

Student Name:

## *The Bean Trees* Study Guide

### Watching Love Grow

When Taylor Greer leaves home in search of a better life, she never expects to become the foster mother to an abused, abandoned child, whom she names Turtle. Forced to start afresh, Taylor and Turtle surround themselves with strong women who have also learned to survive on their own. What will these women, who have all seen hard times, teach Taylor about life and love? How do friends shape our view of the world?

### Be a Better Reader

As you work through the study guide for *The Bean Trees*, you will practice these skills, which will help you when you read novels in the future, for school assignments or just for fun.

1. Describe how characters in a novel are developed.
2. Describe the plot development and structure of a novel.
3. Describe and analyze the role of setting in a novel.
4. Identify and analyze the themes in a novel.
5. Identify and analyze an author's purpose and perspective.
6. Explain how historical context affects readers' understanding and appreciation of a novel.

### Behind the Scenes

American author Barbara Kingsolver (1955) never dreamed she would become a writer. In school, she studied biology and economics while dedicating her spare time to political activism, including protesting the Vietnam War. When she married and became pregnant in 1985, she began suffering from insomnia. Her doctor suggested that she tire herself out by scrubbing the bathroom tiles with a toothbrush, but Kingsolver took to the typewriter instead. Shortly after, she published her first novel, *The Bean Trees*, which was received with great critical acclaim.

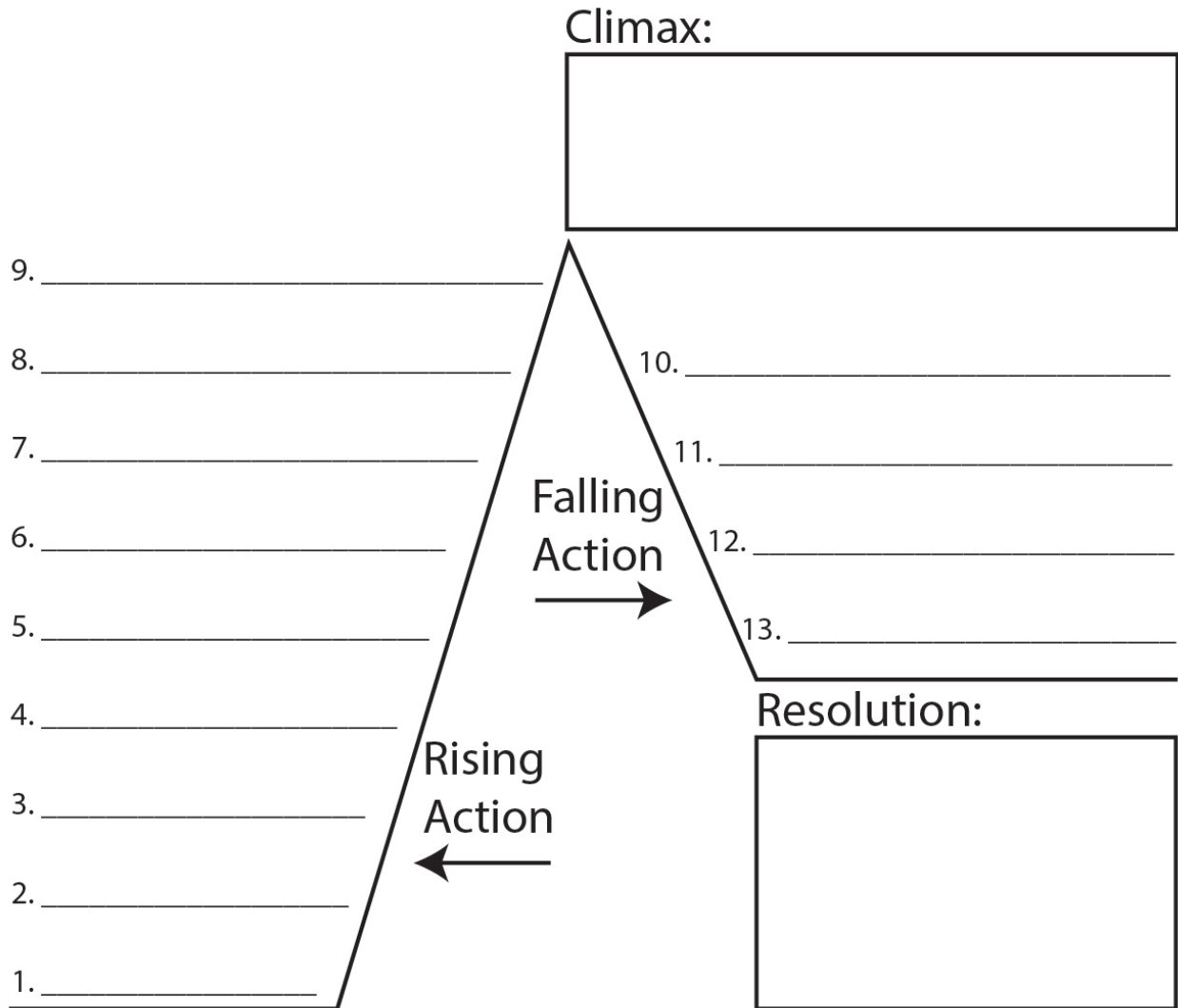
Perhaps because she never studied writing or dreamed of becoming a writer, Kingsolver had little interest in what critics thought of her work. She was much more interested to know that average Kentuckians were reading her novels, and that they felt well represented in her work. Readers familiar with Kingsolver's biography will easily recognize her two great passions – social activism and environmental protection – in her novels, although Kingsolver claims that this is where the similarities end. With the exception of setting her novels in the Kentucky region where she grew up, Kingsolver claims there is nothing autobiographical about her work.

