

---

## The Poisonwood Bible: Rachel And Ruth May - Sisterly Foils

Throughout the novel *The Poisonwood Bible* by Barbara Kingsolver, readers are given an in-depth glimpse into the thoughts and actions of the women of the Price family during their time in the Congo. Within this time, the audience learns many things about the characters and primarily the daughters, such as how twins Leah and Adah and sisters Rachel and Ruth May have many similarities and contrasts. As such, they fit into the criteria for being foils, which according to Wikipedia, by definition means “a character who contrasts with another character, usually the protagonist, to highlight qualities of the other character”. One of their contrasts includes how Rachel is self-centred and Ruth May is the opposite. A similarity they have is their mindset regarding the people of Kilanga upon their arrival. Finally, another contrast between the sisters is the path they choose to take with their mindset. Each of these similarities and differences helps to enhance the traits of both characters, hence making Rachel and Ruth May foils for each other.

One of the main parts of being a foil includes differences between the characters but rather than just differences, they are opposites that contrast each other. With Rachel and Ruth May, a huge contrast is seen between their values, which for Rachel is herself and for Ruth May is her family. From the very beginning of the story, Rachel is self-centred beyond all belief and even brings a hand mirror to the Congo, which proves how much she values her looks and her future alone. Inversely, Ruth May does not care what she looks like but rather values spending time with her family. Each of these traits adds to the fact that they are foils. The girls' values come into play especially when Ruth May is sick in bed with malaria. Rachel does not seem like she could care less about Ruth May, but is rather worrying over herself and her well being. Her first words in Section 2 of Book 3 are when she says, “I was in the kitchen house slaving over a hot stove when everybody came running by” (245) as if her family does not have other issues at that moment. In contrast, Ruth May's first words of the section are very much different when she says, “Sometimes you just want to lay down and look at the whole world sideways. Mama and I do. It feels nice” (215), showing how deeply Ruth May cares for her family. She even says, “I was sad and wanted Leah to come back” (215) soon after. Kingsolver does this intentionally to provide a strong contrast between the two girls before also revealing similarities between them in order to emphasize the traits of each character. If Ruth May were not so nice, Rachel's bad attitude may not look quite as bad, but that is not the case. Because of this, Rachel and Ruth May are foils.

The criteria for being a foil does not only include differences but rather includes similarities as well. Although Ruth May is a much kinder person than Rachel, they both have a similar view of the people of Kilanga when they first arrive. Rachel is very judgemental of the people's ways and Ruth May is equally as confused. Ruth May's initial opinion is biblically-based when she says, “God says the Africans are the Tribes of Ham. Ham was the worst one of Noah's three boys: Shem, Ham, and Japheth” (20) which implies that she thinks they are the worst. Similarly, one of Rachel's first thoughts is that the people of Kilanga are heathens when she says her family “got shoved straight into the heathen pandemonium” (23). These opinions are not the nicest or most understanding, which unfortunately can be expected for the time that the story is set in, especially since the family comes from a place that teaches them that “they're different

---

from us and needs ought to keep to their own" (20). Kingsolver begins the story purposely with everyone having an overall confused mindset and lack of understanding of the idea of the coloured people in Kilanga before they spend more time there and form their own opinions based on experience rather than the bible or word of mouth from family and friends. With Ruth May and Rachel this is especially valuable because they have the same opinion upon their arrival, just like the rest of the Price family, which enhances the traits that make them foils.

Yet another contrast between Rachel and Ruth May involves the source of their opinions on the people on Kilanga as previously mentioned as well as the paths they choose to take in the future with their mindsets. Rachel continues being judgemental and thinks only of herself, while Ruth May gets used to life and begins accepting the people. The source of their opinions is also quite important because Rachel's judgements are based on her superiority complex, meanwhile Ruth May's are based on the bible, opinions she gathers from other people, and curiosity. For example, when the family first arrives in the Congo, one of Rachel's first thoughts is "We got fumigated with the odor of perspiring bodies. What I should have stuffed in my purse was those five-day deodorant pads" (22). She acts like a high school bully and is far from respectful. The worst part is that she is old enough to know her opinions and words are hurtful, yet in Ruth May's case, if she were to say something that may be considered hurtful it is obvious given her age that she does not quite grasp the idea of keeping things to herself and that her ideas are easily swayed by her family and their religion. Most of Ruth May's opinions are simply curiosity, such as when she says, "If someone was hungry, why would they have a big fat belly? I don't know." (50). If Rachel, a 16-year-old, were to think something like this, it would obviously be judgement because she knows that it is rude and most likely knows the answer, while Ruth May is simply asking a question because she is a 5-year-old who doesn't quite understand.

Kingsolver does a great job of writing in a way that makes the reader think, especially when it comes to foils. It is obvious that Adah and Leah are foils, so it can be assumed that Rachel and Ruth May are also foils and when it is studied closely it is easy to see that they are in fact foils because of their contrasts and similarities that enhance each other's storyline and personality. They are different because Rachel is self-centred while Ruth May is not and also because of the paths they take with their opinions, providing the part of being a foil that differentiates them rather than Kingsolver writing the same character twice over. They are similar because they start off at the same point with the same opinion, which provides a connection between the two girls to establish that they are foils. Overall, Rachel and Ruth May Price exhibit many differences and many similarities, all of which make them foils for each other.