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The Poisonwood Bible

by

Barbara Kingsolver

1998



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KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

SETTING

Most of the novel takes place in Africa from 1959 to the late 1980's. Nathan Price takes his family to the Congo as missionaries just prior to the Congo's historic declaration of independence and the election of the first native prime minister. As the prime minister was ill-prepared, the move to independence led

LIST OF CHARACTERS

Major Characters

Nathan Price - The Baptist missionary who drags his family to the Congo in opposition to the mission board's advice Nathan is a driven, self-centered man with misguided notions on God's expectations. Although he seemed normal enough when he first married Orleanna, his injury in WW II seems to have marked him for life. Furthermore, he has an inflated idea of his own ability and knowledge. He has no regard for women or for their intelligence and no interest in truly understanding the people with whom he imagines himself to have a ministry. He makes no allowance for culture or traditions—or even for safety—in his attempt to create conversions. As the women of his family grow away from him, he becomes increasingly more narcissistic and is believed to be insane long before the incident of his own tragic death.

Orleanna Price - Wife to Nathan Price and mother of four daughters. Orleanna herself was raised by her father, having lost her mother as a very young child. Having little female influence beyond her aunt, she is vulnerable to persuasive skills of the young Nathan Price who seems to have seen her as his own personal mission. He marries her at the suggestion of Orleanna's aunt who had been providing him with Sunday dinner for several weeks after he had met Orleanna. She is one of the voices of the novel and is continuously driven to explain why she was powerless to intercept his influence or control of.....

SHORT PLOT SUMMARY (Synopsis)

The novel is the story, told in five voices, of the Price family who travels to the Congo as missionaries to the people of Kilanga province. The story is not told in a chronological format, but rather is divided into six books plus an epilogue. Each book contains several "clusters" of events upon which the narrative voices comment.

The actual chronological events of the story begin with the Price women trying to wear as many of their clothes as possible and filling their pockets with all sorts of household items in an attempt to meet the weight requirement of the airline. They arrive first in Leopoldville where they meet the Underdowns and are provided with information about their mission station. Eben Axelroot, pilot of a private plane, takes them to their final destination in the Congo. Although the Kilanga people had prepared a meal and an elaborate welcome, the initial meeting becomes more of a confrontation as Nathan indicates how poorly prepared he is for the culture or the people. Instead of delivering a blessing for the food, he begins with.....

THEMES

Major Themes

The Power of the Land - The spirit of the Congo and the relationship between the land and the people permeates the novel. The native people live in harmony with the land while the European and American "guests" survive—if they do—in spite of it. Disease and health, feast and famine are natural rotations, which kill off the weak. Adah and Leah develop an understanding of the land, Orleanna and Nathan are destroyed by it, Ruth May becomes a part of it, and Rachel successfully sets herself above it.

Salvation/Redemption - Salvation and redemption are closely linked with concepts of guilt and forgiveness and take on different meanings for different members of the family.

Story Telling - The novel is not an adventure tale with exciting events that one frequently finds in "missionary" stories. Rather, its focus is on the act of "telling." Thus, the author moves in a..... 1

LITERARY HISTORICAL INFORMATION

The history of the Congo as it applies to the novel can be traced to the late 1800's exploration by H.M. Stanley who stirred the interest of Leopold II of Belgium. Heading a group of European investors, Leopold authorized Stanley to establish posts along the upper Congo River and to negotiate with some of the tribal rulers. By 1884, Leopold's committee had agreements with over 400 independent African tribes, and on that basis declared a right to govern the entire territory. In 1884, the territory was named "The Congo Free State," and Europe recognized Leopold as king.

Leopold extended his control into the interior and built a railroad to get around a section of rapids in the Congo River. Leopold and his military directed mining activities for diamonds and cobalt and were notorious for maltreatment of the natives, including forced labor, whippings, hostage taking.....

CHAPTER SUMMARIES WITH NOTES AND ANALYSIS

Book One: Genesis

Orleanna Price. Sanderling Island, Georgia

Orleanna Price, the mother of the Price children and wife of Nathan Price, begins the novel by talking about the experience of Africa after the fact. She has returned home to Georgia and seems sad and bitter about the experience. She sees the African forest as she did from the beginning as a place of gloom even though it is "filled with life." The animals are poisonous, the vines "strangle their own," the forest "eats itself and lives forever."

