

Extract from the
poisonwood bible by
barbara kingsolver



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In this passage from the novel "The Poisonwood Bible", by Barbara Kingsolver, the author describes a forest, the début of the book's ulterior setting. The passage is taken from the opening pages of the novel, and its main continuous theme is the paradox of life and death that are 'co-existing' in the forest. Kingsolver uses varying sentence structure and literary devices to better describe the forest and to emphasise its importance, as well as that of the characters described further on in the passage, in the storyline, and addresses the reader using first person narrative to get them involved in the plot of the story. The first of the two paragraphs in the extract describes a dark and thriving forest, which "eats life itself and lives forever"(10). This grim phrase could compare the forest to an entity that destroys anything alive, but at the same time thrives, and continues to live. The struggle between life and death is near brutal and utterly violent. Kingsolver describes "vines strangling their own kin"(6), and "a single-file of army ants biting a mammoth tree into uniform grains and hauling it down to the dark"(7-8). In the opening line, the author calls this forest a "ruin"(1), and in naming the book, "Poisonwood Bible", it is clear that the tone of the novel is relatively grim, and the setting describes mirrors the title well.

The first word, 'Poisonwood' is perspicuous in this paragraph, as poison is often deadly, but woods, or forests are often associated with life. The second word, 'Bible', is quite vague in this extract, though the second paragraph does enlighten the reader a little bit more on the topic. This paragraph does not just describe death, but life as well. Everything has a purpose: the vines are killing themselves, but it's being done for sunlight, which brings life to the forest. The ants are killing the tree, but only so that their queen can

thrive. Kingsolver conveys the way that life comes out of death with “ a choir of seedlings arching their necks out of death”(9). By doing this, she shows that there is a continuous cycle in the forest, of life coming out of death, and death coming out of life. The second paragraph of the extract introduces five ghostly women situated in these thriving surroundings. Due to the pace of this paragraph, they appear to be moving quite quickly and hurriedly through the forest, and the fact that no emotions concerning the forest are presented implies that they do not fear it. The five figures are ghostly in this environment for multiple reasons: the first being that Kingsolver describes them as “ pale, doomed blossoms”(12-13), which gives them a melancholic, insubstantial appearance. The second reason for this description is the length of their presence in the passage: they are present for a very short time, hurrying onwards with thought or regard to where they are. This indifference towards the forest makes them appear to be unreal. The last reason is that they seem minuscule in comparison to the forest. Such small beings should have no importance whatsoever when they are placed in such a gargantuan setting. The forest has even less regard for them, this being emphasised by Kingsolver’s last sentences, because, after the women pass through, “ Behind them the curtain closes. The spiders return to their killing ways.”(26). The first sentence of this quote is part of another: “ She appears to be conducting a symphony”(25-26), it’s theatrical, staged, which could imply that this appearance was made deliberately, not just by the author, but by the character herself. Even though these women come across as being insignificant here, the fact that they are actually mentioned and described at all in the introduction to the novel at all leads the reader to knowing that the women play important roles in the book, and that they will

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be seeing them again. The women are presented as intruders in the forest, due to the way that they are described. Kingsolver uses phrases such as “headlamps from another world”(17) to describe the first woman, who is the mother of the other four’s “large, false-pearl earrings”(16), which emphasises that they do not belong, and creates a mystery that needs to be solved as to where they are from and why they are in the forest. Adding on to the women’s other-worldliness, they are described as “pale”(12), whereas they are walking in a tropical, most likely African forest, and native Africans are dark, the opposite of pale. Kingsolver uses phrases such as “graceful hand”(24), “false-pearl earrings”(16) and “shirtwaist dresses”(12) to describe the way that the five appear and act, and this indicates that they are from an upper-class in society. Therefore, why they would be trudging through such a wild environment. As to why they would be in the forest, the simple solution might be that they are lost. However, that wouldn’t be right, as the mother is described as being “deliberate”(15), which means that she knows where she is leading her daughters. The effect of this is that the reader feels as though he or she already has to begin piecing together a puzzle and making assumptions. Having said that, Kingsolver does not leave the reader totally ignorant, and she describes the five figures in a way that says a lot about them without excessive information being needed. “Four girls compressed in bodies as tight as bowstrings, each one tensed to fire off a woman’s heart”(18-19) suggests that the girls are uncomfortable in their own bodies, and that they are uncertain of the future, as well as what they are doing at the present. “Even now they resist affinity, like cats in a bag: two blondes – the one short and fierce, the other tall and imperious – flanked by matched brunettes like bookends, the forward twin leading hungrily while

