**CRY THE BELOVED COUNTRY**

**NOTES**

In the remote village of Ndotsheni, in the Natal province of eastern South Africa, the Reverend Stephen Kumalo receives a letter from a fellow minister summoning him to Johannesburg, a city in South Africa. He is needed there, the letter says, to help his sister, Gertrude, who the letter says has fallen ill. Kumalo undertakes the difficult and expensive journey to the city in the hopes of aiding Gertrude and of finding his son, Absalom, who traveled to Johannesburg from Ndotsheni and never returned. In Johannesburg, Kumalo is warmly welcomed by Msimangu, the priest who sent him the letter, and given comfortable lodging by Mrs. Lithebe, a Christian woman who feels that helping others is her duty. Kumalo visits Gertrude, who is now a prostitute and liquor-seller, and persuades her to come back to Ndotsheni with her young son.

A more difficult quest follows when Kumalo and Msimangu begin searching the labyrinthine metropolis of Johannesburg for Absalom. They visit Kumalo’s brother, John, who has become a successful businessman and politician, and he directs them to the factory where his son and Absalom once worked together. One clue leads to another, and as Kumalo travels from place to place, he begins to see the gaping racial and economic divisions that are threatening to split his country. Eventually, Kumalo discovers that his son has spent time in a reformatory and that he has gotten a girl pregnant.

Meanwhile, the newspapers announce that Arthur Jarvis, a prominent white crusader for racial justice, has been murdered in his home by a gang of burglars. Kumalo and Msimangu learn that the police are looking for Absalom, and Kumalo’s worst suspicions are confirmed when Absalom is arrested for Jarvis’s murder. Absalom has confessed to the crime, but he claims that two others, including John Kumalo’s son, Matthew, aided him and that he did not intend to murder Jarvis. With the help of friends, Kumalo obtains a lawyer for Absalom and attempts to understand what his son has become. John, however, makes arrangements for his own son’s defense, even though this split will worsen Absalom’s case. When Kumalo tells Absalom’s pregnant girlfriend what has happened, she is saddened by the news, but she joyfully agrees to his proposal that she marry his son and return to Ndotsheni as Kumalo’s daughter-in-law.

Meanwhile, in the hills above Ndotsheni, Arthur Jarvis’s father, James Jarvis, tends his bountiful land and hopes for rain. The local police bring him news of his son’s death, and he leaves immediately for Johannesburg with his wife. In an attempt to come to terms with what has happened, Jarvis reads his son’s articles and speeches on social inequality and begins a radical reconsideration of his own prejudices. He and Kumalo meet for the first time by accident, and after Kumalo has recovered from his shock, he expresses sadness and regret for Jarvis’s loss. Both men attend Absalom’s trial, a fairly straightforward process that ends with the death penalty for Absalom and an acquittal for his co-conspirators. Kumalo arranges for Absalom to marry the girl who bears his child, and they bid farewell. The morning of his departure, Kumalo rouses his new family to bring them back to Ndotsheni only to find that Gertrude has disappeared.

Kumalo is now deeply aware of how his people have lost the tribal structure that once held them together, and he returns to his village troubled by the situation. It turns out that James Jarvis has been having similar thoughts. Arthur Jarvis’s young son befriends Kumalo, and as the young boy and the old man become acquainted, James Jarvis becomes increasingly involved with helping the struggling village. He donates milk at first, then makes plans for a dam and hires an agricultural expert to demonstrate newer, less devastating farming techniques. When Jarvis’s wife dies, Kumalo and his congregation send a wreath to express their sympathy. Just as the diocese’s bishop is on the verge of transferring Kumalo, Jarvis sends a note of thanks for the wreath and offers to build the congregation a new church, and Kumalo is permitted to stay in his parish.

On the evening before his son’s execution, Kumalo goes into the mountains to await the appointed time in solitude. On the way, he encounters Jarvis, and the two men speak of the village, of lost sons, and of Jarvis’s bright young grandson, whose innocence and honesty have impressed both men. When Kumalo is alone, he weeps for his son’s death and clasps his hands in prayer as dawn breaks over the valley.

### Analysis — Book I: Chapters 4–6

Kumalo’s inability to understand his surroundings throughout these chapters underscores that his visit to Johannesburg is a rite of passage for him. The novel leaps forward from Natal directly to the outskirts of Johannesburg, and the novel’s omission of Kumalo’s actual journey means that we see the abrupt change in landscapes without a smooth transition. From the train window, everything is immediately and overwhelmingly different: the dominant language is now Afrikaans (a Dutch-based language spoken by the original white immigrants to South Africa), and the black Africans are from different tribes. The shared points of reference that characterize village life are gone—when a man on the train likens the height of the buildings in Johannesburg to a hill behind his father’s home, Kumalo does not know what he is talking about. Even familiar sights and sounds appear to be corrupted. Behind Gertrude’s door, Kumalo hears the sound of laughter, but even this sound is so twisted that it is more terrifying than reassuring.

On the other hand, Kumalo is also quick to adapt. He finds the lavatory at Msimangu’s Mission House a curiosity, but he is able to use it without difficulty. It is true that Kumalo requires Msimangu’s help just to find Gertrude’s place, but, impressively, he returns that same afternoon with a truck and is able to help his sister move. Initially unable to decipher even the smallest details of city life, such as a traffic light, Kumalo learns rapidly and shows remarkable resourcefulness despite his foreign surroundings.

