Cry, the Beloved Country Study Guide

Cry, the Beloved Country by Alan Paton

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

Cry, the Beloved Country was written by South African author Alan Paton. As the story opens, the year is 1946. Stephen Kumalo, the reverend of a village church in Ndotsheni, which is in the province of Natal in South Africa, receives a letter from a reverend named Msimangu in Johannesburg. The letter urges him to come to the city to take charge of Kumalo's sick sister Gertrude and her small son. Despite limited savings, Kumalo and his wife decide he should go help Gertrude and also look for their son Absalom, whom they haven't heard from in a year.

After making the day long journey to Johannesburg and getting immediately conned by a local, Kumalo finds his way to Msimangu, who offers his assistance with Kumalo's search. Msimangu admits Gertrude is not sick but has fallen into liquor and prostitution. The two priests quickly locate her. Kumalo admonishes her for her new lifestyle and the neglect of her son. Gertrude repents and agrees to return to Ndotsheni with Kumalo. He moves her into the house of Mrs. Lithebe, where he is staying. Kumalo and Msimangu dive into the search for Absalom with less luck. They visit a series of houses where Absalom was living with his cousin Matthew; but, they always arrive long after Absalom has left. There are hints that Absalom has been in trouble. Kumalo visits his brother John, a relatively powerful and wealthy carpenter who has turned to politics. He kicked his son Matthew out long ago. He doesn't know the whereabouts of either Absalom or Matthew.

They track Absalom's movements to a reformatory, where his life seemed about to turn around. He was doing well and had been granted an early leave to marry a girl he had impregnated. He also had a steady job. But, the white reformer who speaks so highly of Absalom is shocked to learn that Absalom has stopped going to work, and the girl he is set to marry hasn't seen him for days. News travels around of the murder of a prominent white reformer named Arthur Jarvis in his own home, and Kumalo fears Absalom may have been involved.

Kumalo's worst fears are proven. Absalom killed Arthur Jarvis during a house break-in that went wrong. Kumalo is further horrified when he realizes Arthur is the son of James Jarvis, a wealthy white farmer who lives above Ndotsheni's valley. Absalom had two accomplices in the crime, his cousin Matthew and a man named Johannes Pafuri, who knocked Arthur's servant unconscious with an iron bar. John Kumalo decides to hire a lawyer for Matthew and Johannes.; The defense will be that the two young men were not present for the crime. Kumalo visits his son in jail; Absalom cannot explain how his life turned so violent. The white reformer is angry at Absalom for ruining the reputation of the reformatory. However, he agrees to help find Absalom a lawyer. A white English priest named Father Vincent also offers to help. They hire a man named Carmichael, who builds a defense based on the truth. Kumalo takes in Absalom's pregnant girl, wanting to do the right thing for his grandchild.

James Jarvis and his wife travel to Johannesburg in the wake of their son's death. James had not understood his son's passion for equal rights for blacks. But, as he starts

to read through Arthur's papers, he sees the wisdom of his son's chosen vocation. James and Kumalo have an unexpected encounter when Kumalo visits a relation of the Jarvises while seeking an Ndotsheni girl who has gone missing. As Kumalo and Jarvis realize how their lives are intertwined, Jarvis has no malice toward Kumalo for Absalom's actions, even showing the old reverend some compassion.

Despite the truth, Absalom alone is found guilty of the crime against Arthur Jarvis and is sentenced to hang. Kumalo visits his son a final time in jail, hoping the boy has repented his actions. Father Vincent arranges the marriage between Absalom and the girl before Kumalo takes his remaining family back to Ndotsheni. There is a small chance that Absalom's sentence will be commuted by a governor, and Msimangu promises to keep Kumalo informed on developments. Msimangu gives Kumalo a generous financial gift to ease his burden with his suddenly increased family. On the morning they are set to travel to Ndotsheni, Gertrude, who was briefly considering becoming a nun, disappears back into her immoral life.

Despite his family troubles, Kumalo is greeted warmly by the villagers he left behind. His wife embraces the girl and Gertrude's son as her own children. Arthur Jarvis' young son, who is staying at his grandparents' house, happens upon Kumalo. They strike up a friendship. Kumalo is astonished by his generosity and confidence. Through him, James Jarvis begins patronizing the drought-stricken community, sending milk for the children and arranging for the building of a dam. James hires an agricultural planner to help revolutionize farming in the valley. When James' wife dies, Kumalo feels her death must have been from a broken heart. In a letter, James assures him that she was already ill and wanted to help build a new church in Ndotsheni. The friendship between James and Kumalo saves Kumalo from being sent away by his local bishop.

Absalom writes to his family to tell them that he has not received mercy; he will be hanged. On the night before his son's death, Kumalo climbs a nearby mountain to pray for his son's soul. He runs into James Jarvis, who assures him he will do everything in his power to regenerate the valley. Kumalo prays, thankful for all the people who showed him kindness on his journey. He asks God for the peaceful rebirth of Africa as a continent.

Book One, Chapters 1-5

Summary

In September 1946, Reverend Stephen Kumalo receives a letter from a fellow reverend in Johannesburg, Theophilus Msimangu. The letter asks him to come to the city to care for Kumalo's sick sister, Gertrude. Though Kumalo and his wife have been saving money to send their son Absalom to a good school, they realize they will have to use the money for Kumalo's trip. It is a moot point because Absalom is also in Johannesburg, supposedly looking for Gertrude. They have not heard from him in a year. Kumalo and his wife lament the loss of so much family to the city, including Kumalo's carpenter brother, John. They haven't heard from any relatives for a long time. The couple is tense about their lost family, and they bicker.

Kumalo travels to the train station with a friend, who asks Kumalo to also look for another local, the daughter of a man named Sibeko, who went to Johannesburg as a servant to a white family. The train trip to Johannesburg is long. Kumalo is anxious because he does not like the enormity and anonymity of the city. The train passes through the gold mines and into the vast urban expanse of Johannesburg. Arriving in Johannesburg, Kumalo is nervous about finding the proper bus to Sophiatown, where the reverend Msimangu's mission is, and accepts the help of a friendly Zulu man. The man offers to buy Kumalo's bus ticket while Kumalo waits in line to board. He soon realizes the man has disappeared with his money. Another man, one who knows Msimangu personally, escorts him to the mission.

Msimangu has arranged a cheap room in the house of an old woman, Mrs. Lithebe. He feeds Kumalo and tells him Gertrude, who came to the city with her young son to look for her missing husband, has turned to selling alcohol and prostituting herself. Kumalo reveals his anxiety over his son Absalom. The letters that Kumalo and his wife write to Absalom are sent back. Msimangu promises help find Absalom as well. Kumalo is surprised to learn Msimangu knows his brother John, who is now a local politician and has given up his religious roots. Msimangu takes Kumalo to his room at Mrs. Lithebe's, and they decide to start their quest for Kumalo's family the following day.

Analysis

The novel opens with a long descriptive passage setting the scene in the valleys of rural South Africa. The themes are immediately made clear in this passage as the author writes, "Keep it, guard it, care for it, for it keeps men, guards men, cares for men. Destroy it and man is destroyed" (Page 11). The fate of people and nature are intertwined. The description of the natural world goes on to lament the disrepair of the land. Readers can foreshadow that if the land is so ill-used and dead, the people who live upon it must be suffering as well. The author also draws the reader directly into the scene by using the second person narrative voice for the opening sequence: he

describes if “you” stand here “you” will see some particular views or landmarks. The use of “you” is unusual in novels, and the author uses it to force the reader to imagine what life is like in the destroyed landscape of the Umzimkulu valley and to fully grasp the ramifications of using the land poorly. The problem is not just that of those who live there but of all who live in the word with compassion for their fellow man.

The novel shifts into the voice of a third person omniscient narrator to tell the story of Stephen Kumalo, and the ominous foreshadowing continues with the inciting incident, the letter from Johannesburg. Before Kumalo even opens it, he is filled with dread: “He was reluctant to open it, for once such a thing is opened, it cannot be shut again” (Page13). The tone is immediately set for tragedy. Readers should not expect this to be a comedic novel; opening the letter invites hardship beyond Kumalo’s control into his life. Readers should note his essentially passive character, swept up into events that are much bigger than his small village life.

Kumalo is a reverend at a Christian church (St. Mark’s) but descends from the Zulu tribe. The uneasy fusion of a former way of life with the outside influence of foreign entities is evident when he prays to God but uses a tribal word to refer to him: “Tixo.” The clash of cultures, ancient customs versus modern technology, rural versus urban living (the Kumalos have a great unease about Johannesburg, which absorbs family without ever sending them home again), all come to the fore in this first section, and , keen readers will note how these themes are threaded throughout the text.

The tone is further set by the use of language. There is a formality about the use of words that indicates two things. First, the characters are not native English speakers; they take more care with words then a native speaker accustomed to the idioms and slang of English. Second, there is an old-fashioned quality to the words that grounds the reader in 1946 South Africa. The use of phrases like “must needs” and the lack of contractions in the dialogue are a reminder that these characters live in a different world from the beginning of the twenty-first century, and should not be judged according to modern values and norms. Kumalo, his wife, and the author believe in the mystical power of words, as when Kumalo chides his wife, “You have said it. It is said now” (Page 15). They rely on the respect and power bestowed by titles; everyone calls Kumalo “umfundisi,” which means “parson” or “reverend,” and all older adult women are referred to as “Mother,” underscoring women’s main role and value. The author uses repetition of phrases to reinforce the power of language. The aforementioned passage, “Keep it, guard it, care for it, for it keeps men, guards men, cares for men. Destroy it and man is destroyed” (Page 11) demonstrates this repetition which is then echoed further down the same page as the author laments that the land is “not kept, or guarded, or cared for.”

The theme of racial inequality is also quickly evident, as the priests discuss the “broken” black tribes and the responsibility of whites to rebuild what they had destroyed. There is also a class hierarchy within the black community, however, demonstrated when Kumalo rides the train to Johannesburg and has no one to talk to because “there was no one who appeared of that class” (Page 19). White suppression of blacks in South Africa has not only made them poor and powerless, but it has divided them from

themselves. This lack of unity highlights the fact that the tribal lifestyle has been obliterated.

Vocabulary

prelude, intimation, alight

Book One, Chapters 6-8

Summary

Msimangu takes Kumalo to Claremont, where Gertrude lives. Gertrude is shocked to see her brother, who is just as shocked at how poorly she is living, surrounded by men and neglecting her son. Gertrude is filled with shame, but Kumalo prays with her, offering both God's forgiveness and his own. Gertrude agrees to return to Ndotsheni with him. Kumalo helps pack up her few possessions and sets her up in a room at Mrs. Lithebe's. The next day, Msimangu takes Kumalo to another neighborhood where they find his brother John. Kumalo is shocked to learn that his brother has gotten a divorce and has a new wife. John has left the church, believing that religion does nothing practical to help the oppressed plight of black South Africans. John stopped writing to Kumalo because he didn't think his brother would understand his new, urban lifestyle. In Johannesburg John is free of tribal chiefs and has his own power. He is protesting against whites who rely on cheap black labor in the gold mines to enrich themselves.

John gives Kumalo the last known address of the factory where Absalom worked. He and his own son, who is a close cousin to Absalom, had become estranged. So, he has not seen either young man for a long time. After they leave, Msimangu explains that John, along with men named Tomlinson and Dubula are leaders of a movement to rouse blacks to fight for their rights, yet John and the others lack the courage to do anything that might send themselves to prison. At the factory, the white supervisors find an employee who knew Absalom, though Kumalo's son no longer works there. They get the address of a Mrs. Ndlela in Sophiatown where Absalom lived. Once again Kumalo and Msimangu are too late to find the boy. Mrs. Ndlela says Absalom left a year ago, but she gives them a forwarding address. She admits to Msimangu that she never saw Absalom misbehave, but he spent time with a bad crowd.

