



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative

2012 Volume II: Storytelling: Fictional Narratives, Imaginary People, and the Reader's Real Life

Stylistic Voice and Questions of Speaking for the Voiceless in The Poisonwood Bible

Curriculum Unit 12.02.10, published September 2012

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"How strange for one man to think he could write the story of another man, a real living man who is perfectly capable of telling his story himself—and then call it autobiography"—Lee Siegel on Dave Eggers' *What is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng*

Introduction

How one speaks can command the attention of a group of friends, a classroom, or even a crowd of thousands. The inflections, pauses, and words delivered in speech have the power to mesmerize, inform, entertain, or reveal. The alternative is also true. Speech can be used carelessly, boring or offending the audience. The term "voice" does not just apply to speech; writers possess voice as well. The strongest writers have a distinctive voice because they consider which word choice, word placement, details, tone, and figurative language would best convey the message they want their readers to understand.

There are people who regardless of their speaking and writing ability are not given a true voice in the world. Their stories are not part of the larger narrative we encounter in school history classes or in literature. They are the voiceless. They are silent. Often writers see these gaps in the "master narrative" that our society accepts as truth and they attempt to fill those gaps by writing for the voiceless, the oppressed. It is refreshing to have stories to read about Native Americans, Hispanics, Africans, African Americans, and women, but many of these stories are not told by the people whose story is being related. For example, one might ask how legitimate Mark Twain's representation of Jim in *Huckleberry Finn* actually is. Or we could consider whether it is possible for Kathryn Stockett, a white woman, to tell an authentic story about African American maids in the South in her novel *The Help*. With these ideas in mind, this unit designed for high school seniors will use Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible* to examine how writers create voice, how voice creates character, and what the writer and the character are trying to convey through his or her choices in diction, syntax, detail, tone, and sensory language. The students will then examine how these stylistic techniques work together to create the larger meaning of the work as a whole, and how Kingsolver uses stylistic voice to raise larger questions about who is able or permitted to speak for themselves in society.

Rationale

This unit is designed for my Advanced Placement English Literature and Composition course for use at the beginning of the school year. I have tried many units at the beginning of the year with varying degrees of success. During my reflections on those units I began to focus on the two main concerns I have at the beginning of the year. The first is that my students come from a wide range of preparatory backgrounds. Some have been in an AP class before, some students are identified as gifted and have completed highly demanding and accelerated course work, some are coming from a background of my district's equivalent to an honors course, and some are coming from a regular core level English class with no acceleration or stress on college preparation. AP courses are tremendously rigorous and these wildly differing preparation levels provide me with a conundrum commonly experienced by many teachers. How do I make each of my students feel as if he or she can be successful from the start, but how do I also ensure that my more advanced students do not get bored?

My second concern arose from my first. I want all of my students to be successful, so I began to think about the goals of my AP course at its most basic level. The course, at its simplest, is a skills course. Students need to be able to identify a technique within a piece of literature, explain how that technique adds meaning, and explain how the technique functions in the text. The students need to be able to demonstrate this skill in a discussion, in an essay, and on a multiple choice test. If students can get the basics of this skill at the beginning of the year, then they will practice the skill throughout the year, mastering it with a level of sophistication that will enable them to receive a score of a 3, 4, or 5 on the AP exam and be successful in whatever course of study they pursue at university. The purpose of this unit is to engage all students in activities at the beginning of the year that are accessible yet challenging, and enable students to begin to practice the basic skills they will need to master by the end of the year. Focusing on literal and figurative voice is one powerful way to accomplish my goals.

According to Nancy Dean in her text *Voice Lessons*, "Understanding voice gives students an appreciation for the richness of language and a deeper understanding of literature. Through voice we come to know authors; by exploring voice we learn to wield language" (xi). Her phrase "wield language" touches a cord in me. Language, as many of my students understand in this age of social networking and bullying, can certainly be a weapon. Yet Dean's word "wield" brings to mind images of knights holding a sword high to defend or fight for themselves or a group of people. Kingsolver is certainly having her characters use language within the novel not only to defend, but also to discover and proclaim an idea or set of ideas.

The Poisonwood Bible tells the story of the Price family. Nathan Price, the father, makes the decision to move his family in the 1960's from America to the Congo to be missionaries. Nathan makes all of the decisions for the family, even refusing to take them back to the States when the sponsoring organization tells him to do so. Nathan's decisions ultimately destroy the family and even lead to the death of one of his daughters. Kingsolver's novel centers on providing his wife, Orleanna Price, and her daughters, an unrepresented group of women within the events of the story, the chance to speak for themselves and tell their own stories rather than the one Nathan was forcing upon them. "Reversing Nathan's arrogation of the authority to speak for his family, she denies him a voice in the narrative while allowing Orleanna and her daughters to speak for themselves." ¹ These women, in turn, also tell the story of the Congolese people, which begins to touch on the larger ramifications of writing and voice I want my students to consider. Whose story is this? Is Kingsolver telling the story of the Price women who were essentially not able to speak in the novel, or is she speaking for

the people of the Congo who were not able to speak when the United States came in and arranged for the assassination of their leader and set up a new dictator? By considering voice and questioning its far reaching implications, my students will hopefully be able to consider how language and writing work for them. It is my goal that my own students learn to "wield language", so that they can move on to be successful readers and writers in any field, but also so that they can then speak for themselves and defend their ideas in writing.

As an English teacher I want my students to find their voices as speakers and as writers. I want them to be able to tell their own stories and to examine the legitimacy of the stories they read. Students who can break down the components of a writer's voice and consider how that writer is using a certain word or word placement to create an effect on the reader are extremely sophisticated readers. Those readers have the potential also to become sophisticated writers. Kingsolver's story is distinctive in that it can be used to examine voice on these more literal levels of style and technique while also raising questions about who is allowed to speak or be heard.

Approaching *The Poisonwood Bible* through voice makes sense since Kingsolver uses the voices of the mother and the four daughters of the Price family to tell the story of this American family's missionary trip to the Congo. Orleanna and her daughters each have their own interpretations, agendas, and voices. Each character's distinctly different voice and distinctly different way of interpreting and reacting to events the family experiences shape how the reader interprets events. Additionally, the story told in the novel is one of a missionary family coming into a village to change the belief system of those people and of America's involvement in the placement of a dictator as the leader of the Congo and how that affected the people of the Congo. This rich representation of voice by Kingsolver will provide my students with the opportunity to examine how smaller decisions of technique by a writer impact the much larger meaning within a piece of writing.

