



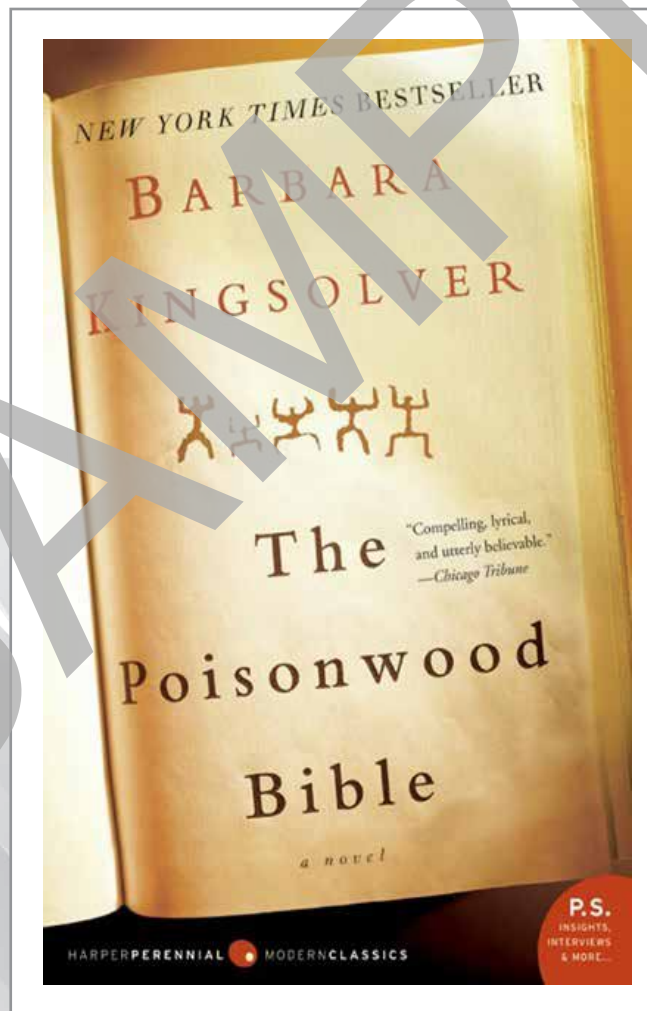
TEACHER GUIDE

GRADES 9-12

COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM BASED LESSON PLANS

The Poisonwood Bible

Barbara Kingsolver



READ, WRITE, THINK, DISCUSS AND CONNECT

The Poisonwood Bible

Barbara Kingsolver

TEACHER GUIDE

NOTE:

The trade book edition of the novel used to prepare this guide is found in the Novel Units catalog and on the Novel Units website. Using other editions may have varied page references.

Please note: We have assigned Interest Levels based on our knowledge of the themes and ideas of the books included in the Novel Units sets, however, please assess the appropriateness of this novel or trade book for the age level and maturity of your students prior to reading with them. You know your students best!

ISBN 978-1-50204-087-9

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Skills and Strategies

Comprehension

Predictions, inferences,
cause/effect, universality

Literary Elements

Metaphors, similes, allusion,
conflict, irony, symbolism,
foreshadowing, characterization,
setting, theme, genre, plot
development

Vocabulary

Target words, definitions,
application

Thinking

Brainstorming, analysis,
compare/contrast, research,
critical thinking, evaluation

Listening/Speaking

Discussion, monologue, oral
presentation, speech

Writing

Poetry, sequel, essay, TV script,
précis, lament, newspaper
article, acrostic

Across the Curriculum

Art—collage, sketch; Drama—
script; Music—appropriate
selections, style; Current
Events—articles; Film—
movie trailer

Genre: fiction; categorized as a framework story (i.e., a story within a narrative setting, the “framework”; The history of the Congo is embedded in the narratives of Orleanna Price and her daughters.)

Setting: primarily the Congo/Zaire, Africa and Georgia, USA; 1959–late 1990s

Point of View: first person

Themes: guilt/forgiveness/redemption, survival, maturation, sacrifice, love, individuality, the importance of language

Style: narrative communicated through five voices

Tone: reflective, regretful

Date of First Publication: 1998

Summary

Nathan Price takes his wife, Orleanna, and their four daughters to the Belgian Congo to serve as a missionary family to the Africans. His dictatorial role as husband and father, inflexible approach to the native Congolese, and obstinate refusal to leave during the country's dangerous political upheaval doom his mission. As they struggle to adapt to the African climate and culture, the family endures illness, deprivation, and fear. Yet Orleanna and the children gradually adapt to life in the village, learn survival tactics, and form friendships. After Ruth May's death from a green mamba bite, Orleanna and the other three girls leave the Congo; however, Nathan remains and ultimately dies there. Orleanna and Adah return to the United States, where Adah enters college and eventually becomes an epidemiologist. Rachel reaches Johannesburg, where she marries several times and eventually manages her own hotel resort. Leah stays in the Congo, marries the former village schoolteacher, Anatole, and starts a family of her own. All must deal individually with the guilt of Ruth May's death and the lasting effects of their time in the Congo.

