

Reflections:

A Student Response Journal for...

The Poisonwood Bible

by Barbara Kingsolver

written by Halina Adams

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ISBN 978-1-60389-081-6

Item No. 303021

To the Teacher

Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible* deals with several mature topics, including child prostitution, the destructive diamond trade in Africa, sexuality, death of children, nudity, obscenity, racism, and violence against women and animals. Instructors should also be prepared to discuss the complex political events that act as a backdrop to Kingsolver's story of the Price family. In addition, Kingsolver has a decided message in this book, which is that America and Europe destroyed the Congo. Kingsolver does not deal with these issues gratuitously; they are fairly essential to her story.

Pre-Reading

1. Books, movies, television shows, magazines, comic books, video games, and even commercials can take us to different places, times, realities, and worlds. Through various stories we can learn about distant peoples and places. Sometimes, these books and movies can tell us true things about a place and the people who live there, but books and movies can also misrepresent a different country, the people who live there, and the customs that those people practice in their homeland. There are many different movies and books about Africa, and there are many different versions of Africa in movies, books, and television shows.

Think back to movies you have seen or books you have read about Africa. What do you know about this continent? What kind of assumptions do you make about Africa and the history of the countries there? Write a journal entry describing how Africa is depicted in a story that you have either read, seen, or been told about. Be sure to include details about how people were portrayed, what you learned about the environment there, and any details you might have learned about customs.

2. The title of a novel is an important element in drawing attention to the book and capturing the interest of potential readers. Sometimes, the title is straightforward and gives the reader a good idea of what the novel is about, or suggests a theme or concept in the story. Conversely, sometimes the title

The Poisonwood Bible

is more cryptic and provides little information. *The Poisonwood Bible* is a title that includes some information, but not enough to make the subject matter clear. The word “Bible” suggests that the novel has something to do with religion. However, the word “Poisonwood” is more of a mystery. It’s a word that is probably unfamiliar to many people, and, thus, obscures the meaning of the title.

Consider the title of this novel and what it might mean. Using a dictionary, the Internet, or other source, find the definition of the word “Poisonwood.” Use that information to formulate an idea of what the novel is about. Explain your idea in a paragraph or two, and provide information to support how you arrived at that conclusion.

Book One: Genesis

Leah Price

3. Traveling far from home can be difficult, especially when you are leaving behind everyday items. The Price family must leave Georgia and all of the luxuries of their home. Going to Africa means that the girls and Mrs. Price must choose carefully what items they can bring and what items they cannot bring. Selecting what to take becomes even more difficult because of the weight limits on the plane. In the end, the Price family brings a strange combination of household items to Africa. Leah details several of those items: “In addition to the cake mixes, she piled up a dozen cans of Underwood deviled ham; Rachel’s ivory plastic hand mirror with powdered-wig ladies on the back; a stainless-steel thimble; a good pair of scissors; a dozen number-2 pencils; a world of Band-Aids, Anacin, Absorbine Jr.; and a fever thermometer.”

If you were to leave home for a year and could pack only ten items, what would you bring and why? Make a list of these items, explaining briefly why you would bring each one.

Rachel Price

4. The Price girls have very different personalities. Because this novel is told in the first person from each character's perspective, we really get to know each girl. We become familiar with the Price girls' voices, their misspellings, their desires, their dislikes, and their motivations. Through each chapter, we learn how what kind of personalities the girls have. For example, Rachel talks a great deal about her clothing and her hair, while Leah spends very little time describing herself and more time describing the circumstances leading to the Price family's arriving in Kilanga. Each girl's personality affects how she talks about what happens in the Congo.

Make a chart comparing Leah and Rachel. Freewrite about each girl's personality and how she feels about Africa. While you are writing, you may want to consider the following questions: What are some other differences in the ways the two sisters describe their surroundings? What do the two sisters' ways of opening their stories tell you about each one? Do you like Rachel or Leah better? Why?

5. The Price family is very conservative. They come from a small American community and are used to people behaving, dressing, and thinking just as they do. When the villagers have a feast to honor the arrival of the Price family, Reverend Price is clearly surprised by how the people of Kilanga act, dress, and think. The Reverend is not the only family member who is confused or uncomfortable with the way the Kilanga villagers act—Mrs. Price and the girls also feel out of place.

Describe a situation in which you have felt uncomfortable, uncertain how to act, or out of place. Write a paragraph in which you describe the circumstances of the situation and why you felt uncomfortable. Then, write out a scene of twenty to twenty-five lines in which you tell one of the people making you feel out of place why you feel awkward or strange.

Adah Price

6. In a book where we overhear everyone's voice, we must remember that the characters are not always talking to one another. For example, though Rachel tells us about all of the things she does that her father would not approve of, we can be pretty certain that she does not share these secrets with him. Adah is also not as talkative with her family and friends as she is in other parts of the narration. Adah explains why she does not talk often: "Silence has many advantages. When you do not speak, other people presume you to be deaf or feeble-minded and promptly make a show of their own limitations. Only occasionally do I find I have to break my peace: shout or be lost in the shuffle."

Write a letter to one of the other Price sisters explaining why Adah would prefer to write in her notebook as opposed to speaking out loud. Be sure to include an example from the book or a real-life example about a time when you chose to remain quiet instead of speaking up.

7. Though we get to read only what the Price girls and Mrs. Price write about Kilanga and the rest of the Congo, there are other characters in the novel that take part in the action and observe what happens. For example, Methuselah, the parrot, often witnesses the strange behaviors of the Prices.

Imagine you are Methuselah. You escape the Price household and fly to a parrot newspaper. The other parrots ask you to write for the latest issue of their paper and describe the new family that has moved to Kilanga. Write three paragraphs about the Prices. You may describe how they are getting used to Africa, or you may talk about the disagreements among family members. Consider including how each family member treats you.

Rachel

8. Some people have different opinions about how to celebrate holidays. The Price family decides to use holidays to get to know their neighbors better and to become a part of the Kilanga community. However, Mrs. Price

The Poisonwood Bible

and the Reverend do not always agree on the best method for celebrating holidays and getting acquainted with the community. For example, during the Easter celebration, Reverend Price and Mrs. Price try to interact with the people of Kilanga—Reverend Price organizes an Easter Pageant and Mrs. Price fries chicken. Not surprisingly, Mrs. Price’s method for getting to know the people of Kilanga seems to be more successful.

What does the Easter incident tell you about the different personalities of the Reverend and Mrs. Price? Write a two-paragraph obituary for either the Reverend or Mrs. Price. In the first paragraph use the Easter incident as an example of what that character was like when he or she was alive. In the second paragraph describe how the people of Kilanga feel about the death of this character.

Ruth May

9. Many people believe that you can express yourself by how you dress. For example, if you have a favorite band, you can wear a tee-shirt with their logo on it. In other cultures, however, clothing can mean different things. Some cultures do not think that clothing is used as an expression of your personality. Instead, the citizens of some countries view clothing as only something practical. For example, in a cold country, warm clothing is more important than colorful clothing. In the Congo there are different definitions of “proper clothing.” Reverend Price is horrified by the village dress, while Mrs. Price understands that things are different in Africa: “Where you’d be wearing out the knees of your trousers, sir, they just have to go ahead and wear out their *knees!*”

Do you think that everyone should wear the same type of clothing? Write a letter to the editor of your school newspaper arguing that in some situations what we consider to be “modest” or “trendy” may be impractical.