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A Discovery of Sanctuary
in the Struggles of Motherhood

“The Bean Trees” is a novel written by Barbara Kingsolver that explores themes of motherhood, sanctuary, and family, and advocates for those who have been marginalized by a still xenophobic American society. Throughout the book, Kingsolver repeatedly shows her talent for storytelling, and her ability to embellish her writing even further with various language devices. Kingsolver primarily relies on imagery, figurative language, and irony in her exploration of these very real and potentially controversial topics.

Kingsolver utilizes sensuous language and strong imagery to establish clear settings that complement the plot. One of the most obvious showings of sensory description is her repeated mention of colors in the various locations in the novel, such as her description of the “pink and fat and humorous-looking” clouds in the Arizona Desert (Kingsolver 47). In the same setting, she describes the rocks as pink when they are hit by the sun (Kingsolver 47). Perhaps she uses pink to describe this particular setting because she is trying to emphasize its nakedness, comparing its color to that of many animals when hairless such as cats and rats whose bodies are naturally pinkish under their fur. She also focuses on very specific details that relate to the plot more than others when describing settings. One example of this is her description of Roosevelt Park, in which she points out how “constellations of gum-wrapper foil twinkled around the trash barrel”

(Kingsolver 148). Giving the park dirty images foreshadows Turtle's abuse in the same park which happens later in the novel. Taylor had a motherly instinct that the park was a dirty and unhappy place, and she turned out to be absolutely right. These effective uses of imagery are further enhanced through the addition of figurative language, especially metaphors and similes.

Figurative language plays a major role in establishing images in "The Bean Trees." One of the most memorable uses of figurative language in Kingsolver's book is the simile she puts forth when Taylor is changing Turtle's diaper at the Broken Arrow Motel; she says, "You're like a mud turtle. If a mud turtle bites you, it won't let go till it thunders" (Kingsolver 30). This scene is the first hint at what Taylor will eventually name the child, and is also the scene in which Taylor discovers the many bruises on the small child's body. This scene is a turning point in the novel, which is likely why Kingsolver chose to embellish the scene's imagery with this strong simile. Kingsolver also turns to a metaphor when describing Taylor's prayers for rain in chapter eleven (Kingsolver 207). The rain works as a metaphor for the confidence that Taylor feels she needs in order to successfully raise and take care of Turtle. The cicadas work as a metaphor for the many worries that Taylor has about her ability to raise the child, and her doubts that she will be able to keep the child alive at all. She needs the rain to wipe out the cicadas because she can not find a way to do it herself, similarly to her needing confidence in her independence to wipe out her self-doubt. Both the imagery and figurative language, along with many other devices, help support the recurring irony throughout the storyline.

Irony is perhaps the most recurring device in the novel. The irony begins when Taylor leaves her hometown to avoid becoming pregnant and having a child young, only to acquire a young child soon after her departure. This irony adds to the theme of change put forth by

Kingsolver that applies to nearly every major character in the book. Lou Ann and her ex-husband Angel's ironic situation begins when Angel leaves Lou Ann to raise their new child Dwayne Ray on her own. Immediately Lou Ann becomes panicked, and doubts her ability to raise her son on her own, much like Taylor doubts her abilities to raise Turtle. This entire plotline turns around later in the novel, when Lou Ann cuts her hair and gets a job. At this point, Angel sends her a package with gifts, and a letter asking her and Dwayne Ray to move back in with him. Unlike the Lou Ann the reader came to know at the beginning of the novel, the evolved and newly independent Lou Ann only marvels at the fact that she can not even wear the hair piece he sent her, since she has cut her hair off. The tables have turned, and Angel is now the one doubting his ability to be on his own without her. This specific usage of irony also complements Kingsolver's efforts to center the story around women who work their way into independence, surviving in a sexist society in which they are expected to be perfect mothers and abide by rules set by men.

In "The Bean Trees," Kingsolver effectively explores themes of motherhood, sanctuary, and family; and advocates for those who have been sidelined by an isolationist American society through usages of imagery, figurative language, and irony. Taylor and Lou Ann, along with other female characters such as Mattie, help each other to be the most successful, powerful, independent, and kind women that they can be, defying all sexist stereotypes and expectations of them.