The Poisonwood Bible: Plot Analysis And Revealing Of Main Questions

Summary:

In 1959, evangelical Baptist Preacher Nathan Price uproots his family (his wife, Orleanna, and their four daughters, Rachel, Leah, Adah and Ruth May) to travel to Kilanga, a village in the, then Belgian, Congo, and take over the mission there. Nathan is singularly focused on saving the souls of those in Africa while Orleanna and the girls stress over how they will survive in Kilanga as they realize just how different it is from their hometown in Georgia. A series of misfortunes, including a drought and the death of Ruth May, sees Orleanna leave Kilanga with her daughters. The family is split as Leah, Rachel, and Nathan remain in Africa while Orleanna and Adah return to the United States. Leah settles down with Anatole, the school teacher she met in Kilanaga, and has four sons. Rachel lives with Eeben Axelroot, the pilot, for a time before she marries twice, her second husband owns a hotel that she takes over, and becomes a successful businesswoman. Nathan moves from village to village for many years before he is eventually killed when a group of villages blames him for the deaths of their children. In the States, Adah goes to college to become a doctor and while there she meets a neurologist that helps her recover from her disability and learns to walk without a limp. Orleanna struggles with the guilt she feels over Ruth May's death and becomes involved in the Civil Rights Movement. However, she is unable to find peace until she and Adah return to Africa and Ruth May's spirit tells her to forgive herself.

Questions:

1. Of the women in the Price family, who changes the most?

Of the sisters Leah seems to change the most in my eyes. On the surface, she adapts the most to the Congolese way of life (taking place in a hunt, learning the language, learning the culture) and marries Anatole and she is at peace in Africa. On a deeper level, some of her key beliefs shift in big ways. Leah does not lose her strong sense of justice but her idea of what justice is shifts as she spends more time with Anatole and learns to think for herself, independent from her father. Her sister Rachel tells her that her brain has been "washed by a Communist plot" and Leah agrees with her. Leah comes to expect that the government should do more to help people and to maintain justice and equality. Earlier in the book, Leah reacts in alarm when Anatole tells her that the communists may help the Congo and he even asks her if she knows what a communist is and she gives a simplistic answer. Yet after living for many years in Africa, her husband joining the revolution, and seeing all she sees she expresses pride at her change in allegiance. Additionally, her idea of religion shifts from her father's strict interpretation of scripture to something closer to Brother Fowles's more liberal idea of religion as worship encompassing the natural world (pantheism). In doing so she goes from worshipping her father and doing everything she can to get his approval to pitying him for being unable to fathom the impact of their actions.

2. In contrast to question 1, who changes the least?

In contrast to Leah, Rachel maintains many of her beliefs. On a surface level, she maintains her love of society and all of its comforts. She has made a home in Africa due to her hotel being there as well as her belief that she would never be able to fit in with the people she used to hang out with after everything she has been through and done. She maintains her air of superiority for being from a “civilized” country. She remains wary of her workers, many of whom are black, and admits that she misses almost America every day and would even close down the bar just so she could watch an American TV show by herself. Whereas many of her sisters let Africa change them, Rachel seems to have reacted to her experiences by drawing deeper into herself and her beliefs.

3. Shortly after arriving in Kilanga, Nathan Price decides to plant a garden. What is the significance of this venture and what does it say about him as a character?

Nathan’s garden is important on a variety of levels. For one it displays how he views the people of Kilanga. Nathan goes into this venture with the idea that the people don’t know how to grow their own food and that the lack of agriculture in Kilanga is due to their stupidity. When Mama Tataba (?) tells Nathan that his garden will not grow unless he makes hills and plants the seeds within them he brushes her off and flattens the field again when she makes the hills herself. Yet, when it begins to rain the sprouts are drowned and Nathan has to concede and make hills in his next venture. These interactions show that Nathan fails to glean that the people of Kilanga have other reasons for not growing the typical American garden. In his mind it is the only garden worth having and does not acknowledge the more likely scenario, that the people of Kilanga found that farming was not a valuable venture and instead put their time into other ones.

Nathan’s venture also displays how western nations viewed the Congo, and largely Africa as a whole. Africa, more specifically the Congo, is not a continent full of people with rich and diverse histories and cultures to Nathan. Instead it is a place full of differences and those differences are wrong. The people are deemed uncivilized and in need of help and God’s will. To Nathan the Congo is a place that needs to be changed. Similarly the western world viewed Africa not as a place full of people from whom they could learn but as a place to exploit. Africa was painted a continent of intrigue and mystery with cannibals and okapis that once were unicorns. It is a place that needed to be tamed and changed to fit western ideals and expectations. So the western world sent missionaries and armies and merchants to show the “uncivilized” natives exactly that as they divvied up the continent so that they could further control and change it.

4. Methuselah the parrot is mentioned various times in the book. Is there any greater significance to him or is he just a parrot that was left behind? If he is significant, explain why.

I think Methuselah can serve as symbolic of two different things. On one hand, he is a representation of the Congo. Methuselah is unable to care for himself after being a pet for so long and when he gains his freedom he stays close to what he knows before he meets his untimely death when a civet cat kills him. Similarly the Congo struggles to stand on its own upon gaining independence and that independence is short lived before a different sort of predator, the United States, kills it. On the other hand, another character that follows a pattern similar to Methuselah’s is Nathan Price. Methuselah is left behind by Brother Fowles, refuses to leave Kilanga, and dies there. Similarly, Nathan Price is left behind by his family, refuses to leave villages along the Kwilu River, and meets his end in one of these villages. While Nathan may have despised the bird, Methuselah foreshadows his end rather nicely as he shows what

happens to those who don’t leave.

