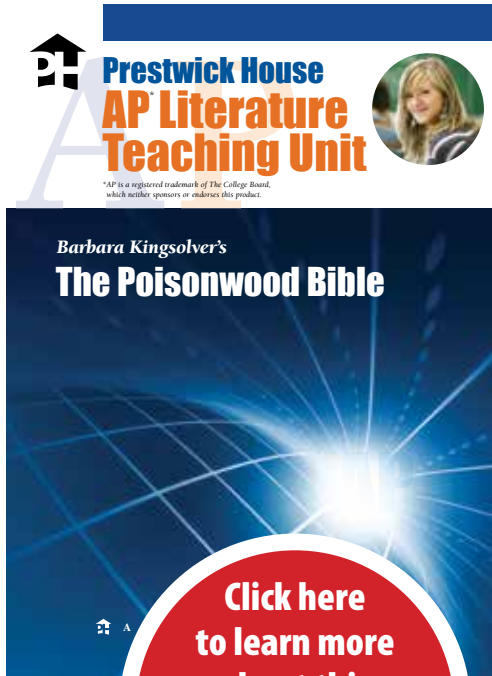




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Teaching Unit

# The Poisonwood Bible

by Barbara Kingsolver

written by Jill Clare



**Prestwick House**

Item No. 308696

# The Poisonwood Bible

## Objectives

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

1. analyze the author's use of multiple narrators and explain what this technique contributes to the meaning of the work.
2. analyze the text for evidence of thematic development and explain what the themes contribute to the overall meaning of the text.
3. examine motifs presented in the text and explain how they contribute to the development of characters and themes.
4. analyze various symbols in the text and explain what they contribute to the meaning of the work.
5. examine how characters develop throughout the work and explain how character development helps build thematic meaning.
6. explain how characters function as foils in the text.
7. explain how each character's use of language contributes to his or her characterization.
8. respond to multiple choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
9. respond to writing prompts similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.

## Lecture Notes

### HISTORICAL INFORMATION

The following are brief summaries and explanations of some of the historical events and people in *The Poisonwood Bible*.

### THE ROUNDTABLE CONFERENCE

This conference was held on February 20, 1960 in Brussels. Tribal chiefs, heads of unions, and party leaders from the Congo attended the conference, along with representatives from Belgium. Patrice Lumumba was released from jail specifically to attend this event, and he proved important in negotiating a date of independence that would occur soon, rather than decades in the future. The Roundtable Conference was the meeting in which the date for the complete independence of the Congo was decided and set. At the close of the meeting, Lumumba gave a statement, in which he said: "The doors of the Congo are wide open to all men of good will wishing to help us. On the other hand, we shall not tolerate any person or power with imperialistic aims. We prefer liberty with poverty to wealth with tyranny." In *The Poisonwood Bible*, the Underdowns deliver the news of this meeting to the Prices during book two.

### INDEPENDENCE DAY

Congo celebrated its independence from Belgium on June 30, 1960 in Leopoldville. The festivities included speeches from the new president of the Congo, Joseph Kasa-Vubu, and from the king of Belgium, Baudouin I. Lumumba was not scheduled to give a speech that day, but he did so nonetheless following his inauguration as Prime Minister. Lumumba's speech became a diatribe against Belgium's imperialist, immoral, greedy rule and was very well received by the Congolese people attending the ceremony. However, most Western leaders criticized the tone of Lumumba's speech. In *The Poisonwood Bible*, Leah and Nathan travel to Leopoldville on Independence Day to witness history in the making. In her account of the festivities, Leah remembers being struck by how popular Lumumba is among the Congolese; she recalls thinking that she would go deaf from the volume of the cheering around her.

### KATANGA'S SECESSION

The province of Katanga declared its independence from the Congo on July 11, 1960. Katanga, led by **Moise Tshombe**, was one of the most developed areas in the Congo and contained rich mineral resources like diamonds, cobalt, copper, and zinc. This secession represented a great economic blow to the Congo, as Katanga contained a great deal of its resources. In *The Poisonwood Bible*, Leah hears about Katanga's secession from Anatole in book three. Anatole comes to deliver this news to Nathan, in order to impress upon him how dangerous the situation has become for the Price family.

### Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. In every work of literature, the voice of the narrator significantly affects the tone, theme, and nature of the story. A work of literature that frequently changes narrators presents the reader with several narration styles and viewpoints. Choose a work of literary merit in which there are frequent changes of narrator. Then, in a well-organized essay, analyze how the changing narrators affect the thematic development of the novel.

*Note to the student: For this exercise, you must write about The Poisonwood Bible.*

2. The use of darkness and light as symbols is commonplace in literature. Darkness often symbolizes doubt, fear, ignorance, and sin, while light commonly represents purity, understanding, and redemption. Choose a work of literature in which darkness and light figure prominently as symbols. Then, in a well-organized essay, explain what these symbols contribute to a theme of the novel. Avoid mere plot summary.

*Note to the student: For this exercise, you must write about The Poisonwood Bible.*

3. The growth and development of adolescent characters is an extremely familiar theme in literature, best exemplified by coming-of-age-stories. Choose a character from a work of literature who comes of age, mentally, emotionally, or spiritually over the course of the work. Then, in a well-developed essay, analyze how the author conveys this maturation to the reader.

*Note to the student: For this exercise, you must write about The Poisonwood Bible.*

4. Authors often allude to other works in order to illuminate broad themes or complex ideas. The content of the allusion itself is as important as how the author chooses to make use of the allusion. Choose a work of literature in which frequent allusions are present. Then, in a well-developed essay, analyze how these allusions help to establish the tone of the work.

*Note to the student: For this exercise, you must write about The Poisonwood Bible.*

5. In literature, a foil is a minor or secondary character who serves to illuminate or emphasize the defining qualities of a major character. Choose a work of literary merit in which a minor character serves as a foil to a major character. Then, write a well-organized essay in which you analyze how the minor character serves as a foil and how this comparison illuminates the main character's qualities.

*Note to the student: For this exercise, you must write about The Poisonwood Bible.*

# The Poisonwood Bible

## Book One: Genesis

1. What is the title of this book an allusion to? Why do you think it is significant?

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### Chapter One: Orleanna Price

1. Who is the narrator of this section? How does she describe herself?

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2. What tone does the narrator employ throughout this introduction? Provide examples from the text to illustrate the tone.

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3. How does this chapter foreshadow the fate of the Prices?

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4. To whom does the narrator direct this introduction?

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## The Things We Learned

### Chapter Fourteen: Leah

1. How does Leah's opinion about Tata Boanda's two wives and her relationship with Pascal develop her character?

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2. How does Ruth May befriend the children, and how does that develop her character?

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**Chapter Thirty-Two: Ruth May**

1. Why is the reader presented with news of tumultuous political events through Ruth May's narration this time?

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2. How do Nathan and Orleanna interpret "The meek shall inherit" differently?

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3. What is Ruth May's *nkisi*, and what is its function? What might Nelson's giving the *nkisi* to Ruth May foreshadow?

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**Chapter Thirty-Three: Leah**

1. How does Orleanna's newfound voice affect Leah?

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2. Discuss Leah's doubts about her father. What theme does her doubt develop?

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