

Poisonwood bible symbolism example #2



**ASSIGN
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Symbolism is when an object represents something other than itself, often of a more abstract nature. Symbolism creates quality aspects that make literature more meaningful. Symbolism is often recognised as an important part of an extended text used to enhance a theme or idea of a story to a deeper level. This is why symbolism is a significant feature of a novel. An example of this is in the novel *The Poisonwood Bible* written by Barbara Kingslover.

The story is set in 1959 and follows an obsessive Baptist minister named Nathan Price who drags his wife (Orleanna) and four daughters, (Adah, Rachel, Ruth-May and Leah) deep into the heart of the Congo on a mission to save the “unenlightened” people of Africa. The five women narrate the novel. From the beginning, the attitudes of the five women cover a wide spectrum of events and happening of their time in the Congo. There are many examples of symbolism in *The Poisonwood Bible* including the demonstration garden, Methuselah and the Poisonwood tree itself.

Methuselah is the pet parrot of Brother Fowles, the previous missionary, which was left behind. This parrot acquires symbolic value. Biblically, the name “Methuselah” comes from the Hebrew Bible. It is the name of the oldest living person who, according to myth, lived close to 969 years. The parrot represents Africa and its people. Using the name Methuselah to this image, Kingslover is stating that the African culture is far more ancient than the arriving colonizers, and inferring they should respect the culture of the Congo, just as the oldest man in the bible was respected.

However expanded, the parrot is also symbolic for the doomed Republic of Congo in that Methuselah is caged much like the Congo is oppressed by Belgium. Both gain independence but are not ready to become self-sufficient and perish as a result. Methuselah is denied freedom for most of his life, and while he is kept in a cage and fed by his masters, he loses the ability to fend for himself. Even after Nathan releases the parrot it continues to be dependent on the Price family.

He proves unable to fly and therefore survive when released into the wild, and so he becomes a symbol of the Congo; granted independence, but doomed to limited flight because of such long imprisonment from western colonial powers. Ironically a predator caught the vulnerable Methuselah, meeting his doom on the same day that the Republic of Congo began its own short-lived independence. Within a few months the equally vulnerable nation was also be set upon by a predator, the United States, and killed. This confirms that Kingsolver intended Methuselah to symbolise the Congo and its imminent doom. A symbol consisting of many levels in the novel is Nathan's demonstration garden.

This is the land in which Nathan tries to grow vegetables in the traditional American way. On one level the demonstration garden represents the difficulties the Price family have adapting to life in Kilanga. It can be seen to symbolise the attitudes and beliefs that the Prices carried with them to Africa. Like those attitudes, the plants are wildly inappropriate in this environment. Despite Mama Tataba's traditional wisdom, that to grow plants in the Congo soil "you got to be make hills," Nathan insists that he knows better: "I've been tending soil ever since I could walk behind my father.

However he was tending soil in America, in the West; he is in Africa now, literally and metaphorically on different ground. The plants become unrecognisable and unable to fruit. The indigenous North American plants cannot vegetate under the conditions in the Congo. Nathan pursuing his garden, even with warning, speaks volumes about common, Western, imperialistic dismissal of and disregard for native ways. It does not occur to Nathan to consider that, if the climate permitted this sort of garden, Africans would have planted it themselves.

Thus this venture further highlights Nathan's blind arrogance, and his capacity to reason with their culture. On another level the demonstration garden is symbolic of its biblical suggestion, the Garden of Eden. It is in the Garden of Eden that Adam and Eve ate the poisonous apple imbuing all future generations with the original sin. Ironically, Adam and Eve sin by craving truth and knowledge that is not intended for them. Nathan however, sins through his intentional ignorance, through his rejection to learn anything about the native culture and environment, and develop his knowledge and accept the world around him.

Therefore the demonstration garden provides a deeper understanding to the reader of the relevance of Nathan's ignorance. An important use of symbolism in *The Poisonwood Bible* is the Poisonwood tree. Nathan first encounters the Poisonwood tree while planting his demonstration garden. Mama Tataba warns him not to touch the dangerous plant, but he haughtily ignores her resulting with painful rashes covering his hands. This was a consequence of his arrogance to the culture surrounding him. The author

further develops this idea of symbolism by creating a biblical allusion connecting this poisonous plant with the bible.

This is in the form of a linguistic mistake. The language of the area the Prices are living is called Kikongo. In this native language the word “ bangala” can mean “ dearly beloved” although conversely if mispronounced the meaning can change entirely to that of “ Poisonwood Tree. ” Unable to grasp this subtle linguistic distinction Nathan often declares to the natives of Kilanga in his sermons that Jesus is dangerous, poisonous, can cause intense pain and should be avoided rather than voicing that Jesus is beloved.

His imperceptive mistake is a result of his reluctance to learn anything about the culture around him, an indicator of his cultural arrogance. Nathan’s mispronunciation also represents his conceit and misconceptions towards the Congo throughout the novel. Adah, being brilliantly perceptive, realises not only Nathan’s mistake in pronunciation, but also how this is symbolic of his entire mission in the Congo. She states: “ We came in stamped with such errors we can never know which ones made a lasting impression.

I wonder if they still think of him standing tall before his congregation shouting, ‘ Tata Jesus is bangala! ‘ I do. I think of him exactly that way. We are the balance of our damage and our transgressions. He was my father. I own half his genes, and all his history. Believe this: the mistakes are part of the story. I am born of a man who believed he could tell nothing but the truth, while he set down for all time the Poisonwood Bible. ” This describes the impression Nathan left on the Congo explaining his self-assured

obliviousness that what he was doing was morally correct, however in reality it wasn't.

In a wider context however, Adah is referring to the legacy of mistakes that the men from the West, men like Nathan, bequeathed to Africa, a legacy that, however shameful, is now “ part of the story” and with which must now be learnt to live with. The Poisonwood Tree therefore symbolises not only a mistaken phrase but also the arrogance of Western men with superior perceptions unwilling to accept the Congo and its culture. It is the significance of symbolism that highlights these ideas. In conclusion, it is the common use of symbolism in novels, such as *The Poisonwood Bible*, that is a significant feature in a novel.

It more deeply portrays many themes and ideas that firstly appear to be only touched on the surface. Although the perception of symbolism is often very different for each person reading a text, due to their different experiences and opinions they bring to the symbol, each idea founded from a symbol conveys a greater meaning that the reader can relate to their own lives. Kingsolver uses this technique at various times through out the novel broadening our knowledge to the circumstances and underlying critical themes that the novel holds. This is why I believe symbolism is an extremely significant part of any novel.