

Summer Assignment: *The Poisonwood Bible* by Barbara Kingsolver

Assignment Overview:

Welcome to AP English Literature! Your summer assignment for our class is to read *The Poisonwood Bible* by Barbara Kingsolver and complete pre- and post-reading assignments. As you read, you should also take notes on the novel.

This 1998 book is set against the backdrop of the struggle for independence in the Belgian Congo. Kingsolver tells the story of the members of Price family, who are living as missionaries in the Congo in 1959. The book switches perspectives between the mother, Orleanna, and her four daughters: Rachel, Leah, Adah, and Ruth May. The writing is beautiful and evocative, rewarding the attention of thoughtful readers. A previous AP student wrote about it: "It took me a while to get even a smidge excited about it, but after a while, I fell in love with *The Poisonwood Bible*." It's super-good.

The novel has received the following critical acclaim:

- PEN/Faulkner Award, runner-up
- Pulitzer Prize, runner-up
- Book Sense Top 10 2003 (Number One)
- Independent Publisher Book Awards, Audio Fiction 1999
- American Booksellers Book of the Year (ABBY)
- Patterson Fiction Prize, The Poetry Center, 1999
- Los Angeles Times Best Books for 1998
- New York Times "Ten Best Books of 1998"
- Village Voice Best Books for 1998
- New York Public Library "25 Books to Remember"
- The Orange Prize, Great Britain, short list

Assignments for *Poisonwood*:

- 1) Before reading, consult some of the **background sources** provided and compose *Journal Entry #1*.
- 2) Read the book, taking **notes** as you do so. Compose *Journals #2, 3 and 4* **as** you read. Self-select three points during your reading to pause and journal.
- 3) After reading, compose *Journal #5*.
- 4) During the first week of class, complete a **reading check/quiz** (quote identification and context).
- 5) Complete a theme-based take-home analysis **paper** (3-4 pages) in the first quarter.

Step 1: Pre-reading research

This book takes place in a time (1959) and place (the Congo) that are quite distant from us. It's really helpful to know a little bit about the history of the Congo, especially since it's not really taught in schools and it's totally fascinating.

Read/view at least **THREE** of the following resources (at least one must be text and one video):

1. The [introduction](#) to the book *King Leopold's Ghost* (PDF)
2. An [article](#) providing an overview of the history of the Congo
3. An [excerpt](#) from Henry Stanley's *Through the Dark Continent*, published in the 1870s. Stanley was the explorer who "opened up" the Congo for King Leopold.
4. A [video](#) from the BBC that covers King Leopold of Belgium's rule of the Congo (warning: this video contains some graphic/disturbing imagery).
5. John Green's [Crash Course video](#) on the Congo
6. Choose a source (non-Wikipedia, for variety's sake) on your own that expands on any of the previous options or that relates to any of the following terms: Congo, King Leopold II, Patrice Lumumba, Mobutu, Henry Morton Stanley.

Once you've digested all this madness, compose *Journal #1*.

Step 2: Reading, Journaling & Taking Notes:

Our class is literature-based, so we will be **reading** novels, plays, poems, and other texts. It's important to take our reading seriously and to set yourself up for success by giving yourself uninterrupted blocks of time to focus without any distractions.

Taking notes is pretty important, and it's also important that the notes you take be YOUR notes. As a student in an AP-level course, you should NOT be consulting online sources or commercial study aids. Taking solid, reliable notes will make your life easier and give you material to study when you need it.

Rather than attempting to take notes as you read, you should take breaks to write up notes at the end of each chapter/whatever section you have read for the day – it's a great way to test your recall, and it's a more natural process than constantly stopping to jot notes as you are reading (which impedes the "flow" of reading). I also **strongly** suggest that you **handwrite** notes rather than typing them – this is proven to enhance recall and understanding. Your notes will be considered your first homework grade of quarter 1.