The next day the two men try to take a bus to Alexandra, a black community where Absalom might live. However, they are talked out of using public transit by Dubula. He is urging blacks to boycott the buses in protest of a fare hike. They decide to walk eleven miles to Alexandra. They are given a ride by a sympathetic white man who goes out of his way to take them. Mrs. Mkize, the owner of the house where Absalom once lived, claims the two cousins moved out a year ago. She seems afraid and refuses to talk more. Msimangu sends Kumalo away so he can talk with Mrs. Mkize privately, and he swears on a Bible he is not going to cause her trouble. She finally tells him she saw the cousins with lots of goods, watches, clothes, and money, though she never saw any violence or blood. She tells him that Absalom was friends with a well-known taxi driver named Hlabeni.

Msimangu regroups with Kumalo, and they find Hlabeni. They hire him to drive them back to Johannesburg. Hlabeni also seems afraid at the mention of Absalom, but he tells Msimangu and Kumalo that Absalom lives in a squatters Shanty Town in Orlando. As they drive back to Johannesburg, they see whites offering rides to all the blacks

walking home to Alexandra. The police try to make trouble for these whites for operating without taxi licenses, but the whites aren't afraid to go to court and continue helping as they can.

Analysis

In the novel, the author, a white South African, tries to present a balanced view of the relationship between whites and blacks. Many whites go out of their way to help blacks, such as with the bus boycott. Blacks occasionally act violently against whites, and even against themselves. The novel does not present the situation as "good" versus "evil" with a saintly hero and an evil villain. There are virtue and sin on both sides; but, the author indicates the time has come to raise awareness about greater injustices and to start enacting broader changes.

The struggle for some level of equality between blacks and whites takes precedence in 1940s South Africa. Women are treated as second class citizens. Their rights are not a priority. Kumalo's utter disgust with Gertrude's behavior – selling alcohol and her own body – shows little compassion for the difficulty of surviving as a woman alone in the city at that time. Kumalo tells Gertrude "You have to shamed us" and Gertrude herself claims, "I am a bad woman, my brother. I am no woman to go back" (Page 34). Though Kumalo eventually "forgives" her and accepts her back into the fold, the scene is indicative of how women are viewed in this culture. Similarly, women's priorities are illustrated by Kumalo's wife, who wants a stove "like any woman" (Page 36). Modern readers may have difficulty digesting such antiquated views of women. Kumalo's wife is never even given the dignity of a first name. There were innumerable cultural and generational differences between twenty-first century norms and a world divided against itself more than half a century ago.

Readers should beware of a bias presented in the text that equates city life with a lack of morals and rural village life with traditional values. Going to Johannesburg means one will certainly become corrupted, as is evident by Kumalo's family: Absalom, Gertrude, and John. John in particular demonstrates a petty desire for power, status, and wealth by shedding his first wife and his religious beliefs. He abandons his family, not even writing home, because he does not think they will "understand" his new lifestyle. The "lifestyle" is rife with authorial judgment, right down to the ironic way John himself disparages the tribal way of life. Though no one character in the novel is presented as perfect or blameless, there is still a subtle sense that retaining tribal, village life would have maintained a morality now lacking in South African culture. By examining the question from all sides, that conclusion is too easy. For example, the villages are dying because the land has not been properly maintained. Also, even if everyone had stayed in Ndotsheni, lack of food and work might have driven people to equally poor moral judgments.

John does however present an interesting view of religion when he proclaims, "I do not wish to offend you gentlemen, but the Church too is like the chief…You are not free to have an experience. A man must be faithful and meek and obedient, and he must obey

the laws, whatever the laws may be. It is true that the Church speaks with a fine voice, and that the Bishops speak against the laws. But this they have been doing for fifty years, and things get worse, not better" (Page 39). The novel focuses on the friction between passive and active as styles for evoking change. Kumalo tends to rely on God to assist in the righting of wrongs, or to rely on whites who have the power to change. John declaims about poor blacks changing their lot for themselves by demanding greater economic benefit from the gold mines; yet Msimangu indicates that John does not actually back up his rousing oratory with action. He is as passive as his brother, despite his renunciation of the Church. There is even some irony in the fact that the most active protest that black leaders like Dubula organize, is a bus boycott. It is a form of action through inaction. The question of who bears responsibility to evoke change in unjust South Africa – black or white, rich or poor, religious, or secular – permeates the book right along with how to force a shift in the way everyone thinks about equality.

Vocabulary

sullen, denunciation, stout, cunning, compel, fidelity, earnest, gratify, exposition, somber, irresolute

Book One, Chapters 9-11

Summary

Kumalo takes comfort in his young nephew as he worries about his own son. Msimangu takes Kumalo to the Shanty Town in Orlando. The houses there are rigged together from sacks, bits of iron, and old wood. They offer little shelter from harsh weather. Kumalo and Msimangu meet a nurse who knew Absalom, and they follow her directions to the house of the Hlayshwayos where he was staying. The woman who lives there directs them to a nearby reformatory where Absalom was sent when he got into some trouble. Kumalo fears the worst at this news, wondering what bad behavior his son has gotten into. The young white man who works in the reformatory office tells them that Absalom is no longer there because a young girl showed up one day and claimed she was pregnant with Absalom's baby. Absalom was behaving and even excelling at the reformatory. He had achieved the position of head boy. Since he and the girl seemed to care for each other and his behavior was excellent, authorities released him from the reformatory. The white man tells them Absalom has a good job at a factory and that he (the white man) has arranged for his pending marriage. He promises to take Kumalo and Msimangu to see Absalom where he lives in Pimville when he is done with his work.

Later, the white man drives them to Pimville where they find the pregnant girl. She tells hem Absalom left for the town of Springs four days ago and has not returned or sent any word. The men are disappointed to learn that Absalom has shirked his familial duty. Kumalo feels sympathy for the girl and wants to help her and his future grandchild, but Msimangu reminds him the baby might not even be Absalom's. The white man is also disappointed that the effort he put into his young protégé has gone to waste, but he promises to keep looking for Absalom. When the white man leaves them, Msimangu apologizes to Kumalo for his negative attitude, and promises to take Kumalo to see the girl again. Msimangu has business to attend in a community of blind people that he ministers to. He urges Kumalo to come with him and rest for a few days, leaving the white man to continue the search.

When they return to Msimangu's mission, they learn a famous white engineer named Arthur Jarvis, who worked for black rights, has been murdered in his home. "Natives" are suspected of committing the crime. Kumalo knew Jarvis' father, who lived in a town called Carisbrooke near his own village. Kumalo is overcome with a sense of fear. He worries that Absalom might be involved in the murder.

Analysis

In Chapter 9, the focus shifts. While there are no sign posts for the shift in attention and voice, the chapter acts like the chorus of a Greek tragedy, arousing sympathy by creating a vivid, poetic picture of life in Orlando's Shanty Town. It focuses on the plight of an anonymous (perhaps named Mrs. Seme) woman. Even though her house is

overcrowded, she must take in boarders in order to feed her family. She interacts with the powerful black activist Dubula to try to move up the five year waiting list for a bigger, private house. She ends up in a ramshackle structure that is part of Shanty Town's genesis. Her child dies before a doctor can examine it. The use of repetition, reliance on dialogue (making the reader a voyeur into private conversations), and movement through time at an accelerated, past time elevates the chapter outside the flow of the narrative. Like a Greek chorus, the chapter acts to bear witness. Paton most likely intended it as a shocking portrait of the difficulties of blacks' lives for white readers, offering a different perspective than the relative good social standing of the priest Kumalo (and foreshadowing that even his success will not shield him from tragedy). This chapter once again underscores the idea that tribal village life should be venerated and city life renounced, when the anonymous speaker claims, "Oh my husband, why did we leave the land of our people? There is not much there, but it is better than here. There is not much food there, but it is shared by all together. If all are poor, it is not so bad to be poor" (Page 57).

The inclusion of this chapter gives at least a temporary voice to a black woman. Her anonymity allows her to act as a symbol for all black women. The primary focus of women's lives in this society is motherhood. Only women who have achieved an elderly age having raised a family are given any respect in this world, and the title "mother" has tones of reverence. The loss of a child, as this woman experiences, can result in the destruction of a woman's sense of herself. They must resign themselves to "the lot of women to carry, to bear, to watch, and to lose" (Page 59).

Both Gertrude and Absalom's young girlfriend, lacking education and having used their sexuality as a means to survive, are chastised and disparaged for their actions. However, since Msimangu and Kumalo are Christian, they ultimately must forgive the women their sins. Msimangu shows his disgruntlement with the entire younger generation, scoffing at both the veracity of Absalom's paternity to the girl's child, but also blaming young men for failing to live up to their familial responsibilities. There is a clear schism in the priorities and values of Kumalo's generation and that of his son and younger sister .

Keen readers will note how deeply embedded and significant custom is to the tribal generation. Titles of respect are used under all circumstances. Kumalo doesn't mix much with those not of his class and gender. In giving directions to a house, one character explains it can be found "on the side of the hand that you eat with" (Page 63). Understanding that life is so traditionally demarcated that everyone eats with the same hand gives readers a better understanding into a culture that is so alien to their own. It also offers insight into Kumalo's mindset, that he is watching a world of ingrained custom erode away and that is clearly disturbing when it is all he has ever known. This idea is underscored in the rhetorical passage, "Cry for the broken tribe, for the law and the custom that is gone….Cry, the beloved country, these things are not yet at an end" (Page 72). Paton makes a direct plea to the reader to recognize how desperately this society needs to change to accommodate the needs of everyone.

One brief rhetorical repetition in this section comes via the line, “God have mercy upon us. Christ have mercy upon us. White man, have mercy on us” (Page 58). Echoing the “Holy Trinity” of Catholicism, here poor blacks are reduced to begging whites, who have the power to bestow life or death on the powerless, for “divine” intercession. Religion and power are entwined in the minds of the poor blacks, but as John Kumalo pointed out, the Church is toothless. Only whites have the actual power to save blacks.

Vocabulary

travail, intimacy, perplex, obscure, melodious, muse, habitation, contrive, reformatory, amend, indifferent

Book One, Chapters 12-14

Summary

After news of the murder, Mrs. Ndlela visits Msimangu to tell him the police came looking for Absalom. She sent them to Mrs. Mkize, who has a reputation for dubious affairs. Msimangu hopes to go see Mrs. Mkize without telling Kumalo the news, but Kumalo appears and Msimangu must reveal the truth to the worried father. They set off to visit Mrs. Mkize, and Kumalo insists on paying the taxi fare. Mrs. Mkize sent the police to Mrs. Hlatshwayo in the Orlando Shanty Town, who sent them to the reformatory. The police have been to each house without getting any further in their search than Msimangu and Kumalo did.

The two men travel to Ezenzeleni to visit the blind ministry, as planned. Kumalo is overcome with despair, assuming the worst about his son's actions. He tries to hope for the best and makes nebulous plans to heal his family, including Absalom's girl and the unborn child. But, he knows how unlikely it is that things will go back to normal. Msimangu tells him wallowing won't help, and Kumalo goes to listen to Msimangu preach to the blind. He takes comfort in the aid white people are giving to the blind blacks, and he is swept up in Msimangu's resonant oratory style, taking comfort in the Bible and determining to trust in God's grace for his son.

Kumalo and Msimangu return to Sophiatown where they sell Gertrude's few possessions. They are glad to have the extra money. Almost as soon as they are back, the white man from the reformatory visits and tells them the worst. Absalom has killed Arthur Jarvis, and his cousin was one of the two accomplices. The white man is devastated for his ministry. Full of despair, Kumalo goes to tell his brother John about his son's involvement, and John is similarly afflicted with anguish. The two fathers go to the prison to see their sons. Kumalo questions Absalom on why he did it, and Absalom hides behind fear. Kumalo can't understand why Absalom gave up his job, his good recommendations from the reformatory, and his future with the girl he cared about to get involved with "bad companions." Absalom tries to blame the devil, but Kumalo thinks Absalom should have fought the devil harder rather than ruin his own life and shame his family. The white man offers to help Absalom marry the girl if he still wants to.

