



Multiple Critical Perspectives™

Teaching Barbara Kingsolver's

The Poisonwood Bible

from

Multiple Critical Perspectives™

by

Jill Clare



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General Introduction to the Work

Introduction to *The Poisonwood Bible*

THE *POISONWOOD BIBLE*, by Barbara Kingsolver, is based in historical fact but focuses on an entirely fictional missionary family. The novel is set during the tumultuous political events in the Congo during the Cold War, including the Congo's first attempts at independence, the nefarious murder of its Prime Minister, the meddling of foreign powers in the Congo government system, and the Congo's subsequent corrupt leadership. These events serve as a backdrop for the story of Nathan Price and his family. Although the novel is interested in the political story of the Congo, *The Poisonwood Bible* is, at its core, a story of how one family comes to understand and live with guilt and regret.

The novel is quite unusual in its narrative style. It is told from a first-person point of view, but the narrator changes from chapter to chapter. Each of the women in the Price family narrates several chapters, and each narrator brings her own distinctive style and voice to each chapter. This unusual method of narration gives the reader special insight into the Price family and into the mind of each narrator. The only member of the Price family who does not narrate even a single chapter is Nathan.

Due to the entirely female point of view, the novel operates within the “hermeneutic of suspicion.” That is, *The Poisonwood Bible* allows the marginalized and oppressed a chance to be heard. History is most often told from the point of view of the most powerful, leaving those who are disadvantaged no chance to tell their stories. *The Poisonwood Bible* turns this on its head, allowing women a chance to speak and even allowing the natives of the Congo a chance to be heard and understood. The natives are presented in an extremely favorable light, while the politically powerful in the West and Nathan himself emerge as the antagonists.

Nathan's antagonism is best conveyed through his willful arrogance and ignorance. Because Nathan refuses to believe that anything the natives do may have merit, he ignores their traditional means of planting to his own detriment. He ignores and rejects the traditional religion of the village, refusing to learn about it even though it would help in his ministry to the Congo. The themes of arrogance and ignorance play heavily in the novel. In addition, the novel emphasizes the theme of the search for justice as Nathan's daughters try to understand life in the Congo and the political situation unfolding around them.

The Poisonwood Bible reaches its climax when Ruth May, the Prices' youngest daughter, is killed by an extremely poisonous mamba snake. This climactic event triggers an immense change in the lives of the Price women as well as a change in the pacing of the novel. After Ruth May's death, the time span in which the story takes place stretches to encompass nearly thirty years. This sudden change in pace allows Kingsolver to more thoroughly explore the themes of guilt and forgiveness. In effect, after Ruth May's death, the novel becomes an odyssey for the characters to come to terms with the burden of her death, and to come to terms with their places in the world.

Feminist Theory Applied to *The Poisonwood Bible*



Notes on the Feminist Theory

FEMINISM IS AN EVOLVING PHILOSOPHY, and its application in literature is a relatively new area of study. The basis of the movement, both in literature and society, is that the Western world is fundamentally patriarchal (i.e., created by men, ruled by men, viewed through the eyes of men, and judged by men).

In the 1960s, the feminist movement began to form a new approach to literary criticism. Of course, women had already been writing and publishing for centuries, but the 1960s saw the rise of a feminist literary theory. Until then, the works of female writers (or works about females) were examined by the same standards as those by male writers (and about men). Women were thought to be less intelligent than men, at least in part because they generally received less formal education, and many women accepted that judgment. It was not until the feminist movement was well under way that women began examining old texts, reevaluating the portrayal of women in literature, and writing new works to fit the developing concept of the “modern woman.”

The feminist approach is based on finding and exposing suggestions of misogyny (negative attitudes toward women) in literature. Feminists are interested in exposing the undervaluing of women in literature that has long been accepted as the norm by both men and women. They have even dissected many words in Western languages that reflect a patriarchal worldview. Arguing that the past millennia in the West have been dominated by men—whether the politicians in power or the historians recording it all—feminist critics believe that Western literature reflects a masculine bias, and, consequently, represents an inaccurate and potentially harmful image of women. In order to repair this image and achieve balance, they insist that works by and about women be added to the literary canon and read from a feminist perspective.



Activity One

Examining Nathan's Misogyny

1. Divide the class into five groups or a number of groups divisible by five.
2. Assign each group one of the following sections of the novel:
 - Book One, chapter nine (A chapter narrated by Adah). From the beginning of the chapter until “I still have a fellow feeling for that almond-tasting word.”
 - Book One, chapter eleven (A chapter narrated by Adah). From midway through the chapter when Nathan begins his parable—“Later on at the dinner table he was still animated ...” until the end of the chapter.
 - Book Three, chapter thirty-three (A chapter narrated by Leah) Beginning near the end of the chapter with “I *wanted* to believe in him” and continuing through the end of the chapter.
 - Book Two, chapter sixteen (A chapter narrated by Rachel) Beginning after Anatole leaves the dinner table—“Well, that puts a whole new outlook on things, doesn’t it?”—and continuing through to the end of the chapter.
 - Book One, chapter eight (A chapter narrated by Ruth May) Beginning with “Father says the body is the temple” and continuing through the end of the chapter.
3. Have each group closely read its assigned passage. Then, have each group discuss the following questions:
 - How has Nathan influenced the thinking of the narrator of your assigned chapter?
 - Does Nathan’s status as a man surrounded by women affect his actions and teachings?
4. When the groups have finished discussion, reconvene the class and have a representative from each group *briefly* paraphrase what happened in the assigned passage.
5. Have the students discuss the following questions:
 - How does Nathan use his masculinity to exercise power?
 - Is Nathan a misogynist?