Defining Voice

The study of voice incorporates analysis of diction, detail, figurative language, syntax, and tone. These are five basic techniques that students are expected to understand deeply by the time they sit for the AP exam, so it is vital that they begin to hone their understanding of these concepts early. While many students may be able to define these terms, I have discovered that few can begin a discussion of the function of these techniques when they enter my class. Enter *The Poisonwood Bible*.

For this unit I will first cover each component of stylistic voice in mini-lessons using examples from *The Poisonwood Bible* and other texts. Then we will go through Ruth May's narratives in detail examining the different aspects of her voice and character. The students will progress to a written analysis of Ruth May's voice and how it may reveal the larger meaning of the work. After students write we will examine some of those pieces as a whole class to look at different ways students approached writing about voice. After this modeling of how to teach and discuss voice through Ruth May's narratives, small groups of students will be assigned either Adah's, Leah's, or Rachel's narratives to analyze and teach to the rest of the class. After the student teaching we will return to a large group discussion of Orleanna's narratives, which are denser and provide a better bridge to discussion of the more figurative issues of voice in the text.

Stylistic Voice

Voice can be examined in two ways within *The Poisonwood Bible*: stylistically and figuratively. The first way my students will examine voice is within its stylistic construction, which lends itself so easily to a beginning unit for an AP English Literature course or to most high school English classes. Throughout my years of teaching and studying English, I have heard voice defined in a variety of ways and used in place of other terms such as tone. For the purposes of this unit, the definition that best fits what I want my students to consider can be found in Nancy Dean's *Discovering Voice: Voice Lessons for Middle and High School*. Dean states, "Voice is created through *conscious choices*. In other words, the writer, painter, or musician purposefully chooses his or her 'tools'(words, colors, instruments) and uses them in ways that create a certain effect." ² This plays on the ideas of specific choices writers make, which is one key component that students need to consider when reading analytically and preparing for the AP exam. In another of Dean's books, she describes voice as being "central to communication" because "Voice, the color and texture of communication, stamps expression with the indelible mark of personality. It is the expression of who we are: the pitch and timbre of verbalization. Voice is the fingerprint of a person's language." ³ While students are examining the narratives of Orleana, Ruth May, Adah, Leah, and Rachel Price, I want them to identify the ways in which the "color and texture" of the narratives differ, thus creating different voices and, in turn, different characters and perspectives. While we work through the novel we will focus on five components of voice: diction, detail, figurative language, syntax, and tone. ⁴

By starting the year with *The Poisonwood Bible* my students will get practice examining diction, syntax, selection of detail, figurative language, and tone with five separate narratives that allow them to do a comparison of how the techniques are used from character to character. For example, the character Ruth May is only five years old. An early line within one of her narratives is, "If somebody was hungry, why would they have a big fat belly? I don't know." ⁵ The content of this line is immediately suggestive of a younger character because it is asking a practical question based on a visual observation, something children often do. As students look at the diction in the lines, the phrase "big fat belly" sticks out as suggestive of a younger speaker because of the redundancy of words and the choice of the word "belly" over "stomach," a slightly more specific and mature word. The final sentence, "I don't know," is a simple statement demonstrating the lack of knowledge of the character, and its placement directly after the question shows the speaker does not attempt to puzzle out the question, an action an older character might attempt.

Students can easily juxtapose Ruth May's sentence with 17-year-old Rachel's statement that opens her first narrative, "Man oh man, are we in for it now, was my thinking about the Congo from the instant we first set foot. We are supposed to be calling the shots here, but it doesn't look to me like we're in charge of a thing, not even our own selves." ⁶ The content of Rachel's statement is clearly different from Ruth May's in that Rachel is commenting on the larger place (Congo) and the larger differences she sees (us vs. them), while Ruth May looked at one specific visual image and could not connect to a larger concept. When looking at Rachel's diction, there is the use of a slang phrase "man oh man," calling to mind teenagers and their fondness for more casual language and language experimentation. There is also the structure of the sentences with the parenthetical comments lending a caustic tone to the statements, which is much more sophisticated than Ruth May's simple question that she fails to puzzle through. The changes in narrative speaker from chapter to chapter provide the students with the opportunity to compare the voice changes and see the striking differences between the diction, syntax, and tone of 17-year-old Rachel and five-year-old Ruth May. This way they can begin to identify word choices and structures that seem to be unique to each character and consider the larger function of those choices. What is it about the phrase "man oh man" that calls to mind a teenage

voice? What effect is made on the reader by using this phrase? What does the use of the phrase tell us about the character using it? By extension then, what can we, as readers, begin to think about the character's purpose in telling us her side of this story?

While this seems like a relatively simple concept and each idea appears to flow easily to the next (identification to figuring out meaning to considering function) all teachers know that students will not automatically make these leaps within their analysis and learning. That will only occur in some strange utopian classroom that I have certainly never encountered. That movement among levels of analysis takes work to teach. In order to get there, a teacher must have the students consider each concept individually at first; only then can they build to that swirling of concepts together to consider the larger meaning and function of the voice.

Diction

The first component of stylistic voice to consider is diction. When I ask my students to define diction they quickly yell out "Word choice!" Certainly diction is at its simplest word choice, but it is really about choosing the perfect word to convey your exact idea. Also, words do not just have a dictionary definition, they have a connotation as well. The connotation of a word often resonates more with a reader or audience and is one of the things my students need to consider more deeply. I tell my students (in a rather clichéd manner, I admit) that words are not simply black and white; they are a thousand shades of grey, depending on their context. Students should consider that "Words can be formal or informal, depending on the writer's audience and purpose...A writer's words should always suit the audience and purpose of the piece." ⁷ The idea of purpose is an important concept I want my student to examine when reading the novel. Since character narratives often overlap in *The Poisonwood Bible*, the reader gets the chance to hear about the same event from more than one perspective. I want my students to look closely at the retelling of events and see how the diction of the differing narratives shapes our understanding of the event.

