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# Cry, the Beloved Contradiction: Paton's Colonial Legacy

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Cry, the Beloved Contradiction: Paton's Colonial Legacy

By

Cameron Mahoney

THESIS

Submitted to  
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## SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

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## ABSTRACT

Cry, the Beloved Contradiction: Paton's Colonial Legacy

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This critical investigation seeks to analyze scholarship on Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country* to date, and attempts to synthesize the drastically different readings of the text in order to reconsider how contemporary audiences might reconcile traditional and modern perspectives of the novel. Ultimately, this reconsideration aims to suggest new ways of reading Paton's classic work.

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2012

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Dan and Jill Mahoney.

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This thesis uses the guidelines provided by the *MLA Style Manual* and the Department of English.

## PREFACE

This thesis attempts to include all pertinent scholarship on Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country* to date, from notable reviews upon its release in 1948 to the present. While not entirely exhaustive, the author strived to include all writings which seek to establish or recontextualize Paton's work in the larger literary canon.

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## INTRODUCTION

*Cry, the Beloved Country* was first published in 1948 by Charles Scribner's Sons in America and Jonathan Cape in London and was met with almost universally positive reviews (Paton, 17). It assumed a presence in high schools and colleges, securing a niche as the delegate of South African literature in the wider Western Canon (Anne Paton, "Why I'm Feeling South Africa"; Paton, 18). It was made into a musical in 1949, a film in 1951 and again in 1995, and a stage production was first performed in 2003. Though the work continues to enjoy its stature as one of the first South African novels to gain worldwide acknowledgment, there has been significant backlash towards both its political and aesthetic contents.

Compared to the work of popular contemporary South African writers such as Nadine Gordimer, Ezekial Mphahlele, and J.M. Coetzee, *Cry, the Beloved Country* appears morally simplistic, politically misguided, and socially dated. As Harold Bloom writes in the preface to his 2006 critical guide to the novel, "*Cry, the Beloved Country* is a humane Period Piece, but not at all a permanent narrative fiction... Its humane sentiments remain admirable, but in themselves do not constitute an aesthetic achievement... [it] has wonderful intentions, but minimal characterization, and altogether unsurprising narrative development, as artless as it is benign" (7). This is a fair summary of contemporary views of the work, and surprisingly one of the less brutal critiques.

Perhaps most indicative of the onset of *Cry, the Beloved Country's* waning respect was Anne Paton's 1998 dispatch in the London Sunday Times entitled "Why I'm Fleeing South Africa." The widow of Mr. Paton reminds readers that the novel "has sold more than 15 million copies and still sells 100,000 copies a year." Compare these figures with the "some 10 million copies" sold of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, which was published a decade after Paton's book<sup>1</sup> and remains an ubiquitous text in high school classrooms and college campuses (Garner, "Things Fall Together"). In this editorial, Mrs. Paton cries for her country, detailing her experience as a victim of violent crimes and thefts, even as Apartheid was being dismantled and South Africa held its first democratic elections. "I am glad [Alan] is not alive now," she writes, "He would have been so distressed to see what has happened to his beloved country." Perhaps most disheartening is the fact that Anne, while clinging to the failed liberal ideology her husband held dear, succumbs to the Eurocentric prejudices that stain his most famous book: "We have a saying, '*Don't fire the gardener*' because of the belief that it is so often an inside job—the gardener who comes back and does you in." She goes on, "A character in *Cry, The Beloved Country* says: 'I have one great fear in my heart, that one day when they are turned to loving they will find we are turned to hating.' And so it has come to pass. There is now more racial tension in this country than I have ever known." Anne Paton effectively blames the plight of the country on black South Africans ungrateful for the social change white citizens like her husband and herself helped bring about. She even claims a

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Paton's sales figures range from 1948-1998, while Garner's range from 1958-2007, making this an imprecise but reasonable comparison, given the books' similarities in content and general reception.

solution, “We need a powerful, well-trained and well-equipped police force” unintentionally paraphrasing the misguided advice of one of the novel’s overtly racist characters (Paton, 183).

