

A GUIDE TO

Cry, the Beloved Country

Alan Paton

*Cry, the beloved country, for the unborn child
that is the inheritor of our fear.*

THE NOVEL AT A GLANCE

Cry, the Beloved Country tells of the struggles of a black and a white South African to cling to hope in the face of family and social crises. In many ways the personal journeys of the Reverend Stephen Kumalo and James Jarvis, a well-to-do landowner, reflect the problems of South Africa in the later 1940s.

Settings: The main settings are the village of Ndotsheni in rural Natal province in eastern South Africa and various districts of Johannesburg, the country's largest city, in 1946.

Protagonist: Reverend Kumalo, a Zulu who is the Anglican pastor of St. Mark's Church in Ndotsheni. Kumalo struggles to overcome a great family tragedy: His son, Absalom, is arrested and convicted for murder and is subsequently executed for the crime.

Conflicts: External conflicts include those of black vs. white South Africans; among blacks about how best to achieve racial equality; among whites of different generations on political and social issues; between Kumalo and his son over the latter's criminal behavior; between Kumalo and his brother John over political and moral issues. Several individuals, notably Kumalo, his sister Gertrude, and Jarvis, wrestle with internal conflicts.

Climax: The novel's main climax occurs when Kumalo and Jarvis are reconciled after Kumalo's son kills Jarvis's son.

Resolution: Both Kumalo and Jarvis are set to renew their lives based on the insights they have gained over the course of the novel.

Themes: Only love and compassion are strong enough to prevail against hatred and fear; all human beings are morally responsible for their actions; any social system built on racism and economic exploitation is unjust; power corrupts those who hold it; human empathy and religious faith help us to bear life's sufferings; the power to improve society lies in courageous moral example.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

The novel's vocabulary should pose few problems of comprehension to upper-grade students. The shifting vantage point of the narrative might be confusing, however. Students should make sure they know about whom or from whose perspective the third-person narrator is speaking as they move from chapter to chapter and from section to section within chapters. Some sexual situations (such as Gertrude Kumalo being a prostitute) and the occasional inclusion of offensive ethnic terms might trouble students. You might tell them that these are part of Paton's attempt to draw a realistic portrait of South Africa in the 1940s.

BACKGROUND

South Africa in 1946. At the time the novel was written, in 1946, South Africa, once a British dependency, was an independent nation. Its population was about twelve million. More than 80 percent were black (sometimes referred to as "native"—a term often considered offensive by blacks—in the novel). Of the whites, about 60 percent were Afrikaners, mostly descendants of Dutch-speaking Europeans who first came to South Africa in the seventeenth century, and about 40 percent were descendants of later, mainly English-speaking immigrants. After large deposits of diamonds and gold were discovered in the late nineteenth century, the country's economic prosperity sprang largely from the mining industry, though farming remained very important, especially among blacks. Whites controlled the country's government and economy. Most blacks lived in poverty, which contributed to a breakdown of traditional society, resulting in many blacks living rootless lives in the cities. Apartheid was the officially sanctioned system of racial segregation and white supremacy in South Africa from the late 1940s to the early 1990s.

Absalom. The name of Kumalo's son alludes to a Biblical personality whose rebellion against his father, King David, leads to his death. The story of Absalom is found in II Samuel, Chapters 13–19.

MAIN CHARACTERS (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

Reverend Stephen Kumalo, Anglican pastor of St. Mark's Church in the village of Ndotsheni in Natal; about 60 years old.

Reverend Theophilus Msimangu, Anglican priest at Mission House in Sophiatown.

Gertrude Kumalo, Kumalo's much younger sister. After her husband disappeared, she became involved in prostitution and petty crime in Johannesburg.

John Kumalo, younger brother of Kumalo; a prosperous shopkeeper in Johannesburg. He devotes much of his time to radical politics and is gifted with a fiery eloquence.

Absalom Kumalo, Kumalo's only son. He left rural Natal for Johannesburg, where he drifts into a life of crime. He is convicted of murdering Arthur Jarvis and, at the end of the novel, is hanged for the crime.

Arthur Jarvis, idealistic, young white engineer who grew up near Kumalo's home. A compassionate and deeply patriotic person, he hopes for a new social order.

James Jarvis, Arthur Jarvis's father. Politically conservative at the start of the novel, he is deeply moved by Arthur's death and begins to change as he learns more about his son's beliefs.