A nice place to look at diction is in the middle of the novel. The family is attacked by a swarm of fire ants and must leave the village in a mass rush of confusion. The story is told in fragments by each of the daughters as they are awoken in the middle of the night covered in ants. Leah begins, "This awful night is the worst we've ever known: the *nsongonya*. They came on us like a nightmare. Nelson bang-bang-banging on the back door got tangled up with my sleep, so that, even after I was awake, the next hours had the unsteady presence of a dream. Before I even knew where I was, I found myself pulled along by somebody's hand in the dark and a horrible fiery sting sloshing up my calves." ⁸ Notice the use of the words "nightmare," "sleep," and "dream." Obviously each of these words is related by subject, but they provide us with the impression that Leah is confused and unaware of the exact events of the evening. When she states, "I found myself pulled along by somebody's hand" the word "found" makes it seem like she did not go to anyone or reach for anyone deliberately, but that someone pulling her to safety was a discovery she made. She was not an active participant in leaving and running to safety. When the dream references are linked with this she is an even less active participant in her escape from the ants. This becomes important later in her narrative; she is asked where her family is and she realizes she never looked for them and has essentially abandoned her family. "'I don't know. I don't really know where anybody is, I just ran.' I was still waking up and it struck me now with force that I should have been looking out for my own family. I'd thought to worry about Mama Mwanza but not my own crippled twin. A moan rose out of me..." ⁹ Note that in this realization that she abandoned her family, Leah uses the phrase "I was still waking up." At this point in her story she has run some distance from the village and is currently standing in the water at the edge of the river, waiting to be placed in a canoe. Leah is generally considered by herself and her other family members to be the most able-bodied member of their

family and the one with the strongest ability to survive the Congo. In fact, within Adah's description of the ant swarm their mother, Orleanna, tells Adah that, "Leah will, Leah can take care of herself" as Orleanna tries to figure out which daughter or daughters to save. ¹⁰ According to Orleanna, Leah, the most able member of her family, never thought of helping them in a time when they most needed her help. Leah's repeated use of words related to sleep give the reader the impression that she was unconscious in her abandonment of her family. Was Leah truly unconscious or did she just wish to appear so in her retelling? This passage is a good example of one in which the speaker's purpose should be examined closely, and diction is a good entry into that discussion.

Syntax

Syntax is another term my students feel confident defining as "word order." I, however, like the more expressive phrase "sentence arrangement" which has a greater scope than simply "word order." When students examine syntax they are looking at where a writer chooses to place words, which word is placed near another, how phrases are configured and organized within the sentence, and the punctuation choices used within the sentence. Whenever I study syntax with my students, I face two barriers. The first is, "No way this guy thought about every sentence like this, Miss!" The same student who will spend all night figuring out how to beat one level of an Xbox game cannot fathom someone examining their writing with the same level of concentration and attention to detail the student gives to Xbox. Students need to realize that these are expert writers and that writing is their livelihood. Additionally, students seem reluctant to discuss syntax because they do not have ready access to grammatical terms within their vocabulary. However, as long as students know the basics of subject, predicate, verb, noun, pronoun, adjective and a few others, they have more than enough term knowledge to proceed with a discussion of syntax. They should also be able to discuss punctuation, especially the semi-colon. If your students are not comfortable with these basics, then a quick review is probably necessary, but syntax is not a nerdy study of grammar minutiae and should not be approached in that manner.

Adah's narratives within the novel provide an excellent examination of syntax and could make for some fun discussions or even warm up activities. Her fascination with palindromes and word play can really hone discussion in quickly on syntax. Adah's animosity towards her twin sister is revealed when she states, "Leah fancies herself Our Father's star pupil in matters Biblical. *Star Pupil: Lipup Rats*. Miss Rat-pup read the quote, nodding solemnly" ¹¹ Adah's palindrome of 'star pupil' as 'lipup rats' gives her the opportunity to call her sister a rat-pup, which is not an exact replica of the palindrome. This syntactical change is subtle, but revealing about Adah's feelings toward Leah.

Selection of Detail

Detail selection is a murky idea to many of my students because they are reluctant within their own writing to cut out anything they have already written, even if it doesn't work, because it takes such an effort to get it onto the page. So the very thought that any writer may have added, removed, and then added something different to create a certain effect is foreign to them because they are rarely willing to do it themselves. "Detail...shapes the reader's understanding and view of a topic. The writer can emphasize a point by focusing the reader's attention on a thought or reason through detail." ¹² This is also a clear reason to examine detail choices with my students so they begin to see the purpose behind including one phrase but not another. Within *Poisonwood* some characters seem to care far more about what details they include than others. For example, Ruth May might not be including certain details about an event, but she is five years old, so her reasons for not including those details are very different from Leah's, Adah's, or Rachel's reasons.

The most fascinating narratives to examine for selection of detail are Orleanna's. Her narratives in general are rife with meaning and she is clearly in deep emotional conflict about her time in the Congo and her behavior while she was there. One of her daughters dies and the Price family is involved in the coup to change leadership, even though it is a peripheral involvement. Orleanna's guilt over these events is often in conflict with her need to be released from whatever responsibility she feels about these things.

Orleanna's passage that opens the novel is an excellent one to consider from the standpoint of selection of detail. "Imagine a ruin so strange it must never have happened. First, picture the forest. I want you to be its conscience, the eyes in the trees. The trees are columns of slick, brindled bark like muscular animals overgrown beyond all reason. Every space is filled with life: delicate, poisonous frogs war-painted like skeletons, clutched in copulation, secreting their precious eggs onto dripping leaves. Vines strangling their own kin in the everlasting wrestle for sunlight." ¹³ This passage is filled with detail, but upon examination the detail connects to larger events in the story. Orleanna states that the "space is filled with life", but then she proceeds to describe a poisonous and destructive life. This alludes to [the] destructive force of the jungle on her family (malaria) or it could connect to the destruction America brought to the Congolese people. "Vines strangling their own kin" could be connected to what Nathan does to his children by taking them to the Congo and being so incredibly strict about religion and his expectations for them. It could also be Orleanna admitting that she played a part in the "strangling" of her own daughters. The detail choices within Orleanna's narratives are complex and revealing about character's purpose.

