

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Cry, The Beloved Country

by
Alan Paton

Book Information

Alan Paton, Cry, The Beloved Country

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283 Pages

Book Level: 6.2

Interest Level: UG

This book is a beautifully told and profoundly compassionate story of the Zulu pastor Stephen Kumalo and his son Absalom, set in the troubled and changing South Africa of the 1940s.

Topics: Classics, Classics (All); Community Life, Prejudice; Countries/Regions, South Africa; Emotions, Courage; Emotions, Love; Family Life, Fathers; Family Life, Sons; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12; Recommended Reading, NY Publ. Library Best Books for the Teen Age; Recommended Reading, Oprah's Book Club; Religion, Misc./Other

Main Characters

Absalom Kumalo Stephen Kumalo's son, who murders Arthur Jarvis

Arthur Jarvis the man who is murdered by Absalom Kumalo

Father Vincent a white priest who befriends Stephen Kumalo

Gertrude Kumalo Stephen Kumalo's sister, who becomes a prostitute in Johannesburg

James Jarvis a landowner whose son is murdered by Absalom Kumalo and who helps Stephen Kumalo rebuild the village

John Harrison Arthur Jarvis's brother-in-law

John Kumalo Stephen Kumalo's brother, who has become a corrupt political figure in Johannesburg

Margaret Jarvis Arthur Jarvis's mother

Mr. Carmichael an attorney who takes Absalom's case free of charge

Mr. Harrison Arthur Jarvis's father-in-law

Mrs. Lithebe the native woman who provides lodging to Stephen Kumalo and his family while they are in Johannesburg

Msimangu a Johannesburg priest who befriends Stephen Kumalo

Napoleon Letsitsi an agricultural demonstrator who helps the village

Stephen Kumalo a native village priest, who attempts to restore his family and village

Vocabulary

ineluctable not to be avoided, changed, or resisted

Kaffir a member of a group of southern African Bantu-speaking peoples

osiers any of various willows whose pliable twigs are used for baskets or furniture

prodigal recklessly extravagant

Synopsis

Stephen Kumalo, a priest from the South African village of Ndotsheni, one day receives a letter from a priest in Johannesburg, suggesting that Kumalo travel to Johannesburg to see his sister, who is very sick. Stephen Kumalo's only child, Absalom, is also in Johannesburg, and his parents have not heard from him for some time. Hoping to reunite his family, he travels to the frightening large city where he receives help from the priest, Msimangu, in locating his relatives.

He finds that his sister, Gertrude, is a prostitute. She agrees to move with her son to Stephen Kumalo's lodgings and later return with him to the village. Next, searching for Absalom, he locates his brother John, who has fallen away from the church, is living with a woman, and has become active in politics. John tells Stephen that his own son and Absalom left his home together, and he does not know their whereabouts. Eventually, Stephen traces Absalom to a reformatory and then to the place where he is supposedly living with a girl who is pregnant with his child. Arriving at the house, they find Absalom has been missing for several days.

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Arthur Jarvis, a white man who was active on behalf of better education and conditions for blacks, is murdered during a robbery in his home. Absalom is arrested, along with his cousin and another young man, and admits to the shooting. He says the killing was unintentional and done out of fear. Absalom is convicted and sentenced to die. The two other young men, who claim to have not been at the scene, are freed. Stephen Kumalo arranges for his son to marry the mother of his child.

The slain man's parents, James and Margaret Jarvis, are from the same locale as Stephen Kumalo. They come to Johannesburg after learning of their son's death. James Jarvis reads his son's writings about the existing racial injustices. He meets Stephen Kumalo and treats him compassionately.

Stephen Kumalo returns to his village with Absalom's wife and Gertrude's child. Gertrude, unable to renounce her ways, runs away the night before the departure. The villagers welcome Kumalo despite his shame. Arthur Jarvis's young son arrives to visit his grandfather and becomes acquainted with Stephen Kumalo. He tells his grandfather there is no milk for the children in the poor village. James Jarvis provides milk, hires an agricultural demonstrator to help the people improve their crop production, builds a dam for water, and plans to replace the decrepit church building.

On the night before Absalom's execution, Stephen Kumalo and James Jarvis encounter one another as Kumalo climbs a mountainside to hold a vigil for his son.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

Why did Father Vincent tell Stephen Kumalo that "sorrow is better than fear"?

He believed that fear impoverishes, while sorrow may enrich. After a sorrow, a person can at least begin rebuilding his life.

Literary Analysis

Identify some of the causes of the problems faced by native peoples that were described in *Cry, the Beloved Country*.

Blacks had been given small amounts of land that were unable to support the tribes. The soil became depleted from overgrazing and erosion. Then, men and young people moved to the big cities in search of income and better opportunities. Away from the structure provided by tribal culture, they sometimes fell away from their former values and religions and into crime. Many people in the city remained impoverished, resulting in the shanty towns.

Inferential Comprehension

When Stephen Kumalo met James Jarvis as he headed up the mountain, Jarvis did not climb down from his horse, and Kumalo did not speak all that was in his heart because "such a thing is not lightly done." What was Paton saying through this incident?

He was saying that, although the two men felt love for each other, societal taboos about race kept them somewhat apart.

Constructing Meaning

Cry, the Beloved Country contains many sad and troubling incidents and themes, but also elements of hope. Identify some hopeful aspects of the novel.

Whites gave blacks rides during the bus boycott. Although Stephen Kumalo was not able to bring Absalom and Gertrude home, he did bring children to become new members of the tribe. Stephen Kumalo and James Jarvis understood and had compassion for each other. The agricultural demonstrator helped the people improve farming practices.

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Teachable Skills

Understanding Characterization Although James Jarvis and Stephen Kumalo were of different races and vastly different stations in life, they had some qualities and some life circumstances in common. They also changed in similar ways in the novel. Instruct the students to write a short theme comparing and contrasting these two characters.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Ask the students to learn more about South Africa's history, both before and after the time in which the novel occurs (the late 1940s). Divide the class into groups of two or three and assign each a decade. Ask each group to research its decade and present its findings to the class. As a class, make a time line illustrating South Africa's history.

Understanding the Author's Craft One purpose of Alan Paton's novel was to draw attention to the racial inequities in South Africa and to advocate a change. As a teacher in a native school and a principal of a reformatory, Paton knew firsthand of some of the problems he described in the novel. Later in his life he became involved in South African politics and was even accused of treason. Ask the students to research Paton's life story using the internet or biographical materials. Ask them to write an essay that includes their findings and relates them to the novel.

Identifying Persuasive Language *Cry, the Beloved Country* is a novel of social protest. It very deliberately brought to the public's attention the situation in South Africa in the 1940s in hopes of helping bring about solutions to the problems. Ask students to select and read other novels of social protest--perhaps Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, or Richard Henry Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast*. Ask them to attempt to locate information on how the novels may have affected the social problems they identified. Ask the students to present summaries of these novels and social problems to the class.