

Footprints in the sand



“ Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?” (Matthew 7: 3). Scholars are fast to uphold the severe wisdom of this advice, yet very few are entirely capable of following it. Numerous authors have written upon this topic, one of whom is Alan Paton, author of *Cry, the Beloved Country*. Many debates have been sparked by this book due to Paton’s ability to examine the plank in his eye, South Africa. Even the essence of the book’s title examines South Africa and declares the presence of the inner conflict of its citizens. The importance and meaning of the title of *Cry, the Beloved Country* is visible in Paton’s efforts to link the reader to forthcoming ideas in the novel, Paton’s description of South Africa’s problems, and Paton’s prayer for the solution of South Africa’s difficulties with race and racial oppression. One way Paton connects the reader to the racial tension in the novel is through the repetition of the thematic title throughout key events in the novel. Paton often uses the wording of the title within the text to express the pain inflicted by South Africa’s moral conflict, racial segregation and oppression. Paton uses the repetition to connect events in the story with the overall theme, altering the context slightly each time. At one point, Paton expresses the anguish of the broken African society and the transformation and assimilation into a white man’s society of hatred and separation. Paton pleads, “ Cry for the broken tribe, for the law and the custom that is gone. Aye, and cry aloud for the man who is dead, for the woman and children bereaved. Cry, the beloved country, these things are not yet at an end” (Paton 73-74). By creating links between major events and minor characters, Paton’s repetition slowly delves into one’s mind and leaves the indelible mark of a quest for liberty and freedom so that one again views the title, it is as if one sees the cover for the first

time, and one realizes how much is held in the few words of “cry, the beloved country.” Another way Alan Paton relates the title of Cry, the Beloved Country to the subject matter of the story is through personal identification with the reader’s feelings. Paton plays upon the maternal or paternal instincts within everyone, finding a chord and playing upon it, evoking fear or wisdom or sadness through his powerfully chosen yet simple words. At one point, Stephen Kumalo searches for his son in the wide streets of Johannesburg. He fears that his son has done something terribly bad, and for the reverend, this is almost more than he can bear. Paton narrates, “Cry, the beloved country, for the unborn child that is the inheritor of our fear. Let him not love the earth too deeply—For fear will rob him of all if he gives too much” (Paton 80). The reverend’s despair is evident in his fear of love for the earth and that which lies within the earth. Because of the appearance of the book’s title at such a critical juncture, one cannot keep oneself hereafter from connecting the title of the book to this point in the novel. On the other hand, Paton delves into South Africa’s problems with unity and erosion, conveying a sense of how a beautiful country is going to waste due to petty morals. Paton brings up the controversy of apartheid and inequality present in a country that cannot rise from the past, yet tries to participate in the present. When James Jarvis reads the work of his deceased son, Arthur, he finds shocking evidence and realizations of what the white men have done to South Africa in the name of improvement. Arthur wrote convincingly about the fault of white men for inflicting segregation and causing nothing but harm because of it. Arthur wrote, “It is true that we hoped to preserve the tribal system by a policy of segregation. That was permissible. But we never did it thoroughly or honestly—We are caught in toils of our own selfishness”

(Paton 146). Because of the white man's desire to separate the black men from the white men, a system filled with flaws has resulted, causing the white men more trouble than good in their struggle against a system of their own creation. Another explanation of Cry, the Beloved Country can be found when one researches into the history of segregation and white man's oppression of "inferior races" in the name of Christianity. Paton discusses the hypocrisy of a race of men who strive to make the world better and proclaim equality for all, yet cannot accept another human being as a man. In the last speech that Arthur Jarvis wrote before he was murdered by Stephen Kumalo's son, Arthur realized that white men have oppressed the blacks "for their own good" and with a perfect belief that what they are doing is acceptable and just because the Africans are not human, and therefore do not deserve all the rights the white men deserve. Arthur proclaims, "The truth is that our Christian civilization is riddled through and through with dilemma. We believe in the brotherhood of man, but we do not want it in South Africa" (Paton 154). The truth that Paton reveals through the medium of Arthur Jarvis is that South Africa has a double-standard: one standard for the rights of man all over the world, the other for the rights of man within South Africa. Somehow, these two ideas are not even comparable, even falling under entirely different categories of humanity. Later, Paton deals with South Africa's racial troubles before one page has even been turned. A conflict is present in the very title, Cry, the Beloved Country. Paton uses this simple phrase time and again to express grief and hope over South Africa's stale position, a position that has long been lost in the bitter tangle of oppression and segregation. When the African community discovers that the white government is considering a complete

segregation of the country, there are extremely mixed reactions evoked by the finality of such a step. Paton quips, “ Yes, there are a hundred, and a thousand voices crying. But what does one do, when one cries this thing, and one cries another? Who knows how we shall fashion a land of peace where black outnumber white so greatly?” (Paton 78). The common verb, to cry, appears here also, in the reaction of the fearful and outraged native peoples. One discovers that the title conveys these reactions that, though they vary as much as the colors in the rainbow, all share a sense of deep sadness, a searing loss of pride and unity. Another example of Paton’s hope for unity can be found in a call to prayer. Often, when the characters of the book are involved in huge inner struggles, they turn to prayer, finding peace and the strength to wait for the greater solution that lies beyond, though they cannot see it with their mortal eyes. While Reverend Kumalo wrestles with the horridness of the murder his son has committed, Father Vincent helps him to focus on the greater picture, to hope for others, to pray for others who can see no end to their difficulties drawing near. Father Vincent aides Kumalo with an outsider’s perspective, convincing Kumalo to pray for those who cannot reach out for prayer. Father Vincent advises, ““ And why you go on, when it would seem better to die, that is a secret. Do not pray and think about these things now, there will be other times. Pray for Gertrude, and for her child, and for the girl that is to be your son’s wife, and for the child that will be your grandchild”” (Paton 110). Paton’s advice is nothing less than wisdom, helping others to see the greater picture without despair. “ Cry, the beloved country,” he seems to say, “ but pray also. Pray for the beloved country, for its improvement, and its rebirth.” Through the creation of a parallel with the reader, an in-depth study of South Africa’s difficulties, and a <https://assignbuster.com/footprints-in-the-sand/>

strong hope for the solution of racial segregation, one discovers the true meaning of Cry, the Beloved Country. One discovers Alan Paton's gift of expression through the telling of a man's epic journey through life, a man who finally discovers the meaning of love and loss, though he leaves nothing but footprints in the blowing sand. Each day, in every part of the world, one more person learns to live and to love, to feel from the bottom of one's heart for a land so beautiful that no words can describe the attraction for fear it will appear fickle. After all, " It is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all."