Figurative Language

Kingsolver is an incredibly lyrical writer, so her book is tailor-made for an examination of figurative language. Also, the more lyrical passages can indicate different things about the speaker of the narrative than passages with plainer language. Writers use "figurative language because it's a rich, strong, and vivid way to express meaning. By using figurative language, we are able to say much more in fewer words." ¹⁴ Seeking out different figurative techniques the Price women use and "analyzing the crap out of them" (as my students say) might seem tedious and annoying, but when this activity is couched in the larger realm of voice it gains a context that lends a clear purpose to the activity. The simple act of considering why Orleanna, for example, is much more metaphoric and uses more sensory language than Rachel provides students with a way to escape analysis of technique in isolation and slides them into looking at how a technique builds to a larger meaning in the text.

Adah is an interesting character to look at as well when considering figurative language and voice. Her language slides from syntactically complex to lyrical to sparse and back again. Looking at when it is sparse compared to when it contains figurative language makes it easier for students to consider how these choices affect the purpose behind the narrative. At one point, Adah says about her own potential death, "I should like to be a doctor poet, I think, if I happen to survive to adulthood. I never imagined myself as a woman grown, anyway, and nowadays especially it seems a waste of imagination," ¹⁵ but when describing yet another funeral for a Congolese baby she says, "All the mothers come walking on their knees. They shriek and wail a long, high song with quivering soft palates, like babies dying of hunger." ¹⁶ Commenting on her own mortality she is very straightforward, but when describing the crying of mothers at a funeral she equates it with "babies dying of hunger." The use of figurative language in one and not in the other makes the death of babies have more of an impact on the reader. Perhaps this choice is Adah's way of coping with her own realization of her mortality as she is surrounded by dying children when she herself is still a child. Students can use the ways she categorizes death to consider what she is trying to relate to her audience or what these lines reveal about the psychological impact of her African experiences.

Tone

Tone is a concept that is vitally important for students to understand and understand well in an AP English Literature course; without fail it is covered on the exam. Despite its importance, I often dread my discussions of tone with my classes because in some long ago class that it seems every single one of my students has taken, they are told that tone and mood are the same thing. We repeatedly discuss the vast and distinct differences between these two elements, but my students continually treat them as one and the same. It is my hope (deep and desperate) that by linking tone with a discussion of voice, my students will begin to comprehend the concept of tone. I recommend covering tone last in the initial discussion of these concepts because "understanding tone requires an understanding of all the elements writers use to create it: diction, detail, figurative language, imagery, and syntax." ¹⁷ The concept itself is difficult to understand because it is so abstract and often elusive in written language, yet so easy to comprehend in spoken language. A limited vocabulary is another issue I have discovered that impedes my students' ability to examine tone properly. Apparently many teachers have this problem because handouts of tone words are easily found on the internet. I recommend pulling a sheet off the internet that best suits your students' needs, passing it out, and discussing it prior to looking at tone in the text.

When students are discussing tone there are really two components to the discussion. They need to figure "out *what* the tone is and *how* that tone is created." ¹⁸ Rachel's narratives are a great way to start a tone discussion because she is filled with teenage attitude and contempt. Turn to the start of any of her narratives and you are greeted with something like, "Well, Hallelujah and pass the ammunition. Company for dinner! And an eligible bachelor at that, without three wives or even one as far as I know." ¹⁹ Rachel's flippant use of a Biblical term and mocking reference to the cultural differences between her ideas of an eligible bachelor versus the Congolese version immediately conveys to the reader her general disdain for the situation and starts an easy discussion of tone.

If my students look at each of these components individually at first, just to get a sense of how to approach each component of voice, then they should be much better equipped to examine the overall voice of each character. Through their analysis of each character I hope they will realize that "each narrator serves not only as a focal vehicle for telling the story, but also as a determining agent whose choices of whom and what to include in her portion of the story shape the overall message and thematic slant of the entire work." ²⁰ This realization that the overall message of the story is being shaped by the choices the characters make within their narratives will be a nice segue into the larger questions of who can speak for others.

Speaking for the Voiceless

Speaking of incarcerated women, L. Jeanne Fryer observes, "The 'master narrative' is the story told by the dominant culture and fosters normative ways of seeing, thus marginalizing, and indeed attempting to silence, all that don't comfortably fit into this story." ²¹ Students often encounter only the "master narrative" in school through the novels and plays they study in English class. In recent years my school district and others have been making strides in attempting to change this narrative so it is more reflective of the multi-cultural student body we see each day in our classes. Despite this, there are still a shocking number of stories that go untold by the people who actually experienced them. Social media has been changing this, as seen via Facebook, Twitter, and You Tube in the reports that come out of various countries in the Middle East as governments are challenged by their citizens. While we are seeing stories told as they unfold, there are many from the past that are still untold, and will remain that way unless opportunities are provided for those stories to be spread.

When a writer chooses to tell the story of a traditionally voiceless person questions arise. Who tells the stories? Should the person who has experienced the story relate it for others, or can someone else who already has a public platform available speak for others? Fryer speaks for many when she contends that "real voices need to be heard; voices of direct experience are significant and authoritative. They help to crack the 'master narrative' allowing space for increased awareness, expanded understanding and possibilities for change." ²² When a person is speaking from experience there is a particular kind of authority automatically granted to them. For example, Richard Wright's novel *Black Boy (American Hunger)* is generally considered an autobiographical account of his life, although Wright refused to call it an autobiography. Since the story is so closely associated with his life it is generally considered a powerful account of African American life during that period of history. Some people may question whether some of the events in the story actually happened to Wright, but no one questions the validity of his voice in telling that story. Kathryn Stockett's novel *The Help* has been widely read by my students and many others. It retells the stories of a series of fictional African American maids in the South, and it raised a firestorm of concern by critics and readers alike because the author of the story is white. Many questioned whether she had the right to speak for the characters she portrayed in her story, and many wondered if her portrayal of the women relied on too many stereotypes. Most of my students loved the book. Prior to reading they had no knowledge of the hardships faced by African American women as domestic workers in the South. Stockett's book introduced them to an issue they would have never otherwise known about or considered.

