

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

The Poisonwood Bible

by Barbara Kingsolver

written by Amy E. Clayton

Copyright © 2008 by Prestwick House Inc., P.O. Box 658, Clayton, DE 19938. 1-800-932-4593.
www.prestwickhouse.com Permission to copy this unit for classroom use is extended to purchaser for his or her
personal use. This material, in whole or part, may not be copied for resale. Revised December 2011.

ISBN 978-1-60389-891-1

Item No. 303270

The Poisonwood Bible

Note

The Poisonwood Bible is set in the Belgian Congo between the years 1959-1990. A zealous Baptist minister, Nathan Price, takes his entire family from the suburbs of Georgia into the jungles of Africa to fulfill his dream of being a missionary.

The story is told through the eyes of the women surrounding Nathan: his wife and four daughters. The perceptions of the Congo and its politics differ drastically from one narrative voice to another. There seems to be little that these women can or will agree on. However, after a shared tragedy, all of them realize Nathan's patriarchal nature and understand that, if they are to survive in Africa, they must rely only on themselves.

Although the biblical and historical allusions may be challenging, many students will connect with Leah, Adah, and Rachel as the characters come of age and struggle to make their way in the world.

All references come from the Harper Perennial Modern Classics edition of *The Poisonwood Bible*, copyright 2005.

The Poisonwood Bible

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to

1. find historical and biblical allusions in the story.
2. identify and understand the author's use of foreshadowing.
3. explain a change in one character or in each of the characters.
4. identify essential conflicts and their resolutions.
5. find examples of simile and metaphor in the text.
6. explain the historical context of the Congo at the time the novel is set.
7. map the character development of Nathan as the antagonist.
8. define and identify the literary elements the author employs.
9. explain the style and tone of each of the narrative voices in the novel.
10. identify and explain the significance of motifs in the story.
11. compare and contrast the cultural values of the Price family to the cultural values of their Congolese neighbors.
12. identify and explain ironic elements in the novel.

The Poisonwood Bible

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Find an example of a biblical allusion. How does it function in the novel?
2. Choose one character, and explain how he or she changes throughout the course of the novel using examples from the text.
3. Word play is an important aspect of the novel. Adah is obsessed with rearranging letters and words to create new meaning. Conversely, Rachel appears oblivious to language and continuously uses the wrong words. Ironically, her vocabulary errors create unique insights: “Maybe he’s been in Africa so long he has forgotten that we Christians have our own system of marriage, and it is called Monotony.” Discuss either Adah or Rachel. How does their word play support concepts in the novel?
4. Discuss Rachel’s survival technique: “[S]tick your elbows hard into the ribs of your neighbors to wedge yourself in, then pick up your feet so you won’t get trampled.” What does this technique reveal about her character?
5. What is significant about the recurring snake imagery? In what ways does this motif enhance the overall tone of the novel?
6. In the beginning of the novel, Orleanna says, “But what else could we have thought? Only that it began and ended with *us*. What do we know, even now? Ask the children. Look at what they grew up to be. We can only speak of the things we carried with us, and the things we took away.” To whom do you imagine she is speaking, and why? What events are being foreshadowed here? Use evidence from the text to support this idea.
7. Identify elements of foreshadowing in the text. How effective are these at preparing the reader for the events of the novel?
8. Explore the symbolism of Adah’s crooked posture. What is Kingsolver trying to convey through this character’s deformity and eventual rehabilitation?
9. Orleanna admits once that ultimately a mother loves her children from the bottom up. This is her justification for choosing Ruth May over Adah and Adah over Leah. Do you agree with the logic of this statement? Why or why not?
10. Draw a parallel between the political struggles occurring in the Belgian Congo at the time period of the novel and any one of the personal struggles of any of the Prices. How are the two interconnected?

The Poisonwood Bible

Book One: Genesis

Chapter 1: Orleanna Price – Chapter 2: Leah Price

VOCABULARY

accosting – approaching (someone) in a bold or aggressive manner
apocalypse – the end of the world; a biblical reference
brindled – spotted and gray
claustrophobic – afraid of small spaces
dominion – control
imperious – demanding
iota – a very small amount
missionaries – religious followers who aim to spread their beliefs
okapi – an African animal that resembles a giraffe
plantain – a tropical fruit similar to a banana
progeny – children, offspring
vexed – annoyed, irritated

1. Why does Orleanna describe herself and her daughters from a third-person point of view at the start of the book?

2. When Orleanna says, “She could lose everything: herself, or worse, her children. Worst of all: *you*, her only secret. Her favorite,” to whom is she referring when she says “you”?

3. In your opinion, what does Orleanna mean when she says, “One has only a life of one’s own”? Do you agree with this statement? Explain your opinion.

Chapter 3: Ruth May Price – Chapter 6: Leah

VOCABULARY

aspect – an expression or look; appearance
bougainvillea – a vine or shrub with small flowers
Broca’s aphasia – the impaired ability to express oneself through speech
clamor – noise
despond – depression
edification – moral instruction
fumigated – exposed to fumes
gallimaufry – a confused jumble
hootenanny – an informal musical performance
notorious – well known for something bad or negative; infamous
papist – a negative term for “Roman Catholic,” derived from the word *Pope*
paroxysm – a violent outburst
perfusion – the act of pouring over or through
sarongs – large pieces of cloth, tied and wrapped as dresses or skirts
sloop – a ship
tedium – the condition of being routine or dull; boredom
tithes – percentages of income donated to the church each week
vestigial – lingering, leftover

1. Ruth May alludes to the biblical story of Ham and to Southern Jim Crow laws. How do you feel about Ruth May’s interpretation regarding the connection between the Bible and racial inequality? Moreover, what can you infer about the author’s attitude toward the issue of racial inequality and the creation of Jim Crow laws?

2. Compare and contrast the different approaches Orleana and Nathan have when they are guests at the welcome celebration. Which approach do you feel is more appropriate?

3. How is Adah different from her twin sister, Leah?

Chapter 7: Rachel – Chapter 9: Adah

VOCABULARY

Apocrypha – religious writings often omitted from the Bible due to unknown authorship
caches – hiding places
castigated – punished
crinolines – undergarments made of stiff fabric used to shape skirts and dresses
insolence – disrespectful behavior
pagan – a non-Christian or someone who worships more than one god
palindromes – words or phrases that read the same backward and forward
vile – foul; horrible; offensive

1. Should Reverend Price host an Easter service even though it is not actually Easter Sunday?

2. How do the people of Kilanga react to Rachel's hair? Why are they interested in it?

3. Why does Orleanna serve fried chicken at the church picnic?

4. Why is Nathan disappointed at the church picnic?

5. Saint Matthew was an Apostle of Jesus Christ. He spent a great deal of time and energy trying to teach others about Jesus and helping them to be saved. Why is it fitting that Ruth May's sock monkey, Saint Matthew, should have been stolen by the children?

