

Use of language and linguistics in the poisonwood bible by barbara kingsolver ess...

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While reading *The Poisonwood Bible*, I was fascinated by Kingsolver's extensive use of Lingala, the language used in the region of the Congo where the Price family lives. Lingala is a language in which each word has several meanings, and Kingsolver has the characters in the story use language to reflect themselves. Kingsolver also masterfully wields words to connote subtle ideas throughout the novel.

Throughout the novel are sprinkled many phrases in Lingala, phrases that are eventually learned or heard by any one of the narrators. For example, the villagers have names for three of the Price daughters. Leah, at first, is called "leba", meaning fig tree, and then later Anatole the schoolteacher calls her "beene-beene", meaning "as true as the truth can be." Adah is "benduka", "the crooked walker", but "benduka" spoken with a different emphasis, on the latter part of the word, is the name the villagers call a beautiful species of birds around their village. Rachel they call "mvula", the Lingala word for a pale white termite that comes out after rain. The villagers were fascinated and also disgusted with Rachel's appearance, and her long, white-blond hair. Ironically, Rachel was completely obsessed with her looks.

Each of the Price daughters has their own unique relationship to the Lingala language, and also language in general. Rachel, portrayed as a "platinum blonde", not very intelligent girl, is very egotistical, and cares only for her appearance and her own comfort. Rachel constantly and uncaringly misuses words, both in Lingala and English. This literary technique helps show her as completely self-interested, ignoring the world around her. Adah, Leah's identical twin, is a cripple for most of the book, as the right side of her brain

was deformed since birth, and the left side of her body paralyzed. Her outlook at life was very cynical, and she preferred to examine everything backward rather than forward. In the book, she reads words both backward and forward, and often creates palindromes about what she sees. One of the earlier palindromes, when the characters are first introduced is, “ Elapsed or esteemed, all Ade meets erodes pale”.

These palindromes add flavor to Adah’s narration, supplemented by her wit and perception. Adah is very perceptive as a result of her reticence; her observations are very witty, and at times sarcastic. For example, Adah always refers to Nathan Price as “ Our Father,” She encompasses all of his behavior with this one phrase, illustrating his demeanor in the household and his attempts, although subconscious, to become G-d himself. Adah’s observations are always the cleverest. In my opinion, Kingsolver perfectly mirrored Adah’s personality in her style of narration. Ruth May, the youngest daughter at five years, narrates as a girl her age would be expected to, but with refreshing humor. At the beginning of the book, Ruth May speaks about Africans as the Tribes of Ham, a history lesson from her father.

“ Ham was the youngest one, like me, and he was bad. After they [Noah’s family] got off the ark and let the animals go is when it happened. Ham found his father Noah laying around pig-naked drunk one day and he thought that was as funny as all get out. The two other brothers covered Noah up with a blanket, but Ham busted his britches laughing. When Noah woke up he got to hear the whole story from the tattletale brothers. So Noah cursed

all Ham's children to be slaves forever and ever. That's how come they turn out dark."

This not only offers an example of the superiority attitude, but also is skillfully written in proper voice for a five-year old, and with wit. Later in the novel, Ruth May invents her own language in which to communicate with the local children, showing her enthusiasm and adventurous spirit.

Language, as wielded by Kingsolver in her prose and the narration of the book, plays a very large role in the development of the novel, and it's quality. Even mistaking or mispronouncing words has been given a large role, as noticed by Adah.

" Then there is batiza, Our Father's fixed passion. Batiza pronounced with the tongue curled just so means ' baptism.' Otherwise, it means ' to terrify.' Nelson spent part of an afternoon demonstrating to me that fine linguistic difference while we scraped chicken manure from the nest boxes. No one has yet explained it to the Reverend. He is not of a mind to receive certain news. Perhaps he should clean more chicken houses". This confusion undoubtedly contributed to the failure of Nathan Price's mission in the

Congo, how surprising it is that such small linguistic errors can have such an effect. The title of the book, *The Poisonwood Bible* , refers to this very phenomenon. Nathan, when preaching, would attempt to say that " Jesus is dearly beloved!", but each time would declare heartily that " Jesus is a poisonwood tree!" In conclusion, I was impressed by Kingsolver's knowledge

of the Lingala language and by the research she must have done into the language's cultural meanings. The linguistics were an integral part of the novel, and unfortunately seemed to fail Kingsolver in the latter half of the novel. The story was meant to convey Kingsolver's beliefs and view of the world around her, however, Ruth May's untimely death seemed to be the climax of the story. Following that, the narrators, Adah, Leah, Rachel, and Orleanna Price, seemed to be mouthpieces that, in their own voice, broadcasted the political and social views of the author. The two halves of the book were as similar as the twins, Leah and Adah. Unlike Adah, the second half of the novel never really revived.