Kingsolver's novel raises similar questions. She is telling a story that few Americans know and touching on traditions of American colonialism that many are not aware exist. Most of Barbara Kingsolver's writings have a political and social justice element within them. Kingsolver has said, "It surprises me that almost everyone else in the United States of America who writes a book hates to be called a political writer. As if that demeans them." ²³ Kingsolver clearly embraces the title of political writer and has focused much of her writing on the treatment of women and underrepresented people in her books *Bean Trees*, *Holding the Line*, *Homeland and Other Stories*, and *Another America/Otra America*. "Throughout the two decades of Kingsolver's literary career, she has followed this calling to be the progressive social conscience of her times, and her political interests are largely rooted in her personal experiences." ²⁴ Through her writing she has raised issues concerning Native Americans, the poor, union workers, race, immigration, agriculture, environmentalism, as well as many others. Clearly she sees issues in society that she wants her readers to think about, so she uses her platform as a writer to bring these ideas into the public discourse. Is that problematic or not? Is it appropriate for her, a white woman with a relatively privileged upbringing, to speak for people she believes need to be heard?

These difficult questions are the very ones I would like my students to ponder while reading *The Poisonwood Bible*. We read many novels throughout the year that raise social justice issues, but Kingsolver does so in a way that seems to invite her audience to question whether it was appropriate for her to do so. Elaine R. Ognibene comments that in Kingsolver's novel, "the effects of Nathan's missionary position on his wife, Orleana, his four daughters, and the Congolese become clear as Kingsolver parallels Nathan's behaviors to imperialist actions in the Congo." ²⁵ It is very clear to any reader that Nathan's behavior with his family mimics the behavior of America and other nations toward the Congolese people. The interesting thing is that Kingsolver remedies the situation for the Price women by allowing them to tell the story and silencing Nathan. This choice in narrators essentially imposes imperialist actions on Nathan by the very people he oppressed. However, in providing the Price women with a voice Kingsolver makes "Orleana and her daughters . . . interpreters of the African world for Kingsolver's American readers." ²⁶ I would like my students to consider the implications of such a choice. "Kingsolver's sympathies are clearly on the side of the Congo; but because her Congolese characters never speak for themselves," Kimberly A. Koza contends, "she seems to deny them

agency in their own story." ²⁷ So which is more important, that the story gets told, or that the Congolese people get to tell the story themselves?

Kingsolver goes to great lengths in the story to demonstrate guilt on the part of almost all of the American characters. "Kingsolver's novel gains its power through her exploration of the Price women's struggles to judge their own complicity in both their family's fate and that of the Congo." ²⁸ Orleanna especially feels responsible not only for what happened to her daughters, but also for America's activities in the Congo. Her narratives are riddled with statements like "How can I ever walk free in the world, after the clap of those hands in the marketplace that were plainly trying to send me away?" ²⁹ In addition to Orleanna's numerous references, Leah marries Anatole, a Congolese teacher, and immediately becomes invested in the fate of the Congolese people as she lives under the dictator Mobutu's rule. Mobutu changes the name of the country to Zaire and the names of all of the towns. Leah's daughter Elisabet wonders if her name will have to be changed because it is too European, to which Leah responds, "It wouldn't surprise me actually. Mobutu's edicts are that far-reaching." ³⁰ Through Leah readers get a sense of what madness actually occurs after the assassination of Lumumba and the placement of the dictator Mobutu with the help of vast amounts of American money. For many of my students Leah's experience with her American family and then her African one will be the only time they learn about the events that occurred in the Congo in the 1960s. These events are important because they are similar to many of the things happening in Africa today and provide students with a concrete way to begin thinking about the issues.

There seem to be some legitimate arguments for Kingsolver to tell this story, yet many argue that her portrayal of the Congolese people is thin. Anatole, Leah's husband in the novel, is a major character in the story, yet "the idealized Anatole is more a symbol of African resistance than a fully developed character." ³¹ In fact arguments about Anatole's portrayal are reminiscent of things said about Mark Twain's portrayal of Jim in *Huckleberry Finn* as thin and stereotypical. "What A. LaVonne Brown Ruoff says about Kingsolver's depiction of Native Americans in her earlier novels could also be applied to her portrayal of Anatole: 'They're there for local color, for romance. But they are not real people.'" ³² Some of my students would argue with that statement since they have found Anatole to be a very powerful character in the story.

I do not think there is an answer to the question of who has the right to tell certain stories, but I think the question should be considered by students and readers in general. There is danger in not considering the validity of the stories we read and we should always consider the *purpose* behind the tale. In the novel *What is the What*, an autobiographical novel that tells the story of a "Lost Boy" of the Sudan, Valentino Achak Deng, as written by the American author Dave Eggers, the narrator makes an interesting statement about the flexibility of stories even when they are told by the person who experienced them. "But now, sponsor and newspaper reporters and the like expect the stories to have certain elements, and the Lost Boys have been consistent in their willingness to oblige. Survivors tell the stories the sympathetic want, and that means making them as shocking as possible. My own story includes enough small embellishments that I cannot criticize the accounts of others." ³³ The narrator, Valentino Achak Deng, speaks of the storyteller having an awareness of audience. What the audience wants to hear shapes the story he tells of his experiences escaping the Sudan and the violence there. We all shape our voices to fit our audiences (I am doing so as I write this unit) and make changes in our stories to better fit our audience. Does that make the telling of our own experiences any less authentic and valid? Deng wanted his story told and went so far as to have the American writer Dave Eggers write his story and call it a novel. Does this make Deng's story less important to read simply because he did not compose it himself?

By considering questions like these students will understand the larger implications of a literary work and writing in general. The act of putting words on a page has purpose and comes with a responsibility. Maybe by considering ideas like voice, the purpose behind voice, and the right of one to tell a story my students will understand the power their own writing can have.

AP Curricular Objectives

This unit covers many of the main goals of an AP English Literature and Composition course. It will certainly begin building the base for the deep analysis required by the AP Literature exam, and it will provide the students with many opportunities to read and write in an analytical and critical way.