John's meeting with his son goes more positively, and John is determined to hire a lawyer. His son didn't pull the trigger, and no one can prove he was even at the crime scene. Kumalo is shocked by his brother's heartlessness. He is further disgruntled by the way the white man is self-righteous and takes Absalom's actions as a personal affront to his ministry, refusing even to help find Absalom a lawyer. Kumalo decides to ask Father Vincent, a kind English priest who offered assistance, for help.

Analysis

Like Chapter 9, Chapter 12 offers a Greek chorus of perspective, this time in the guise of a public meeting among whites about how to handle “native” crime. There are a variety of points of few – from the overly simplistic “hire more police” to “give them more education and jobs” to “segregate blacks into their own country.” There are examples of casual racism as well as economic arguments for lifting the poorest so that everyone gets richer as the chapter drifts into direct rhetoric to the reader about the fears, justified and unjustified, of the white perspective. Again the author makes the reader implicit in the struggle, referring throughout the chapter to “we:” “We shall be careful, and knock this off our lives, and knock that off our lives, and hedge ourselves with safety and precaution. And our lives will shrink, but they shall be the lives of superior beings; and we shall live with gear but at least it will not be the fear of the unknown” (Page 77). Paton published the novel right around the time that racial segregation was legalized in South Africa under the system of apartheid, and this chapter is a direct appeal to his white counterparts to consider the error of this policy. Once again the author makes use of repetition, using the refrain “cry, the beloved country” to give the novel the feel of a speech addressed directly to people who have a choice about their future and are leaning in the wrong direction.

When Msimangu gets word that the police are looking for Absalom, he decides to pursue the investigation of Absalom’s culpability alone. When Kumalo appears on his doorstep at the moment, he is irritated by Kumalo’s presence. This small detail helps round out Msimangu’s character. He has selflessly helped Kumalo throughout the search for Absalom and has been almost perfect in his kindness. This small moment of imperfect humanity helps readers identify with him. It also underscores the idea of intention in the novel. Msimangu has a knee jerk reaction to Kumalo’s presence in that moment, and he feels without thinking. He almost lashes out at Kumalo before he checks himself and remembers what the other man is suffering. This focus on intention is echoed in Kumalo’s conversation with Absalom in prison. His son, like Msimangu, acted without thinking when he shot Jarvis, responding to an emotion: fear. Absalom has no answers to Kumalo’s questions of “why.” He didn’t intend to kill a man, or turn to a life of stealing and hanging out with violent thugs, but he did it anyway. He acted without intention, and the novel makes a strong case that such behavior will always end badly.

Intention follows from the theme of passive versus active. Absalom passively followed his so-called friends into danger and crime, rather than actively pursuing what he knew was morally right. As Msimangu preaches at Ezenzeleni, he, too, follows a passive train of thought. Msimangu has an oratorical gift, but he uses it to point his flock to accept their earthly suffering and look for a reward in heaven. He does not urge blacks to actively seek a better life now. It is telling that Kumalo listens to Msimangu preach and feels rejuvenated. Kumalo is not an active agent of change in this novel either. Readers should reflect on how his passivity affects their attitude toward him as a narrator.

There is also a strong emphasis and repetition of the idea that the tribe is “broken” and Kumalo wishes to “rebuild” it. Kumalo’s individual struggles, to heal his family from Absalom’s wayward behavior and to take in Absalom’s wife and child as a way of rebuilding the family unit, are symbols of South Africa as a whole. The nation is broken, and unless action is taken to rebuild it, violence is bound to ensue.

Vocabulary

vacillate, dubious, tenacious, forgo, rueful, vagabond, smite, transfigure, prodigal, bereft

Book One, Chapters 15-17

Summary

After returning to Mrs. Lithebe's house, Kumalo is surprised by a visit from the white reformatory worker, who apologizes for his unnecessary anger, admitting he has a tendency to lash out when he fails in his work. He reverses his position and urges Kumalo to get a lawyer who can make a judge believe that Absalom is telling the truth, both about the presence of his accomplices and his unwillingness to kill. The white man accompanies him to see Father Vincent, hoping he might recommend a lawyer. Father Vincent is more than happy to help secure a lawyer, as well as to marry Absalom and the girl. The white man leaves and Kumalo pours his grief out to Father Vincent, wondering how Absalom turned out so badly and what he and his wife could have done to prevent it. He is devastated that Absalom only seems upset for his own fate rather than his destructive actions. Father Vincent urges him to pray and find things to be grateful for, rather than wallow in self-pity.

Kumalo follows Father Vincent's advice. He goes to see the pregnant girl to tell her the news about Absalom. He asks if she still wants to marry Absalom, and she says yes. She admits she has a troubled background. Her father left her alcoholic mother, and the girl left home because she didn't get along with her mother's new husband. Kumalo is disgusted to learn the girl has been sexually involved with two men before Absalom. He tries to shame the girl, even testing her by asking her to sleep with him (Kumalo). He pulls himself together and recognizes his cruelty. He tells her marrying Absalom will require moving to a small, quiet village. The girl is genuinely thrilled at the prospect, and Kumalo realizes he has underestimated her.

Kumalo arranges for the girl to move into Mrs. Lithebe's house with him, Gertrude, and her son. He knows he will have to use his savings to accommodate them all, which means his wife will not get the stove she has longed for. Mrs. Lithebe is afraid of Gertrude's frank and careless influence. She reminds the girl to be respectful and quiet. The girl readily acquiesces as she is happy to belong somewhere. Kumalo visits Absalom again, and Absalom recounts a meeting with his two accomplices who are enraged that Absalom doesn't act as the scapegoat for all of them. Kumalo makes Absalom feel guilty for associating with such untrustworthy people in the first place. Realizing that is not the best approach for helping his son turn his life around, he tells him they are hiring a lawyer and arranging his marriage. For the first time, Absalom seems a little happy and hopeful.

Kumalo meets with the lawyer provided by Father Vincent. The lawyer is Mr. Carmichael, a white man who works for the rights of the black community. Mr. Carmichael has met with Absalom and believes he is telling the truth. He asks Kumalo to gather his own thoughts as well as the impressions of others about Absalom's behavior before the murder to help build a defense. Kumalo is overcome with gratitude that Mr. Carmichael is working the case for free.

Analysis

Kumalo's passivity is partially explained by the indoctrination of his culture. When the white reformatory worker returns to see him, Kumalo can't express any of his anger or hurt at being treated disrespectfully. He has to let the white man do as he pleases. Even though the white man intends to apologize, Kumalo has no choice but to accept the apology, even if he still felt irritated: "Kumalo struggled within himself. For it is thus with a black man, who has learned to be humble and who yet desires to be something that is himself" (Page 98-9). Kumalo, despite his position of reverence and respect in his own community, is still powerless in the greater world. His powerlessness comes at the hands of the white man, but Kumalo feels the hand of fate in his life too, describing how Absalom's crime was predestined, lying in wait to ruin their good name and status from the time Absalom was born. As Kumalo believes he did everything he could to raise Absalom to be moral and good, he cannot blame himself for his son's bad character; therefore, he sees himself as a victim of destiny.

Kumalo is described as one who "thought slowly and acted slowly, no doubt because he lived in the slow tribal rhythm" (Page 105). Once again, Kumalo is a symbol of the tribe itself, and the tribe is a symbol of a traditional, dying way of life. He literally cannot keep up with the modern world. He was always a few locations behind in his search for Absalom. Had he found his son a few days earlier, perhaps he could have prevented a murder. But, in his "slow tribal" way of life, speed was not required because murder was not a potential threat.

Kumalo demonstrates his complexity and his struggles to maintain his good intentions in this section. He purposefully acts cruelly and shames the pregnant girl because she hasn't, in her young life, lived up to his moral standards. He quickly recognizes his intentions are not pure, and he retracts his statements to the girl. As a professed Christian, he must show compassion to the girl and her difficult circumstances. She had grown up with an alcoholic mother and no father. He behaves similarly with Absalom, wanting to punish his son for his thoughtless choice of companions and actions. Kumalo, who is a man trying to live a good life, is not a saint. He must stay vigilant about his intentions and work to maintain his moral righteousness. He is the readers' proxy, and his struggles are universal. The poor girl, who has been through so much at such a young age, is also cautioned to watch her intentions by Mrs. Lithebe, a guardian of female virtue. Mrs. Lithebe urges both Gertrude and the girl not to laugh in a "careless, idle" way. Even the intention behind laughter can speak to one's moral character, and for women in particular, this can be damning.

Vocabulary

dispirited, dogged, reproach, bereaved, persist, seemly, dejection, absolve, implicate

Book Two, Chapters 1-4

Summary

The novel switches focus in Book Two, moving to the Jarvis family, who live in the town of Carisbrooke above the valley where Stephen Kumalo and his family live. Time rewinds slightly to the few moments before James and Margaret Jarvis receive the news that their son Arthur has been murdered. James and Arthur were not very close; James had hoped Arthur would take over their family farm, but Arthur chose to move to Johannesburg to pursue engineering. James also didn't understand Arthur's intense involvement in the battle for blacks' rights.

The police captain relates the sad news to them. He escorts the Jarvises to a plane to fly to Johannesburg. They are met by Arthur's widow's brother, John Harrison, who takes them to his parents' house where the widow (Mary) and Arthur's two children are staying. The Harrisons offer every assistance to the Jarvises, arranging the funeral and church service and taking them to see Arthur's body. John promises to bring James the paper Arthur was writing at the time of his death, "The Truth About Native Crime." There is a clear generational divide. John, like Arthur, supports blacks' rights, while James Jarvis and Mr. Harrison have been indifferent to the plight of the lower classes. But, with Arthur dead and an outpouring of community grief mourning his loss, James finally wants to understand his son and his work. Margaret Jarvis was more aware of their son's pursuits and was already proud of him.

James spends time in Arthur's study and is fascinated by his son's varied correspondence with advocacy groups, as well as his obsession with Abraham Lincoln, about whom Arthur has a shelf full of books. He reads the piece of writing Arthur was working on in his final moments. It expressed a need for change in white attitudes toward blacks. Having destroyed the black tribal sense of community and lifestyle, it is morally imperative for whites to educate the blacks and help them rebuild their communities. Arthur did not believe in suppressing the blacks out of fear. James spends a great deal of time thinking about what his son wrote, and he takes a book on Abraham Lincoln to read.

The funeral is attended by people of every color and class, which further surprises James. While getting Arthur's affairs in order, he spends a lot of time talking with Mr. Harrison, who wants Arthur's killer caught and executed. A rumor spreads that the killer was a former employee of Arthur and his wife. Harrison has a negative and fearful view toward blacks, condescendingly wondering what they would do if the whites weren't there to give them "housing" and jobs in the mines. James wishes his son were alive to offer the opposing perspective.

The next day James begins reading Arthur's full manuscript on native crime. Arthur urges white Christians to stop subjugating blacks in the name of God's will. James realizes how little he has thought about the treatment of blacks, and he feels like he is

only just coming to know his son. He shows Arthur's final pages to his wife, who already knew their son better. He lets her read the last words written by Arthur.

Analysis

Book Two starts off with a description of the province of Natal. The same description was used to begin Book One. This repetition indicates a reboot in time and place. The novel returns to Natal to jump into the perspective of James Jarvis at the time right before he learns of his son's murder. The description of the setting veers from a deeply unwell landscape to the higher ground of High Place, the Jarvis Farm, and there is a metaphorical resonance to this location: the Jarvis' are white and have greater social standing and wealth. Even their land is in better shape despite the drought.

Almost immediately readers will note the parallels between James Jarvis and Kumalo. Both have sons who chose to leave home to seek better opportunities in Johannesburg; neither father understands what drives his son, and neither can identify with the next generation's differing priorities. Readers should note the irony in the description of James' attitude toward his son's renunciation of the family farm in favor of Johannesburg: "It had been a heavy blow, when he decided against High Place, but his life was his own, and no other mad had a right to put his hands on it" (Page 123). James will soon after find out someone did put his hands on Arthur's life, and readers can anticipate comparing how James reacts to his son's untimely death with Kumalo's handling of Absalom's criminal life and prison time. Just as Kumalo demands to know "why" Absalom acted as he did, so does James wonder "Why him?" in regards to Arthur's murder at the hands of the people he was trying to help.

