13. **2003, Form B.** Novels and plays often depict characters caught between colliding cultures -- national, regional, ethnic, religious, institutional. Such collisions can call a character's sense of identity into question. Select a novel* or play in which a character responds to such a cultural collision. Then write a well-organized essay in which you describe the character's response and explain its relevance to the work as a whole. (*Write about *The Poisonwood Bible.*

Adapting to unfamiliar situations is difficult for anyone, but is especially difficult when attempting to reconcile the differences between inherently separate cultures. Naturally, when two such diverse entities are brought together, there is bound to be conflict between beliefs.

Throughout the novel, *The Poisonwood Bible*, by Barbara Kingsolver, Nathan Price is seen as a character with an immutable will that refuses to conform to the Congolese culture which leads on myriad occasions to the detriment of others. Kingsolver uses Nathan’s blunt refusal of the Congolese culture to illuminate the folly of those attempting to apply provincial ideals to exotic locales.
Nathan’s self-induced ignorance of Congolese practices results in the repeated failure of any practical task he attempts in the Congo. This is no better evidenced than in Nathan’s vain endeavor to establish a functioning garden despite not having a clue as to the agricultural system present in the Congo. While first breaking ground for his ill-fated garden plot, Mama Tataba appears entirely befuddled towards his actions, questioning “What you be dig for? Worm grub?” (39) This questioning comes as a surprise to readers, who understand completely Nathan’s motives for digging up the ground, but to Mama Tataba, someone who knows how crops are grown and harvested in the Congo, this erroneous behavior is ludicrous. Mama Tataba recognizes Nathan’s unfamiliarity with the land and attempts to offer him advice. Nathan, without considering that a native of Congo would know how to grow crops better in Congo than would he, dismisses her contentions, pompously declaring, “Mama Tataba, I’ve been tending the soil ever since I could walk behind my father,” which instantly betrays his ignorance to the fact that practices that are successful in the United States might not carry over to the exotic landscape of the Congo (40).
After building the mounds to protect his garden, the plants flourish, resulting in immense greenery despite bearing no fruit. Only after a heavy rain washed away his crops did Nathan acquiesce to Mama Tataba’s advice. Yet surprisingly, he still retains his bullheaded belief that his American knowledge base will prove successful in Africa. Nathan’s belief that he could adapt the Congo to his ways utterly fails with the realization that there are no pollinators necessary for the American plants to bear fruit. Nathan’s resigned comment in response to Leah’s contention that they should have brought bees as well, “You might as well bring the whole world over her with you, and there’s not room for it,” is used by Kingsolver to demonstrate the inherent flaws in thinking that solutions in one area of the world will be equally successful in another (80). The policies that led to utopia in one society can forge the path to anarchy in another. Nathan’s desire to spread the mustard seed of American ideals failed to flourish when disseminated in the distinctive African soil.

After his failure agriculturally, Nathan fortifies himself inside of his preconceived notions leading to even less leeway in adapting his ideals to
native beliefs which prevents him from converting the Congolese to his beliefs. His failure is no more apparent than when contrasted with Brother Fowles relative success due mainly to his ability to adapt his teachings to Congolese beliefs. While Nathan becomes resistant to influences in the Congo, Brother Fowles opens himself to native beliefs in an attempt to insert some of his own into their culture. Nathan tries to end the entire practice of polygamy, in effect asserting his culture over the Congolese culture, where as Brother Fowles instead focuses his energy "debating the merits of treating a wife kindly" and as a result "saw the practice of wife beating falls into great disfavor" (257-258). Kingsolver reveals her belief through this event just how powerful learning about and adapting to a new culture can be when attempting to facilitate growth and development in that culture. Nathan in all of his bluster and self-righteous religious proclamations, fails to stir even one heart to his cause or effect positive changes in the village, but Brother Fowles, by appreciating and recognizing the Congolese culture, opened many Congolese to Christian teachings evidenced by the "secret little altars to Tata Jesus" that appeared
as a result of his actions (258). This confrontation between Nathan and Brother Fowles serves to demonstrate the depth of the folly of those ignoring regional beliefs and customs, choosing instead to imposes their beliefs on those they are seeking to subjugate.

While Kingsolver demonstrates her belief that the only way to positively impact another is to first strive for understanding through these events, she also manipulates these events to hint at a larger purpose. Nathan’s belief that he can impose “Western” ideals on the Congolese people in order to accomplish his goals is indicative of the macrocosm in which the United States is attempting to do the same to Africa in order to pillage natural resources for national gain. Her ultimate definition of Nathan as “a man who believed he could tell nothing but the truth, while he set down for all time the Poisonwood Bible,” is indicative of Kingsolver’s disdain for current United States policies, suggesting that, like Nathan’s actions toward the Congolese, rampant disregard of other cultures and societies only disseminates poison around the world and cultivates distrust and hatred for the United States (533). Kingsolver uses
the example of Nathan Price’s culture colliding with that of the Congolese
to emphasize her belief that the United States should change policies
dealing with the Congo, as well as other areas of foreign influence, to
include more understanding of the native culture and lifestyle instead of
simply refusing to acknowledge their culture and impose Western ideals
and influence purely based on dominance.

An accord can be arduous to accomplish between drastically differing
cultures, especially with willfully ignorant obstacles (such as Nathan
Price) hindering the process, but Kingsolver suggests the first step on this
long and difficult road to achieve such a mutually favorable agreement is
to first arrive at understanding.