AP requires that any AP literature course cover standard C1 which states that a course "include an intensive study of representative works of both British and American writers, as well as well as works written in several genres from the sixteenth century to contemporary times." The inclusion of *The Poisonwood Bible* into the course meets two of these requirements by providing my students with access to a contemporary piece of writing by a woman. Women are currently quite underrepresented in my course, so this unit is one way to incorporate a broader range of voices for my students. Additionally, students were assigned the text as summer reading and will reread the text as we move through this unit. This rereading satisfies the intensive work required by an AP course that is often neglected simply because teachers feel compelled to cover a vast amount of material quickly.

The students will be writing shorter pieces as well as longer essays in this unit. The writing activities will meet the AP standard C4 which states that, "The course teaches students to write an interpretation of a piece of literature that is based on a careful observation of the works textual details, considering such elements as the use of figurative language, imagery, symbolism, and tone." The act of analyzing voice, which encompasses detail, figurative language, and tone, will enable my students to write about these concepts in more sophisticated way. The practice they get verbally analyzing in discussion will hopefully translate into their writing so that the content of their pieces is enhanced and we can focus on writing convention and style.

When the students complete their writing they will receive various types of feedback from me. They will all receive comments on their papers, but we will also occasionally look at some individual models of student work and develop plans for revision. Students will be expected to revise various pieces of writing throughout the unit to show their growth as a writer. These activities will help the students meet the standard C8 which requires that "the AP teacher provide instruction and feedback on students' writing assignments, both before and after the students revise their work, which help the students develop a wide-ranging vocabulary used appropriately and effectively." These activities also help to meet standard C10 which states, "The AP teacher provides instruction and feedback on students' writing assignments, both before and after the students revise their work, which help the students develop logical organization, enhanced by specific techniques to increase coherence, such as repetition, transitions, and emphasis." These standards are met throughout my process of teaching writing. I always provide my students time to meet with me to discuss a paper before it is handed in and after the work has been graded. I have a policy that if you did not earn an "A" on an essay, then that essay may be revised for a better grade. Students who take advantage of this policy greatly enhance their ability to use techniques within their writing for a clear purpose because they are rethinking previous writing choices made during the revision process.

Strategies

I, like most teachers, have a discussion model I follow in my class. I tend to follow the same model each year, but I like to have student input prior to the first whole group discussion to ensure that I am meeting the needs of the learners in each class. Before our first whole group discussion I have the students create two lists on the board. On the first we identify what we expect from others in a class discussion. Responses include things like "the group listens when I speak" and "no one tells anyone their idea is stupid." Then we make a second list that identifies the things that they, personally, should do in a class discussion. These generally overlap with the other list with responses like "I should listen," or "If I disagree with someone I should do it politely or ask them for textual evidence." Despite the overlap I think it is important to make a distinction between the actions of the individual vs. the actions of the group because then the students see that the group only works if each person follows certain expectations. After we make the lists I compile the expectations on a piece of large chart paper and post it in the room.

When it is time for large group discussion I always pull out the chart and review it with the class. I usually post the chart in the middle of the board in the front of the room so it is in clear view of everyone in the class. Then we all move our chairs in a circle to get ready for discussion. My general policy is pretty simple. The discussion is for the students, not for me, and everyone must participate at least twice. To encourage participation from all I have a chart and I check off their names each time someone participates. After a few whole group discussions I usually start handing this duty off to a student. To encourage further participation and reduce my voice in the group, I will often give the students a list of questions or talking points for the discussion the day before. As the school year progresses I ask the students to write down questions or talking points they would like me to add to these handouts so that they have further investment in the discussion.

By taking these student centered steps I have found that the participation in large group discussions increases throughout the year as students feel more comfortable with the routine and since they set many of the expectations for the discussion.

Another strategy I am using in this unit is student teaching following a jig-saw inspired approach. Many students and teachers are familiar with the concept of jig-saw where a group of students is responsible for one piece of a reading, and then the small group reports their information out to the larger group. The entire class gets all of the information while only doing part of the reading or work. All members of my class are reading the entire novel, but the class will be split into groups to work with one character's set of narratives in close detail. Each group will teach their material to the rest of the class. When my students are teachers in the classroom they take over the role of teacher completely. They are expected to write a lesson plan, teach a lesson for an entire class period, assign homework, collect completed homework, and grade the homework. This strategy of having the students teach the class can easily be adapted to any unit or subject matter. The basic method works with virtually anything and demonstrates a student's mastery over the subject matter.

When asking my students to teach for the first time I always model my expectations by teaching a similar thing first. In this unit I am going to teach Ruth May's narratives to show the students one approach they could use. The students will receive the assignment and assignment details in advance and be placed in groups prior to our work with Ruth May's narratives. The rationale behind this is that the students will have a chance to take notes on the strategies I use to examine Ruth May's narratives with the class and consult with their group frequently during the process. Additionally, I will give them a copy of the lesson plans I used to teach Ruth May's narratives so they can see how the lesson plan connects to the activities in class.

Each student will receive a copy of my lesson plans, a checklist of everything the "teachers" are expected to hand in, and a list of the possible narratives the students may teach. We review the lesson plans and the due dates, and we discuss the expectations. I hang a sign-up sheet for teaching dates on the door, and the students sign up for the day they would like to teach. I usually plan the first day for the Tuesday following the sign-up day. After signing up I let the students work in their small groups planning lessons. I also provide them with access to computers and encourage them to ask me many questions. I usually only allow for one day of planning in class. After the planning day we go back to work on other classroom activities, but two days prior to their teaching the students must hand in their lesson plan and sit down with me to review their homework and its corresponding grading rubric.

When a group teaches they are given full control of the classroom from the minute the bell rings to when the end of class bell rings. While they are running the class I sit in the back of the classroom with a checklist making note of all of the students who participate. In order to ensure full participation and cooperation for the student teachers I give the students in the class 25 participation points on student teacher days. I have found that this keeps their behavior under control and ensures the student teachers get a class of active participants because it is the easiest points they will ever receive in my AP English class. At the end of class the group should assign the homework, and the students are expected to return it the next day. I do not permit my students to hand in late work to me, and they are not permitted to hand it in late to the student teachers. The student teachers then have three school days to check and return the homework to me for my grade book. The group receives a grade based on the neatness of the paperwork they hand in, the quality of the homework assignment, and the quality of the lesson they taught. I usually take extensive notes during the lessons, type up the notes, and give each member of the group a copy of the notes along with the grade.