The shifted perspective gives readers an opportunity to look at Kumalo from another vantage point. Without yet knowing his intimate connection to the crime, James reflects on the mission in Ndotsheni, which he has often ridden by: "But it was a sad place as he remembered it. A dirty old wood-and-iron church, patched and forlorn, and a dirty old parson in a barren valley where the grass hardly grew" (Page 132). Kumalo himself knows his valley is in trouble, but he still believes it is a beautiful place, the heart of the community and tribe. To an outsider it has little value. The novel forces readers to look at characters from a variety of perspectives, and similarly, to consider a variety of solutions to the issue of racial inequality.

American readers will immediately get Arthur's obsession with Abraham Lincoln in a way that might not be as evident to South African readers. But, to an American audience, the allusion to Lincoln should equate the struggle for racial equality in South Africa to that of the American Civil War. The novel as a whole runs parallel to Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin, creating a sympathetic portrait of a community that has no voice in an oppressive society.

The author recreates Arthur Jarvis' papers for the reader, in which Arthur passionately pleads for the necessity of white action to right former wrongs perpetrated against blacks. This use of a fictional "primary document" creates layers of storytelling in the

text. It gives an indirect look at Arthur’s character even though he is dead, but more importantly it gives Paton an outlet to make a direct address to his white South African audience for change across the nation. Under the guise of fiction, Paton is able to give his views on the social and political turmoil in the country in a straightforward, elegant argument. James Jarvis is the proxy for that white South African reader, a person who has been content not to think too hard about the circumstances of his life. However, when forced to face it, he sees the wisdom and necessity of changing his attitude and taking action.

Vocabulary

erode, congenial, indisposition, vicious, inexplicable, ineluctable, latter, exploitation, impede, preliminary, ascribe, refute

Book Two, Chapters 5-8

Summary

The day of the court case arrives. Absalom's lawyer, Mr. Carmichael, pleads not guilty on Absalom's behalf to the crime of murder, as Absalom did not intend to kill Arthur Jarvis. Absalom testifies that one of the other two accused, Johannes Pafuri, suggested the time and place of the house burglary because he knew no one would be home. Absalom describes tying handkerchiefs over their mouths and entering the house, where they encountered the servant, Richard Mpiring. Johannes knocked Mpiring out with an iron bar he was carrying. Absalom was not expecting Jarvis to enter the room, and he shot him out of fear. He buried the revolver on a plantation, and prayed for forgiveness. Absalom tells the judge he carried the revolver because he had heard Johannesburg was dangerous, and he only had a single bullet in it at the time he shot Jarvis. He had only intended to use it for self-defense and to frighten people, just as Johannes intended to use the iron bar. Absalom accuses Johannes and his cousin Matthew Kumalo of lying about their absence from the murder and their discussion of it afterward at the house of Baby Mkize. Absalom went to the house of Joseph Bhengu, where the police found him, and he regretted not turning himself in and confessing immediately as he had intended.

After the court has adjourned, Stephen Kumalo exits. He is unsettled by the sight of Arthur Jarvis' father James. The trial receives little attention because gold has been discovered in a town called Odendaalsrust and everyone is buying and selling stock shares. Everyone is planning for a bright future, except for the blacks who will continue to work hard for the same low wages.

James Jarvis continues to read his son's papers, walking past the blood-stained floor on his way to Arthur's study. He finds one article that is critical of James himself for raising Arthur without a sense of nationality and social responsibility. James is offended but continues reading. He is impressed by his son's selflessness. Arthur was working toward what he felt was morally right and was willing to die for the cause of South African equality. When he leaves the house after reading this, he goes through the front rather than past his son's bloodstain.

James and Margaret visit Margaret's niece, Barbara Smith, at her home in Springs. James stays behind while the women go to town but is soon disrupted by a knock at the door. He recognizes the black visitor as a reverend, but he cannot understand the man's sudden trembling and weak knees. The black man is Kumalo. He inquires about the daughter of a neighbor, Sibeko, who supposedly lives in the house working for Barbara Smith. James questions a boy who works in the house, but he never knew the woman, so James invites Kumalo to wait for Barbara's return.

James finally recognizes Kumalo as the parson from Ndotsheni, but he still doesn't understand Kumalo's fearful behavior. Kumalo finally admits that his son killed Arthur.

Though surprised, James has no anger for Kumalo. Kumalo describes how he would see James and Arthur riding past the mission church. He tells James that he saw a "brightness" in Arthur. When Barbara returns, James asks her about Sibeko's daughter. Barbara coldly recounts that the girl turned to making liquor and was sent to jail. She claims she doesn't know what happened to the girl after that, nor does she care. James gently and tactfully shares this information with Kumalo. James watches as Kumalo leaves, deeply shaken by the encounter.

Analysis

The beginning of Chapter 5 is set in the court room, which the author vividly describes. A second person narrative voice gives the reader an immersive feeling of being there. Paton goes to great trouble to describe the chain of responsibility in upholding the law. A judge can only uphold the law as it stands, even if the law is not just. Paton is none too subtle in laying the blame for unjust laws at the feet of white people, who vote the laws into action. Many laws are based on fear rather than justice. No matter how sincere, just, and morally righteous a judge is, he is essentially corrupt because he is working within a flawed and corrupt system.

After the setting's description and the law's framework are described, the dialogue begins and continues for many uninterrupted pages. It seems as if it were a transcript of Absalom's testimony.

Chapter 6 explains in part why South Africa is so full of fear. White South Africans are afraid of losing their wealth which comes at the expense of black rights, as symbolized by the discovery of new gold mines in a small, unknown town. Paton uses an ironic tone for much of the chapter justifying why "we" must continue to develop the mines as they have been built in the past, hoarding the profit and keeping blacks down while simultaneously making South Africa a "wonderful" and wealthy nation. The chapter is entirely rhetorical, summing up the hypocrisy and greed of white South Africans who are afraid to try anything new to improve the conditions of blacks lest they lose even a fraction of their profits.

Readers will note all the euphemisms to denote racial inferiority. Blacks are referred to as "natives" or "Non-Europeans." The social pyramid is even more textured, and blacks or tribal groups like Zulus are not the only ones looked down upon. People of Afrikaner descent are also looked down upon by white South Africans of European ancestry. They mock the name of the town where gold has been found, "Odendaalsrust," as awkward and equate it with a lack of sophistication. Afrikaans as a language is disparaged, though even a white farmer like James Jarvis can speak Zulu, a native tongue. Fear is clearly a major theme in the novel, and these euphemisms and mockeries are a way for the group in power to distance themselves from the oppressed, to make them an "other" that is less human and therefore less deserving of rights. These tactics were used similarly by the Nazis against Jews in Europe, and the author suggests that if things continue unchecked in South Africa violence will be inevitable. However, given that

blacks outnumber whites, the tide of violence will move in a different direction from the Nazi use of violence to maintain their power.

Paton once again is able to voice his rhetoric about the white need to act selflessly to heal South Africa as a whole through the papers of Arthur Jarvis. Even though James is personally offended by what Arthur writes about his father's lack of social awareness, he is still won over by his son's arguments and willingness to support his words with actions. James makes his own small action, his own shift in intention, when he leaves Arthur's house through the front door rather than walking past his son's blood yet again. It is not that he "cannot face it anymore," as the police guard at the house believes, but rather that he is making a choice not to wallow in his son's death. Rather than letting that death define him in a way that makes him resentful and bitter, James is taking the first small step toward honoring his son's death through action that supports Arthur's mission. Arthur would not want his father to continue reliving the pain of his death. However, he would want his father to keep his death from being meaningless.

Vocabulary

culpable, contempt, impersonal, expedient, aspire, inverted

Book Two, Chapters 9-12

Summary

After the discovery of new gold mines, John Kumalo gives a public speech encouraging black laborers to demand their share of the nation's wealth. John is a dynamic speaker who has the capacity to rouse a crowd to action, but he uses his power sparingly. John is afraid of losing his own small wealth and status so he never pushes his speeches too far. The police attend the speech, but they know that John has no intention of creating a dangerous situation. Kumalo and Msimangu listen to John's speech, and Kumalo is shocked at his brother's gift. Msimangu believes John's corrupt pettiness is a better option than using his power to start a national race war. Separately, James Jarvis also listens to the speech, but he is less impressed. John Harrison, who accompanies him, thinks James is too old and set in his ways to face the coming changes to the nation.

White people fear a strike by the black mining laborers. A strike would stop the South African economy. Some fear that the strike will spread to all black workers. Of the 300,000 black mining laborers, only a few strike, and the police end it by pushing the blacks back into the mines, causing three deaths. The Synod of Johannesburg's Diocese urges the industry hierarchy to allow the miners to form a union to negotiate their working conditions, but no one takes it seriously.

At Kumalo's accommodation, Mrs. Lithebe warns Gertrude to be careful of the company she keeps and to stay vigilant against speaking and laughing "carelessly." Gertrude is exhausted with the effort to behave in Johannesburg. On the day before Absalom's ruling and sentencing, the newspaper reports another white man's murder by a black burglar. The timing of this violence bodes ill for Absalom's chance at leniency. Msimangu and Mrs. Lithebe decide to withhold the news from Kumalo, knowing it will upset him. Everyone in the house attends a meeting at Msimangu's church, where a woman speaks about her vocation as a nun. Upon returning, Gertrude tells Mrs. Lithebe she might want to become a nun in order to subdue her sexuality. Mrs. Lithebe encourages her in this thought, but they decide to think about it before Gertrude makes a decision. Gertrude mentions the tentative plan to Absalom's girl, who promises to take care of Gertrude's son if she joins a convent.

Everyone attends court the next day for the Judge's ruling. He reviews all the testimony and evidence. He decides there is not sufficient evidence to convict Pafuri of knocking out the servant, nor even enough to place Pafuri or Matthew Kumalo at the crime scene. He lets them go free. The judge then considers the case for and against Absalom. He decides that despite Absalom's professed objectives, the fact that he was carrying a loaded weapon indicates some intention for violence. This intention is enough for Absalom to be found guilty of murder. He will be sentenced to death by hanging. The judge decides he cannot be merciful because Absalom made a series of bad choices of his own volition. He was carrying violent weapons when he broke into the house. Then, he used the weapons to inflict harm. Absalom breaks down sobbing, and Kumalo is

assisted out of the court by Msimangu and the white reformatory worker, who breaks tradition by exiting through the “non-European” door with the black men.

The group goes to the prison so that Father Vincent can marry Absalom and the girl, who barely know each other. Kumalo spends a few minutes alone with Absalom after the ceremony. He and the family will travel back to Ndotsheni the following day. Absalom offers all the money in his bank account for the care of his child and requests that Kumalo name the baby Peter if it is a boy. Kumalo is bitter that Matthew and Johannes aren’t sharing the burden of guilt. Absalom breaks down again at the thought of going to the prison Pretoria alone. The prison guard gives them a few extra minutes together. Finally, Kumalo must leave. Absalom wraps himself around his father in desperation, but the guard pulls him off. The girl is excited to present herself to Kumalo as his daughter, but Kumalo is too overcome with grief to think about it.

Kumalo goes to say goodbye to his brother John, refusing his offer for tea. John commends Kumalo for taking on the burden of Gertrude and her child, as well as Absalom’s bride. Kumalo urges John to bring Matthew home so that he does not end up like Absalom, and John assures him he already plans to do that. Kumalo questions John about his politics, worrying about the trouble his views could cause him. Kumalo warns John to be careful lest he is watched. Out of spite, Kumalo even makes up a story to instill fear in John that he has a spy visiting the shop to listen to him. He points out that Absalom had two “friends” who betrayed him and John might too. John becomes enraged and kicks Kumalo out. Kumalo regrets his lie to his brother.

In a different part of the city, the Harrisons escort James Jarvis to the train station for his trip home. Mr. Harrison is glad of the trial’s outcome and only wishes the two accomplices had been jailed as well. James thanks Mr. Harrison for all his help. Before getting on the train, James gives John Harrison an envelope and tells him not to open it until James is gone. Inside John finds a thousand pounds to put toward the club John and Arthur ran together for blacks, with the request that John name the club after Arthur.