Though intimidating, Johannesburg is not wholly symbolic of evil in the world. There are factors that ease Kumalo’s transition and that more generally provide hope that all is not lost for South Africa. Kumalo is helped and treated with respect by the men he speaks to on the train and by Mr. Mafolo. It would seem, then, that the young man who robs Kumalo is an exception, not the rule. The priests at the mission sit together regardless of color, demonstrating that racial harmony is possible, and they greet Kumalo’s story with friendship and interest. Thus, although Johannesburg, with its chaotic nature, has the potential to destroy individuals and families, as Gertrude’s separation from her child demonstrates, it also has the power to bring people together.

This section shows the complicated relationship between Christianity and white domination. On the one hand, the priests of the mission appear to be the only people both concerned enough and strong enough to heal the city’s wounds. Furthermore, Msimangu appreciates that a white man “brought [his] father out of darkness” by converting him to Christianity, demonstrating that some natives welcome this religion imported from Europe. On the other hand, Christianity is partly responsible for the decimation of the tribal structure in South Africa. With two separate communities whose values differ so greatly—the indigenous South African tribes and the transplanted white colonists—so deeply ingrained in the cultural landscape of South Africa, it seems unlikely that one would wholly suppress the other. Kumalo is caught between these two communities, as evidenced by the fact that he often refers to God as “*Tixo,*” the Xhosa word for “Great Spirit,” instead of using European words. This apparent synthesis of his Zulu and Christian heritages suggests that Kumalo has managed to find a middle ground between these cultures.

### Analysis — Book I: Chapters 7–9

By introducing the figure of John Kumalo, these chapters give us a political context for Stephen Kumalo’s journey. John’s claim that the local village chiefs are pawns of the white man is somewhat accurate—historically, white leaders in South Africa allowed tribal chiefs free rein as long as the chiefs did not interfere with white claims to power. Similarly, John’s claims that the church preaches submission and meekness, that the old village way of life is dying, and that a new way of life is being born in Johannesburg are also true. Msimangu’s earlier comment about his father being carried out of the “darkness” into Christianity reflects that he has submitted himself to a new order. Furthermore, it is clear that Johannesburg, with its prostitution and liquor-selling, represents a corruption of old village values.

Despite his insightful viewpoints, however, John is an unreliable representative of these old village values. He has broken his family ties by parting with his wife, probably due to his infidelity, and by ceasing to correspond with his family. He is more comfortable speaking in English than in his native Zulu, and he addresses his brother as if he were making a speech to an invisible audience. Furthermore, he seems overly impressed, rather than disgusted, by European prosperity. Finally, Msimangu hints that John does not have the courage to match his convictions—John fears taking real risks to improve the lot of black Africans. John speaks out against white oppression, but he does so more from personal egotism than out of genuine concern for his people. Although he is correct in many ways, John possesses many of the flaws of the system he criticizes.

Msimangu, on the other hand, stands for the incorruptible power of love, and these chapters validate his claim that there is “only one hope for our country . . . when white men and black men . . . desiring only the good of their country, come together to work for it.” The story of the black couple who helps a destitute white woman, for example, shows that racial harmony and human decency are possible, even if the government seems unable or unwilling to operate in accordance with these ideals. While John operates from corrupt motivations, his friend and colleague Dubula, who seems to work tirelessly and selflessly for his people, leads the bus boycott to protest economic prejudice against blacks. Solidarity between whites and blacks triumphs over racism as white South Africans risk trouble with the police in order to give rides to the striking blacks, and Msimangu, impressed with this display, takes up and repeats one white man’s defiant challenge to the police, “Take me to court.”

In an overview of black Shanty Town life in Chapter 9, Paton employs an unusual narrative technique of setting aside the novel’s story line and meditates on South Africa’s physical and social landscape. Paton uses this same technique in Chapters 1, 3, and 4 in describing the geography of South Africa. In Chapter 9, however, the description is focused more on the country’s social landscape. Repetitive scraps of dialogue from anonymous speakers are woven together, giving a sense of the general desperation of these settlements. We hear the voices of need as one clambering, undifferentiated mass: the voices of those who need lodging and the voices of those who need money and who are thus forced to rent out precious space. Finally, the action focuses on one woman and her sick daughter, for whom a doctor is found only after it is too late. The destruction of this small family mirrors the greater destruction of African life as a whole.

### Analysis — Book I: Chapters 10–12

This section opens with a lyrical meditation on hope and ends with a lyrical litany of despair. At the outset, Kumalo takes strength from his nephew, a serious but affectionate youngster who seems to reconnect Kumalo to his village life. The act of telling the child about his village eases Kumalo’s homesickness and, though he is saddened by the thought of his son, strengthens Kumalo with thoughts of his wife and friends in the village. Kumalo’s interaction with his nephew thus reaffirms Kumalo’s values. But Kumalo faces a gradually worsening picture of Absalom’s situation, and Paton builds our sense of foreboding to match Kumalo’s. The details of Absalom’s situation are teased out as we discover, piece by piece, that he has been in trouble with the law, has impregnated a young girl, and has now disappeared. Each stop on Msimangu and Kumalo’s zigzagging journey brings a new clue. The announcement of Jarvis’s murder seems, at first, to be merely a part of the social landscape. Paton, however, makes it a climactic moment in Kumalo’s quest for knowledge about Absalom, introducing it at just the right point to make us suspect that Absalom is involved with the murder. The narrative structure skillfully leads us to have the same suspicions that Kumalo has.

Arthur Jarvis’s murder demonstrates the terrible ironies of the social disorder that mars the country. Jarvis wishes to help black Africans regain their rights. Presumably, his tract on native crime explains that the solution to the problem lies in greater freedom and opportunity for the black population, not in greater suppression. The tragic irony, then, is the fact that he is murdered by people for whose rights he is fighting. We can assume that his killers are motivated at least in part by the desperation created by the inequities of South African society. Although Jarvis fights these inequities, his attackers perceive him not as an ally but as part of the problem since he is white.

