
Cry the Beloved Country by Alan Paton

From Bookmarks

Drama forms the core of Alan Paton's novel *Cry, the Beloved Country*. But so resonant is Paton's work that even calling it "drama" sounds shallow. Paton is not interested in drama for the sake of entertainment or a good story; he seeks to represent the drama of life itself, of love and hate, of fear and greed, and of the power of forgiveness.

Set in South Africa, the novel opens with Reverend Stephen Kumalo preparing to make a journey to Johannesburg. His sister Gertrude and his son Absalom left the countryside village of Ndotsheni some time ago in search of better job prospects. But Kumalo has not heard from them for a long time. Upon receiving a letter from Reverend Msimangi in Johannesburg telling of Gertrude's whereabouts, Kumalo ventures into the great city to look for her and Absalom.

When Kumalo arrives at Johannesburg, he is heartbroken to find his sister living as a prostitute, and his son arrested for the murder of a white man. His efforts to rebuild the tribe and return to Ndotsheni seem futile. Desperately, he flails to save the life of his son, who will almost certainly be sentenced to death for his crime.

Powerful emotions propel the plot forward, set against the turmoil in South Africa during the 1940s and 1950s. The country is in great pain; its inhabitants see no way out of their quandary. Yet the land itself, with its vast, rolling plains, offers a glimmer of hope and promise.

As heartachingly beautiful as the continent of Africa itself, Alan Paton's poetic prose evokes the majestic cadence of the King James Bible. Such a serious style, after all, is befitting of an examination of such weighty issues and strong emotions.

Paton describes South Africa - the beloved country - as a land fractured with hatred. The disenfranchised blacks carry out violent crimes against the whites, plunging Johannesburg into fear. The whites are at a loss as to what to do. "Who knows how we shall fashion a land of peace where black outnumbers white so greatly? . For we fear not only the loss of our possessions, but the loss of our superiority and the loss of our whiteness. Some say it is true that crime is bad, but would this not be worse? Is it not better to hold what we have, and to pay the price of it with fear? And others say, can such fear be endured? For is it not this fear that drives men to ponder these things at all?" They know that education could improve the black people's condition, and hence reduce crime. But they fear that an educated black population would be difficult to control, and harder to exploit. Thus, the cycle of destruction is allowed to continue.

Throughout his narrative, Paton describes so vividly the problems that plagued South Africa during the apartheid era that the reader is left completely disillusioned. But, using the story of Reverend Kumalo as a symbol for the restoration of South Africa, Paton shows there is still hope. For while fear may be a powerful emotion, love is yet more powerful: love holds the power to heal the people's deep-set wounds.

Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country* remains relevant for modern readers, given the parallels between South Africa in the 1940s and the world today. Fear of terrorist attacks have gripped the globe, as the war against terror wages on. Despite all this violence and gloom, *Cry* reminds us that in each one of us there is the potential to do good. We have the power to change the world; pity if we lack the will to do so.

(Reviewed by Wenkai Tay JAN 11, 2004)