Back at Mrs. Lithebe’s there is a small gathering to say goodbye to Kumalo and the women. They are celebrating Msimangu’s impending retirement into a religious community where he will live without possessions away from the material world. Before they part for the night, Msimangu takes Kumalo aside and gives him his entire savings of thirty three pounds. Msimangu tells him he has no other family to give it to nor any need for it in his new life, and Kumalo can use it to look after his suddenly expanded family. Kumalo is overcome with emotion at Msimangu’s generosity. All Msimangu asks in return is that Kumalo keep him in his prayers. Msimangu promises to keep Kumalo informed on how Absalom’s plea for mercy to the Governor-General-in-Council goes, and if and when Absalom is finally hanged. Kumalo wakes early the next day to make final preparations for their journey, but is shocked to discover Gertrude is gone, having left her son and her nice clothes behind.

Analysis

Chapter 9 dissects the character of John Kumalo. John is content to be a big fish in the small pond of his community. He doesn't have to answer to a chief. Instead, he is treated like one without having to be born into it. But, his power is empty because he doesn't have the intellect or the selflessness to use it for the greater good. Like everyone else in South African society, John is afraid of losing what little wealth and status he has. He has no intention of risking them in order to help others rise up as well. John is one of the few blacks who potentially has the power to effect change among his people. He is too selfish to act on it, making him a counterpoint to Arthur Jarvis. As a white man, Arthur had no stake in the fight for black rights beyond moral correctness and responsibility. He protests for racial equality for selfless motives. Like John, he does not want to be a martyr. But, he is willing to give up his life for the cause of justice.

Once again the question of intention moves to the forefront. John does not intend to start a race war. He only intends to keep his own claim to financial security and a modest amount of prestige. John is morally corrupt because he never even stops to consider his motives or how he could use his power to serve others. Kumalo, who has dedicated his life to service, is still not perfect. He chooses to lie to John about a potential spy because he wants to hurt his brother. Yet, he immediately recognizes the sinfulness of this intention and repents of it. This final confrontation between the brothers demonstrates the butting heads of religion versus politics and passivity versus aggression. John doesn't truly stand up for the things he pontificates about. He is not really political. He is essentially as passive as his brother – which means that though Kumalo is less powerful than John superficially, he has the power of good and right on his side. There is a tacit promotion of a life that relies on God to improve one's lot.

Though the gold mining strike is a failure, the Synod of the Diocese of Johannesburg prophesies future violence if blacks are not given a better lifestyle. Paton uses vivid metaphor to hammer home the idea that just because the blacks are quiet doesn't mean they aren't angry. The novel is set in 1946 and published in 1948. Paton writes in real time with a sense of urgency for his white South African audience. He is foreshadowing violence in his society if the issue of racial inequality is not dealt with. Forty-six years of apartheid would bear out Paton's prophecy in ways he had no way of knowing.

Keen readers will note the symmetry of financial donations and what it says about the novel's main characters. James Jarvis offers a large sum of money to keep Arthur's work in Johannesburg alive. Kumalo accepts a sum of money from Msimangu that is big to him to support his suddenly large family in a rural community with little opportunity. James, a wealthy white man, gives. Kumalo, a good but poor reverend, receives. Arthur's work involved more than throwing money at the problem of inequality, and Kumalo also needs more than money to rejuvenate his small community. Readers can, perhaps, foreshadow James' more active participation in the village close to his own home and Kumalo sparking that active participation through his passive kindness.

Vocabulary

resurgent, dominion, indiscriminate, orator, synod, unscrupulous, renounce, supposition, cogent, countenance, infer, extenuate

Book Three, Chapters 1-3

Summary

Kumalo, the girl, and Gertrude's son take many trains back to Natal province and to Ndotsheni. Kumalo's wife and friend meet him at the train station, and he quickly and quietly tells his wife the news about Absalom and Gertrude's sudden disappearance. His wife welcomes the girl and little boy as her own children, setting off a wave of emotional gratitude in the girl. As they walk home, people come out to welcome Kumalo home. The valley is in deep drought and even the streams have dried up. Kumalo's friend reveals the women are walking to the river near the Jarvis farm for water. The friend now works for Jarvis and knows of that man's troubles. The people of the village converge at the church and Kumalo leads an impromptu prayer, thanking God for their safe travels and asking for rain and forgiveness for everyone's sins, particularly Gertrude's and Absalom's.

The people disperse. Kumalo reveals his family's misfortunes to his friend, wondering if he should leave the village in shame. But, his friend assures him that all the people are glad to have him back and no one would want him to leave. He tells his friend that Sibeko's daughter has disappeared, and though Barbara Smith didn't care where she might have ended up, James Jarvis showed some compassion by not sharing this sentiment, not realizing Kumalo understood the woman's English.

Kumalo shows his wife Msimangu's extraordinary financial gift, which eases their burden a little. He begins to pray for his home in a more focused way, and wonders how they can change the poverty of the community. He wants to keep the community together, rather than watching all the young people seek their fortune in Johannesburg, and goes to see the village chief and school headmaster to brainstorm ideas for regenerating the farms. Both men are deeply aware of the problems but have no solutions. Kumalo forces the chief to acknowledge the death of the community's small children rather than resting on a promise to simply think about the tribe's difficulties. The chief promises to speak again to the local magistrate.

Kumalo returns to church to work on his accounts, and is surprised when a small white boy rides up on horseback. The boy looks just as his father did many years ago: it is Arthur Jarvis' son. The little boy lifts his hat to Kumalo, being too young to know the customs. The boy asks to see the house and is impressed by its size, though Kumalo points out most villagers' houses are not as nice. Kumalo asks the boy if he'd like some water, and the boy is surprised to learn there is neither a refrigerator to make ice water nor milk to drink. The boy realizes there is no milk because of poverty, and wonders what happens to the children in the village. Kumalo tells him honestly that they are dying. The boy absorbs this and after impressing Kumalo will his rudimentary Zulu vocabulary, he leaves, promising to return to practice more Zulu.

Kumalo's friend visits later that night and announces that Jarvis has sent cans of milk for the village children and they will be replenished daily. Kumalo will be responsible for distributing it. Shocked, Kumalo sends Jarvis a blessing by way of the friend. The next day, Kumalo gets four letters in the mail from Absalom. One is for the girl. The other three are for Kumalo, Msimangu, and the lawyer Carmichael. Absalom has not been granted mercy and will hang on the fifteenth of the month. Kumalo shares Absalom's letter with his wife. She urges them to keep doing their work, rather than wallow in self pity.

Storm clouds gather over the valley for the first time in months, and the village gets excited for the impending rain. Kumalo is surprised when Jarvis, the magistrate, and the village chief all converge near the church and start putting sticks and flags in the ground. Kumalo does not understand the purpose of the sticks, and neither does the chief, who simply tries to stay out of the way. The chief promises to ensure no one moves the sticks and flags. Kumalo overhears Jarvis offering to go to Pretoria to help expedite something, and the magistrate agrees to the plan. Jarvis asks Kumalo if he can take shelter from the rain in the church, and Kumalo agrees. The fierceness of the storm keeps them from conversing, and Jarvis has a hard time finding a spot to sit where the roof isn't leaking. As the storm abates, Jarvis inquires about Absalom. Kumalo tells him there will not be mercy, and Jarvis offers to think of Absalom on the day of his death.

Analysis

Though Kumalo's homecoming is laced with pain – his son is likely to hang, Ndotsheni is crippled by a ceaseless drought – the inherent goodness of this rural life is pervasive. From Absalom's wife's there is contented acceptance of her new home and Kumalo's wife's automatic acceptance of her new children. The villagers' joyful reunion with their leader in faith are happy to have him back to guide them. They do not judge Kumalo by his son Absalom's actions.

Ndotsheni and its valley may be "a wasted land, a land of old men and women and children," but it is still the only place Kumalo can feel at "home" (Page 203). This idea of home reinforces the latent battle between urban and rural. No matter what ails the country, the author subtly presents the case that it is still a better option than the city because the people are kinder and more group-oriented. They do not selfishly seek their own fortunes. Kumalo leads an impromptu prayer service upon his arrival home, and the author uses a metaphor to encapsulate the key to rural life: "One breaks into a hymn, with a high note that cannot be sustained; but others come in underneath it, and support and sustain it, and some men come in too, with the deep notes and the true" (Page 204). It takes a community willing to work together and support each other to rejuvenate the land and survive as a tribe.

When Arthur Jarvis' son visits Kumalo, he lifts his hat to Kumalo as a sign of respect to Kumalo's age and position as reverend. Kumalo is surprised. The boy is unaware of the "custom" that whites never put themselves in a position to be "less" than a black person.

This small moment is important for two symbolic reasons. First, it indicates that racism is not inherent. The white boy does not feel innately superior to Kumalo, a black man. Racism is taught, which means in can also be untaught. Through this unteaching, there is the hope for a more harmonious future for South Africa. The boy personifies that hope. If his optimistic and open-minded generation can treat blacks with respect and compassion, things will begin to change for the nation.

The rainstorm and end of the drought foreshadow positive changes for Ndotsheni, particularly when paired with James Jarvis' appearance in the village with the magistrate. Readers should note how little control Kumalo has over the fate of his community. Just as he can't make it rain, he can only wait for an influential white person like Jarvis to take an active interest in his community's regeneration. His kindness and genuine interest in Jarvis' grandson play small roles in winning Jarvis' attention and assistance. The words of Jarvis' own son has a much greater impact on Jarvis' decision to start taking action in the wider world of Christian justice. Kumalo, despite his stubborn desire to keep his community together, is ultimately powerless.

Vocabulary

tremulous, flag, respite, sultry, loiter, abate, apprehension

Book Three, Chapters 4-7

Summary

Rumors spread that the sticks in the ground mark out a dam, though no one knows where the water will come from. No one returns to do anything with the sticks. Kumalo goes about taking care of his church and villagers, while he anxiously awaits news of Jarvis' return from Pretoria. The little white boy comes back to practice more Zulu. He makes Kumalo laugh with his enthusiasm and confidence. Kumalo is saddened to learn the boy will return to Johannesburg after his grandfather comes home. The boy promises to return for more Zulu lessons. As he leaves he sees a car on the road. He knows his grandfather is back.

Immediately after the boy departs, Kumalo is surprised to find a young black man waiting for him at the church. His name is Napoleon Letsitsi. Jarvis has hired him as an agricultural demonstrator to revolutionize the way the community farms. Kumalo invites Napoleon to stay with them. Over dinner, Napoleon explains his potential plans for the valley. They will be using fertilizer, planting trees, plowing in different patterns, and sharing the land instead of maintaining individual farms. The dam will be supplied by a pipe from the river to irrigate all the fields. Kumalo and Napoleon are excited and impatient for the work to begin, and Kumalo wants Napoleon to meet the chief. Just as they are about to leave, the little white boy returns to say goodbye to Kumalo. He is leaving early the next morning for Johannesburg.

Some time later, Kumalo and his neighbors prepare for the confirmation ceremony of some local youth. Kumalo's friend who works for Jarvis arrives early with the milk, announcing that Jarvis' wife has died. The village is aware of the woman's gentle kindness and everyone is devastated. Kumalo wants to offer his sympathies in person but decides he has no business at the white man's home. He writes a heartfelt note and sends it immediately off to High Place, Jarvis' farm. He worries that Jarvis' wife died of a broken heart over her dead son.

Rain pours over the valley during the confirmation in the church, which is led by the Bishop. After the celebration and simple meal, the Bishop tells Kumalo he wants to send him to another community, believing Kumalo's proximity to the Jarvis family is bad for everyone. Kumalo tries to protest, telling the Bishop about his joyful homecoming and his desire to lead the community in its agricultural evolution. But the Bishop adamantly believes Kumalo is too old and had too much scandal to effectively lead the building of a new church. They are interrupted by a boy with a letter for Kumalo. Jarvis writes thanking Kumalo for his sympathies and announcing that his wife wanted to finance the building of a new church in Ndotsheni. He gently tells Kumalo that she was sick before Arthur died, a tacit way of absolving Kumalo's family from blame. The Bishop reads the letter, and realizes Kumalo still has a great deal of work to do in Ndotsheni. After the Bishop leaves, Kumalo, his wife, and the villagers create a floral wreath to send to Jarvis for the funeral, along with a note expressing the grief of the entire community.