So, the question we come to is: why critically reconsider *Cry, the Beloved Country* at all? Modern perspectives have homogenized, and this certainly isn’t the first reconsideration of the novel<sup>2</sup>. After all, Paton’s book was published before apartheid even began, and the modern reader exists in an era decades after pop musicians protested South African segregation with “Sun City” and “Lethal Weapon 2” featured a bigoted South African villain. If we can say that South Africa is in the post-apartheid era, the rest of the west is then in a post-South African era. Racial violence still troubles the nation, but the zeitgeist has died down; concrete institutions like apartheid are easy to protest, but hope and answers seem to have disappeared along with its demise.

Despite its shortcomings, though, *Cry, the Beloved Country* is a novel of hope in the bleakest of situations. Modern readers may find Paton’s proposed solutions lacking, but the core circumstances of race relations that inform his writing remain a reality today. Paton’s assumptions about black South Africans border on racist at times, but they remain vital to the ongoing discussion of otherness brought to the foreground by the rise of postcolonial studies. In an era when the word “nigger” is being censored in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *Cry, the Beloved Country* has much to offer readers in understanding the stance of liberal paternalism these censors and Paton have in common (Shultz).

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<sup>2</sup> Critical retrospectives were published in 1973 by Larson and 1998 by Foley, marking both the 25th and 50th year publishing anniversaries.

Just as NewSouth Books condescendingly hopes that black readers will more likely enjoy this new edition of *Huckleberry Finn*, so too did Paton hope that, with the help of European institutions and sympathetic white benefactors, native South Africans could integrate into western society. Upon its release, *Cry, the Beloved Country* was lauded for its tendency to make American and European audiences look at the plight of race relations in their own countries. Over decades the context has changed, but the parallels between Paton's book and our own conception of race remain poignant.

It should be noted that *Cry, the Beloved Country* shares anachronistic embarrassments with many great novels, but suffers more for being so overtly political in its agenda. Melville's, "tiger yellow barbarians," Dickensian characters referred to only as "Jew," Shakespeare's "old black ram," and Conrad's "devils of the land" are commonly seen as historical embarrassments, explained away in classrooms as a result of a less enlightened period of Western culture. In Stephen Dedalus's words, "history is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake." Racism is an historical reality, yet something not entirely in our past. However, viewing these examples from the privilege of modernity breeds a certain condescending superficiality, reassuring the reader that they live in times more egalitarian and morally progressive. It also ignores a fundamental aspect of literary art: perspective. We must remember that each of the above examples is narrated from a very specific perspective (Huck Finn, Ishmael, Pip or David Copperfield, Iago, and Marlow, respectively) and aren't meant to be morally prescriptive. So, not only is this a matter of time period, but these characters have prejudices that the reader has to sort out, different worldviews that, no matter

how disagreeable to modern sensibility, enrich the literary experience. The reader isn't supposed to idolize Nabokov's Humbert Humbert any more than she is to take verbatim Christopher Marlowe's unflattering characterization of the cartoonishly evil Barabas the Jew. This may seem basic to experienced readers, but the effect is more profound than it may appear: the presence of racial antagonism taints common perceptions of classic works and reinforces a sense of security that the reader "knows better." This leads the reader to overlook nuance of characterization, unreliable narration, and the complexity of interracial relations in a work in favor of self-congratulations for the ability to judge between moral black and white. Racism in literature doesn't merely reflect the social tenor of the time it was written, especially when we consider that racism is still very real, regardless of the progress society has achieved. The Western Canon's larger problem is the lack of diversity in the perspectives narrating, not how they do that narrating. *Cry, the Beloved Country* cannot be critically dismissed merely because of its biases, especially given the wealth of South African books it now competes with and continues to outsell. The existing spectrum of writing on the novel is either naively positive or damningly negative; ironic, given the assumptive binaries the enterprise of Postcolonial Studies seeks to dismantle. Instead of succumbing to either extreme, both ultimately dismissive, we must complicate our reading of this text.

