

**AP Literature Summer Reading assignment 2014: *The Poisonwood Bible*
Mr. Flaherty, Ms. Miron, Mr. Mudano**

Course Description and Expectations:

This course is run like a seminar and active class participation is expected.

- **Students should be interested in stories and why we tell them; they should be prepared to consider the purposes of storytelling. This is a theme that will be explored throughout the year.**
- Students are required to read closely and actively, participate regularly in class, write frequently, and reflect thoughtfully on their progress.
- Student writings include literary analysis compositions, quarterly “personal thoughts” that are presented to the class, and informal reflections on the literature on our class blog.

This course prepares students for the AP Literature Examination in May and provides the equivalent of a freshman college course.

Summer Reading Assignment

- **Read *The Poisonwood Bible* by Barbara Kingsolver.** This book will be followed during the school year by *Heart of Darkness* and *Things Fall Apart*, works of literature that use an African setting to explore ideas about perspective and human nature. *The Poisonwood Bible* will introduce questions and themes that we will continue to examine in these subsequent works, so it is essential that you read it thoughtfully. This novel will take a concentrated amount of time, so you should not wait until the last days of your summer vacation to begin the assignment. If you read the novel earlier in the summer, we suggest you review it and your response questions shortly before school begins. It is not acceptable to argue that you did not do well on the quiz/ are not prepared for the quiz because you “read the book too long ago.”
- **Complete three responses as described on the back of this handout and hand them in on the first day of school. These will be submitted to www.turnitin.com on the first day of school, so bring an electronic copy to class.**
- **Be prepared to take a short, objective test on the first day of class.**
- **Be prepared to write an essay on the novel.**

As you read, consider the following important elements of the novel.

- Characters—how does Kingsolver portray them? Consider thematic nomenclature.
- Identify and reflect on the significance of character foils.
- Biblical allusions
- Symbols and motifs/ recurring details
- Imagery
- Foreshadowing
- Tone/ attitude of the narrators
- Diction/ syntax and how both are used to create distinctive voices for the characters
- Theme/ thematic ideas
- Structure of the novel, including the significance of the quotes that precede each section

Poisonwood Bible Response Questions—to be handed in on the first day of school.

Please complete three responses as you read. These responses will be like the blog responses that you'll complete during the school year. Each response should answer at least one of the prompts, using integrated, apt quotes from the reading to support your assertions. End your response with a "lingering question" – a question that remains unanswered at the end of that section of the reading. Each response should be about a page in length.

Response #1: pages 1 - 186

- The novel opens with a narrative directive, presumably to the reader: *Imagine a ruin so strange it must never have happened. First, picture the forest. I want you to be its conscience, the eyes in the trees.* What is the effect of this directive on you as a reader? What does it suggest about the novel that's about to unfold? As Orleanna continues her narration, who does the "you" that she is speaking to appear to be? To what great disasters does she allude? Why is she telling the story looking back (past) on Africa while the girls seem to tell it as if it's happening (present) in Africa? "And now we are here" (Kingsolver 13).
- How does Kingsolver use voice to characterize each sister? Which sister's voice is the most compelling for you?
- Kingsolver has said, in talking about how she names her characters that, "A name has to be just right: memorable, culturally appropriate, original but not silly. And ideally, it carries some meaning that coincides nicely with the person's intentions and character." Consider the significance of names in *The Poisonwood Bible*.
- Book Two is entitled "The Revelation" and the girls' section is entitled "The Things We Learned." Whose revelation? What is the revelation? What do the girls learn?
- Patrice Lumumba: Kingsolver's novel arguably is as much about Patrice Lumumba and the historical events in the Congo in the early 1960s as it is about the Price family. As you read, consider how the political events in the Congo affect and and mirror what is happening to and within the Price family.

Response #2: pages 187-376

- What is the significance of the Kikongo word *nommo* and its attendant concepts of being and naming? How do the Price sisters' Christian names and their acquired Kikongo names (210, 225) reflect their personalities and behavior?
- The African concepts of *nommo* and *muntu* are introduced in this section of the reading (209 - 210). Explain them. How do these ideas compare to similar western concepts of naming and existence?
- What ideas are examined about justice and balance/ betrayal and salvation/ guilt and innocence/ freedom and captivity?

Response #3: pages 377-end

- Orleanna says, "To live is to change, to acquire the words of a story, and that is the only celebration we mortals really know" (385). Adah says, about her mother, "...she constantly addresses the ground under her feet. Asking forgiveness. Owning, disowning, recanting, recharting a hateful course of events to make sense of her own complicity. We all are, I suppose. Trying to invent our version of the story. All human odes are essentially one. 'My life: what I stole from history, and how I live with it.' (492). What does this novel ultimately say about story-telling?
- Look again at the first and last chapter of the novel. Consider the ways in which the last chapter is a response to the first. Consider how the idea of "ruin" is reworked. Consider the significance of the okapi.
- Within the context of her novel, Kingsolver both introduces us to African concepts such as *nommo* and *muntu* and then goes a step further and requires us to accept those beliefs. Consider the significance of book 7, "The Eyes in the Trees" and its impact on the reader. What is Kingsolver doing with this final book of her "Poisonwood Bible"? Consider the significance of this quote: "The glide of belly on branch. The mouth thrown open wide, sky blue. I am all that is here. The eyes in the trees never blink. You plead with me your daughter sister sister for release, but I am no little beast and have no reason to judge. No teeth and no reason. If you feel a gnawing at your bones, that is only yourself, hungry" (Kingsolver 537).
- How can this novel be read as a political or religious allegory? Do you agree with Kingsolver's conclusions that everyone is complicit?

Enjoy the novel! Have a great summer! We'll see you in the fall.