Napoleon starts the farming improvements, but it is slow work. The villagers are resistant to change, and they don't want to give up their land and cattle. As progress is made, Napoleon is hopeful that the following year will be even better. Napoleon is slightly bitter about Jarvis' involvement in revitalizing the community, disliking their dependence on a white man. If whites hadn't withheld so much in the first place, blacks wouldn't be so dependent now. He tells Kumalo that no matter how effectively they restore the valley, there still won't be enough work and food to support the community. Young people will still inevitably go to Johannesburg for opportunities. Napoleon surprises Kumalo with his perspective on working for the greater good of Africa as a whole, not just for oneself or one's race. Kumalo only advises Napoleon never to seek power or to hate whites indiscriminately.

On the evening before the fifteenth of the month, Kumalo climbs nearby Emoyeni mountain to keep vigil and pray for his son. He runs into Jarvis on the road. Jarvis thanks him for the church's floral wreath and discusses plans for the new church in Ndotsheni. He admits he is moving to Johannesburg, but he promises to return frequently to monitor the work he began in Ndotsheni. They talk of Jarvis' grandson and how much he reminds them of Arthur Jarvis. Kumalo tells him he is going up the mountain. Jarvis understands the reason. He consoles Kumalo with thoughts of all the new and good work they will do together in the valley. Kumalo tries to thank him for all his assistance, but Jarvis chafes at the compliments and leaves, wishing Kumalo well.

Kumalo finishes his climb and spends the night praying, confessing his sins, and running through the list of all the blessings in his life, all the good people and good work now being done. He prays for all that has been lost but also for the hope of redemption for all of Africa. He falls asleep but wakes before dawn, thinking of his son who is having his final meal and will hang as the sun rises. He wonders what Absalom is feeling and wishes Absalom's death could be stopped by God himself. He continues to pray until he thinks it is the time of his son's death. He stands and removes his hat, and watches the sun rise.

Analysis

Kumalo prays for a miracle for Ndotsheni, and James Jarvis is that miracle. But, his perspective varies differently from that of Napoleon, who represents another facet of the generation gap. Napoleon is a young black man who wants to take action to lift his people up. He received an education and can revolutionize poor black communities with his agricultural knowledge. He is resentful that they must rely on the patronage of a white man for the financial support to start this revolution: "But it is not the way it should be done, that is all" (Page 244). He seethes with latent bitterness, whereas Kumalo simply feels gratitude toward Jarvis. Kumalo is too old for "new and disturbing thoughts and they hurt him" (Page 246), but the next generation has a more strident and fearless worldview. Though Napoleon is taking proactive, nonviolent steps to improve the situation of his people, his discontent and idealistic views on a united Africa foreshadow unrest. As long as he and others like him have resentment in their hearts, there is a

likely chance that resentment will boil over into violence, despite Kumalo's advice to Napoleon to avoid hating whites indiscriminately.

Several passages in this final section once again speak directly to a white South African reader, imploring them to acknowledge and revere the humanity of the black race and to examine their own fear and try to overcome it. The author again uses repetition to drive home his points, creating a narrative rhetorical voice that lends itself to an oral speech, such as in the passage, "And what was there evil in their desires, in their hunger? That men should walk upright in the land where they were born, and be free to use the fruits of the earth, what was there evil in it? Yet, men were afraid, with a fear that was deep, deep in the heart, a fear so deep that they hid their kindness, or brought it out with fierceness and anger…They were afraid because they were so few. And such fear could not be cast out, but by love" (Page 252). Paton circuitously indicts his reader with this fear. He cleverly avoids offending his audience by speaking of "them" instead of abrasively accusing a second person "you" of being afraid, despite his frequent use of "you" throughout the novel. In doing so, he tries to gently prod his reader to explore their own feelings and motivations and to rise above any negative instincts.

The final section is laced with optimism – Ndotsheni is on the mend and Kumalo takes stock of all the generous and kind people he has met on his journey to Johannesburg and back. The novel makes the subtle claim that there are plenty of good people in the world, and through these good people the world can change. Yet the final paragraph contains an ominous warning. "Yes it is dawn that has come…The great valley of the Umzimkulu is still in darkness, but the light will come there. Ndotsheni is still in darkness, but the light will come there also. For it is the dawn that has come, as it has come for a thousand centuries, never failing. But when that dawn will come, of our emancipation, from the fear of bondage and the bondage of fear, why, that is a secret" (Page 253). Paton turns Kumalo's dawn vigil into a metaphor, using light and darkness to have the greater meaning of enlightenment and success versus ignorance and fear. Despite his optimism, he is realistic enough to recognize the journey to a just and equal South Africa will be long and difficult. Publishing the novel as apartheid was institutionalizing racism, Paton knew there was little hope of a better world in South Africa for the foreseeable future.

Vocabulary

pastoral, afoot, wrest, overwrought, transmute, render

Characters

Stephen Kumalo

Stephen Kumalo is the protagonist of the novel, a sixty-year-old black village priest who goes on a physical and emotional journey to Johannesburg to find his son. He is fairly humorless, but kind and dignified within his limited sphere of influence. More than having a specific personality, Kumalo is an archetype of the passive and dutiful black man who quietly accepts his subservience to whites. He is a symbol of a bygone era, when black tribes in South Africa formed communities that lasted for generations in pastoral calm. As South Africa modernizes through the gold industry, Kumalo is left behind, losing much of his family and community to violent urban life.

Kumalo is also old-fashioned in his reliance on God and his faith to get him through troubling times. He does little to question or push back against the status quo. Yet despite his passive exterior, Kumalo lashes out in subtle ways against those in his life (Gertrude, Absalom, Absalom's girl) who disappoint his strict moral values. This intentional cruelty may be a transmuted rage over his diminished station in life. He cannot even influence the people he loves to behave properly. Absalom's fate renews Kumalo's determination to keep his village Ndotsheni together as a united community. But, he is powerless to help them himself, except inadvertently through his gentle kindness. By treating James Jarvis and his grandson with compassion and benevolence, he is rewarded with their patronage in the village.

Msimangu

Msimangu is a black reverend living in Johannesburg who helps Kumalo on every step of his journey to find Absalom. Msimangu then assists with getting through Absalom's trial. An older man like Kumalo, Msimangu has strict and old-fashioned views on morality. Although he is generous and kind, he has moments of judgment and disgust towards "sinners" like Absalom's girl and the young black men who take advantage of girls like her. A gifted preacher, he uses his oratory talent to urge his flock to a passive acceptance of life's suffering with the expectation of being rewarded in heaven, an attitude personified by Kumalo. Though he hopes for greater justice for blacks and more compassion and understanding between the races, he does not actively fight for these causes, or even support those who do. He fears violence between the races and would rather wait for whites to have a change of heart toward blacks than encourage blacks to take their rights through force. Like Kumalo, he represents a rapidly disappearing generation that idealizes a tribal past and fears what the urban future will mean for his community.

James Jarvis

James Jarvis is a wealthy white farmer who lives above the valley where Ndotsheni rests. His land thrives on its higher ground. Before readers meet him, James is content to keep his mind occupied with his land and work. The murder of his son Arthur forces James to reevaluate his priorities. James didn't understand his son Arthur's passions while he was alive; however, after his son's death, James makes the effort to read Arthur's papers and understand why Arthur so vehemently fought for black civil rights.

James allows himself to be persuaded by Arthur's logical and Christian arguments. He returns to the Natal province with a more outward and compassionate perspective, urged on further by his grandson who emulates his own father (Arthur). James recognizes his selfish obliviousness to the world around him. Though respectful to the blacks he encounters and employees, he has never gotten involved in politics or thought too much about the issues of blacks' rights. It could be said that this has helped create the greater circumstances which allowed the murder of his own son. In his own small way, James continues Arthur's work locally by dedicating himself to revitalizing the community of Ndotsheni. He has the most pronounced shift in perspective in the novel. Without his broadened mind and ability to act as a "deus ex machina" for Kumalo's community, the blacks there would have no hope of saving themselves.

Absalom Kumalo

Absalom Kumalo is Stephen Kumalo's teenage son who seeks better opportunities in Johannesburg and ends up being hung for the unintentional murder of a white man. Absalom acts without thinking, following the lead of others, despite his moral upbringing as the son of a reverend. He has difficulty taking responsibility for his crime because he didn't "mean" to kill anyone. He cannot accept that simply by carrying a gun he was increasing his chances of getting into a violent situation. He also shows signs of laziness. Even when he thrives in the reformatory and gets a good factory job, he returns to the "bad company" that got him in trouble in the first place. He would rather steal money than to work for it. Absalom hardly accepts responsibility for his fate by the novel's end, but he acts as nobly as he can by offering all the money he has to care for his unborn child.

Gertrude

Gertrude is Stephen Kumalo's sister, 25 years younger than her brother. She represents that generational difference that Kumalo also experiences with his son. Her family symbolizes the crisis imposed upon tribal communities by the modern urban pull. She loses her husband when he goes to work in the gold mines. When she goes to Johannesburg to find him, she falls into moral ruin as a prostitute and liquor dealer. Gertrude has a "careless" and "idle" way of laughing and talking, especially to men who remain a temptation to her even after her brother saves her from herself. Gertrude wants life to be fun and easy, but she knows this is wrong. She is briefly inspired to join

a convent in order to remove herself from such temptations. In the end, she is too weak and runs away to her morally questionable life, abandoning her son in the process.

John Kumalo

John Kumalo is Stephen Kumalo's younger brother, who moves to Johannesburg and gives up his religious beliefs in order to live as he pleases and try to consolidate a little power for himself. Though he talks disparagingly about having to cater to the whims of ignorant rural tribal chiefs, he is described as "fat like a chief." His morality is questionable as he laughs off the fact that he cast aside his first wife in order to marry a second. A hypnotically gifted orator, John has joined the movement for greater black equality. Yet, he is a hypocrite who speaks out for black rights only so far as it gets him some notoriety and power in the black community. He is never so adamant that he will lose what little power and wealth he has obtained. John would rather be a big fish in his small pond than a martyr for the nation. Such motivations will do little for the greater good of his people.

Arthur Jarvis

Arthur Jarvis is a white reformer who advocates for justice and equality for the blacks of South Africa until he is murdered in his own home by Absalom Kumalo – an irony that everyone is aware of. Arthur wrote eloquently on the subject of justice, urging other whites to support the cause as Christians and compassionate human beings. He runs an organization within the black community to support their efforts at a better life. Ironically, despite having an estranged relationship with his father, Arthur's writings influence James Jarvis more than anyone else to change his perspective and involvement with the causes of their nation.

Stephen Kumalo's Wife

Stephen Kumalo's wife is the unnamed woman who embodies the black concept of "mother." She is an older woman who cares in a maternal way for her entire community. She embraces this role when she unquestioningly absorbs Gertrude's son and Absalom's wife as her own children. Her biggest ambition is to own a stove, but she is willing to sacrifice it when the money saved is needed for other purposes. She supports Kumalo's work in a stereotypically gendered way, cooking and cleaning for the church.

Absalom's Wife

Absalom's Wife is a young, never named girl. She gets pregnant by Absalom and marries him before he is hanged for murder. Though Stephen Kumalo and Msimangu look down on her for sleeping with men at such a young age, her childhood was shaped by a father who abandoned her and an alcoholic mother. She was left with few opportunities to thrive. Her true innocence shines through in her genuine joy and

contentment at moving to the rural community of Ndotsheni from Johannesburg and being a real part of the Kumalo family, with parents and responsibilities of her own.

Father Vincent

Father Vincent is a white English reverend who has a compassionate and generous attitude toward blacks. He does everything in his power to assist Absalom in his murder trial. A deeply devout man, he shows signs of an enlightened attitude toward blacks similar to those of Arthur Jarvis.