With this in mind, then, perhaps it is time to revisit *Cry, the Beloved Country*, a text that has been labeled racist, paternalistic, and Eurocentric. It is a comparatively easier task to simply deconstruct the values of an author at odds with our own, as so many critical papers have done; the more difficult and

interesting task is deciding what to do with such a text after sorting these matters out. Protagonist Stephen Kumalo notes as he reads the letter that sends him on his journey, “once such a thing is opened, it cannot be shut again,” which applies as well to a critical appraisal of the text as a whole (36). The novel continues to sell well, and continues to enjoy a place on literary curriculums. In 2003, it was reprinted in trade paperback as part of the Oprah’s Book Club collection, assuming a role in what Rita Barnard deems “a highly sentimental and commercialized form of global thinking and feeling,” curiously rekindling the patriarchal overtones that initially caused critical backlash against the text (Safundi). *Cry, the Beloved Country* isn’t going away, and regardless of the current prominence of other South African writers, retains importance and popularity.

Through an investigation of the novel’s critical heritage, formal literary features, political background, and place in modern literary theory, the reader will resituate *Cry, the Beloved Country* in the literary canon and attempt to settle disputes between interpretive contradictions provided by scholarship and criticism to this date, in addition to Paton’s own authorial contradictions. Ultimately, the reader will have a better understanding of the following: What are the contradictions that give this book its dubious reputation? How can we account for the novel’s enduring popularity? Can we situate the novel between literary aesthetics and the political? What is Paton’s political agenda and how can we reconcile this with contemporary political thought? How are Paton’s personal experiences inseparable from his literary output? How is this African novel

actually a distinctly European part of the Western Canon? Ultimately, how should we read this text and why does it matter?

## II. Plot Overview

*Cry, the Beloved Country* is known as a “Jim comes to Joburg” tale, a type of country-meets-city plotline popularized by the 1949 film of the same name (Lucia). Indeed, the entire first book is dedicated to the fish-out-of-water scenario of Stephen Kumalo, provincial black South African priest, travelling to Johannesburg to find his prodigal son, Absalom and errant sister, Gertrude. In the city he is helped by the generous black priest, Theophilus Msimangu. This premise juxtaposes the story of James Jarvis, a wealthy farmer who lives on the hill above Stephen’s village. In Book II, James receives the news that his son Arthur, a politically progressive supporter of racial equality, has been shot by a ‘native,’ Stephen Kumalo’s son Absalom. James travels to Johannesburg to set his son’s affairs in order. Betrayed by his politically radical brother John Kumalo, Stephen must cope with the execution of his son and his sister’s willful return to criminal indigence in the shantytowns of Johannesburg. Both men return to the country to grieve and rebuild; the once-prejudiced Jarvis begins to help the impoverished black villagers in order to honor his son’s legacy, while Kumalo seeks Jarvis’s forgiveness while starting a relationship with Arthur’s son. The novel ends with both men accepting their tragedies, understanding the costly toll of racial tension, and looking toward the future with both fear and hope.

The frame narrative at work here is important, because it represents the fundamental assumptions informing Paton’s work. Though both patriarchs endure similar hardships and a country-to-city trek, James Jarvis claims a

privileged role over our protagonist. While Stephen's travels serve to open his eyes to the problems of his country, he is impotent without the assistance of generous white South Africans and achieves moral victory only by ultimately abandoning the last traces of his native identity. James Jarvis is left to nobly accept and forgive his black counterpart, satisfied that racial harmony is necessary and possible for South Africa, if only the natives give up autonomy and westernize themselves. This moral binary pervades *Cry, the Beloved Country* and reinforces the cultural and racial prejudices that originally caused strife for Paton's beloved country.

Secondly, this larger view of the plot is important because it establishes *Cry, the Beloved Country* as a thoroughly Christian work of morally didactic fiction. Like *The Bible*, Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* or Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*, *Cry, the Beloved Country* presents a scenario that seeks to inform and instruct through example. More specifically in its relationship with *The Bible*, the book "tells stories of the lives of people that followed Christian teachings, and stories of people that decided to go against God and the consequences that they faced" (Glossary of Literary Terms). This is decidedly different from the technique of allegory used in so much of literature, considering Paton's subject matter isn't buried under any metaphorical or aesthetic layering that lends the act of reading to multifaceted interpretation and meaning. Instead, Paton adheres strictly to depicting his own moral code in a realist form akin to Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, a book he admired greatly, even going so far as to copy Steinbeck's style of dialogue formatting (Callan, *Cry, the Beloved Country's Journey*). Paton wished the book to be "considered as a social record,"

problematic given the western lens with which he views native culture (Paton, 14). To paraphrase Larson's twenty-five year retrospective on the novel, we can say that due to the European heritage of the narrative framework, black South Africans fail to identify with the reality it attempts to portray, and more importantly, reject its usurping of their political voice in the sociopolitical matters it tackles (Larson, 53-57).

