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MARXISM ARCHETYPE HISTORICISM FEMINISM

Teaching Barbara Kingsolver's

The Bean Trees

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by

Priscilla Baker

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General Introduction to the Work

Introduction to *The Bean Trees*

*T*HE BEAN TREES, BARBARA KINGSOLVER'S first novel, was published in 1988 to wide critical acclaim. The novel won the Enoch Pratt Library Youth-to-Youth Books Award, the American Library Association Notable Book, and the New York Times Notable Book.

During her college years, Kingsolver actively protested the Vietnam War, marking the start of many years' dedication to social and political change. The themes of social, political, cultural, and economic injustice permeate the pages of Kingsolver's poems, short stories, essays, and novels.

The novel addresses the themes of fate versus personal choice, the role of men versus women, physical versus psychological scars, person versus society, class struggle, sense of community, abuse and neglect, reverence for other cultures, and motherhood and family.

And though her novel is clearly driven by topical causes vital to all of humanity, it is also an extremely character-driven novel that skillfully exists quite simply and beautifully on its own level and on its own merits. As a result, the reader cares not just about the issues but about the characters themselves.

Feminist Theory Applied to *The Bean Trees*

Notes on the Feminist Theory

F EMINISM 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).

The feminist movement in society found its approach to literature in the 1960s. 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 unintelligent (at least in part because they were generally less formally educated than men), and many women accepted that judgment. It was not until the feminist movement was well under way that women began examining old texts, reevaluating their portrayal of women and writing new works to fit the developing concept of the "modern woman."

The feminist approach is based on finding suggestions of misogyny (negative attitudes toward women) within pieces of literature and exposing them. Feminists are interested in exposing the undervaluing of women in literature that has been accepted as the norm by both men and women. Feminist critics have even dissected many words in Western languages that they believe to be rooted in masculinity. Feminists argue that since the past millennia in the West have been dominated by men—whether they be the politicians in power or the historians recording it all—Western literature reflects a masculine bias, and consequently, represents an inaccurate and potentially harmful image of women. In order to fix this image and create a balanced canon, works by females and works about females need to be added and read from a feminist perspective.

• Reject any view of female personality in contrast to male personality. Feminists believe that the female personality is a separate entity from the male personality, and if judged by the same measures, is judged incorrectly. The female personality can stand independent of the male personality, just as the male can stand independent of the female.

• Examine, and possibly celebrate, the creative, life-giving role of femininity. Though traditionally women have been portrayed as dependent on men for everything, the fact is that men are dependent on women for the most basic necessity in the world—birthing children. A male's relationship to his mother has always been portrayed as a very strong bond (whether in the Freudian theory of the Oedipal complex or modern phrases such as "Mama's boy").

• Explore the concept that men and women are both incomplete without each other (women cannot conceive without men, etc.) not of feminine "incompleteness" alone (Adam's rib, Freudian theories on sexuality, etc.). ■

Mythological/Archetypal Approach
Applied to *The Bean Trees*

Notes on the Mythological/Archetypal Approach

MYTHOLOGICAL, ARCHETYPAL, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CRITICISM are all very closely interrelated. This is because Freud formulated many theories around the idea of the social archetype, and his pupil, Carl Jung, expanded and refined Freud's theories into a more cross-cultural philosophy.

Critics who read texts with the mythological/archetypal approach are looking for symbols. Jung said that an archetype is "a figure...that repeats itself in the course of history wherever creative fantasy is fully manifested" ("The Problem of Types in Poetry" 1923). He believed that human beings were born innately knowing certain archetypes. The evidence of this, Jung claimed, lies in the fact that some myths are repeated throughout history in cultures and eras that could not possibly have had any contact with one another. Many stories in Greek and Roman mythology have counterparts in Chinese and Celtic mythology (long before the Greek and Roman Empires spread to Asia and northern Europe). Most of the myths and symbols represent ideas that human beings could not otherwise explain (the origins of life, what happens after death, etc.) Every culture has a creation story, a life after death belief, and a reason for human failings, and these stories—when studied comparatively—are far more similar than different.

When reading a work looking for archetypes or myths, critics look for very general recurring themes, characters, and situations. In modern times, the same types of archetypes are used in film, which is why it has been so easy for filmmakers to take a work like Jane Austen's *Emma* and adapt it into the typical Hollywood film *Clueless*. By drawing on those feelings, thoughts, concerns, and issues that have been a part of the human condition in every generation, modern authors allow readers to know the characters in a work with little or no explanation. Imagine how cluttered stories would be if the author had to give every detail about every single minor character that entered the work!

Activity One

Examining Archetypal Characters in the Novel

1. Copy and distribute Notes on the Archetypal/Mythological Approach.

2. Divide the class into five groups, or a number of groups divisible by five.

    • Each group will need to address one of the following archetypal character types: HERO, VILLAIN, TEMPTRESS, EARTH MOTHER, and SAGE.

3. Assign each group, or allow each to choose, a different archetypal character type and instruct students to:

    • Reread closely the *Notes on the Archetypal/Mythological Approach* character description that pertains to their assigned archetype.

    • Find as many characters as possible that fit the assigned archetype with specific references to the text for support.

    • Remember that concepts or groups of people can parallel these archetypes as well.

4. For visual reference, have students write on the board their assigned archetype and the characters from the novel they will be discussing with the class.

5. Have each group reveal their findings to the class. Make sure they include the following in their analysis:

    • What role does this particular archetypal character play in other characters' lives? In the novel as a whole?

    • Consider the effect on the novel if this archetypal character were absent.

    • Does the archetypal character exist primarily as a stereotype or as a unique person? In what ways?

6. In closing, discuss in what ways an archetypal reading of the characters is beneficial. Distracting.

Formalism Applied to
The Bean Trees

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.

The Bean Trees: Formalist Activity One

Graphic Organizer Two (Additional Examples)

Directions: Note one or more examples of the devices/concepts in the novel that are *different* from the ones you identified in Organizer One. Briefly describe the examples and include the number of the page on which it was found.

Device	Example	Page #
metaphor		
simile		
repetition		
onomatopoeia		
alliteration		
hyperbole		
personification		
paradox		
irony		
Symbols/Motifs	**Example**	**Page #**
dreams		
colors		
beans/wisteria		
birds		
Broken Arrow Motel		
light/dark		
home		
names		