The white reformatory worker

The white reformatory worker is a man, never named, who assists Absalom in getting back into society's good graces after a few brushes with the law. He is devastated when Absalom returns to his illegal habits. The white reformatory worker takes an unhealthy pride in his work with the less fortunate blacks, which somewhat undermines his good intentions. He takes Absalom's behavior personally. He learns a humbling lesson from this experience. He offers all the help he can to Kumalo and Absalom to keep Absalom from execution.

Arthur Jarvis' son

Arthur Jarvis' son is the young son of the murdered reformer who befriends Stephen Kumalo in Ndotsheni while he is staying with his grandparents. Arthur's son is theoretically a small embodiment of his father. He is confident and compassionate. He wants to help Kumalo's congregation when he learns of their suffering. The boy has an open mind which optimistically symbolizes the next generation. He is unaware of the customs which make Kumalo "less" than he is in life. He treats the old black reverend with respect and equality, eagerly learning what Kumalo can teach him.

John Harrison, Jr

John Harrison, Jr. is Arthur Jarvis' brother-in-law. He has a progressive attitude toward blacks and works with Arthur to run an organization that supports blacks' rights. He is another example of the generational class, as he and his father have opposing views on the political and social situation in South Africa.

John Harrison, Sr.

John Harrison, Sr.is Arthur Jarvis' father-in-law, the personification of the older white generation that fears blacks and wants to keep them oppressed rather than give up any personal power or comfort. He refers to blacks as "niggers" and wishes that Absalom and his accomplices would hang for Arthur Jarvis' murder. He represents a stubborn

and unchanging perspective that will keep South Africa from moving forward. It will likely lead to violent clashes between the races.

Napoleon Letsitsi

Napoleon Letsitsi is the young black agricultural demonstrator hired by James Jarvis to revolutionize farming in the Ndotsheni community. Napoleon wants blacks to be self-sufficient. Even though Jarvis pays him a good salary to do this work in Ndotsheni, he is mildly resentful that the village must rely on the patronage of a white man. He represents the changing attitude of the younger black generation. They want reform and revolution rather than the continued oppression and subservience of blacks.

Mrs. Lithebe

Mrs. Lithebe is an old woman who offers Kumalo room and board while he is in Johannesburg. She is a rigid moralist, preaching to Gertrude and Absalom's girl not to talk or laugh "carelessly or idly." She believes fully in the goodness of Kumalo and the other priests. She does her best to help him during his search for his son, including taking in his ever-increasing family.

Matthew Kumalo

Matthew Kumalo is John Kumalo's son. Matthew turns to a criminal life, leading John to kick him out. Matthew is the ultimate passive troublemaker. Though he doesn't plan the crime or carry any weapons, he goes along without putting up a fight. He has no qualms about lying in court to save himself, leaving his cousin to bear the consequences alone.

Johannes Pafuri

Johannes Pafuri is one of Absalom's accomplices in the murder of Arthur Jarvis. Johannes is the main bad influence on Absalom in Johannesburg. He is the mastermind behind the plot, knowing which house to burglarize and when to do it. He carries an iron bar, indicating a violent nature. He has no qualms about beating the house servant. He has no moral character, as he sells out Absalom and then lies about his own involvement in the crime.

Objects/Places

Msimangu's Letter

Msimangu's letter is addressed to Kumalo. It asks him to come to Johannesburg to look after his sick sister. There is an ominous feeling about the letter, as both Kumalo and his wife expect it to have bad news. It has been so long since they heard from any of their family in Johannesburg that they can only believe any news from the city will be bad. The letter is the inciting incident of the novel. Without Msimangu's words exhorting Kumalo to travel to Johannesburg, the rest of the novel would not happen.

Revolver

A revolver is the weapon Absalom uses to murder Arthur Jarvis. Though it is loaded with a single bullet and he only carries it as a diversionary measure against actual violence, the revolver leads to Absalom's undoing. Without thinking, he accepts anonymous advice that guns are necessary in Johannesburg.

Iron Bar

An iron bar is the weapon Johannes Pafuri uses to knock Jarvis' servant unconscious. Like the revolver, carrying the iron bar could lead to violence regardless of the original intention.

Arthur Jarvis' Papers

Arthur Jarvis' Papers are the documents Arthur wrote in which he passionately argues for justice and equality for South African blacks. Arthur's father James reads these documents after his son's death and slowly opens his mind to Arthur's ideas, resulting in his desire to assist the local black community of Ndotsheni near his home in the Natal province.

Gold Mines

Gold mines are a source of great wealth for white South Africans, at the expense of cheap black labor. They are a source of tension between the races. Blacks seek their equal share in the profits the mines bring in, while whites fear how far blacks are willing to go to get their share.

Stove

Having a stove is the dearest wish of Kumalo's wife. They have saved money for a long time to buy one. However, the purchase must be put on hold when Kumalo is forced to use the money to travel to Johannesburg to look after Gertrude and find Absalom.

High Place

High Place is the name of the prosperous Jarvis farm that overlooks the valley where Stephen Kumalo's village, Ndotsheni, is located.

Ndotsheni

Located in the Umzimkulu valley in the South African province of Natal, Ndotsheni is the village where Kumalo lives. The village is suffering under the hardships of drought and unsustainable farming practices.

Ndotsheni's Church

Ndotsheni's church is the heart of the village community. Kumalo oversees the church. It is the ultimate symbol of the village's decline because the roof leaks and there is no money to repair it. James Jarvis' generous offer to rebuild it near the end of the novel is a metaphor for the impending rejuvenation of Ndotsheni.

Johannesburg

Johannesburg is a large city in South Africa. It is a wealthy city because of nearby gold mines. Rural black South Africans go there in search of better opportunities. In the novel, it is represented as a hotbed of moral and ethical decline.

Themes

Racial Inequality

Life during the 1940's in South Africa is rife with racial inequality. Though blacks are the majority race in the country, they are subjugated by the white minority who will not let them ascend to positions of power or have a piece of the country's gold mining wealth. Blacks live on land that is too poor to farm. They have little education. Families and tribes are broken apart because of the gold mines, which draw young black men to live in faraway,basic compounds for low wages. Everyone lives in fear. The blacks live in fear of angering or offending whites and suffering reprisals. The whites live in fear that the blacks will rise up against the injustice in their lives and try to take back power of the country.

Each character in the novel deals with the issue of racial inequality in a different way. Stephen Kumalo essentially accepts reality. He works to improve conditions in his small village but only through passive channels. When the little Jarvis boy raises his hat to Kumalo, Kumalo is surprised by the sign of respect to an elder and reverend. As a black man, he expects no such honor. Similarly, Msimangu, the reverend who helps Kumalo in Johannesburg, subscribes to a passive religious attitude – bear this world's suffering to receive rewards in the next. Kumalo's brother John, who has done relatively well for himself in Johannesburg, has a powerful rhetorical style and could potentially rouse the black masses to action. Yet, he hangs back,too. He only protests slightly for a bigger piece of the gold industry and better wages for black miners. He fears losing what little power and wealth he has in life. The black political leader Dubula leads a bus boycott in protest against a fare hike, which seems moderately successful as an active tactic for change. Yet, the blacks are also reliant on whites who offer them rides from the distant suburbs of Johannesburg. The novel indicates that change in this pattern of injustice will only come through changing the attitudes of white people. Arthur Jarvis argued that if whites considered themselves Christian, they must end the inequality because they know it is wrong. Also, fear is not an acceptable motivation. After his death, his work does change the attitude of his father James, who dedicates himself to Arthur's work in place of his son. Kumalo's village, through James' patronage, begins to regenerate with new farming technology and education. The message is that if whites do not change their behavior, the alternative will be violence, as symbolized by Absalom's unfortunate murder of Arthur.

Relationships between Fathers and Sons

Stephen Kumalo and James Jarvis both experience a generational clash with their sons. Neither man understands the motivation and goals of his offspring. Kumalo is distressed that all the young people in his dying village move to the city and fall into criminal lives. As a priest, he has a hard time believing it has happened to his own son. While visiting Absalom in jail, all he can ask is "why?" over and over. He is angry with

Absalom for acting carelessly about the company he keeps and renouncing the help he received at the reformatory. Kumalo is happy to live in his valley, though he mourns the loss of tribal life in the face of the gold mining industry. He does not want to admit the world is changing, but his son's actions force him to accept that there has to be a new way forward rather than seeking comfort in the past. He cannot save his son's life, but he decides to take a more active role in saving his village and the children of his community (though his active desire to bring about change is ultimately passive, as he is reliant on the help of James Jarvis and the weather, which he would attribute to God's grace.

James Jarvis is also at a loss to understand his son's actions. Arthur's passionate agitating for the rights of blacks has never made sense of James. He was content to live prosperously above the valley where the blacks struggled, never taking the time to think about their plight. His son's death forces him to reconsider his indifference. Reading his son's papers, James must contend with the gross injustices of his country for the first time. As a way of creating meaning from Arthur's death, he takes up his son's cause, doing his small part to heal the broken land and people by adopting the valley and doing everything in his power to regenerate it. James is further stimulated to action by his grandson, who takes after his father's curiosity and generosity of spirit. James lost his son but honors his work through his own actions.

James and Kumalo were each content to live in the "old" world, reluctant to embrace modern trends and attitudes. Each man loses a son and it changes his perspective. Though there might not have been understanding across the generations, there is always love, and these two fathers both seek to make the world better in honor of their sons' untimely deaths.

The Significance of Intention

Throughout the novel, the author gives special note to people's intentions when they speak and act. It is frequently noted when a character, such as Kumalo or Msimangu, acts cruelly for no reason. Kumalo often finds himself wanting to hurt those he interacts with, whether it is his brother John, Absalom, or Absalom's young girl. He immediately recognizes the inherent immorality of these actions and seeks forgiveness for his wrong-headedness. He is desperate to know the "why" of Absalom's actions – why he allowed himself to get caught up in behavior he knew was wrong. Absalom's defense tries to build a case around intention – Absalom didn't mean to kill Arthur Jarvis, it was a reaction out of fear. Absalom's conviction and sentencing to death proves intentions don't necessarily matter if a crime is committed. Kumalo, as a religious man, is more than aware of this, which is why he so frequently calls himself out for acting with bad intentions.

Other characters have dubious intentions: John Kumalo uses his power to keep his power, rather than to affect positive change in his community. He uses his gift for oratory to take his people only so far, because he fears the repercussions of going further and leading an insurrection against whites. James Jarvis discovers he has been living

without intention for many years, unthinkingly doing what he has always done. His son's death forces him to reevaluate his lifestyle, and he starts to live with the intention that John Kumalo lacks: to make the greater community that he is a part of better. The novel makes the point that acting thoughtlessly, with no eye to the consequences, is almost worse than acting with bad intentions. Bad intentions can be overcome with forgiveness, but no intention makes one an accomplice to the bad intentions of the people with whom one associates.

Style

Point of View

Cry the Beloved Country is written from the perspective of a third person omniscient narrator, who mainly stays focused on the internal world of Stephen Kumalo. The narrator also dips into the minds of a variety of other characters, particularly James Jarvis beginning in Book Two. These two men are of the same generation, but they come from completely different worlds. The narrator uses his perspective to compare and contrast their thought processes. The author also occasionally uses a second person point of view, inviting the reader more fully into the story by the use of “you.” Though most of the novel is written in the past tense, the passages where the author steps out of the narrative to describe are presented in the present tense. This adds urgency to the circumstances. For example, life in the Orlando Shanty Town is a situation that needs to be changed very soon.