Lastly, note that the form of the plot is circular: both patriarchal characters travel from point A to point B and back again, both have sons who are killed but are given hope by a newer generation, and the emotional tone of the novel creates a loop of despair and hope. This is crucial in defining the appeal the text has as a symbol of progressive renewal that exposes the cycle of hatred and violence. More importantly, though, it definitively ties Paton's book to his Christian morality, given the cycle of redemption inherent in the biblical narrative. Paton creates his own circle of death and rebirth, sin and redemption that instills in the reader a Christian conception of the plight of South Africa. Just as Paton can only conceive of sympathetic black characters when they are thoroughly westernized, he similarly hoists the western idea of salvation on his reader, naively believing it to be the answer to South Africa's prayers. Interestingly enough, *Cry, the Beloved Country's* critical heritage shares a circular form, moving from the overblown positive hype of early reviews to fierce critical deconstructions in subsequent decades, only to return back to its roots by satisfying the guilt of its Oprah Book Club readership.

### **III. Brief Biographical Notes**

*Cry, the Beloved Country* is a text that requires some knowledge of the author's life to fully understand his liberal, yet Eurocentric authorial stance. The son of a minor civil servant in a devoutly Christian household, economic and cultural binarisms served as an integral demarcation between Paton's life and the lives of black Africans, similar to that of his character, Arthur Jarvis. Indeed, he grew up to earn a degree at the University of Natal, further separating himself from the "other" of black South Africa through advanced literacy and academia, especially as he took on jobs teaching white high school students in Ixopo and Pietermaritzburg. While we cannot hold Paton accountable for his upbringing, readers should be aware of the reality he existed in prior to engaging the racial problems of his homeland. It seems as though Paton's appointment at Diepkloof Reformatory was his first real engagement with the reality of black South Africa, and is possibly the genesis of his liberal guilt. Paton became known for his progressive legislations at the reformatory, and it becomes clear that, like Arthur Jarvis, Paton's sympathies with black South Africans perhaps stem from intellectualized guilt for being raised unaware or unconcerned with their plight. These circumstances are no great inherent fault nor within his control, though his work would perhaps resonate more genuinely if the reader could feel that Paton had any familiarity with or desire to engage native African culture for its own worth, something that Arthur Jarvis's son begins to do in the novel, which is perhaps an expression of both Paton's hope for future generations and his own personal regrets (Liukkonen, 2008). Indeed, the entire framework of the novel lies in his strictly liberal Christian rhetoric and worldview, as when the martyred Arthur Jarvis laments "Our civilization is not Christian..." establishing a single

minded approach to solving racial tensions that ultimately undermines the text itself (Paton, 188).

#### **IV. Between the Aesthetic and the Political**

Adorned with the “Oprah’s Book Club” seal of approval, the trade paperback edition of *Cry, the Beloved Country* boasts the superlative, “The most famous and important novel in South Africa’s history.” Certainly the former holds true: the novel eclipses Paton’s other literary offerings and has enjoyed the aforementioned impressive sales figures, not to mention its adaptations in popular culture. The latter, however, is a more troubling prospect. The novel’s pre-apartheid context complicates its common conception as a snapshot of South African reality, given the trends in nationalism and independence indicative of the postcolonial era. Paton’s prose style is often praised, especially in early reviews, but the novel falls short of the contemporary theoretical complexity of the works of South African authors J.M. Coetzee or Nadine Gordimer, or even the psychological depth of Paton’s own *Too Late the Phalarope*. This is crucial given *Cry, the Beloved Country*’s overtly political subject matter and Paton’s own liberal leanings.