Her opinion of herself is one of a useless wife and failed mother; she feels that her children never needed her, that her husband could never have loved her. At one point her daughters had told her that she never had a life of her own, but her response is that her own life was the only thing she did have. She considers herself only a "captive witness" to all that happened in Africa, yet struggles with guilt about her own part in leading her family into Africa. Her chapter is an invitation to readers to draw their own conclusions about the story the rest of the book will tell.

Notes

The first chapter begins a pattern of narration that is followed throughout the book. Each book begins with Orleanna Price, wife of Nathan who speaks from her home in Georgia after returning from the Congo. Bit by bit, she works her way backward until she finally explains, midway through the novel, how she became involved with Nathan Price. She establishes her audience, "my un-captured favorite child," in this first section, although it is done so casually that it is easily overlooked. She explains that she is still struggling to live with the things she learned; she tries to shed the blame for the things that happened on one hand and yet claims a role of her own as a conqueror's wife on the other. Orleanna begins her narrative by addressing the "eyes in the trees." Her plea will come full circle and be answered by those "eyes" at the end of the novel.

(The remaining narratives of each "book" are told under a subtitle and clustered around situations and/or events that are shared or observed by the Price daughters. Therefore, after the first rotation, the notes are in reference to each "cluster." [my designation])

The Thing We Carried: Kilanga 1959

(Cluster 1 Major Event: Arrival in Kilanga, the African Welcome, and Nathan's offensive "prayer.")

Leah Price

The trip from Bethlehem, Georgia to the Congo begins with the voice of Leah Price, one of the twins. After packing all the things esteemed absolutely essential, they had discovered that Pan American Airline only allowed 44 pounds of baggage per person. That did not, however, apply to the actual weight of the people

themselves. Thus, in an attempt to take as much as possible, Mrs. Price and all four girls had worn multiple dresses and sets of underwear and then had filled all available pockets with other accessories such as cake mixes and various tools.

The first stop in Africa is in Leopoldville where they meet the Underdowns-missionaries whose term had expired. There they have to endure their wardrobes a bit longer while the Underdowns fill them in on everything they can expect in their new home in Kilanga. They are told not to expect much in the way of help, which Leah finds disappointing. She also reveals some early insight about her father Nathan by letting us know that he was "peeved" by the informative Underdowns and that while the women were loaded almost beyond endurance, Nathan Price was bringing only the "Word of God" which weighs nothing at all. They leave Georgia in midsummer, arriving in Kilanga near the end of the dry season.

Notes

Leah and her twin are both able to see the humor in situations, even while being completely miserable. Leah is compassionate, insightful and genuinely wants to believe in her father's mission. Nevertheless, she notes with irony that the weightiest burden also weighs nothing. That burden will become heavier as time goes on and will be one that each of the girls will have to either shed or shoulder. Leah also gives us a little insight into the Underdowns. While they claim to have established the mission of Kilanga and seem to know a great deal about the people, they are also very distant emotionally from those to whom they once ministered. They have retired to a fine house in Leopoldville with all the modern conveniences; in spite of being full of information, they seem to have little information that is actually useful. Leah also comments on the vanity of her sister Rachel who is fifteen and determined to be as painted and dressed up as possible in spite of where they are going. She compares Rachel to the damsel Rebecca from the Bible who was selected to marry Isaac and given golden earrings "right off the bat."

Ruth May Price

Five-year-old Ruth May gives her first impression of the Congo. She tells the story of Noah showing that she has been taught that the Africans are the children of Ham and are cursed. She mentions that her fellow Sunday school teacher Rex Minton had told them not to go to the Congo because the natives would eat them. She finds Mr. Axelroot rather dirty. She prizes a collection of comic books sent to them by the Underdowns although she had been sick on the plane and had "upchucked" on the *Donald Duck* comic.

Notes

Ruth May also gives us an initial look at her twin sisters with her explanation that Adah is "bad on one side" and "brain damaged" and hates the rest of the family. Her count of the white people who will be in Africa includes her storybook characters.

Rachel Price

Rachel is the oldest and most sensitive to the reception the family receives from the Africans. Her observations make her father seem naive and arrogant even though she herself puts on airs and.....