5. What is success? Is success for one entity (person, group, nation, etc) the same as success for another?

Success is achieving a set goal or finding a measure of happiness. The idea of success is a combination of values and beliefs held by an entity and therefore I find it hard for the different entities to be measured against the same idea of success, though the world often does this. While it is true that there are some basic ideas of success, having all basic needs met, beyond that success becomes more difficult to quantify as it is a personal concept. In the book the United States government is upset when the new head of the Congolese government fails to control the Congo. The United States government is applying their own ideas and values to the Congolese government and this leads to conflict. The United States government wants the Congo to be controlled while the Congolese government wants their to be consensus among the people and therefore take a far different approach to leading their country. It can be debated which of these is the more successful strategy to leading a country but it is useless to measure whether or not the Congolese government was successful in leading their country by the standards of the U.S. government when they were not attempting to meet those standards or reach the goal the U.S. government had.

6. Should collective guilt and responsibility be acknowledged or should society merely target the individuals who have done wrong?

I believe it is important to acknowledge collective responsibility. It is important to place blame on the shoulders of those who actually committed the acts but nothing happens in a vacuum. While someone may not have committed an act they may have encouraged it somewhere along the way or at the very least, never condemned it and they may have even benefitted from the act coming to pass. I think collective guilt acts as a sort of check to keep people from never taking responsibility for something as well as helping them to understand how their actions can impact the world.

7. Each of the Prices have a very distinct sense of justice and as well as their own ideas on whether or not absolute justice is possible. Discuss whether or not you believe absolute justice is something that could be reached.

In one of her chapters, Adah tells of how attempts at justice often lead to injustice of other forms and therefore it is impossible. Doctors may save lives but those lives can lead to overpopulation and people may starve to death. I am inclined to agree to a point. Absolute justice will likely be always out of reach because people’s idea of what is just varies so much. Furthermore, even when people agree on what justice is, for example, children shouldn’t die of preventable diseases, there must then be another discussion over how to solve the problem, how to get the resources, and plenty of other questions of how exactly a problem should be solved. While I believe we may be able to provide for our population and ensure people do not die from preventable causes I believe we will be prevented from doing this by debating how we should requisition the resources necessary because without a doubt people will need to give up some wealth and that is never something that people are very willing to do not to mention the debate over is the people really deserve the help.

8. What is the significance of the book’s title The Poisonwood Bible?

In the Congo the word “bangala” has two meanings depending on the way it is spoken. Say it slowly and it will mean “beloved” but, say it quickly and it will refer to the poisonwood tree, a plant that will cause painful swelling if touched and death if the wood is burned and the smoke is inhaled. Nathan Price never learns the distinction and in his attempts to connect to the people while preaching through using their language he tells them that Jesus is a poisonwood tree. While this also displays Nathan Price’s inability to adapt culturally it also alludes to how religion can be used as a weapon and is quite dangerous. Nathan’s single minded determination to convert the people of Kilanga sees Ruth May killed, places undue stress on the rest of his family, sees them eventually leave him behind, and he is even killed trying to convert another village years later. In contrast, Brother Fowles, who takes a far more liberal approach to religion, and his family are seen to be much happier with their more relaxed interpretation of scripture. The title signifies the danger that religion poses as well as memorializing Nathan’s cultural helplessness.

9. The Poisonwood Bible deals heavily with the idea of collective guilt and how it is felt by those in the nations that exploited and interfered with the Congo. Explain how at least one of the characters is shown dealing with this collective guilt.

Rachel is rather interesting in this regard because of how she stands out from the rest of the women in her family. The rest of her family is shown growing up and almost attempting to atone for what their people have done to the Congo. Adah becomes a doctor specializing in tropical diseases and she makes some key discoveries about AIDs and Ebola, diseases that are very prevalent in Africa. Leah marries a revolutionary and raises four children in Africa. Orleanna joins the Civil Rights Movement back in the States. Rachel, does none of these things. She never sheds her disdain for Africa and many of the people within it. She looks down upon her workers and clutches her purse tighter when she goes shopping with her sisters at the end of the book. She is overjoyed to return to the comforts of society with Axelroot. Rachel’s method of dealing is to simply not deal with it all. Which I think is an important piece to include because it shows the full spectrum of how one deals with guilt and furthermore ties back to the first chapter in which Orleanna talks about how people deal with this guilt and furthermore how she knows that most will “sail through [life] with a conscience clean as snow”. Rachel is this person and it is almost necessary that she be this person because it shows the full spectrum of reactions even among a family who is tied to one of the acts causing collective guilt, Nathan’s mission work. Rachel is the one who hangs on to her American ideas of the Congo and uses her experiences to strengthen those beliefs. Despite all her time among the people she never comes to appreciate the culture or the environment like her sisters do. Her ideas do not change so much as solidify. Rachel deals with her guilt by not dealing with it and that is important.

10. What is the significance of Nathan Price being the only Price to never get a chance to narrate the book?

In the very beginning of the book, Orleanna Price claims that the only question worth asking is “How do we aim to live with it?” with the “it” being the collective guilt that comes with being part of the group of people who took part in the colonization and interference in Africa. This is not a question that is meant for people who actually committed the acts as collective guilt is not felt by these people as they actively participated. Therefore, it is a question that only the women of the Price family can answer. Nathan Price took part in the colonization through being a missionary and furthermore it is unlikely that due to his religious convictions and inflexible nature that he would ever see what he did as wrong. It is significant that Nathan Price never got a chance to

narrate the book because it distinctly marks him as a colonizer. In the political allegory of The Poisonwood Bible he plays the role of a world power as they attempt to bend the Congo to their will. Therefore he is not dealing with trying to find a way to deal with collective guilt and therefore should not be narrating the novel.