I recommend getting in the habit of creating a note-taking format that you take down as you read. The process I use works like this:

- I break up my notes into sections for each chapter or section
- As I read, I create a bulleted list of notes and quotes, labeling each with a page number when I can (see sample on page 4).
- On each line I jot down shorthand notes for any interesting observations; I look for things such as:
 - major plot events
 - major themes

- recurring motifs
- new characters or settings
- changes to existing characters
- interesting description or imagery
- interesting literary devices
- significant quotes (IMPORTANT)

Things to consider:

1. **Consider chapters** – Is there any thematic significance to the organization of the story? Do chapter titles, if chapters have titles, have any significance?
2. **Consider the characters** – Address how they have changed and the significant events that have affected them in each chapter or section of the novel.
3. **Note the Setting** – List the locale, time period, and length of time that passes in each section of the novel.
4. **Consider themes and motifs** – Reflecting on your earlier notes can be helpful with this, especially as you progress through the piece. Do you see any repetition of concepts? Images? Significant meaning in the piece?
5. **Consider the author's style** – What literary devices are important to the author's style? Which are used most often? What effect do they have?
6. **Quotations** – Although at this point it is difficult to predict exactly which quotations will be useful for future assignments and tests, you should still make note of powerful lines or scenes, lines that are well-written or are particularly interesting to you, and lines that reflect important qualities or changes in characters. Record in your notes the page number and some description of the quotations that you find important.

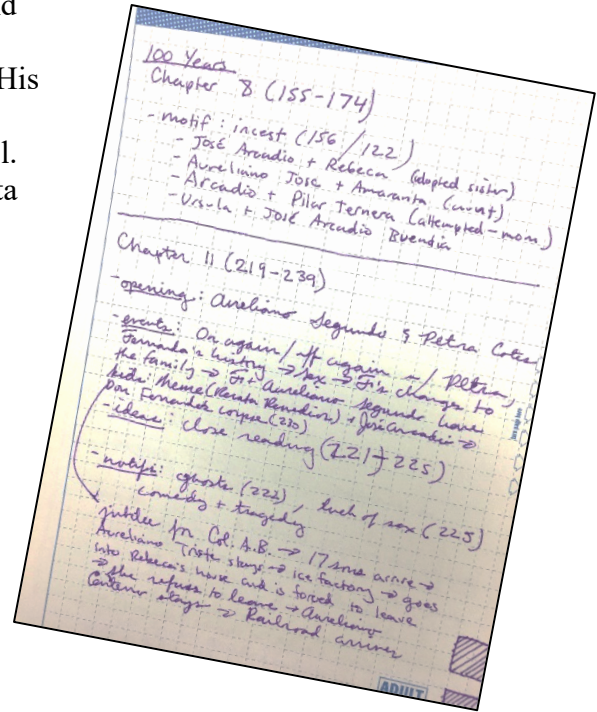
Step 3: Post-reading journal

Once you've finished the novel, complete *Journal #5*.

Sample Notes: (Ideally, these would be handwritten and include more quotes and page numbers)

Chapter 7 (133-153)

- Opening: Col. Aureliano Buendia is captured along with Col. Gerinaldo Marquez
- Events: Ursula visits C.A.B. in jail → reminisces about assassination attempts → soldiers afraid to execute him → firing squad assembled (flashback: to chapter 1, ice, pg. 1) → Jose Arcadio arrives and saves him, soldiers defect → C.A.B. back to war → returns to Macondo → Arcadio's children (Remedios and twins Jose Arcadio Segundo and Aureliano Segundo) → Jose Arcadio's death (blood) → His embalming → Rebeca a shut-in → C.A.B. poisoned by coffee → leaves to find allies, Col. Marquez in command → Marquez & Amaranta → JAB dies
- Closing: JAB's funeral, rain of flowers; "the exequies of the king"
- Motifs:
 - time & repetition (136)
 - premonitions, clairvoyance, curses (138, 139)
 - arbitrary events
 - rumor
 - death
 - suicide
 - rejection
 - reality/fiction
- Questions:
 - Family dynamics?
 - What statement is GGM making about power?
 - Are his characters symbolic?
 - Close reading practice: 145-146



Journal Prompts: These can be typed or handwritten and should cover the topic in a causal tone over the course of 2-3 paragraphs. Feel free to explore open-ended questions and thoughts as they pertain to the prompts. Please have journals in uniform format and keep them in one place to submit (folder, notebook, online file).

#1: Briefly analyze each of the background sources you chose to read. What are your initial opinions of the setting and conflicts *before* reading?

#2, 3, and 4: Select three stopping points as you read and gauge your interest and understanding for each entry. What actions or characters surprise you? How would you evaluate Kingsolver's style? Does this novel remind you of any other works (poems, songs, movies, novels)?

#5: What is your overall opinion of the story and of Kingsolver's style? What would you change? How did the background sources prepare you for your reading? How did the Congo change the family members?