By juxtaposing a number of different white voices in Chapter 12, some of which are sympathetic and some that are profoundly unsympathetic to the black Africans, Paton lays bare the stark differences of opinion that divide the white population. The man who bemoans the lack of adequate education for black children in Johannesburg represents the belief that the white government is responsible for the natives’ problems because it has failed to help empower blacks. The man who worries that more schooling will make blacks smarter criminals, on the other hand, represents the belief that the black population is inherently immoral. Whereas the first man embodies trust in the black population, the second man embodies mistrust of the black population. Those who fall on the side of the second speaker seem oblivious to the challenges facing the black population, and Paton suggests that these whites remain oblivious on purpose because of their fear.

### Analysis — Book I: Chapters 13–15

In these chapters, which form the climax of the novel, the Kumalo family becomes a model for coping with great suffering, and Paton uses Kumalo’s experiences to show how grief can prompt a range of emotional responses. At times, we see Kumalo so smitten by sorrow that he is unable to function and simply shuts down. Kumalo, rendered completely mute and unable to do anything but nod, temporarily comes to a complete halt when he first hears the news about his son, and he seems to have great difficulty holding on to his sanity. Absalom is similarly unable to function. Pressed for answers in the prison’s visiting room, he mostly nods, cries, or says he doesn’t know. In these instances, Kumalo and his son epitomize grief as a kind of paralysis, during which even the everyday functions of the body, like talking or moving, are impossible.

On the other hand, the novel suggests various ways that individuals can derive meaning from sorrow and find solace in it. Christianity plays an important role in this process. Both Msimangu and Father Vincent comfort Kumalo with words from the Bible. Father Vincent reminds him that the ways of God are secret and suggests to him that he must find meaning by showing his compassion for others, rather than by trying to understand why Absalom has gone astray. The ability to accept the idea that there is a divine plan for the universe leads to a sense of order that provides refuge when everyday life seems disorderly or cruel. Comforting others provides a similar refuge. Kumalo has always gotten strength from helping others, as evidenced by his rejuvenation when he finds and rescues Gertrude. In Chapter 15, Father Vincent confirms the idea that helping others can bring relief to one’s own soul. Kumalo’s suffering is so unbearable for Father Vincent to see that he wonders when the old man’s painful ruminations will cease, looks away, and can barely sit still. Father Vincent also has his moment of paralysis while the two men sit together in silence, but he recovers his sense of well-being by reminding Kumalo of God’s mercy and helping him keep his faith and find solace.

Throughout these three chapters, Kumalo is frequently left alone, and the scenes paint a somewhat negative portrait of solitude. In Ezenzeleni’s garden, Kumalo is unable to remain hopeful, even at the prospect of returning with his newfound knowledge of ways to heal Ndotsheni. In the mission, he rejects Father Vincent’s suggestion that he pray, dismissing it so bitterly that Father Vincent is forced to sit the old parson down for a priestly intervention. Most poignant of all is Kumalo’s abandonment at the prison gates. The scene is set with great drama, with the young man driving off angrily in one direction and John setting off in another, leaving Kumalo conspicuously alone.

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### Analysis — Book I: Chapters 16–17

Though their lives somewhat resemble each other’s, Absalom’s girlfriend and Gertrude represent two distinct models of womanhood in the novel. Whereas Gertrude, enmeshed in her seedy Johannesburg life of prostitution and liquor-selling, is cynical, Absalom’s girlfriend, who is young and unwise to the ways of the world, is optimistic. This difference in attitude is reflected in their different reactions to Kumalo’s invitation to return with him to Ndotsheni. Gertrude initially turns down Kumalo’s invitation because she considers herself too sinful. But Absalom’s girlfriend, who, like Gertrude, is promiscuous, immediately accepts Kumalo’s offer because she attributes much of her misfortune to the circumstances of her past and not to her own actions. Gertrude sees no hope for her situation, while Absalom’s girlfriend has complete faith, perhaps naïvely, that blessings such as marriage and family can rehabilitate her.

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**Summary** Book I: Chapters 16–17

Both Kumalo and Msimangu reproach Absalom’s girlfriend for her lifestyle, but she in fact shares many of Kumalo’s values, including an emphasis on family. She runs away from her own family, but she does so not because she dislikes the mutual dependency involved with belonging to a family—having to depend on others and having others depend on her. Rather, she leaves home because her deteriorating family fails to offer nurturing relationships. She fulfills her need for such relationships by taking lovers, whom she calls “husbands,” a term that demonstrates her desire to interact with others on a meaningful level. Similarly, her unreserved willingness to give herself to Kumalo—as either a lover or a daughter (she is quick to call Kumalo her new “father”)—illustrates how desperate she is to be loved. Stripped of everything by her circumstances, Absalom’s girlfriend still craves the family structure that Kumalo considers so important, and she makes do with what pieces of it she can find.

Gertrude’s strange behavior marks a fundamental perversity in her character, and it signals the novel’s tendency to relegate native women to the domestic sphere. The arrival of Absalom’s girlfriend makes it clear that black South African women endure a second type of segregation by being confined to their homes. Although it is mentioned that women are seen on the streets, every female character that the novel portrays as respectable speaks from inside her home: Mrs. Mkize, Mrs. Ndlela, and Mrs. Lithebe. Clearly, there is little value in the violence and degradation of Gertrude’s old life, but it is not surprising that she chafes at the strict rules that govern her life at Mrs. Lithebe’s house. The novel, however, presents Gertrude’s resistance to strictly defined gender roles as if it were a sign of mental illness. The novel deals too often with forgiveness to condemn Gertrude’s actions explicitly, but the fact that nobody can quite describe her strange laughter and carelessness makes her seem deranged. What one might reasonably see as resistance to domestication is instead shown as borderline insanity.