Formalist Theory Applied to *The Poisonwood Bible*



Notes on the Formalist Approach

THE FORMALIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE was developed at the beginning of the 20th century and remained popular until the 1970s, when other literary theories began to gain popularity. Today, formalism is generally regarded as a rigid and inaccessible means of reading literature, used in Ivy League classrooms and as the subject of scorn in rebellious coming-of-age films. It is an approach that is concerned primarily with *form*, as its name suggests, and thus places the greatest emphasis on *how* something is said, rather than *what* is said. Formalists believe that a work is a separate entity—not at all dependent upon the author's life or the culture in which the work is created. No paraphrase is used in a formalist examination, and no reader reaction is discussed.

Originally, formalism was a new and unique idea. The formalists were called “New Critics,” and their approach to literature became the standard academic approach. Like classical artists such as da Vinci and Michaelangelo, the formalists concentrated more on the form of the art rather than the content. They studied the recurrences, the repetitions, the relationships, and the motifs in a work in order to understand what the work was about. The formalists viewed the tiny details of a work as nothing more than parts of the whole. In the formalist approach, even a lack of form indicates something. Absurdity is in itself a form—one used to convey a specific meaning (even if the meaning is a lack of meaning).

The formalists also looked at smaller parts of a work to understand the meaning. Details like diction, punctuation, and syntax all give clues.



Activity One

Examining Shifting Narration

1. Divide the class into five groups or a number of groups divisible by five.
2. Assign each group a narrator from the following list:
 - Orleanna
 - Leah
 - Adah
 - Rachel
 - Ruth May
3. Instruct each group to make a list of the characteristics that best define the narrative style of its assigned narrator.

Note: The groups do not need to refer to any specific point in the novel; rather, they should think of the narrative techniques as a whole instead of at any specific point.

4. After each group has made its list, ask the groups to brainstorm about how the novel would be different if its assigned narrator were the *only* narrator. How would this affect the themes? Tone? Motifs?
5. Reconvene the class and have a representative from each group present what they found to be the characteristics of their narrator and how the work would be different if she were the only narrator.
6. Lead the whole class in discussion, asking the following questions:
 - What is the literary function of having so many narrators in this novel?
 - What themes of the text does this shifting narration emphasize?
 - How does this shifting point of view affect the story being told?

Marxist Theory Applied to *The Poisonwood Bible*



Notes on the Marxist Approach

THE MARXIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE is based on the philosophy of Karl Marx, a German philosopher and economist. His major argument was that whoever controlled the means of production in society controlled the society—whoever owned the factories “owned” the culture. This idea is called “dialectical materialism,” and Marx felt that the history of the world was leading toward a communist society. From his point of view, the means of production (i.e., the basis of power in society) would be placed in the hands of the masses, who actually operated them, not in the hands of those few who owned them. It was a perverted version of this philosophy that was at the heart of the Soviet Union. Marxism was also the rallying cry of the poor and oppressed all over the world.

To read a work from a Marxist perspective, one must understand that Marxism asserts that literature is a reflection of culture, and that culture can be affected by literature (Marxists believed literature could instigate revolution). Marxism is linked to Freudian theory by its concentration on the subconscious—Freud dealt with the individual subconscious, while Marx dealt with the political subconscious. Marx believed that oppression exists in the political subconscious of a society—social pecking orders are inherent to any group of people.

Four main areas of study:

- economic power
- materialism versus spirituality
- class conflict
- art, literature, and ideologies



Activity One

Examining Class Conflict

1. Divide the class into three groups or a number of groups divisible by three.
2. Assign each group a different section of the novel, as outlined below.
 - Book Two, chapter 24 (the final chapter Leah narrates in Book Two). The entire chapter, as Leah hears Lumumba's speech and reflects on what she has seen in the Underdowns' home.
 - Book Three, chapter 31 (the second chapter Leah narrates in Book Three). Beginning midway through the chapter when Leah says, "I thought the Congo belonged to Belgium ..." until the end of Leah's conversation with Anatole.
 - Book Five, chapter 70 (the fourth chapter Leah narrates in Book Five). Beginning early in the chapter with "In every package there's one oddball thing from Adah ..." until Elisabet asks, "How would you *cook* an elephant?"
3. Have the groups discuss and answer the following questions:
 - How does this section of the novel illustrate class conflict?
 - How does this section of the novel illustrate conflict between races?
 - What tone does Kingsolver use when writing about economic disparity?
 - What tone does Kingsolver use when writing about those who have political or economic power?
4. Reconvene the class and have a representative from each group *briefly* summarize what happened in his or her assigned section.
5. Lead a class discussion in which you ask the following questions:
 - What tone does the novel as a whole use when describing class conflict and struggles?
 - How does the Marxist theory behind class conflict overlap with ideas about race conflict in the novel?