One very important thing to do when asking students to teach a class is to have a guinea pig group. The first teaching group are the guinea pigs, and we have an extensive debrief about their lesson the next day. In the discussion we speak frankly about what worked well, what could have been improved upon, and what is expected of future groups. I make it well known that when it comes to student teaching the guinea pig group will always receive some leniency on their grade because they are going first and do not directly benefit from the debrief discussion. Students are also told in advance that there will be this frank discussion after their lesson, but that there will not be this type of discussion after any other group. The few times I have had students teach and not done a guinea pig group and debrief discussion the resulting lessons were generally dismal failures. Students need this "step back" moment where they can speak as both student and teacher and assess what worked for them as students and teachers. A side benefit of both the discussion and the student teaching is that the students gain insight into themselves as learners.

After each group teaches we will have a large class discussion about voice. We will look for commonalities in the discussions of each of the daughters and begin to consider the larger implications of voice. This is where students will start to bridge the gap between looking at components of writing in isolation and begin to consider how all of the components work together to build a larger meaning.

Classroom Activities

Days 1-3

This unit begins with the students reading *The Poisonwood Bible* in its entirety outside of class. I have assigned the text as summer reading. The lessons are designed with the understanding that the students are essentially rereading this text, and that they have a general understanding of events of the novel.

We will begin the unit with a discussion of voice and the different components of voice, which are diction, syntax, selection of detail, figurative language, and tone. I will ask the students to define each of the terms first and we will put working definitions on the board. Then I will give them my very specific definitions for each term. We will discuss the differences between the student made definitions and the ones I gave them. This discussion is important because it is actually a discussion of diction. Many of the student definitions will provide a general sense of what the terms mean, but my definitions will probably be more specific. In our discussion of the definitions students will begin to consider why certain words within a definition are important.

After our discussion of the terms we will go through each term and look at examples from *The Poisonwood Bible* and other texts. I will provide students with one example from *The Poisonwood Bible* which we will discuss in class as a group. Then they will receive another example from various texts I know they have read during high school as take home practice. Students will be asked to write a short paragraph analyzing one of the voice elements for each example.

The first day of the lesson will be spent on the discussion of definitions. The second and third days of the lesson will be spent on discussion of the various components of voice using excerpts from *The Poisonwood Bible*. For example, on day two we will discuss diction, syntax, and selection of detail. For homework the students will receive three examples from other texts, one example for each component of voice covered that day. The students will then write a short paragraph of analysis for each example. On day three we will discuss figurative language and tone and then the students will get two more examples from other texts for homework. While I have three days allotted for this work, it should be noted that this could certainly take longer depending on the needs of the students in the class.

Day 4

This day is meant for reviewing the concepts and looking at the student homework assignments. We will review the concepts by looking at how the students wrote about diction, syntax, selection of detail, figurative language, and tone. I have a device called an ELMO in my classroom that allows me to take any piece of paper and project it up on a screen. I will use the ELMO to project different student homework assignments for class discussion. If you do not have an ELMO you could photocopy student examples to pass out to the students.

When looking at the student examples we will consider the validity of the analysis and the way the ideas are expressed. This way we can review concepts while also getting a writing lesson in early in the school year.

Days 5-9

This lesson introduces the student teaching activity discussed in the Strategies section of this unit and models it for the students. The first day will be used to pass out and discuss all of the paperwork involved in this

activity. We will first discuss the overall assignment. Next, we will look at the paperwork they are expected to hand in for the project, and they will receive my examples of that paperwork for the Ruth May portion of the novel that I will teach to them. Finally they will receive their group teaching assignments and have a chance to discuss things with their groups. Students can sign up for their teaching date the following day when they arrive to class.

Over the next three days we will examine the narratives of Ruth May and her voice. These lessons will each last about 30 to 35 minutes, which will leave the students with the last eight to ten minutes of class to sit with their groups and discuss some ideas or ask me questions about procedures and things they are thinking about. On the last of the three days of discussion I will give the students a writing assignment based on our discussion of Ruth May's voice. The students will be asked to characterize Ruth May's voice and the character's purpose. Within their writing they will need to identify lines that support their ideas and the textual evidence must span the novel. The students are expected to identify voice components, examine how those components add meaning to the text, and examine the function of those components. I will also schedule a day in to examine student models of this assignment once the assignment has been handed in and graded. This will again allow for a lesson on writing and build off of the short writing assignments earlier in the unit.

On day five of this lesson, students will be in the library working in their groups to create lesson plans, handouts, and assignments for their teaching day. They may also use this time to discuss their ideas with me and receive feedback on their lesson plans.

Days 10-16

Students should have at least three days between when the Ruth May lessons end and when they begin teaching. This gives the first group the proper amount of time to prepare and allows the students additional time to run ideas by me prior to teaching. Once students start teaching I will allot three days to discussion of the first group's character and two days for each group that follows. The students will teach one day, and then we will have a whole group follow up discussion the next day to ensure that all concepts were covered by the group and to add depth to our discussions. I allot three days to the first group because a majority of day two will be spent having the debrief discussion as noted in the Strategies section of this unit.

Days 16-20

These are the concluding days of the unit which will be spent discussing Orleanna's narratives and the overall meaning of the work as a whole. Once the student teaching is complete we will have wrap up discussion as noted in the Strategies section of this unit. Then we will move on to Orleanna's narratives, which are the most complex of the novel.

I will begin these discussions by asking students to make some general observations about how Orleanna's narratives differ from the other characters. Through this discussion students will probably note that she has fewer narratives, that her narratives are longer, that she starts each section of the story, and that her narratives are almost like prologues to each section. Then we will begin to consider why Orleanna's narratives are set up this way. We will record our general thoughts down on a large chart paper so we can look back at those ideas at the end our detailed discussion of voice.