Mr. Carmichael carries himself like a “chief,” a description that gives some credit to the cultural institutions of native South Africans. In earlier chapters, John Kumalo calls the chiefs ignorant, and he likens them to the white man’s dogs. Mr. Carmichael, however, is a man of dignity and respect, and, even though he is white, he is a great friend and leader of black South Africans. He is a man of integrity who exists above the dominant prejudice of his era. Since he is the novel’s first example of a chief, his position seems like it is one of great responsibility and wisdom, one of the offices in South Africa capable of crossing racial lines. This impression of Mr. Carmichael is only fleeting and the position of chief becomes much less glamorous in later chapters, but the figure of Mr. Carmichael demonstrates what the chief once was and suggests what the chief has the potential to become.

### Analysis — Book II: Chapters 18–21

In the beginning of Book II, we see South Africa from the perspective of a conservative white Englishman. The reasons for the impoverishment of the land in Ndotsheni are made explicit: black people are given a limited area to cultivate and over-farming of the land is the inevitable result. Furthermore, a lack of education and the flight of young people to cities make it difficult to introduce methods of farming that are more gentle to the land. The reasons for the ravaging of the land that Paton describes in the first three chapters are suddenly clear. The first two paragraphs of Book II are nearly identical to the first two paragraphs of Book I, which may suggest either the unlikelihood that these conditions will ever change or the inability of most white South Africans to understand the need for change.

The conservative and liberal sides of South Africa’s pressing race debate find charming advocates in Mr. Harrison and in Arthur Jarvis. It is undeniable that Mr. Harrison’s views of black Africans are severe, but he himself is a charming and sympathetic man. He brings comfort to the grief-stricken Jarvises, and although he acknowledges Arthur as a political opponent, he gives the dead man the appropriate amount of respect. Furthermore, his eloquent speech on how Johannesburg’s white community lives in utter fear makes it clear that he is a captive of his emotions. Arthur, on the other hand, could be labeled an idealistic dreamer, but every glimpse we get of him is of a young man standing on a solid foundation of intelligence and moral strength. By providing such admirable champions of two white perspectives on race issues in South Africa, Paton forces us to focus on the issues themselves instead of allowing personalities to obscure them.

By examining Arthur Jarvis’s ideas at length in this section, the novel provides a way for us to get an understanding of the views of those fighting against injustice in South Africa. In the two essay fragments that the novel includes, Arthur contrasts whites’ justification of their policies to the policies’ actual effects. In the first essay, Arthur lists what he thinks are the permissible assumptions and actions of whites: it is permissible to develop natural resources; it is permissible to recruit labor to work the mines; it is even permissible to permit the destruction of tribal life, which some believe was dying out anyway. Arthur argues, however, that it is not permissible to force black Africans to remain uneducated and unskilled just because the mines require unskilled labor. It is not permissible to house black workers but not their families now that the government understands that this setup destroys family life. More generally, it is not permissible to develop natural resources at the cost of a group of people. Arthur’s contention that “[s]uch development has only one true name, and that is exploitation” reflects his fundamental belief that blacks, as human beings, should receive the same treatment and be accorded the same dignity as whites.

Arthur’s unfinished manuscript, which Mr. Harrison gives James Jarvis to read, validates the use of religion as a weapon against oppression. Until this point, Christianity has helped black South Africans endure the oppression of the country, but it has not helped them *resist* it. Arthur uses religion to argue against the policies of the mines. Contradicting the argument of white Christians that blacks were made to labor for whites, Arthur states bluntly that these men are falsely attributing their own opinions to God. A truly Christian leadership, Arthur argues, would encourage the cultivation of individual talents and skills among the native population. This argument provides a response to John Kumalo’s earlier assertion that the church only reinforces white rule. Although the church can act as a voice for conservative, even oppressive ideas, the Christianity that Arthur Jarvis believes in stands on the side of black rights and demands change to the system that denies these rights.

## Book II: Chapters 22–24

**Summary** Book II: Chapters 22–24

### Analysis — Book II: Chapters 22–24

Absalom’s testimony adds religious overtones to the actions surrounding Arthur Jarvis’s murder. The “voice” that tells Johannes when the robbery should be committed and the allegedly “blessed” nature of the iron rod, for example, suggest that Johannes, at least, thinks of the robbery as divine retribution for the inequalities that plague blacks. Absalom, however, is uncomfortable with the violent and superstitious nature of Johannes’s claims. Though he gets involved in the un-Christian act of robbery, he does so not to harm someone else but for gain; he seems slightly less immoral than Johannes. Furthermore, Absalom reverts to his Christian teachings after the murder. Unlike Johannes and Matthew, who do everything they can to escape blame, Absalom prays for forgiveness after he buries the weapon. He accepts his guilt and even confesses, knowing that he has done wrong.

The return of the unidentified and impersonal narrative voice in Chapter 23 to announce the discovery of gold in Odendaalsrust reflects white South Africa’s skewed priorities. The mines are a powerful but understated presence up to this point in the novel, but here Paton thrusts them into the foreground to highlight their role in creating the tension between the issue of white wealth and black poverty. The news of these new gold mines completely eclipses news of the Arthur Jarvis murder trial, demonstrating that white South Africa, in general, cares much more about wealth than about its dire race problems. This discovery of gold makes grown men weep or sing about the performance of gold stocks, and these greedy whites prefer to ignore the inequalities created by the racist system that benefits them so much. Instead, they focus on the power of money, which can create a whole city where there is only grass and dirt.