The object, of course, isn’t to level any charges against a claim made on the back of a dustcover, though it offers an interesting point of entry for considering Paton’s place in the South African canon and beyond. Instead, the two labels, “famous” and “important” exemplify the two primary tensions at odds in *Cry, the Beloved Country*: the aesthetic and the political. As a famous novel, Paton’s work is celebrated for its melancholic, beautiful prose and the universality of its themes, including the disintegration of family life, tension between modernity

and tradition, and racial conflict. Conversely, the adjective “important” suggests hierarchy within a certain context, granted presumably in light of Paton’s social consciousness. While a book may be famous for any number of reasons, “important” imparts a sense of obligation to the text that transcends the trends of style and artistic taste.

Consider, for instance, Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. Conrad’s work is undeniably famous, given its wide readership (recall that *Heart of Darkness* was first published serially in *Blackwood’s Magazine* as a piece of horror fiction, chiefly for entertainment) and the numerous adaptations and re-imaginings it inspired. As a writer of suspenseful sailing and adventure stories, Conrad’s work maintains critical respect for the Polish-born writer’s unique and ornate prose style. It is harder to tell if *Things Fall Apart* could be considered a famous book, since it demands instead to be an important one. Say what you will about Achebe’s reading of Conrad’s alleged racism; *Heart of Darkness* is unflattering to Africans, regardless of whether this was British Imperialist *de rigueur* or a subversive parody thereof. Since convincing cases have been made on each side, the important thing to note is that Achebe’s book relies heavily on the much-publicized intertextual relationship with Conrad’s shortcomings. *Things Fall Apart* is an important book, and through its commentary it makes *Heart of Darkness* not only a famous book, but an important one as well. By foregrounding Conrad’s representation of Africa, Achebe makes *Heart of Darkness* into a curiosity of culture and time period, obviating any judgment of aesthetic content. *Things Fall Apart* has been labeled “significant” and “required reading,” which cements its place in academia,

though it seems to ironically rely on the critique of its nemesis novel. *Heart of Darkness* benefits from the political edge Achebe brings to the table, but was already considered a respected aesthetic precursor to literary modernism.

*Cry, the Beloved Country* achieves this duality of politics and aesthetics through a reading of the text alone, so perhaps its self-proclaimed accolades hold some water. In the current academic climate of canon wars, scholars are quick to take sides in the divide between the aesthetic and the political. Some take a neo-formalist approach, ignoring sociopolitical and authorial context in favor of the purely literary. Others conduct literary seminars more akin to history or sociology classes, where a comment on an author's style or manipulation of convention is simply not radical enough. But this divide is illusory at best, regardless of Harold Bloom's apocalyptic rumblings, and *Cry, the Beloved Country* is a perfectly difficult text with which to synthesize these two approaches.

As a novel that supposedly represents hope and positive social change, *Cry, the Beloved Country* is problematic at best. Paton struggles with issues of representation primarily, relying on Eurocentric language to depict black South Africans who depend on their white counterparts for salvation. He also depicts radical South African politics, an aspect of the culture that would prove fruitful in subsequent decades, in a surprisingly negative light. These shortcomings of the novel have been discussed by other scholars, and I wish to clarify explicitly that this critical reinvestigation is not predicated upon simply decrying the novel as racist or outdated. Just as I am uninterested in adding to the heap of praise surrounding the novel, I would hardly be saying anything new by merely pointing out its faults. Instead, the aim of this investigation is to consider such faults *and*

strengths in light of the existing canon of South African literature in hopes of reassessing the hype and prejudices against *Cry, the Beloved Country*. After all, the book is already cemented into the American conception of South Africa, so regardless of Paton's dubious politics and sometimes anachronistic view of race, the productive option is to work with the text we have rather than try to depose it. In the end, *Cry, the Beloved Country* is a beautiful, admirable novel, and I believe that this synthesis of the aesthetic and the political may deepen the reader's understanding of its place in the literary continuum.

In a review of J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, *The Guardian* declared that "any novel set in post-apartheid South Africa is fated to be read as a political portrait..." which holds true for *Cry, the Beloved Country* (Mars-Jones). This makes a synthesis of the aesthetic and the political necessary for a true portrait of this work's legacy. Not only must we make judgments upon the novel based on its literary value and function in society, we must assess how the aesthetic determines the political, and vice versa.

