

Cry, the beloved country essay

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Cry, the Tribal Breakdown! The historical fiction, *Cry, the Beloved Country*, is a social protest, in the form of a microcosm, against the structures of the society in South Africa that later give rise to apartheid. Alan Paton's characters Msimangu and John Kumalo have conflicting opinions about what the main problem is plaguing the native population of South Africa. But which man has the right idea? Msimangu believes that the dilemma is that the white aristocrats have "broken the tribe" and "it has not suited them to build something in the place of what is broken". In other words he is saying that nothing has been built to replace the broken moral and social framework that the tribal units provided. On the other hand, John Kumalo thinks the main trouble is the economic inequality between the whites and blacks. John seems to believe that black people simply need more money and power to be free and a revolution is the necessary action to take, even if he will not admit it openly because of fear of being arrested.

Arthur Jarvis, a man who is murdered in this book, reaches exactly the same conclusion as Msimangu. Arthur writes in one of his manuscripts, "The old tribal system was . . . a moral system. Our natives today produce criminals and prostitutes and drunkards not because it is their nature to do so, but because their simple system of order and tradition and convention has been destroyed. It was destroyed by the impact of our own civilization.

Our civilization has therefore an inescapable duty to set up another system of order and tradition and convention" (Chapter 20). The tragedy that afflicted the country was the exploitation of blacks by whites and the consequent loss of an entire way of life. The result of this social decadence is seen in the lives of Absalom and Gertrude Kumalo. Both individuals, like so

many others, were quickly swept up by the immorality of Johannesburg and both paid the price for it. Since the whites had taken the most profitable of the already degraded farmland reserves from the Zulu's and other such tribes, blacks were forced to migrate from their tribal homelands to look for work in urban areas.

Their land could no longer provide for them. This is how the large onopolizing white businesses received their laborers. Cities like Johannesburg were filled with white businesses, such as the mining company, which heavily depended on black laborers to whom they paid little. Thus the Blacks suffered from social instability, moral decay due to the breakdown of the tribal system, poverty from working for subsistence wages, and perpetually poor living conditions. It is not surprising that crime rates among blacks were on the rise in this book. These are the things that John Kumalo saw.

He considered this chaos to be the whites fault. It is nearly impossible to answer the question of which man's reasoning is more correct. The economic inequality between the whites and the blacks was to a large degree responsible for the breakdown of the tribal way of life. In this respect, John is correct. But Msimangu has a stronger understanding of the intricacies of the problems gripping the whole of South Africa. He sees things from a Christian perspective and has a better idea of what could have fixed these problems. John seems to believe that black people should simply revolt against their employers to gain money, power, and freedom.

Msimangu, however, envisions freedom in terms of the right to live in a moral and just society, not as power and possessions. He would like to see

South Africa built on brotherly love rather than civil rights obtained by rioting. Without a moral cornerstone and new traditions to give the people order, he believes, economic equality is worth little. Hence John's vision of an abundant life is essentially shallow.