This narrator also implies that power and wealth are not simply issues of white versus black. There are also political and social differences between South Africa’s English inhabitants and its Afrikaners. The grumblings over the name of the mine seem to imply that the Afrikaners are a major presence in the mines and that the English would rather they not be. The voice also brings up the issue of the bilingual state and remarks wistfully how much easier it would be if the Afrikaners would simply accept English as the nation’s language. Clearly, black Africans are not the only South Africans whose culture is being targeted. But though the English dislike Afrikaans, they do tolerate the language and consider it South Africa’s second language. They utterly dismiss, on the other hand, native African tongues such as Zulu and Xhosa.

In Chapter 24, the character of Arthur Jarvis is resurrected through his essay on his personal evolution. Until now, while certainly an admirable figure, Jarvis has been a figure of passion and politics, but without much personality. This essay, however, allows for some real communication from son to father, an experience so intense that the older Jarvis almost flees the room. Eventually, however, James Jarvis forces himself to read his son’s essay, and in doing so, he takes the first step in fulfilling his recent wish to know his son better. While father and son often disagreed in life, Arthur’s writings offer his father some comfort from the grave.

### Analysis — Book II: Chapters 25–27

Chapter 25 proves to be a pivotal meeting point for the novel’s two main perspectives. Book I follows Kumalo, and until this point, Book II has largely been told from Jarvis’s point of view. In Chapter 25, the two men finally meet, and their stories intersect. Paton’s decision to narrate their meeting from Jarvis’s point of view gives us a new perspective on the story. This narrative structure puts us in Jarvis’s shoes. When Jarvis answers the door and finds Kumalo, we are told only that a frail black parson is there. Though we quickly realize that this man must be Kumalo, we share Jarvis’s confusion and suspense until Kumalo identifies himself several pages later. This distance between the two characters mirrors the distance between South Africa’s white and black populations in general. Seeing things from Jarvis’s point of view also gives us a new perspective on Kumalo. Having seen Kumalo’s quest for his son through Kumalo’s eyes, we do not realize what a physical toll this search has taken until Jarvis notices how weak Kumalo is. We also more fully understand Kumalo’s grief for what his son has done because we see how much encountering Jarvis upsets him. Paton makes these two stories intersect in a manner that reinforces not only the distance between whites and blacks but also the nature of their conflict—that blacks are weak and powerless whereas whites are strong and powerful.

Jarvis struggles with a conflict between his conservative perspective that “natives” do not deserve the same considerations as white people, a belief exemplified by Barbara Smith’s curt dismissal of Kumalo’s inquiry about his friend’s daughter, and his desire to extend compassion and courtesy to a frail old man. This split attitude helps explain Jarvis’s interaction with Kumalo at the door. He picks up Kumalo’s walking stick when Kumalo drops it, but he becomes “torn between compassion and irritation” when Kumalo accidentally drops a bunch of papers. When Kumalo explains to Jarvis, however, that “the heaviest thing of all my years, is the heaviest thing of all your years also,” Jarvis seems to understand that the grief the men share puts them on common ground. What differentiates Jarvis from whites such as Barbara Smith, then, is his ability to empathize and identify with others regardless of skin color.

Chapter 26 is a meditation on the complicated relationship between words and social change. John Kumalo speaks beautifully, but he does not demand radical change in the circumstances facing the black population. As Msimangu explains, John is too attached to his own possessions and social position to put himself in real danger. This episode raises some interesting questions about Paton’s views on the merit of words versus action. We see the power of words in the eloquent writings of Arthur Jarvis, and it never occurs to us to question their honesty and ability to change things. With John Kumalo, however, we begin to see that simple eloquence is not enough to bring about social change. The same can be said for unfocused action as well, as can be seen in the easy put-down of the strike. With these examples, the novel argues that social protest does not have meaning without the good intentions and methodical planning necessary to see it through.

### Analysis — Book II: Chapters 28–29

The judge’s sentencing of Absalom demonstrates that white South Africa’s concern lies in self-preservation rather than in progress toward racial equality. Though he toys with the notion that the question of justice in Absalom’s case must take into account the condition of society as a whole, the judge ends up pinning responsibility for the crime on Absalom. By shifting his focus from the larger picture of how society influences individuals to the smaller picture of how Absalom acted in a particular instant, the judge reinforces a truth about the society in which he lives: reason and compassion cannot triumph over ingrained prejudice. The judge is sympathetic to Absalom’s situation, but he proves himself a slave to the legal system, stating that despite his feelings he must act in accordance with the laws. By acknowledging the potential unfairness of these laws but refusing to undermine them further, the judge dehumanizes black South Africans. Finally, he ignores the fact that white South Africa oppresses black South Africans when he argues that South Africa’s ability to abide by its laws in the face of social upheaval is a sign of hope for the country.

The novel spends little time dealing with the various characters’ reactions to Absalom’s sentence, suggesting that any debate over Absalom’s guilt is irrelevant. Absalom reacts as we expect someone in his situation would react—with fear. Kumalo barely even addresses the sentencing. The family members of the victim find solace in the conviction in proportion to their dislike of blacks: the more conservative Mr. Harrison is pleased but wishes the other two youths had been convicted as well, while the more moderate Jarvis limits his comments on the matter to agreeing with Harrison’s support of the sentencing. Paton mutes his characters’ reactions to Absalom’s sentence perhaps to show how little impact people can have on the South African system. No amount of individual emotion, it seems, can sway such institutionalized values.

