

AP English Literature and Composition

The Poisonwood Bible Allusions

Importance of Allusions

In her "Author's Note," Barbara Kingsolver says that she "couldn't have written the book at all without two remarkable sources of literary inspiration" (ix); one of these, she states, is the King James Bible. Because Kingsolver herself recognizes the importance of the Bible as a source for her work, you need to understand her reliance on the Bible, especially the King James version, as a textual source. Through her use of Biblical allusions, Kingsolver adds a layer to her novel that is created by a completely different text. You must recognize the people and events to which she alludes in order to comprehend this significant layer of the novel.

Characters with Biblical Names

- **Rachel**, oldest daughter in the Price family

The daughter of Laban, she was the second and darling wife of Jacob. She was so beautiful that Jacob, after being tricked by Laban to marry his eldest daughter Leah, worked in servitude for seven extra years to earn her hand in marriage. She fathered his two favorite sons, Joseph and Benjamin, and died in childbirth with the latter. Never fond of hard work, Rachel was known for her contemplative nature.

- **Leah**, the first-born Price twin

The oldest daughter of Laban, she was given to Jacob in marriage after he completed seven years of labor for her father. Jacob had assumed that the woman under the veil was Leah's sister Rachel, his beloved, and was shocked and disappointed in discovering her identity. Despite her husband's lukewarm initial reception, Leah proved a faithful and productive wife.

- **Adah**, the second-born Price twin who suffers from Hemiplegia (a rare neurological disorder affecting one side of the body)

A rather insignificant matriarch in the book of Genesis, she is the wife of Lamech—one of Cain's descendants dwelling east of Eden. Adah becomes the mother of nomadic peoples, those who dwell in tents and herd cattle. Lamech warns Adah that he and Cain shall be avenged. Another Adah appears later in Genesis, this one the wife of Esau, Jacob's brother from whom he stole the birthright.

- **Ruth (May)**, the youngest and most innocent of the Price girls

The Biblical epitome of loyalty and devotion, Ruth as a young widow tells her mother-in-law Naomi, "Entreat me not to leave thee or to return from following after thee; whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge; thy people shall be my people; and thy God my God" (Ruth 1:15).

- **Nathan**, the leader of the Price family who is plagued by guilt for what he perceives as his desertion of his unit during World War II

A prophet and the main advisor to King David, Nathan rebuked and chastised David for his seduction of Bathsheba and killing of her husband Uriah. He delivered to David the news that God would punish him with the death of Bathsheba's first-born child.

Book Titles containing Biblical Allusions

- **Genesis**

Literally, the beginning, it is the first book of the Torah (Old Testament) and recounts the origins of the earth and all its inhabitants as well as original sin and humanity's banishment from the Garden of Eden.

- **Revelation**

The final book of the New Testament, it provides vivid imagery involving numbers and strange beasts (reminiscent of Daniel's prophetic symbolism) to describe the Apocalypse—the final battle between good and evil at the end of the world.

- **Judges**

An Old Testament book that recounts the intense and prolonged struggle of the Israelites to conquer Palestine, Judges focuses on battles and their heroes.

- **Bel and the Serpent**

This Apocryphal text includes two stories about wonders and a *dead* god. In the first, Daniel exposes a false god by revealing that the priests of Bel (or Baal) are actually eating the food intended as offering to the patron deity of Babylon. Serving as a detective, he uses ashes to record the priests' footprints, thus belittling Bel. In the second story, Daniel, being punished for killing a dragon honored and revered by the Babylonian people, is thrown into the den of lions but survives the peril unharmed.

- **Exodus**

From the Greek *exodus*, meaning "marching out," this second book of the Torah (Old Testament) focuses on journey. It tells of the enslavement of the Israelites in Egypt and their escape through the Red Sea and into the Sinai desert (where they wander for forty years) with Moses as their leader.

• **Song of the Three Children**

A linguistic alteration of the Apocryphal text, *The Song of the Three Young Men*, this section of the novel reveals the perspectives of the surviving daughters after they have escaped from the Congo and from their father's overpowering influence. *The Song of the Three Young Men* is a story of both hope and despair, ultimately a song of praise and thanksgiving sung by the three who survived being placed in the fiery furnace for refusing to worship an idol during the persecution of Jews in Babylon.

Book Subtitles containing Literary Allusions

- *The Things We Carried*, subtitle for *Genesis*
- *The Things We Learned*, subtitle for *Revelation*
- *The Things We Didn't Know*, subtitle for *Judges*
- *What We Lost*, subtitle for *Bel and the Serpent*
- *What We Carried Out*, subtitle for *Exodus*

In addition to using the King James Bible as a structuring device, Kingsolver relies on her erudite audience's recognition of her references to Tim O'Brien's short-story cycle, ***The Things They Carried*** (1990). The interrelated stories told and retold by multiple voices explore the inadequate preparation for the Vietnam War and its overwhelming effect on a group of young soldiers. The things that the soldiers carry are not only material necessities for battle; despite their differing perspectives, the soldiers must also carry memories of home, guilt for their role in the war, and an anguish created by their newly discovered understanding that truth and reality are not the same.

Other Significant Allusions

• **Apocrypha**

A collection of books, part of the Greek version of the Old Testament, that were not included in the Hebrew Bible. The collection, in which Daniel plays a major role, sheds light on the time period leading to the beginning of the New Testament and includes *The Song of the Three Young Men*, *Susanna*, and *Bel and the Serpent*.

• **Bethlehem**

The hometown of Joseph, descendent of King David, and birthplace of Jesus.

• **Ham**

One of Noah's sons, he saw his father lying drunk and naked in his tent. For the offense of witnessing his father in this state, Ham was cursed. Noah decreed that Ham's descendents would be slaves to those of his brother Shem, who covered Noah's nakedness without looking at him. Shem's progeny became to Semites; Ham's descendents are their enemies the Hamites, who populated northern Africa from Morocco to Ethiopia.

• **Methuselah**

Noah's grandfather who is said to have lived for 969 years and whose name has thus become synonymous with longevity and life experience.

• **Patrice Lumumba**

The first prime minister of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (which received its independence from Belgium in June 1960) who held office for less than three months and was murdered by opponents four months after being ousted from office. Revered as a martyr by some and considered a national hero for his courage and ambition, Lumumba demanded change for his people, especially in terms of educational opportunities, and his assassination is rumored to have involved the American CIA as well as the Belgian government (who formally apologized to his family in 2002).

• **Stuart Little**

A two-inch-tall mouse-like son born to average human parents, he is the hero of an adventure tale by author E. B. White.