Next we will look at Orleanna's voice by examining each component of voice in her narratives. During these discussions it is important that the students are consistently asked to discuss what the purpose is behind her diction, syntax, selection of detail, figurative language, and tone. It is also important to ask the students to

compare Orleanna's statements with the statements made by her daughters, as well as the events in the story. Focusing on these two elements will help the students begin to bridge the gap between examining something in isolation and figuring out how all parts combine to make meaning.

On the last day of discussion students will be given a homework assignment that asks them to write about Orleanna's voice. They will do the same assignment they did for Ruth May, simply substituting Orleanna. Since there was a discussion of the student responses to the Ruth May assignment, students should be able to take that feedback and demonstrate some growth in their writing.

Days 21-23

We will end our series of discussions on Orleanna by opening it up to a wider discussion of voice. Why is the story told by these characters? Why are the narrators only women? Why are Orleanna's narratives limited? Whose story is actually being told? Who actually has a speaking voice in the story? Whose voice do we never hear? As students answer these questions they will need to consistently refer back to the text to provide textual examples.

This will progress us to our discussion of the meaning of the work as a whole. Students will be given their first standard AP writing prompt that mimics question three of the open-ended portion of the exam. The question states, "Barbara Kingsolver uses five different narrators within her novel *The Poisonwood Bible*. Each narrator has a distinctly different voice. Write a well organized essay in which you analyze how different narrative voices illuminate the meaning of the work as a whole. Do not merely summarize the plot." We will discuss the prompt and consider how all of the things we have talked about with voice and purpose help create an overall message or meaning to the novel. Students will complete this assignment at home and turn it in. After the essays are graded we will have a writing workshop using student models from the class. Students will then have the opportunity to revise their essays for a better grade.

Annotated Bibliography

Austenfeld, Anne Marie. "The Revelatory Narrative Circle in Barbara Kingsolver's 'The

Poisonwood Bible.'" *Journal of Narrative Theory* 36, no. 2 (2006): 293-305.

This article provides good background information for teachers prior to teaching Kingsolver's novel. It looks at the function of her narrative structure, which is helpful when teaching this novel at the AP level.

Austenfeld, Thomas, ed. *Critical Insights: Barbara Kingsolver*. Hackensack: Salem Press, 2010.

This is a collection of essays that provide great background for teachers. There are essays about Kingsolver's life as well as her different novels. I recommend "On Barbara Kingsolver" and "The Missionary Position: Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*" as good resources for the ideas within this unit.

The College Board. *The AP Vertical Teams Guide for English*. 2nd ed. Philadelphia: The College Board, 2002.

This book is designed by the College Board for schools designing vertical teams for AP, but it is filled with practical lesson ideas for literature teachers at every level. It is a great resource for AP teacher to use and non-AP teachers for teaching literary terms and discussions of meaning and function.

Dean, Nancy. *Discovering Voice: Voice Lessons for Middle and High School*. Gainesville:

Maupin House, 2006.

This is an incredibly practical book on voice. It provides great introductory information on the components of voice and has lessons that teachers can use in the classroom. All of the lessons are clear, easy to use, and easily adaptable.

Dean, Nancy. *Voice Lessons: Classroom Activities to Teach Diction, Detail, Imagery, Syntax,*

and Tone. Gainesville: Maupin House, 2000.

Very useful text that has short activities teachers could use in class daily as warm-up activities or as take home practice work for students. This book provides an easy way to reinforce the concepts within this unit.

Harmon, William and C. Hugh Holman. *A Handbook to Literature*, 7th ed. Upper Saddle River,

NJ: Prentice Hall, 1996.

This is my source for definitions of all literary terms and devices, which is an absolute necessity in an AP classroom.

Koza, Kimberly A. "The Africa of Two Western Women Writers: Barbara Kingsolver and

Margaret Laurence." *Critique* 44, no. 3 (2003): 284-294.

This is a great resource for considering questions about writers speaking for other people. Students could easily be given the first half of the article to help stimulate discussion in class.

Endnotes

1. Kimberly A. Koza, "The Africa of Two Western Women Writers: Barbara Kingsolver and Margaret Laurence," *Critique* 44, no.3 (2003): 285.
2. Nancy Dean, *Discovering Voice: Voice Lessons for Middle and High School* (Gainesville: Maupin House, 2006), 1.
3. Nancy Dean, *Voice Lessons: Classroom Activities to Teach Diction, Detail, Imagery, Syntax, and Tone* (Gainesville: Maupin House, 2000), xi.
4. *Ibid.*, xi.
5. Barbara Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1998), 50.
6. *Ibid.*, 22.
7. Dean, *Discovering Voice*, 9.
8. Kingsolver, *Poisonwood*, 299.
9. *Ibid.*, 300.
10. *Ibid.*, 305.
11. *Ibid.*, 55.

12. Dean, *Discovering Voice*, 22.
13. Ibid., 5.
14. Dean, *Discovering Voice*, 35.
15. Ibid, 170.
16. Kingsolver, *Poisonwood*, 170.
17. Dean, *Discovering Voice*, 90.
18. Ibid., 91.
19. Kingsolver, *Poisonwood*, 125.
20. Anne Marie Austenfeld, "The Revelatory Narrative Circle in Barbara Kingsolver's 'The Poisonwood Bible,'" *Journal of Narrative Theory* 36, no. 2 (2006), 295.
21. L.Jeanne Fryer, "Silenced Voices: Stories of Incarcerated Women," *Women's Studies* 35, (2006):545.
22. Ibid., 545.
23. Quoted in John Nizalowski, "The Political is Personal: Sociocultural Realities and the Writings of Barbara Kingsolver" *Critical Insights: Barbara Kingsolver* (Hackensack: Salem Press, 2010), 17.
24. Ibid., 17.
25. Elaine R. Ognibene, "The Missionary Position: Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*," *Critical Insights: Barbara Kingsolver* (Hackensack: Salem Press, 2010), 195.
26. Kimberly A. Koza, "The Africa of Two Western Women Writers: Barbara Kingsolver and Margaret Laurence," *Critique* 44, no. 3 (2003), 286.
27. Ibid., 288.
28. Ibid., 288.
29. Kingsolver, *Poisonwood*, 89.
30. Ibid., 445.
31. Koza, "Two Western Women," 287.
32. Ibid.,287.
33. Dave Eggers, *What is the What* (New York: Vintage, 2007), 21.

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