The conflict between John and Kumalo is also exposed here, and though the brothers have grown distant over the years, in Chapter 29 their separation becomes final. In this scene, however, John is less despicable than in previous passages. He plans to welcome Matthew back into his house, and he draws an interesting comparison between his brother’s religion and his own politics. Perhaps, this chapter suggests, Kumalo’s religion is as offensive to John as John’s politics are to Kumalo. Although the novel has always depicted John as nothing more than a bull-necked rabble-rouser, for a fleeting instant we see the situation through his eyes: a man tired of the indignities suffered by his people, with no time for the meek protests of his brother. That the novel sides with Kumalo is clear, but its inherent sense of justice also compels us to look for a brief moment at a conflict from the offending party’s point of view

### Analysis — Book III: Chapters 30–33

In the aftermath of Absalom’s conviction for murder, Paton creates a fragile balance of despair and hope in Kumalo’s life. Kumalo is saddened and frustrated by the devastation of Ndotsheni, which has been further worsened by the drought, and neither the chief nor the school headmaster knows how the area can be mended. Furthermore, Kumalo receives the news that there will be no mercy for his son. Thus, on one hand, both land and family—two important elements of Kumalo’s life—are sources of grief. He is given hope, however, by the friendliness and curiosity of Arthur’s son, by Jarvis’s gift of milk to the community, and by the agricultural improvements that Jarvis attempts to make. Furthermore, the rain eventually comes and ends the drought. Absalom’s letter continues the reconciliation between father and son. Here, then, land and family become sources of happiness, suggesting that Kumalo’s misfortunes, though they are grave, will not last forever.

The improvements planned for Ndotsheni will, however, forever alter the village’s way of life by imposing European methods of farming, and Paton constantly underscores the foreignness of the proposed methods. At first, Jarvis’s activities are mysterious to the villagers, and they view the flags as a curiosity. The native chief is relegated to guard duty while Jarvis and the magistrate fulfill the far more important duty of planting the flags and planning the project, which demonstrates the distance that still exists between the white farmers and the local community. Napoleon Letsitsi explains that the agricultural improvements will require sacrifices on the part of the villagers as well, effectively devaluating their whole cattle-as-currency system and their concept of farming as an individual activity. Nonetheless, it seems evident that the people of Ndotsheni will come to accept these changes. Although they are curious about the flags, they treat them with great respect, and the whole community gathers to replant the uprooted flag.

Arthur’s son emerges as a bridge between these separate worlds. Jarvis has a good heart, but he makes little or no effort to socialize with the villagers of Ndotsheni. Arthur’s son strides into Kumalo’s house without fear. Though only a child, he has already begun to learn Zulu. His eagerness to speak Zulu shows a lack of concern for the superficial racial divisions of South African society. Most telling of all, however, is that the boy and Kumalo laugh together. When Jarvis and Kumalo meet in Kumalo’s church during the storm, it is still a formal affair, and though the two men come to respect each other, their ultimate goal seems to be coexistence. With his Zulu lessons and his jokes, Arthur’s son crosses the final line and opens up the possibility of actual friendship between whites and blacks.

### Analysis — Book III: Chapters 34–36

In their final encounters, Kumalo and Jarvis become the closest they have ever been. They have slowly begun to understand each other’s customs and to communicate through gestures and words that each can understand. When Margaret Jarvis dies, Kumalo’s congregation mourns the death with the European custom of crafting a wreath. When Jarvis meets Kumalo as he climbs to a place of solitude, he greets the information with a solemn statement of understanding. Until now, the two men have been armed with good intentions but have failed to cross the lines into each other’s world. The imbalanced power dynamic between whites and blacks is still very much in play: Jarvis sits atop his horse while Kumalo humbly thanks him. Nevertheless, the intense moment of understanding and compassion that they share is perhaps a slight step toward bridging the country’s enormous racial divide.

Absalom too comes to embody this idea that sometimes understanding one’s situation is enough. The last time we encounter Absalom, in Chapter 29, he is groveling in the prison in front of his father, being drawn away to his cell on death row without any trace of dignity. His letters from prison since Kumalo’s departure, however, reflect an increasing peace that comes with his understanding his circumstances. He does not protest against his fate; rather, he deals with it as maturely as possible, perhaps taking solace in the notion that he is but a small part of a large universe that works in mysterious ways. It is not clear that Absalom is entirely reconciled to his fate—Kumalo wonders if his son can sleep and if he will enjoy his last meal—but Absalom’s letters imply a newfound peace of mind, which is something valuable in the turbulence of the times.

The final paragraph ends with the breaking of the dawn, but in many ways the novel ends with a sunset. Absalom, Arthur Jarvis, and Margaret Jarvis are all dead, and neither James Jarvis nor Kumalo will live much longer. Paton implies that their legacy of peace will not endure. A newer, more fiery school of thought is on the rise, and the redemption present in the novel’s conclusion will not prevent this radical approach from eventually dominating the country. Napoleon Letsitsi is not as corrupt as John Kumalo, but he still argues fiercely for black self-sufficiency and views Jarvis’s last gestures toward Ndotsheni as the payment of a debt rather than an act of generosity. As Kumalo stands outside his house, gazing at the stars, he becomes aware that this change is inevitable and that history may even view him as an impediment to this change. He does take some consolation, however, in knowing that his life has been the only kind he could possibly have led and hopes that the changes for the better will outpace the changes for the worse.

**Main Ideas**

## Themes

**Main Ideas** Themes

*Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.*

### Reconciliation Between Fathers and Sons

*Cry, the Beloved Country* chronicles the searches of two fathers for their sons. For Kumalo, the search begins as a physical one, and he spends a number of days combing Johannesburg in search of Absalom. Although most of his stops yield only the faintest clues as to Absalom’s whereabouts, the clues present a constantly evolving picture of who Absalom has become. As Kumalo knocks on the doors of Johannesburg’s slums, he hears of his son’s change from factory worker to burglar, then from promising reformatory pupil to killer. When Kumalo and Absalom are finally reunited after Absalom’s incarceration, they are virtual strangers to each other. The ordeal of the trial brings them closer together, but it is not until after the guilty verdict that Kumalo begins to understand Absalom. In Absalom’s letters from prison, Kumalo finds evidence of true repentance and familiar flashes of the little boy he remembers.

