*” because she was wealthy.
- Most women do not have this freedom. They are reliant on men, to provide for them and their children. As a result, they must abide by the restrictions imposed upon them by society.
- Even the women in the novel internalise the misogyny in Ireland.
- Mother Superior remarks casually that Furlong must be disappointed to have five daughters and no son to “*carry on the name*”. The implication is clear that girls are inferior.
- Bill replies quickly that he took his own mother’s name, and that it never did him any harm.
- This was brave considering he knows how the nuns feel about people like his mother.
- Mother Superior does not argue with Bill. The reason for this is Bill’s own gender, and it having power in the conversation.
- Although he may not be particularly wealthy, he is a “*man amongst women*” in the convent and therefore even though the Mother Superior does not like much of what he is saying and would prefer him gone, she cannot say so outright.
- Women are not completely powerless.
- Bill reflects that women are “*so much deeper*” than men. His daughter, Sheila, seems to quickly be able to read his thoughts as he remembers a childhood Christmas. Bill is uneasy, noting to himself that women are more frightening than men.
- He acknowledges that men are physically and socially stronger than women. He is both impressed by and almost fearful of women’s instincts and intuition.
- When Mrs. Kehoe from the hotel is warning Bill against having a “*run-in*” with the nuns, and he queries the power of the church, she looks at him “*the way highly practical women looked at men, as though they weren’t men at all but foolish boys*”. Bill has noticed Eileen looking at him the same way.
- The implication is that women understand the realities of the world more than men do, and have found that the best way to get on is not to challenge the status quo.
- Bill knows that the world in which he lives is difficult for young women. When it comes to gender and sexuality, there is a double standard in the world of the text.
- Bill hears a “*sharp hot whistle and laughter*” from men on the street at night, and he worries about his own daughters “*going out into that world of men*”.
- Although the girls are young, Bill has already seen men staring at them.
- There is no judgement of the men who view women in this way: the suggestion is that it is up to the girl’s parents and the girls themselves to be careful.
- Young women imprisoned in the convent are looked down upon for becoming pregnant, but there is no suggestion that the fathers of their children should be held accountable.
- Those taken into work in the convent laundry are considered girls of “*low character*” and “*common unmarried girls*”.
- Local people are well aware that there is abuse of a sort going on in the convent.

- A community nurse has called out to the convent to treat a 15 year old girl suffering from “*varicose veins from standing so long at the wash tubs*”, but there are still those who view the nuns as saints and that the girls deserve their fate. Most people simply turn a deaf ear to the stories that emerge from the convent.
- Bill’s rescue of Sarah is controversial. She is ignored and shunned as she walks through the town and called “*one of those wans*” from the convent.
- There is little sign of imminent change, and it is clear that Bill will find it difficult to persuade others that the mother and baby homes are cruel institutions designed to punish women for daring to become pregnant outside of marriage.

Love and Marriage

- In the world of this text, marriage is the only option for a couple who wish to live together.
- Women who fall pregnant outside of wedlock are generally disowned by their families and sent to mother and baby homes, where they are hidden from society and their mistreatment and forced adoptions are accepted by the community at large.
- Bill has escaped the fate of so many other children born to unmarried mothers, thanks to the kindness of Mrs. Wilson.
- Initially all seems well in the Furlong's marriage. They appear to be happy, if rather busy in their work and home lives.
- Eileen knows Bill well. When he makes a comment about their luck compared to others who are badly off. She correctly guesses that he is reflecting on something that happened during his working day.
- When Bill tells Eileen about the boy collecting sticks in the rain, she does not share his sympathy for the child stating that “*some of these bring hardship upon themselves*”, remarking that its the father’s fault the family is poor. But Bill does not see why the sins of the father should be visited on the son. Eileen takes the pragmatic approach and dismisses the subject.
- Bill loves his family dearly, and he knows Eileen well. He noticed Eileen taking a “*gander around by Hanrahans*” before Christmas and admiring a pair of shoes. When he tells her, Eileen is pleased that he noticed her interest. It may not be a large romantic gesture, but it shows he cares for his wife and wants to please her.
- Nonetheless, all is not perfect in Bill and Eileen’s marriage.
- Bill worries that he is inadequate as a husband. When the children go to bed, husband and wife chat for a while, but conversation dries up quickly.
- Bill’s lack of confidence means that he frets he is poor company for Eileen and wonders if she imagines what life would be like if she married someone else.
- Ironically, it is actually Bill who feels trapped and fantasizes about a different life on occasion. When he calls to a house by the coal yard, he looks appreciatively at the attractive young woman. Although he does not act on his thoughts, it is clear Bill is less than content in his currency situation.
- Tension arises in the Furlong’s marriage.