PLOT

Cry, the Beloved Country is divided into three books, each subdivided into numbered chapters. Book I is mainly **exposition**, Book II leads to a **climax**, and Book III contains **resolutions** of the novel's major conflicts. The author uses the third-person **point of view** throughout, though the vantage point changes. Dialogue is signaled by a long dash rather than quotation marks.

Book I, Chapter 1. The novel opens with a description of the Umzimkulu River valley in Natal. The landscape features lovely rolling, grassy hills, but the soil is poor because of overgrazing and burning. Young people have moved away because the soil will not support farming.

Chapter 2. Reverend Stephen Kumalo, Anglican pastor at Ndotsheni in the Umzimkulu Valley, receives a letter from Theophilus Msimangu, an Anglican priest assigned to Mission House in Johannesburg, bringing news of Kumalo's younger sister Gertrude. Msimangu asks Kumalo to come quickly to Johannesburg because, he says, Gertrude is very ill. Anger mingles with sadness as Kumalo and his wife talk about the breakup of their family. Besides Gertrude, Kumalo's only son, Absalom, and Kumalo's brother John live in Johannesburg.

Chapter 3. Kumalo begins his trip to Johannesburg by taking the "toy train" from Carisbrooke.

Chapter 4. After a change of trains and a long journey, Kumalo arrives in Johannesburg. He is disoriented by the tall buildings, the swirling traffic, and the crowds. A

stranger named Mr. Mafolo escorts Kumalo to the Sophiatown district. There he meets Msimangu at the Mission House and is made to feel welcome and secure.

Chapter 5. At dinner with other priests at the Mission House, Kumalo learns of the crime and juvenile delinquency that afflict both black and white neighborhoods in Johannesburg. After the meal Msimangu tells Kumalo that Gertrude lives in a rough neighborhood called Claremont, where she brews and sells liquor illegally and works as a prostitute. Msimangu also reveals that the pastor's brother John Kumalo has become a politician and left the church. Promising to take Kumalo to Claremont the next day, Msimangu places him in a rented room in the house of a kindly parishioner, Mrs. Lithebe.

Chapter 6. Kumalo sternly confronts Gertrude in Claremont, but his anger soon yields to gentleness and forgiveness. He brings his repentant sister and her small son to live at Mrs. Lithebe's until he can take them to Ndotsheni. Kumalo resolves to search for his son.

Chapter 7. Msimangu takes Kumalo to the shop of John Kumalo. Pompous and domineering, John boasts of his independence from the church and traditional society. He tells Kumalo that his own son Matthew has been friendly with Absalom, and he gives Kumalo the address of a factory where Absalom has worked. At chapter's end a former landlady of Absalom's says she did not like his friends, thus **foreshadowing** problems for Kumalo.

Chapter 8. Absalom's trail has led to the Alexandra district. They learn that Absalom and Matthew have been dealing in stolen goods. Hlabeni, a taxi-driver, then tells them that Absalom is living among squatters in Shanty Town near Orlando.

Chapter 9. Like the intercalary chapters in John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), this chapter digresses from the main narrative to describe some of the inhabitants of Shanty Town. Stark vignettes tell of homelessness, poverty, and disease.

Chapter 10. Kumalo's search for Absalom continues with a visit to a reformatory in Orlando. A young white employee tells Kumalo that his son did so well there that he was released to marry his pregnant girlfriend.

Chapter 11. Back at the Mission House, Kumalo speaks with Father Vincent, a friendly white priest from England, about the shocking murder of Arthur Jarvis, a well-known white engineer, who was shot in his Johannesburg residence. Three black youths are suspected of the crime. The Jarvis family lives near Ndotsheni, and Kumalo says he has seen the young man's father several times. He also remembers seeing Arthur Jarvis as a boy.

Chapter 12. As in Chapter 9, a series of vignettes tells of racial inequality, this time from a white perspective. With considerable **irony**, some of the whites are shown as irrational and cynical. Later in the chapter,

Msimangu learns that the police are looking for Absalom. **Suspense** mounts as we suspect that it's because he's involved in the murder of Arthur Jarvis.

Chapter 13. Kumalo accompanies Msimangu to Ezenzeleni, a colony for blind blacks, where Msimangu conducts a church service.