It is my hope that this investigation may bridge the divide between positive and critical *Cry, the Beloved Country* scholarship. By sifting through existing reviews and scholarly articles, we can separate the hype from the genuine praise, the unfounded attacks from the honest critiques.

In the larger scope, this reassessment of *Cry, the Beloved Country* will serve as an exponent of criticism aforementioned as a compromise between the aesthetic and the political. Because this work has come to represent South African literature as a whole, especially in America, this investigation is also

aimed at developing awareness of the South African literary tradition as an important part of the ever-expanding Western Canon.

### **V. Defining Colonial and Postcolonial**

Distinguishing between colonial and postcolonial literature is crucial in understanding *Cry, the Beloved Country*'s place in the literary canon, especially since this text masquerades as a rebuttal to colonial oppression while merely reinforcing the tenets of colonial discourse. Furthermore, we shall define the difference between colonial literature, postcolonial literature, and the enterprise of postcolonial reading.

Colonial and postcolonial literature are each based on the encounter between different cultures, a key component of fiction that Janet Burroway terms the archetype of "two worlds collide" (168). These two cultures are deemed the self and the other, a nebulous being or group of beings that embodies everything outside of the self. Jacques Lacan's conception of the other expands this basic relationship, clarifying that though the self/other relationship may be oppositional, the self uses the other and "becomes aware of itself as a separate being," an autonomy that is necessary in "the basis of the ego" (Ashcroft, et. al. 155). Essentially, "othering," Gayatri Spivak's term for the "the process by which imperial discourse creates its 'others'" is a human mechanism used to assert individual identity and "confirm its own reality" (Ashcroft, et. al. 156-157).

The basic difference between colonial and postcolonial literature is the awareness each text has of the pervasive nature of imperialism and the difference in their treatment of self and other. Postcolonial literature exposes the false duality of self and other and deconstructs the assumptions inherent between the

colonizer/colonized relationship. Colonial literature falls prey to imperialist ideology, reinforcing the racial and cultural binaries that postcolonial writers seek to dissect. Postcolonial authors like J.M. Coetzee, Chinua Achebe, and Nadine Gordimer complicate the basic premise of the colonial narrative, seeking to explore the complex relationship between peoples of different races and cultures while avoiding cultural value judgments or simple binaries of civilized/savage and good/evil. Conversely, colonial literature may appear to seek reconciliation between races and cultures, but manages instead to deepen the divide between peoples by relying heavily on the cultural biases and moral values of the writer, ultimately clarifying the binary differences that provide the foundation to imperialist discourse.

Abdul R. JanMohammed popularized the term “manicheanism” to identify the core mechanism of colonial literature. According to Ashcroft et. al., “JanMohammed uses the uncompromisingly dualistic aspect of the concept to describe the process by which imperial discourse polarizes the society, culture and very being of the colonizer and colonized into the Manichean categories of good and evil. The world at the boundaries of civilization is perceived as uncontrollable, chaotic, unattainable, and ultimately evil, while the civilized culture is the embodiment of good. The consequences of this for colonial discourse are that the colonizer’s assumption of moral superiority means that ‘he will not be inclined to expend any energy in understand the worthless alterity of the colonized” (Ashcroft, et. al. 120). This moral superiority directly links to Paton’s characterization of native characters and his insistence on black westernization.

Still, *Cry, the Beloved Country* isn't without merit in the scope of Postcolonialism. Indeed, such thoroughly colonialist texts can be enlightening and rewarding when postcolonial reading is employed, an activity that conflates the theoretical complexity of postcolonial literature with otherwise colonial texts. It is here that *Cry, the Beloved Country* retains its worth, not simply as an artifact of errant values, but as an example of how one text which is based on contradictions can lead readers to similar interpretative contradictions: either Paton is a forerunner of racial egalitarianism and a hero of South African literature, as early reviewers would have us believe, or he is the very embodiment of the colonialist ideology he attempts to disrupt, as more modern writers believe.