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the rear one sweeps the ground with a rhythmic limp.”(19-22). Here, Kingsolver uses metaphors to designate the girls, calling them “ cats in a bag”(20), to show how, even though they may be related, and they are all present, they are all so different from one another. This shows that, though they are family, they will bring conflicting views and ideas to the novel. However, the author describes the last two, twins, as “ bookends”(21). This implies that they are similar in the way of looks, though not in the way of thoughts. All this proves to show that these five women are more than just passers-by in the introduction, that they are already an important part of the novel. Kingsolver manipulates the reader’s thoughts, emotions and point of view by using first person narrative. By doing this, she draws the reader in and implicates them in the story. She writes, “ First, [you] picture the forest. I want you to be its conscience, the eyes in the trees.”(2). By addressing the reader in this way, the author immediately reels them into her story, and the readers follow blindly, unaware of the importance that they now have within the novel. The author asks the reader to become a part of the setting of her book, writing it so that the reader is actually being invited by her to interpret the scenes that they will witness however they may wish. Letting the reader be such an active part of her story means that he or she now have the full command of the controls, or so they think. They are definitely in control of the way that they judge certain events and characters in the book, though Kingsolver manipulates them the whole way through, by letting them see some things, but not others which might enlighten that particular mystery. This control and way of addressing the reader creates an intimacy between the reader and the settings or characters that might otherwise not exist.

Kingsolver continues to write in first person narrative in the second
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paragraph of the extract, where she introduces the five women. Here, she writes, “ Seen from above this way they are [...] bound to appeal to your sympathies. Be careful. Later on you’ll have to decide what sympathy they deserve. The other especially - watch how she leads them on, pale-eyed, deliberate.”(12-14) These phrases involve the reader more than the first did, because Kingsolver appeals to the reader, making them decide what they think of the women, but already ‘ corrupting’ their minds when she gives them a warning, saying that the women are perhaps not quite as delicate and innocent as they first appear. When Kingsolver writes “ seen from above”, she is connecting the second paragraph to the first, where she asked the reader to be high up in the trees. Due to this ‘ disposition’, the reader could feel as though he or she has stumbled upon a scene that was not meant for their eyes, or anyone else’s. From a high vantage point, it could be that they are spying on the women. However, Kingsolver wouldn’t let something like that be that obvious in the opening lines to her novel, and it is highly probable that she deliberately meant for the reader to feel as though he or she shouldn’t have seen this, when it was absolutely necessary that they did. Once more, the author is being manipulative in regard to the reader’s insight on information and opinion. Throughout the extract, Barbara Kingsolver describes the forest and the five women in great detail, constantly appearing to try and further the reader’s understanding of the matters presented. She uses a continuous paradox whilst describing the forest, and makes the women appear not to belong in the wild setting, creating the feeling that there is a double entendre to everything that she has written in the passage, that nothing is quite the way that Kingsolver says it is. She uses first person narrative to make the reader feel in control, but <https://assignbuster.com/extract-from-the-poisonwood-bible-by-barbara-kingsolver/>

again, she manipulates and twists the truth, keeping certain things in the dark, and emphasising on others more, to make the reader believe half-truths. These opening paragraphs effectively catch the reader's attention, and it seems that the only way to discover Kingsolver's ulterior motive is to read the rest of the book.