- Eileen becomes agitated when Bill tells her about seeing the miserable, frightened, unhealthy looking women and girls in the convent. She warns that “*such things (have) nothing to do with them*” and there’s nothing they can do about it, even if they wanted to.
- Bill becomes aware that Eileen knows more about what is going on in the convent than she claims, and the differences between their attitudes begin to drive a wedge between them.
- Eileen tells Bill that certain things have to be ignored, “*If you want to get on in life*”, and she accuses him of being too “*soft-hearted*”. Uncharacteristically, she makes a barbed remark about Bill’s mother being fortunate because she was taken in by Mrs. Wilson and allowed to raise her son “*far from any hardships*”. She instantly regrets her comment, but the damage is done, and Bill is unable to find the words “*to ease what had come between them*”.
- Bill’s growing tension is not always obvious, but it breaks out when the family is going to mass. Eileen asks the girls if they have any change for the collection box or if aBill has given it all in his small acts of charity. Bill snaps at her calling what she has said as “*ugly talk*” and remarking that she has enough money in her purse.
- Eileen’s smile vanishes and she looks at her husband in astonishment. The easy familiarity and mutual understanding that they used to have has been replaced by misunderstanding and unease.
- Bill’s world is beginning to unravel a little as he faces the realities of life in his hometown.
- Bill soon discovers the truth about his background. When he visits the Wilson house, he is greeted by a woman, who comments on the similarity and family resemblance him and Ned have.
- Bill is very taken aback but, on reflection, he now sees the loving relationship between Ned and his Mother. They had always gone to mass together, eaten meals together and “*stayed up talking at the fire at night*”. Ned was also very “*down-hearted in himself*” when Bill’s mother died.
- Although there were no signs of a great romantic love, Ned and Bill’s mother were a couple. Yet, because of society’s assertion that only married couples are fit to live together and raise children, the small family is denied respectability and must hide the truth of their situation.
- As Bill begins to see the world around him for what it really is, he can no longer ignore all that is hidden beneath the surface. Were it not for Mrs. Wilson, his won mother would’ve ended up in a laundry.
- He finds himself unable to heed to Eileen’s warnings about minding his own business and keeping on the right side of the church authorities.
- Although he knows there will be a “*world of trouble*” waiting for him at home, he rescues Sarah from the coal shed.
- We can’t tell what effect this decision will have on Furlong's marriage, but the disagreements they have already had on the topic do not bode well for a smooth future.

Religion

- Claire Keegan noted that the book is reflective of the reality of the Magdalene laundries that existed in Ireland in 1966. They were run by the Catholic Church with the support of the Irish State.
- Early in the text, the influence of religion is not strong nor negative, but simply a part of life, a series of rituals that have been embedded in their routine.

- In the beginning of the novel, we learn that during the bitter winter, *“blades of cold slid under doors and cut knees of those who still knelt to say the rosary”*.
 - Religious fasts and daily prayers may not be a meaningful aspect of everyone’s lives, but they are used to the little observances that being Catholic entail.
 - In Bill’s yard *“when the Angelus bell rang, at noon, the men laid down their tools, washed the black off their hands”* and went to Kehoe’s for their dinner.
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- For the majority in New Ross, the Church is no threat to their lives, but provides a service to the community.
 - Bill’s daughter, Joan, is a member of the church choir, and she and her sister attend St. Margarets, acknowledged to be the *“only good school for girls in town”*.
 - Their younger siblings, Sheila and Grace, take weekly accordion lessons at the convent after school.
 - Religion also offers hope to some in the times of recession and high unemployment. Belief in moving statues still brings crowds to shrines where such events are said to have occurred.
 - The people pay lip service to religious belief, rather than being committed to the church, whether Catholic or Protestant. Religious observance is on par with manners and is considered appropriate and necessary - genuflecting at the chapel is like thanking the shopkeeper, one of *“the small things that (needs) to be done”* in the community.
 - Mrs. Wilson was a Protestant in a predominantly Catholic Ireland, there was not *“much tension over religious beliefs which, on both sides, were lukewarm”*.
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- A darker side of the Catholic Church’s work begins to emerge. The nuns run a *“laundry business”* about which little is known. The laundry has a good reputation in terms of its service.
 - Despite this, there is some gossip about the training school girls. Some say that they are not given any education but are simply *“girls of low character”* who are being *“reformed”* and *“doing penance”*.
 - Yet despite these rumours, the community claims the nuns have hearts of gold and work their fingers to the bone.
 - Those who view the training school with a more jaundiced eye believe that the place is a mother and baby home from which children are illegally adopted.
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- Bill does not want to believe the rumours about the nuns mistreating the girls in their care, but is uncomfortably aware of the truth.
 - He recalls meeting a group of young women polishing the floor of the convent, who were dressed poorly, without shoes and afraid. One girl begs Bill to take her home out to the river, because all she wants to do is to kill herself.
 - Bill was shaken by this encounter by the realisation that the girls were locked into the convent with no chance of escape.
 - When Bill tells Eileen about what he saw she says it has nothing to do with their family, asking him *“Aren’t all our girls well, and minded?”* and warns Bill *“if you want to get on in life there’s things you have to ignore, so you can keep on”*.
 - The power of the church is clear. Anyone who sides with them has a good chance of doing well, while those who stand up to them risk too much.