About the Author

Personal: Barbara Kingsolver was born on April 8, 1955, in Annapolis, Maryland and grew up in eastern Kentucky. She is married to Steven Hopp, and the couple lives in Virginia with their two daughters, Camille and Lily. Kingsolver herself lived in Africa for a year in 1963. She is an environmental activist and human-rights advocate. She also plays hand drums and keyboard with her guitarist husband.

Education: Kingsolver graduated magna cum laude from DePauw University with a B.S. in biology (1977) and received her M.S. degree in ecology and evolutionary biology from the University of Arizona (1981).

Career: Kingsolver worked as a technical writer for the Office of Arid Land Studies at the University of Arizona (1981–1985) and as a freelance journalist (1985–1987). Her first novel, *The Bean Trees*, was published in 1988. Other works include *Homeland and Other Stories* (1989), *Holding the Line: Women in the Great Arizona Mine Strike of 1983* (1989), *Animal Dreams* (1987), *Pigs in Heaven* (1993), *Another America: Otra America* (1992), *High Tide in Tucson: Essays from Now or Never* (1995), *Prodigal Summer* (2000), three essays in *Small Wonder* (2002), *Last Stand: America's Virgin Lands* (2002), and *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life* (2007).

Honors: Kingsolver won an Arizona Press Club award in 1986 for outstanding feature writing and was awarded an Honorary Doctorate of Letters from DePauw University in 1995. Accolades for *The Poisonwood Bible* include the National Book Prize of South Africa, a nomination for the

Book One: Genesis, pp. 1–42

Orleanna Price reveals details about her life in retrospect, including the time she and her family spent in Africa. She suffers from deep sorrow and guilt over her family's anguish. She recalls preparing for her family's scheduled year in the Congo. The four Price daughters explain their initial reactions to life there.

Vocabulary
affinity
imperious
apocalypse
emissaries
aphasia
benevolence
stipend
paroxysm

Discussion Questions

1. What is the significance of “Genesis” as the title of Book One, and how do the events in the chapter correlate with the Bible reference? (*Genesis is the book of beginnings in the Bible. In her first narrative, Orleanna’s statement beginning, “I trod on Africa without a thought...” [p. 9], alludes to both the “divinely inspired beginning” and the “terrible end” of the Price family’s tenure in Africa. This sets the stage for Orleanna and her daughters to describe what happened to them there. The Bible reference, “And God said...subdue [the earth]: and have dominion over...every living thing...” [p. 1], correlates with Nathan Price’s vision of conquering and converting the African natives. As a political allegory, Orleanna’s reference to Ike and men locked in rooms bargaining for the Congo’s treasure refers to the United States’ involvement in the country’s political turmoil. She also alludes to the stolen goods other countries have taken from Africa, leaving the country empty and barren. These countries wanted dominion over the Congo.*)
2. Read aloud Orleanna’s statement, “.. Southern Baptist by marriage, mother of children living and dead” (p. 7). What does this statement mean? Note her later allusion to the horsemen and the apocalypse. Analyze what she reveals in her narrative. (*This statement sums up Orleanna’s life. She addresses the memory of a scene with her four daughters by a stream in Africa to the one who died there. The grief and guilt associated with her daughter’s death consume Orleanna. Her allusions to the horsemen and the apocalypse are taken from the Bible, Revelation 6, which refers to four horsemen who pronounce apocalyptic judgment on the earth. In retrospect, Orleanna knows she witnessed both a family and a political apocalypse in Africa and recognizes her own complacency about both. By calling herself the “conqueror’s wife,” she acknowledges her husband’s control over her and reveals her struggle to survive. Her question, “How do we aim to live with it?” [p. 9] has a dual meaning: her own guilt over her child’s death and the guilt of those countries who plundered Africa. She metaphorically refers to herself as a “haunted old bat,” meaning she can never escape her guilt.*)
3. What is the significance of the chapter title, “The Things We Carried,” that precedes the Price girls’ narratives about their journey to Africa? (*Each of the four girls reveals physical and emotional “baggage” they take with them to the Congo. Leah’s statement, “Our journey was to be a great enterprise of balance” [p. 19], sums up the family’s role. After struggling to conceal necessary supplies under their clothing, the Price women eventually realize how worthless many of these things are. Nathan reveals his demanding, unrealistic expectations of his wife and daughters when he arrives in Africa carrying only his Bible, while his family is weighted down with “necessities.” Emotional “baggage” includes fanaticism [Nathan], fear and disappointment [Orleanna], prejudice [Ruth May], self-centeredness [Rachel], idealism [Leah], and self-hate [Adah].*)
4. Discuss Leah’s first narrative and what this reveals about her reaction to the journey. Note the allusions to the lilies of the field and Rebekah at the well. (*Leah tells of her mother’s forethought and the family’s preparation. Orleanna’s primary goal is to take care of her children’s needs, including household items and medicine. Leah refers to her oldest sister by her full name, Rachel Rebeccah, and alludes to Rebekah in the Bible [Genesis 24:15–16]. Rachel, like the biblical*