## VI. Initial Reception

Writing for *African Affairs* in 1949, J. Grenfell Williams declares *Cry, the Beloved Country* “a miracle... the author makes you believe in it as much by his own faith as by his art.” Williams continues in praise of Paton’s depiction of natives: “His Africans talk in short, hard, almost brittle sentences... they shy away from the complex thought which has to be put into words,” concluding that “Mr. Paton is at ease with his Africans” (78-79). In *The Journal of Negro Education*, Gertrude B. Rivers admires Paton’s depiction of Kumalo’s “pacifist method of solving the problem of the South African native,” going so far as to label the novel “a guide book,” reaffirming Paton’s didactic tendencies (51). Rivers also notes that “many of the words and phrases are so new to the average American reader that the author gives at the end of the book a four page list of such words with pronunciation and definitions,” hinting at the exotic appeal South African literature held over western audiences (52).

In the *Antioch Review*, Nolan Miller claims the book to be of a “knotty and difficult style,” curious given Paton’s relatively plain prose style. He goes on to marvel that the 1948 best-seller list “indicate[s] that reading ‘seriously’ is a holy act,” and concludes that “culture-consciousness, even with the inflated dollar, is wonderful” (240). John C. Adler, writing about the Scribner School Edition of the book for *The English Journal*, notes that “*Cry, the Beloved Country* is recommended by the publisher for use by twelfth-year students,” describing the book as “Paton’s tender, tragic search into one of this contemporary world’s deepest problems” (223).

Each of these positive reviews shows the harsh juxtaposition between *Cry, the Beloved Country*’s overblown reception in the west and its immediate banning in Paton’s native country. These reviews also hint at a worldview that explains *Cry, the Beloved Country*’s success as an exotic export for the west or as grief-as-commodity for a white, liberal audience. Most importantly, these reviews reflect the westernized bias that informs Paton’s own writing, and provide a segue into the body of critical work that provided a backlash to Paton’s initial success.

## **VII. Critical Backlash**

Although Alan Paton's *Cry the Beloved Country* depicts the plight of black South Africans in a sympathetic way, this depiction is at best a misguided attempt at reconciling Paton's own white guilt with his religious compulsions. At worst it is a patronizing and condescending prescription of Eurocentric institutions, also known as “the white man's burden,” to solve black South African problems that further destabilizes and undermines the independence, heritage, social system,

and prosperity of the colonized. Analyzing the fundamental contradictions that serve as the basis for this text permits us not only to explode the idea that this novel is written from a singularly Postcolonial viewpoint, but also demonstrates that the book indeed proliferates colonial discourse through its characterization, literary style, and symbolism.

The Eurocentric framework of *Cry, the Beloved Country* is solidified by the elements of style Paton exhibits in his writing. For example, in Crawford's essay on the novel's biblical features, he notes the similarities between Paton's lyrical prose and the poetic style of Hebrew writings and *The Bible* itself. Such Eurocentric stylistic features include the rhetorical strategy of "repetition of statements in different terms," reverence for land, and the rhythm of the nameless call and response dialogue of the anonymous Sophiatown natives in the novel's ninth chapter (Crawford, 16-17). Indeed, this stylistic feature is most aptly illustrated in Crawford's juxtaposition of this passage from Exodus 3:5, "And he said, Draw not nigh hither: put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest [is] holy ground" with Paton's own prose, "Stand unshod upon it, for the ground is holy, being even as it came from the Creator. Keep it, guard it, care for it, for it keeps men, guards men, cares for men. Destroy it and man is destroyed" (*King James Bible, Exodus 3.5*, Paton, 3). Not only is the message of each passage similar, the aforementioned Hebraic meter tendencies and use of repetition as a rhetorical device, are illustrated in the last two sentences of Paton's selection. What Crawford fails to do, however, is to hold Paton accountable for his adoption of biblical style. It is well enough to note the similarities between the two texts, but to acknowledge the larger picture is