- Despite Eileen's warnings Bill comes across a situation he is unable to ignore, when he meets a young girl locked in a freezing coal shed.
- He is appalled by the shocking condition she has to endure. She is barely able to stand when he wraps his coat around her, but she manages to say "*I'm out now*". The girl tells him she has a 14-week old baby that the nuns took from her. She is anxious wondering "*who is there to feed him now*".
- The horror that goes on behind closed doors is gradually revealed. The Mother Superior pretends she is concerned for the girl's welfare. But it is quite obvious that she is lying, particularly when the traumatised girl begins to shake and stand in some sort of "*a trance*" when spoken to by the nun.
- The Mother Superior is too intelligent to threaten Bill and warn him not to tell anyone. But she subtly makes it clear that Bill depends on his good relationship with the church.
- She asks him about her daughters: their education, music lessons, and places in the choir. Her veiled threats are delivered discreetly, but the warning is obvious. She reminds Bill that it may be difficult to find a place for his younger daughters in the convent school because there are so many people hoping for a place.
- Bill's encounters at the convent unsettles him. He can see that the girl is deeply distressed and that the pretence of caring for her will as soon as she leaves. However, at the same time he feels powerless to do anything about it.
- At Mass later that morning, Bill focuses on the Stations of the cross, paying attention to Jesus' suffering. The contrast between this and the luxurious comfort of the nuns at the convent and the way they mistreat the girls strike a chord. Unusually, Bill does not go up to communion that day but stays "*contrarily... with his back against the wall*".
- The Church's power in the town means that few dare to defy them. Mrs. Kehoe warns Bill against involving himself with what happened at the convent, advising him not to say anything about it. She tells him to "*keep the enemy close, the bad dog with you*". The church is so dangerous that it is better to be on the same side as them.
- She reminds him that the nuns "*have a finger in every pie*" and could make life very difficult for him. Mrs. Kehoe even say that the nuns who run the laundry are not in the same religious order as those who run the school. She says they are "*all the one*" and that "*you can't side against one without damaging your chances with the other*".
- The text ultimately asks us to question what it is to be Christian. If it is to help the marginalized and those in difficulties, then the Church authorities are not modelling the right way to treat others.
- Bill, as he brings Sarah home, wonders what is the point of life if people don't help one another. He is disgusted the neither he nor anybody else in the town has been brave enough to stand up to the religious order.

Family

- Only traditional families are accepted in the world of the text. The Church's views of unmarried mothers mean that children born outside of wedlock are not easily accepted.

- Fortunately for Bill's mother, she was employed by a Protestant woman of independent means who was not reliant on the church.
- Bill's mother was disowned when her family found out about her "*trouble*". As a result, Bill was raised by his mother rather than being a victim of forced adoption.
- Mrs. Wilson's kindness and decency was not enough to save Bill from the negative association of being the child of a single mother.
- In the world of this text, there are many who believe that girls that "*get into trouble*" are unworthy of respect, and their children looked down upon.
- Bill's family situation exposes him to cruel bullying in school. Because he is illegitimate, he is called "*ugly names*" and spat upon.
- Biological bonds are not as important as the bonds of love and kindness. Mrs. Wilson was an important part of his childhood and treated him as "*one of her own*".
- When Bill won a spelling competition. Mrs. Wilson praised him, calling him a credit to himself. This validation made Bill feel that "*he mattered as much as any other child*".