Rebekah, is fair and attractive and loves beautiful things. In alluding to the “lilies of the field” [Matthew 6:28], Nathan implies that his wife and daughters should be like the lilies, which need no outward adornment. This narrative also introduces the Underdowns, who will oversee Nathan in his appointment.)

5. Analyze Ruth May's allusions to the “Tribes of Ham” and “Jimmy Crow,” and correlate these with her view of Africa. *(Ruth May associates the black people she sees in Africa with the prejudice against black people that she has heard all her life. The racist theory asserts that black people are descendants of Noah's son, Ham, on whom Noah placed a curse of servanthood because of his sin [Genesis 9:24–25]. Advocates of slavery believed that black people descended from Ham and were, therefore, to be slaves to white men. Jim Crow laws were practices or laws that resulted from proponents of segregation of blacks from whites in public places. They became commonly used during the 1880s when racial segregation was made legal in many Southern states. Several decisions by the U.S. Supreme Court in the 1950s and 1960s and the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1968 declared these laws invalid. Ruth May's allusions show that she has simply soaked up information from her environment.)*
6. Examine Rachel's discourse about the family's first night in Kilanga, noting her allusions to the “sloop (slough) of despond” and Lot and Sodom. What does each family member's reaction reveal about him or her? Note Rachel's misuse of words, i.e., “pandemonium” instead of “pandemonium,” which becomes her trademark throughout the novel. *(The villagers immediately hurry the Prices to an open, dirt-floor area [Nathan's church] for a welcoming meal. Rachel feels as if she is in a pit of despair, such as the one in which the character Christian sinks in John Bunyan's The Pilgrim's Progress. The Price family experiences culture shock as the pandemonium of the music and the dancing overwhelm them. Nathan, who becomes irate over the native women's nakedness, begins to preach to them about their sinfulness and to threaten them with God's judgment. He alludes to Lot and the sinners in Sodom and God's ultimate destruction of that city [Genesis 19]. The crowd becomes quiet, and many leave. The Price girls are afraid and despairing as they attempt to eat the “feast” of goat meat. Orleanna displays grace and acceptance as she insists that her daughters politely eat what is offered.)*
7. How does Adah describe each of the family members' reactions to the Congo when they first arrive? How does Adah herself react? What is Adah's handicap? *(Adah describes the village and its inhabitants. Orleanna views the dark hills behind the river as “Looming like the Judgment” [p. 32], indicating her fear of what may happen to her family. Leah is excited and believes the place is right out of a storybook. Ruth May observes the villagers' lack of teeth. Rachel wants someone to wake her up when the nightmare is over. After his outburst the night they arrive, Nathan has very little to say. Adah thinks they have arrived almost at the end of the earth, but she does not voice her feelings. Adah is Leah's identical twin but, while in the womb, she did not develop normally and was born with hemiplegia.)*
8. Examine the cause/effect of Nathan's demonstration garden. What does this endeavor reveal about Nathan and about Leah? *(C: Nathan decides to produce his first African “miracle” by planting a garden as a model for the villagers. E: Mama Tataba watches him and Leah at work. C: Nathan pulls a small tree from the soil. E: Mama Tataba tells him it is poisonwood. C: Nathan begins planting his seeds in flat rows. E: Mama Tataba tells him he needs to make hills. C: Nathan ignores her. E: During the night, Mama Tataba reshapes his rows into mounds. C: Leah discovers the mounds. E: She and her father level the soil again. Nathan's dialogue with Leah reveals his delight in asking questions for which he supplies the answers and to offer his “words of wisdom.” His reaction to the horrible poisonwood rash shows his tendency to blame others, even God, when things go wrong and his impatience, e.g., when Orleanna tries to help him. Leah idolizes her father and justifies his actions. She yearns for and tries to earn his approval.)*

Character Chart

Directions: In the boxes across from each of the feelings, describe an incident or time in the novel when each of the listed characters experienced that feeling. You may use “not applicable” if you cannot find an example.

	Orleanna	Rachel	Leah	Adah
Frustration				
Anger				
Fear				
Humiliation				
Relief				
Joy				