The author makes an effort to present some moral balance between whites and blacks in South Africa. He does not demonize or martyr either group, as he presents the flaws of each equally. However, the novel itself is a one-sided and impassioned plea aimed at white South Africans to stop living in fear and give blacks their equal rights. Alan Paton does not sit back and offer a simple objective portrait of life in South Africa as apartheid is beginning. He begs his readers to take action and follow their supposed Christian values. They should stop living in fear of change. As noted elsewhere, there is a focus on oratory in the novel. John Kumalo and Msimangu are both powerful speakers, and Arthur Jarvis is an eloquent rhetorical writer. Paton himself uses the novel to present his argument, set in a specific time and place (South Africa on the brink of apartheid) in as palatable and human a form as he can create, a technique he clearly hopes will appeal to the basic human decency and compassion of his fellow white South Africans. The writings of Arthur Jarvis are clearly Paton’s own ideas. While some passages read as little more than propagandist speeches, the story of the dignified black man who just wants to keep his family and community whole intertwines with the gradual enlightenment of an older white man. This gives the reader characters to latch onto and root for, and it offers the most persuasive argument for the need for change and justice in South Africa.

Setting

The novel is set in 1946, two years before racial segregation was fully legalized under apartheid. Writing in 1948 as these injustices were being codified, the author is clearly sending out an impassioned plea for his white compatriots to reconsider their racism. Though blacks are the majority in South Africa, the minority whites have worked to keep them in check by breaking up tribes and communities and subduing blacks with conversion to a passive Christianity. Blacks work in the gold mines that have made the nation rich, but they are underpaid for their labor, not receiving any part of the wealth

they pull from the land. In addition, young black men traveling to the mines are leaving their rural communities and destroying the fabric of tribal life that has existed for centuries. Some blacks try to rouse their people to action and some educated whites have also joined the cause. The air in South Africa at this time in their history is thick with racial tension; everyone lives in fear of everyone else.

The novel sets up a straightforward dichotomy between the idyllic world of village life and the violent and harsh realities of the city. Despite the drought and destitution, Kumalo's village of Ndotsheni is still preferable to the sinfulness of Johannesburg. People go to Johannesburg and forget their values. They live selfishly for their own individual gain. In Ndotsheni, the villagers rally around Kumalo despite his troubles when Absalom is convicted of murder. They pray as a community and celebrate as a community. The group effort of the confirmation of the village's young people into the church is an example. They even have compassion as a community, creating a funeral wreath for James Jarvis' dead wife. These tribal values are held up as ideal. There is something inherently moral about tribal life.

By contrast, John and Gertrude and Absalom all go to Johannesburg and forget their roots. John gives up his religious beliefs in order to gain a bit of power and money. Gertrude turns prostitution. Absalom gets involved with violent thieves and unthinkingly follows their lead, resulting in his own death sentence.

The novel implies that the rapidly changing world, driven by technology and greed, is heading in the wrong direction, as exemplified by city life. If villages had the proper access to education and agricultural advances, there would be no reason for young people to ever leave the villages again. Yet, even Kumalo, who is desperate to hold his community together, knows that isn't quite true. He is the last of a dying culture, and he must find a way for his community to adapt. He must also accept that young people will always seek their fortunes elsewhere in this new world. The novel is an elegy for this ending era, but it is also a call to action as the new era begins. As things change, whites and blacks have a chance to redefine their relationship in a more positive and constructive way. The fact that apartheid becomes law even as the novel is written proves that the author's hopes will not be realized for a long time to come.

Language and Meaning

The language of the narrator is full of rhetorical devices – repetition of the descriptive passages that open books one and two, impassioned arguments for change using a Greek choral structure of commenting on the action, and direct address to the reader. The author is trying to make the novel feel personal; he is putting a human face on the South African blacks most South African whites fear or ignore or oppress, and he is openly asking them to acknowledge the great injustices of the nation and to work towards righting these wrongs before the situation turns violent. The formality in the language and rhetoric makes chunks of the novel seem like a speech – readers could imagine the words spoken out loud for an audience.

There is also a formality in the dialogue of the black characters, because English is not their first language. Though the novel is written in English, readers learn in Stephen Kumalo's first encounter with his brother John that the characters are actually speaking Zulu because John asks to switch to English (another way he is renouncing the traditions and values of his village life). The syntax of their spoken English is slightly unnatural, giving readers the sense that they are not entirely comfortable with this foreign language, as when John says, "my own brother, the son of our mother" (Page 37). They adapt their traditional greetings into English; instead of saying "goodbye" at the end of a conversation, there is a customary wish to "stay well" and "go well." These Zulu characters refer to their problems as "heavy" instead of difficult, giving a literal weight to the burden of their hardships. This metaphorical passage also illuminates the key to the Zulu language: "'When the storm threatens, a man is afraid for his house,' said Father Vincent in that symbolic language that is like the Zulu tongue. 'But when the house is destroyed, there is something to do. About a storm he can do nothing, but he can rebuild a house'" (Page 102). Zulu is an image and symbolic-based language, and these metaphors are peppered throughout the book, giving readers a flavor of the Zulu they are not actually reading.

Since the book is set in 1946, much of the language is old-fashioned for modern readers: for example, characters say "must needs" which is a verb form that is no longer used. They also use words innocuously that have much more weighted meanings today, such as "fondled," "queer," and "gay." Readers must adapt to the archaic meanings of words that are used differently today. However, the outdated language isn't difficult to follow, and there is little in the grammar and syntax that will trip readers up. Since the author's style of penning dialogue does not tag who is speaking and how the words are being spoken, it may be slightly difficult to follow who is talking.

Structure

The novel is divided into three books. Book One consists of seventeen chapters and covers Kumalo's journey to find his son up to the beginning of Absalom's trial for murder. Book Two, with twelve chapters, backtracks and retells part of the story from the perspective of James Jarvis at the time right before he learns of Arthur's murder, and carries forward as his story intersects with Kumalo's at the house of his kinswoman near Johannesburg. Book Two then covers the trial and sentencing of Absalom, showing the reactions of both Kumalo and Jarvis. Book Three consists of seven chapters that recount life for Kumalo and Jarvis back in Natal province. It tells how their lives become inextricably linked after the loss of their two sons. Jarvis makes the choice to follow his son's lead and support the local black community. Kumalo's village life is saved through this intervention.

Within these books, there are also interludes that step slightly outside the main narrative. These offer snapshots of the greater world surrounding Kumalo and Jarvis. For example, there is a chapter telling the hardships of an anonymous black woman living in Orlando's Shanty Town. Another chapter tells about the public meetings where whites address the issues of black violence. There are passages that directly address

the reader with pleas to consider the future of Africa as a whole and to examine how systemic racial oppression is bad for everyone on the continent. These sections and chapters that step out of the main plot can be slightly confusing to the reader, as there are no authorial signposts to indicate Paton is going on a tangent. But, overall the pieces are woven together to form a tapestry for the reader, a big picture vision of the troubles and hardships of life in South Africa at a particular moment in history. The novel acts as a historical document for the modern reader who can look at the full history of apartheid and understand the prescience of Paton's stirring novel.

Quotes

The journey had begun. And now the fear back again, the fear of the unknown, the fear of the great city…the fear of Gertrude's sickness. Deep down, the fear for his son. Deep down the fear of a man who lives in a world not made for him, whose own world is slipping away, dying, being destroyed beyond any recall.

He told them too of the sickness of the land…how it was a land of old men and women, and mothers and children; how the maize barely grew…how the tribe was broken, and the house broken, and the man broken; how when they went away, many never came back, many never wrote anymore.

I do not say we are free here. I do not say we are as free as men should be. But at least I am free of the chief. At least I am free of an old and ignorant man, who is nothing but a white man's dog. He is a trick, a trick to hold together something that the white man desires to hold together.

But when a black man gets power, when he gets money, he is a great man if he is not corrupted…He seeks power and money to put right what is wrong, and when he gets them, why he enjoys the power and the money…Some of think when we have power, we shall revenge ourselves on the white man who has had power, and because our desire is corrupt, we are corrupted, and the power has no heart in it. But most white men do not know this truth about power, and they are afraid lest we get it.

But there is only one thing that has power completely, and that is love. Because when a man loves, he seeks no power, and therefore he has power; I see only one hope for our country, and that is when white men and black men, desiring neither power nor money, but desiring only the good of their country, come together to work for it.

Like your brother, they say the church has a fine voice, but no deeds.

Cry for the broken tribe, for the law and the custom that is gone….Cry, the beloved country, these things are not yet at an end. The sun pours down on the earth, on the lovely land that man cannot enjoy. He knows only the fear of his heart.

Which do we prefer, a law-abiding, industrious and purposeful native people, or a lawless, idle and purposeless people? The truth is that we do not know, for we fear them both. And so long as we vacillate, so long will we pay dearly for the dubious pleasure of not having to make up our minds.

Kumalo struggled within himself. For it is thus with a black man, who has learned to be humble and who yet desires to be something that is himself.

Sorrow is better than fear…Fear is a journey, a terrible journey, but sorrow is at least arriving.

It is the duty of a Judge to do justice, but it is only the People who can be just. Therefore if justice be not just, that is not to be laid at the door of the Judge, but at the door of the People, which means at the door of the White People, for it is the White People that make the Law.

For here is a voice to move thousands, with no brain behind it to tell it what to say, with no courage to say it if it knew.

Yes, God save Africa, the beloved country. God save us from the deep depths of our sins. God save us from the fear that is afraid of justice. God save us from the fear that is afraid of men. God save us all.

He was too old for new and disturbing thoughts and they hurt him also, for they struck at many things. Yes, they struck at the grave silent man at High Place, who after such deep hurt, had shown such deep compassion…A white man's dog, that is what they called him and his kind. Well, that was the way his life had been lived, that was the way he would die.

And now for all the people of Africa, the beloved country. Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika, God save Africa. But he would not see that salvation. It lay far off, because men were afraid of it. Because, to tell the truth, they were afraid of him, and his wife, and Msimangu, and the young demonstrator. And what was there evil in their desires, in their hunger? That men should walk upright in the land where they were born, and be free to use the fruits of the earth, what was there evil in it? Yet men were afraid, with a fear that was deep, deep in the heart, a fear so deep that they hid their kindness, or brought it out with fierceness and anger…They were afraid because they were so few. And such fear could not be cast out, but by love.

Yes it is dawn that has come…The great valley of the Umzimkulu is still in darkness, but the light will come there. Ndotsheni is still in darkness, but the light will come there also. For it is the dawn that has come, as it has come for a thousand centuries, never failing. But when that dawn will come, of our emancipation, from the fear of bondage and the bondage of fear, why, that is a secret.

Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

Compare and contrast Stephen and Absalom Kumalo's relationship with James and Arthur Jarvis'. What lessons do the fathers learn from their sons? Are they the same? What does the novel say about the difference between the two generations? What lessons does the novel teach about family? Be sure to support your argument with examples from the text.

Topic 2

Compare John Kumalo's use of his power to his own disparagement of tribal chief's power. Do you think John is like a chief? Why or why not? Is he a hypocrite? Be sure to support your argument with examples from the text.

Topic 3

Discuss women's roles in the society of the novel. Does the treatment of women differ from women's roles and treatment in today's society? Is it fair to judge the treatment of women by modern standards? Why or why not? Be sure to support your argument with examples from the text.

Topic 4

Do you think Stephen Kumalo is the true protagonist of the novel? Why or why not? If not, then who do you think undergoes the most change? Who is the protagonist? Make a strong argument for your protagonist, even if it is Stephen Kumalo, using examples from the text.

Topic 5

Napoleon Letsitsi wants blacks to be self-sufficient rather than relying on the charity of whites, while Stephen Kumalo gratefully accepts the assistance that James Jarvis and other whites offer him. Does the novel itself support one attitude over the other? How? Do you agree that this is the best way to achieve change in South Africa at that time? Why or why not? Be sure to support your argument with examples from the text.

Topic 6

Compare and contrast city life and rural life as they are presented in the novel. Does one come across as better than the other? What clues lead you to this conclusion? Do you think this is a fair and accurate assessment of the virtues and vices of each lifestyle? Why or why not? Be sure to support your argument with examples from the text.

Topic 7

Discuss the structure of the novel. How do the sections that step out of the main plot serve the story? How and why does the author occasionally use the first person (“we” and “us”) and second person (“you”)? Do you think these techniques are effective in drawing the reader more deeply and personally into the world of the novel? Why or why not? Be sure to support your argument with examples from the text.