Chapter 14. The young white man from the reformatory tells Kumalo that Absalom, along with John Kumalo's son Matthew and another friend, has been arrested. The two Kumalo brothers visit their sons in prison. Absalom tells his father that he shot Jarvis; he has also confessed to the police. But the youth insists that he did not intend to kill Jarvis, only to rob him. After angry words, Kumalo sorrowfully promises to try to arrange for his son to marry his pregnant girlfriend. John Kumalo hints that Absalom's two accomplices will deny participating in the robbery.

Chapter 15. Father Vincent tries to comfort Kumalo, reminding him of the power of prayer.

Chapter 16. Kumalo travels to Pimville to meet with Absalom's girlfriend, who wishes to marry Absalom and start a new life. Kumalo promises to help her.

Chapter 17. Kumalo arranges for Absalom's girlfriend to live at Mrs. Lithebe's until they can go to Ndotsheni. After Kumalo again visits Absalom in prison, Father Vincent introduces him to Mr. Carmichael, a renowned white lawyer. Kumalo is overcome with gratitude when Carmichael agrees to take Absalom's case at no charge (*pro deo*, "for God").

Book II, Chapter 18. The first two paragraphs of this chapter repeat many sentences from Chapter 1, a signal that the upcoming spiritual journey of James Jarvis will be similar to Kumalo's. In a **flashback** to the day of the crime, news of Arthur's murder is brought to the Jarvis farm at Ndotsheni.

Chapter 19. James Jarvis and his wife, Margaret, are welcomed in Johannesburg by Mr. and Mrs. Harrison, the parents of Arthur's widow, Mary.

Chapter 20. James Jarvis looks through his son's books and papers, gaining insight into the dead young man's thoughts on social justice. "We are caught in the toils of our own selfishness," Arthur Jarvis wrote, referring to the exploitation of blacks by whites in South Africa.

Chapter 21. Arthur Jarvis's funeral is attended by many mourners of all races.

Chapter 22. The murder trial of Absalom Kumalo and his accused accomplices, Matthew Kumalo and Johannes Pafuri, begins. Absalom insists that he did not intend to kill Arthur Jarvis but offers a weak explanation for carrying a loaded revolver during the robbery. His father trembles when James Jarvis is pointed out to him.

Chapter 23. In a digression the narrator tells of a major gold discovery in South Africa.

Chapter 24. James Jarvis revisits Arthur's study and reads his son's article titled "Private Essay on the Evolution of a South African." The father is shocked by Arthur's statement that his parents, though they were decent and honorable, taught him nothing about South Africa. We sense that James Jarvis is rethinking his values and outlook.

Chapter 25. Coincidence brings Kumalo and Jarvis face to face. Jarvis and his wife are in Springs, a town near Johannesburg, spending the day with Margaret Jarvis's niece Barbara Smith. Kumalo arrives at the Smith residence to seek news of Sibeko's daughter, as promised in Chapter 3, and finds out that she illegally made liquor and spent time in jail. A **climactic** scene follows: Jarvis recognizes Kumalo as a neighbor in Ndotsheni and senses that he is deeply troubled. Kumalo eventually says, "It was my son that killed your son." Jarvis walks into the garden, lost in thought, and then returns to Kumalo and says, "There is no anger in me." The two men wish each other well as Kumalo leaves.

Chapter 26. John Kumalo asks a crowd to support higher wages for black miners.

Chapter 27. Gertrude tells Mrs. Lithebe that she is thinking of becoming a nun in order to control her powerful sexual desire.

Chapter 28. The day of judgment arrives. The judge acquits Absalom's two associates because of insufficient evidence. Absalom, however, is found guilty and sentenced to hang. He falls to the floor crying. Kumalo is escorted from the courtroom, a broken man.

Chapter 29. Father Vincent marries Absalom and his girlfriend in prison. Then, in a moving scene, Kumalo tries in vain to comfort his son. Later, at a farewell party for the Kumalos at Mrs. Lithebe's house, Msimangu announces that he will enter a monastery. Forsaking his worldly possessions, Msimangu gives Kumalo his considerable life savings of more than thirty-three pounds. Kumalo is overwhelmed. Next morning, as Kumalo prepares to return to Ndotsheni, he discovers that Gertrude has fled, leaving behind her young son.