Student Name:

## The Bean Trees Study Guide

### The Plot

*The Bean Trees* follows the lives of three strong female characters as they struggle to start their lives afresh in a world without men. How will they succeed, and in what ways will they influence each other's lives? As you read *The Bean Trees*, fill in the boxes for each element of the novel's plot.



Student Name:

## The Bean Trees Study Guide

### The Characters

In *The Bean Trees*, Kingsolver introduces the reader to a web of strong, female characters whose lives intersect and strengthen each other. Use the space below to help organize your thoughts on each character. In the second column, write or type a description of the character. Be sure to include at least one direct quote from the novel as evidence to support your description of that character.

Character	Character Traits
Taylor Greer	
Alice Greer	
Turtle	
Lou Anne Ruiz	
Angel Ruiz	
Mattie	
Estevan	
Esmeralda	
Ismene	
Edna Poppy	
Lee-Sing	

Student Name:

## *The Bean Trees* Study Guide

### **The Setting**

*The Bean Trees* is set in the rural expanses of Arizona and Oklahoma, where the characters are able to commune openly with nature. Understanding the setting is one of the keys to understanding the novel as a whole.

Use the spaces below to describe the setting of *The Bean Trees* and the events that take place within. In the first column, type or write direct quotes from the novel—phrases and sentences that are used to describe setting. In the second column, explain in your own words what these details show or suggest about the novel’s themes and characters.

Direct Quote Related to Setting	Your Explanation

Student Name:

## The Bean Trees Study Guide

### Tracking Themes

What is Barbara Kingsolver trying to say about life and its struggles through Taylor's journey home? The main themes of *The Bean Trees* are related to the role of women and independence. See if you can identify and analyze those themes.

**Step 1:** What parts of the plot seem related to a possible theme in the novel? (Think about the main conflict and how it got resolved or worked out.)

**Step 2:** Which characters seem related to a possible theme? What do these characters suggest about life, independence, and rebirth?

**Step 3:** How does Barbara Kingsolver utilize symbols to hint at the novel's themes? What objects, people, or places stand for something "bigger" in the story?

**Step 4:** What does the novel's title suggest about the novel's theme? Why do you think Kingsolver named this novel *The Bean Trees*?

**Step 5:** Write one or two of the novel's main themes in your own words.

Student Name:

## The Bean Trees Study Guide

### Talk About It

What do you think about Barbara Kingsolver's novel about female relationships? How have Taylor's experiences affected your own view of life? In the space below each question, write an answer based on your own experiences and your own understanding of the plot. Include some textual evidence or examples that helped you arrive at your answer.

1. *The Bean Trees* focuses on the lives of three major female characters living in a predominately female society. How do these characters and relationships define the role of women in the Southwest? How do the characters fill each other's lives in a way that makes men unnecessary?

Textual Evidence

2. One of the main themes of the novel is rebirth. What symbolism does Kingsolver use to present this theme? Which characters are most affected by the idea of rebirth? How do you see this theme affecting the characters' plotlines?

Textual Evidence

Student Name:

## *The Bean Trees* Study Guide

### **Represent!**

Show what you know about *The Bean Trees* and its message about rebirth. Choose one of these projects to complete and share with your teacher, classmates, and others.

#### **Choice 1: Fictionalizing Personal Struggle**

Every day, we face struggles in our lives and must make the decision to give up or continue battling. *The Bean Trees* is a novel about many women's struggle to survive alone in a patriarchal society. Throughout our own struggles, we rely on the support of others, much as the women in the novel learn to do.

For this project, you will create a short story based on a personal struggle that you overcame. The story can be about any personal struggle, not only a struggle in relationships. For example, your story could be about facing a fear, overcoming an illness, or learning a new skill. The only requirement is that your story follows a traditional plot structure with rising action, a climax, and falling action. Remember, you are fictionalizing your personal struggle, so your story should contain characters, dialogue, and conflict, just like *The Bean Trees* does!

You can document your three-day struggle as a written diary (which will be delivered as a word document), or as a recorded and uploaded video diary. As you document your project, be sure to comment on how your emotional journey compares / contrasts to Taylor's!

#### **Choice 2: Compiling Memories**

When traveling to a new place, one of the best ways to preserve your thoughts and memories is in a scrapbook. Travel scrapbooks might contain photographs, brochures, leaves, receipts, menus, and many other objects that capture the mood and experience of a journey. The Tuscan, Arizona Museum is looking for a scrapbook of Taylor's journey from Oklahoma to Arizona to represent their new exhibit on rebirth. Because you have just finished reading *The Bean Trees*, the museum has commissioned you to compile the scrapbook!

For this project, you may create either a physical or digital scrapbook of Taylor's physical and emotional journey. Collect or create images, background material (such as newspaper clippings), video, and objects you think best represent the setting, themes, and characters. Compile them all into a scrapbook that presents a cohesive representation of Taylor's rebirth.

If you choose to create a physical scrapbook, take photos of each scrapbook page for upload. If you choose to create a digital scrapbook, use PowerPoint or Prezi to make the scrapbook interactive. Remember, your "scraps" must be justified, so include a short (one-sentence) explanation for each inclusion. If you use any outside sources, be sure to include a Works Cited page at the end!