OVERALL ANALYSES CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Nathan Price - Nathan Price is the one major character who is never given a voice of his own in the course of the novel. He is seen only through the eyes of his wife and daughters, yet he is the mechanism that gets them to the Congo and the domineering force around which their lives revolves. He is cruel, insensitive, arrogant, cold, and obstinate in the extreme, but in spite of these characteristics which only intensify as the story progresses, he does have occasional flashes of insight that would have value if expressed in a different more loving manner. He is a tragic villain for his actions are the result of a sincere belief that he is serving God to the point of self-sacrifice. His motivation—life-long search for forgiveness for his own cowardice—

may be a result of fanaticism in his pre-war days or even an effect of his head injury. Nevertheless, while we see Nathan as a force that leads his family to disaster and accomplishes more negative than positive among his intended flock, his motivation is genuine and all consuming. As each new attempt to reach the African people fails, Nathan is doomed to cave in on himself a little more, believing that he has failed the test of righteousness.

Orleanna Price - Orleanna is Nathan's wife and the lead voice of the novel. Each of the first five books begins with Orleanna as she tries to piece together the situations and events that culminated in the death of her youngest. She does her best to mother her daughters but did not have the strength she needed to counteract the negative influence of Nathan. Her character is more complex than her influence over her daughters would seem to indicate. As an individual within her family, she is weak, merely going... along with whatever Nathan expects and trying to maintain a normal if not always happy home. She makes no major decisions until the moment when she leaves the Congo and only expresses her opinion by.....

PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

The concept of *Poisonwood Bible* is similar to that of a frame story in that the story of the Price family in the Congo is a story embedded within a larger story. The larger story is a story of story-telling itself. While that may seem like double talk, it is not at all uncommon for writers who share a historical oral tradition to experiment with the intricacies of language and meaning that accompany the act of "telling." Furthermore, telling the story is a means of healing for those listening and those who share the events of the story; it is also an act of preservation, of asserting identity, and of creating a history. The way in which the story teller imparts the details of his/her story, that is the choice of words, tone, irony, the insertion of commentary, the implication of an audience—all of these things give meaning and character, not only to.....

POINT OF VIEW

The novel is written in first person, but with multiple narrators. Each narrator has limited.....

QUOTES - IMPORTANT QUOTATIONS AND ANALYSIS

1) "One has *only* a life of one's own." Orleanna, pg 8.

Orleanna is commenting on her daughters' accusation that she never had a life of her own but had given everything for either her husband or the girls. Yet, in Orleanna's perspective, the girls never needed her and her husband was probably incapable of loving her. Thus all she really had was herself.

2) "We aimed for no more than to have dominion over every creature that moved upon the earth. And so it came to pass that we stepped down there on a place we believed unformed, where only darkness moved on the face of the waters." Orleanna, pg 10.

Orleanna's words have ironic echoes of both Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness* and the creation story from the Bible. Her husband also places himself in a god-like position over his family and over the people he is attempting to convert even though he himself is emotionally prostrate before God. It is a misplaced perception of himself, and the observation comes as close to satire as Orleanna is able to get. Neither she nor her husband had dominion over themselves, let alone the "creatures" of the earth. And

SYMBOLISM / MOTIFS / IMAGERY / SYMBOLS

Gardening - Producing fruit has multiple meanings. Nathan was always successful in growing a spectacular garden in Georgia, but the same conditions did not apply in Africa. Symbolically, he also fails in producing human fruit as a result of his mission. After returning to Georgia, Orleanna's first activity is.....

STUDY QUESTIONS - MULTIPLE CHOICE QUIZ

Study Questions (answer key below)

1. Why does Orleanna marry Nathan?
 - A. She is madly in love with him.
 - B. Her aunt suggests marrying him.
 - C. Nathan proposes.

2. What denomination were the Fowlers a part of?
 - A. Catholic
 - B. Protestant
 - C. Baptist.....

ESSAY TOPICS - BOOK REPORT IDEAS

1. Discuss the elements of the narrative that are revealed by Orleanna but not commented on by the Price daughters. How do Orleanna's revelations add to the character of each of the girls?

2. Leah genuinely cared for her father and struggled to please and impress him. Characterize any reciprocal feelings he had for her.

3. Discuss the irony of African words and concepts as they are learned and presented by Adah and Leah.

4. What elements of Christianity, if any, has Anatole knowingly or unknowingly adopted.....

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