Jarvis has no actual searching to do, but it takes him little time to realize that he knows little about his own son. Away from Ndotsheni, Arthur has become a tireless advocate for South Africa’s black population, an issue on which he and his father have not always agreed. Reconciliation with a dead man might seem an impossible task, but Jarvis finds the necessary materials in Arthur’s writings, which give Jarvis clear and succinct insights into the man that Arthur had become, and even instill in Jarvis a sense of pride.

### The Vicious Cycle of Inequality and Injustice

Kumalo’s search for his son takes place against the backdrop of massive social inequalities, which, if not directly responsible for Absalom’s troubles, are certainly catalysts for them. Because black South Africans are allowed to own only limited quantities of land, the natural resources of these areas are sorely taxed. The soil of Ndotsheni turns on its inhabitants—exhausted by over-planting and over-grazing, the land becomes sharp and hostile. For this reason, most young people leave the villages to seek work in the cities. Both Gertrude and Absalom find themselves caught up in this wave of emigration, but the economic lure of Johannesburg leads to danger. Facing limited opportunities and disconnected from their family and tribal traditions, both Gertrude and Absalom turn to crime.

Gertrude’s and Absalom’s stories recur on a large scale in Johannesburg, and the result is a city with slum neighborhoods and black gangs that direct their wrath against whites. In search of quick riches, the poor burglarize white homes and terrorize their occupants. The white population then becomes paranoid, and the little sympathy they do have for problems such as poor mine conditions disappears. Blacks find themselves subjected to even more injustice, and the cycle spirals downward. Both sides explain their actions as responses to violence from the other side. Absalom’s lawyer, for instance, claims that Absalom is society’s victim, and white homeowners gather government troops to counter what they see as a rising menace. There is precious little understanding on either side, and it seems that the cycle of inequality and injustice will go on endlessly.

### Christianity and Injustice

In the tremendous hardships that Kumalo faces, his main solace comes from his faith in God. When he finds out what has happened to his son, his faith is shaken but not broken, and he turns to his fellow priests for comfort. Much of Kumalo’s time is spent in prayer, both for the souls lost in Johannesburg and for the fractured society of his village. Not just a form of comfort, Christianity proves to be a tool for resisting oppressive authority as well. Arthur Jarvis’s final essay, for example, calls the policies of South Africa’s mine un-Christian. Some allusions are made as well to the priests who have made social justice in South Africa their leading cause. As demonstrated with Msimangu, religion is often held up as South Africa’s only possible means of avoiding the explosion of its racial tensions.

Christianity is also, however, associated with injustice. John Kumalo reminds his brother that black priests are paid less than white ones and argues that the church works against social change by reconciling its members to their suffering. He paints an infuriating picture of a bishop who condemns injustice while living in the luxury that such injustice provides. At the same time as he calls the policies of the mines un-Christian, Arthur Jarvis states that these policies have long been justified through faulty Christian reasoning. Arthur Jarvis mentions that some people argue that God meant for blacks to be unskilled laborers and that it is thus wrong to provide opportunities for improvement and education. The novel frequently explores the idea that in the wrong hands, Christianity can put a needy population to sleep or lend legitimacy to oppressive ideas.

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**Main Ideas**

**Motifs**

*Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, and literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text’s major themes.*

### Descriptions of Nature

The novel’s descriptions of the beauty of Natal highlight the contrast between the various ways of life in South Africa. The hills and rivers of white farmland are always depicted as being fruitful and lovely, but the land of the black farmers is always shown as barren, dry, and hostile. This contrast between the natural beauty of South Africa and the ugliness brought on by its politics shows the necessity of change. It also, however, offers some hope. The land may be ravaged, but it is clearly not naturally infertile. With the right nurturing and protection, the potential for real beauty seems endless.

### Repentance

Throughout the novel, a number of characters lash out in anger. Msimangu speaks harshly when he learns that Absalom has abandoned his girlfriend, the young man from the reformatory speaks harshly when he is disappointed in Absalom, and Kumalo gets upset, at various times, with his wife, his son’s girlfriend, and his brother. Often, these episodes are truly ugly. When the young man whirls on Kumalo, for example, his anger is made even uglier by Kumalo’s fragile helplessness. Similarly, when Kumalo cruelly asks Absalom’s girlfriend if she will be his lover, the combination of lechery and bullying is unappealing.

Even acts as vile as these, however, can be atoned for by sincere repentance. Although the characters lash out in anger, their repentance is always met with forgiveness, and even the gravest insults are excused. This pattern demonstrates the power of caring to overcome bitterness. Social relationships are torn by anger, but they can be mended with kindness.

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### The Church

The church in Ndotsheni is a simple, rough structure that represents a faith that is humble and unpretentious. With its leaky roof, the church seems to offer little shelter from the elements, but confirmations and other ceremonies occur there nonetheless—with nothing better available, the congregation must simply make do.

Although it is a house of God, the church is also closely linked to Kumalo. It is introduced to us almost as an extension of his house, and it is he who decides when services will be held and does its accounting. When Kumalo returns from Johannesburg, it becomes apparent that his young successor has had no success in making the church his own, and that both the building and its flock are fundamentally Kumalo’s. Jarvis’s offer to build a new church for the community is a symbol not only of his commitment to Ndotsheni but also of his new friendship with Kumalo.