Book III, Chapter 30. Kumalo travels by train back to Ndotsheni, along with his pregnant daughter-in-law and young nephew. They are warmly welcomed home.

Chapter 31. A local drought worsens. Kumalo asks the traditional chief of the area to help renew Ndotsheni. The friendly but ineffectual chief says that he will speak to government officials. The headmaster of the local school also can offer little help. Kumalo returns home. Arthur Jarvis's young son comes by on horseback, and he and Kumalo strike up a friendship. Kumalo teaches the boy some Zulu words and tells him that black children in the village have insufficient milk. That evening Kumalo receives a cartload of milk—sent by James Jarvis at his grandson's behest.

Chapter 32. The Kumalos receive several letters from Johannesburg, including a poignantly upbeat letter from Absalom, saying he will not be spared from hanging.

Chapter 33. Just as Arthur Jarvis's young son ends another pleasant visit with Kumalo, a black agricultural demonstrator arrives, part of James Jarvis's plan to improve living conditions for the blacks of the area. The plan includes an irrigation dam on the local river. The mood of the novel is now much more optimistic; there is hope for a better future.

Chapter 34. Mrs. Jarvis dies. Kumalo's first impulse is to personally pay his respects to Jarvis, but thinking he will be out of place at the white man's house, he writes a note instead. The bishop overseeing Kumalo then suggests that the pastor move away from Ndotsheni in order to avoid a confrontation with Jarvis over his son's murder. Kumalo is loath to leave the area, and a kindly written reply from Jarvis to Kumalo's note convinces the bishop that Kumalo should stay put.

Chapter 35. New agricultural techniques are introduced around Ndotsheni. Some people grumble at the changes, but Kumalo senses new hope and enthusiasm.

Chapter 36. On the day before Absalom's execution, Kumalo goes to lofty Mt. Emoyeni to keep vigil. He has changed a lot since the start of the novel: Then, he barely thought about his son. Now, concern for his son fills his mind. As Kumalo starts to climb, he meets Jarvis, and the men touchingly wish each other well. Jarvis, too, has clearly changed and says it was Kumalo who changed him. Kumalo continues to the summit and there thinks about everything that has taken place since he traveled to Johannesburg. He sleeps, then wakes at dawn. He thinks about Absalom's final time before execution. The novel ends with the narrator wondering when the dawn of freedom will come for all South Africans.

APPROACHES FOR POST-READING ACTIVITIES

Discussion groups or students doing individual research projects might focus on the following activities.

1. Describing South Africa in 1946

Using material in *Cry, the Beloved Country* and information gleaned from nonfiction sources, students might describe South Africa in 1946, the year the novel takes place. They might focus on the country's geography, economy, and race relations.

2. Comparing South Africa in 1946 with South Africa Today

Students might research South Africa's history from 1946 to the present, considering questions like the following:

- How was apartheid made the law of South Africa?
- How did apartheid affect blacks?
- How was apartheid ended?
- What are some differences and similarities between South Africa in 1946 and South Africa today?

3. Comparing the Novel with Film Versions

Discussion groups might view the 1951 or the 1995 film version of *Cry, the Beloved Country* or the film *Lost in the Stars* (1974), based on Kurt Weill and Maxwell Anderson's musical dramatization of the novel. Students might then compare the different versions of Paton's story, focusing on the plot, characterizations, tone, and themes.

MEET THE WRITER

Alan Paton (1903–1988) was born in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. After he completed his education at Natal University, Paton taught school and served as the headmaster of the Diepkloof Reformatory near Johannesburg. When *Cry, the Beloved Country* was published to acclaim in 1948, Paton became internationally famous. In the 1950s he helped found the Liberal Party in South Africa, which opposed the system of apartheid. The same year, he published a second best-selling novel set in South Africa, *Too Late the Phalarope*. Paton also wrote two volumes of autobiography, *Towards the Mountain* (1980) and *Journey Continued* (1988).

READ ON

Chinua Achebe, "Marriage Is a Private Affair." A story of generational conflict in Nigeria.

Doris Lessing, "No Witchcraft for Sale." Short story dealing with cultural alienation between blacks and whites in Africa.

Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*. The autobiography of the Nobel Prize winner who became South Africa's first black president.

Mark Mathabane, *Kaffir Boy*. Autobiographical account of growing up black in Alexandra, one of Johannesburg's infamous ghettos.

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