### Brightness

Both Arthur and his son are notable for their “brightness,” a symbol of their eager intellects and generous hearts. Although they don’t shine physically, there is still something inherently brilliant about them that holds unquestionable promise. The novel’s mystical way of describing them is strongly reminiscent of the language typically used to describe angels, messengers of God who take human form but are somehow obviously more than human. The character of Arthur’s son seems to be especially developed as an almost divine agent. He rides around Ndotsheni on his horse, appearing periodically to raise Kumalo’s spirits, and his visits are occasionally followed by some generosity from his grandfather (an unexpected milk delivery, for example, or the arrival of Napoleon Letsitsi). Both Arthur and his son, then, help to bring good to their fellow men.

**CHARACTORS**

**Stephen Kumalo**

Stephen Kumalo is the protagonist and moral compass of *Cry, the Beloved Country.* He is a quiet, humble man, with a strong faith in God and a clear sense of right and wrong. An Anglican priest, Kumalo cares for his parishioners and presides over the modest church of the village he calls home. By village standards, Kumalo and his wife are middle-class, living in a house with several rooms. They struggle, however, to save money for their son’s schooling and for a new stove. Kumalo is not flawless, and he occasionally erupts in anger and tells lies. Praying to God, however, saves him from temptation, and he always repents when he speaks unfairly.

As the novel begins, Kumalo undertakes his first journey to the city of Johannesburg. He is intimidated and overwhelmed by the city, betraying his simple background. With the help of generous hosts, however, he is able to put his fear aside and search with determination for his son. As the search drags on, we become aware of Kumalo’s physical weaknesses—according to African tradition, he has reached the time in his life when his children should be caring for him. He is forced instead to search for his son. When it becomes clear that Absalom is in grave trouble, Kumalo’s body is further broken by his grief. His faith wavers, too, but he seeks the help of friends in the ministry, who support him and pray with him. By the time Kumalo leaves Johannesburg, he is deeply sad, but his faith is buoyed by the generosity of others. When he returns to his village, Kumalo works to improve the lives of his parishioners. In the end, he faces his son’s death with mourning, but also with a sense of peace.

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**James Jarvis**

James Jarvis undergoes a journey parallel to that of Kumalo, although he is never granted the chance to be reunited with his son, Arthur, physically. Jarvis is a white, English-speaking farmer who lives on a hill above Ndotsheni. When the novel begins, Jarvis is ignorant of or indifferent to the injustices of South Africa. He cares for his farm and his family, and he more or less takes for granted the political system in which he lives. Jarvis’s complacency is shattered when he learns that his son has been killed. He goes to stay with his son’s in-laws, the Harrisons, in Johannesburg, where he learns that Arthur had become a leader in the community, valued by people from all racial groups for his speeches on social justice. Jarvis here realizes that his son had become a stranger to him.

In an effort to understand his son better, Jarvis reads Arthur’s writings about the injustices he perceives in South Africa, and he is moved by his son’s language and ideas. Jarvis does not undergo a political conversion so much as a moral one—he is not interested, for example, by John Kumalo’s speech before the strike at the mines. Once he returns to Ndotsheni, however, he works hard to make things better for the people of the village. He donates milk to the young children and arranges to have a dam built to irrigate the soil better. Additionally, he hires an agricultural expert to teach the farmers to preserve the soil. When he suffers from a second tragedy—the death of his wife—he consoles himself by carrying out his wife’s wish that he build a new church for the community. Jarvis’s efforts require personal sacrifices, as it costs him both money and the respect of many of his peers. It is clear, however, that he has made a firm commitment to the villagers, and, though he is a man of few words, he expresses himself beautifully through his actions.

## **Theophilus Msimangu**

Msimangu is warm, generous, and humble young minister in Sophiatown. He guides both Kumalo and us through Johannesburg, explaining the political and socioeconomic difficulties that the black population faces and providing shrewd commentary on both blacks and whites. He assists Kumalo with great sensitivity, working to spare him pain when he can and arranging time for him to rest. In general, he makes Kumalo’s time in Johannesburg bearable.

Of all the characters in the novel, Msimangu has the clearest understanding of South Africa’s injustices, and he serves as Paton’s mouthpiece in suggesting a solution: Christian love. According to Msimangu, white South Africans oppress the blacks because they fear their numbers and their power. Msimangu believes that only selfless love can counter this fear. Msimangu’s own selflessness is affirmed at the novel’s close, when he gives his worldly possessions to Kumalo and joins a monastery.

**Absalom Kumalo**

Though Absalom is at the center of the plot of *Cry, the Beloved Country,* he is a somewhat mysterious figure. Having left home like most of the young people of Ndotsheni, Absalom finds work in Johannesburg. For reasons that are never made clear, however, he loses touch with his family and falls into a life of crime. Young and impressionable, Absalom carries a gun for protection, but when he fires the weapon in fear, he ends up killing Arthur Jarvis. Absalom’s basic innocence is affirmed when he confesses everything to the police, and even they seem to suspect his friend Johannes and not him for the murder. Nonetheless, the court holds Absalom solely responsible for the crime. He tries to communicate honestly with Kumalo, though no words can explain what he has done. Originally afraid to die, Absalom appears to reconcile himself to his impending execution and writes respectfully to his mother and father until the time of his death, demonstrating a newfound maturity that allows him to approach death gracefully.

**Arthur Jarvis**

Arthur Jarvis is murdered before we even hear of him, but his writings provide him with the opportunity to speak for himself. A staunch opponent of South Africa’s racial injustices, Arthur Jarvis spent his life at the center of the debates on racism and poverty, and his essays and articles provide answers to many of the novel’s questions. His motives are selfless; he works for change not because he seeks personal glory but because he is weary of the system’s contradictions and oppression. As much as Msimangu, Arthur Jarvis is the solution South Africa needs, and although he is murdered, some hope lives on in his young son.