necessary if we are to gauge the worth of this text and its effects on its readership. Though these stylistic features may not be an entirely conscious choice for Paton, who we remember was raised in a devoutly Christian household, nonetheless, they combine to ultimately alienate and disenfranchise more legitimate and genuine voices, those of black South Africans, firmly establishing the book as an appeal to a white liberal readership which may indeed harm the very cause Paton seems sympathetic to. Indeed, before moving onto the characters themselves, it is important to note that the Eurocentric discourse outlined above extends into the names of characters themselves, many having biblical analogues, which further communicates the message that this text is not written with consideration for a realistic black South African voice, nor is it meant to be read by an audience aware of any consideration of this perspective. As Sheridan Baker points out in his 1957 essay on the moral geography of the novel, the name Jarvis has a striking similarity to Jahveh, or Jehovah, the common name for the Old Testament God (Baker, 57). Similarly, Crawford points out the name Stephen (Kumalo) as representative of martyrdom; Theophilus (Msimangu) reminiscent of a young man recommended for fellowship in a letter from Paul to Timothy; Absalom (Kumalo) as a biblical character who betrays his father, King David, much as Paton's Absalom betrays his own father; James (Jarvis), which means "supplanter," or someone who opposes Christ's message; and finally, Arthur (Jarvis), whose name symbolizes light, knowledge, and truth, and by extension, Christ himself, whose role is played out in a similarly appropriate fashion in the novel's plot (Crawford, 19-21). Collaborating with the narrative framework of redemption and atonement, as well as the stylistic features of Paton's writing,

these biblical references finalize the Eurocentric stylistic features of *Cry, the Beloved Country*.

The characters themselves enact a drama that, while seeming to reconcile white and black characters through conflict and forgiveness, disseminates Eurocentric Christian ideals that overshadow the real problems of South Africa and any solutions to them. In Hogan's 1993 exploration of *Cry, the Beloved Country*'s function in the classroom, he states that "The first thing I ask students is very simple: who are the good characters in the novel?" (Hogan, 208). He goes on to adroitly point out that students come to the conclusion that these characters are of two categories: "(1) Blacks who have devoted their lives to Christ, and (2) whites who help blacks, prominently including the director of a reformatory for black adolescents" (Hogan, 208). Indeed, as Hogan himself points out in his own definition of racism, "...racist ideology is always based on an affirmation of difference," an affirmation that we will come to understand is all too present in Paton's constructed South African reality (Hogan, 207). Before parsing supplementary characters in greater depth, it is our duty as readers to come to some understanding of the protagonist Stephen Kumalo, acknowledging differing interpretations, both conventional and subversive, of his rhetorical purpose in the plot.

The conventional interpretation of Stephen Kumalo is a long-suffering, pseudo-martyr who finds redemption through spirituality and humbleness in light of his familial struggles and the decline of his village due to European imperialism and its subsequent modernization of South Africa. What is most likely hoped to be achieved by Paton through this character is a sympathy with

the plight of black South Africans who are forced to watch as their kin languish in Western vice and fail to reconcile their tribal upbringing with the demands of Western modernity. Stephen Kumalo finds peace through his interracial relationships, his humility, and his faith. Given the thoroughly westernized climax, the end of the novel sends a mixed message of despair at the current state of race affairs and hope for the future generations of South Africa through the example of Stephen Kumalo, and by extension, those he has touched with his goodness.

However, Stephen Kumalo becomes quite a contrary and interesting literary device when we analyze the nature of his character. The reader begins to see that a definition of his character recedes continually into the Eurocentric ideology. To explain, we can first establish Stephen Kumalo as the novel's protagonist, and as a "good" character. Let us then probe further into this simple definition; what does it mean to be a protagonist or a "good" character? To explain this, we need further definitions. A protagonist, simply put, is the main character and primary focus of a narrative. However, when looking at this from a black South African prospective, the meaning becomes additionally complicated, given that the novel tradition and the conception of a main character are foreign concepts to traditional South African storytelling, as described by Charles Larson in his 1973 essay on universality and teaching native South Africans (Larson, 77-79). To add another definition, then, would be to explain that a main character is a common convention of Western literature that has been developed in concurrence with the modern narrative. This definition expands to include the history of Western literature and the modern narrative, illustrating the culture

that underpins Paton's writing. Stephen Kumalo, as a narrative device, precludes South African literary tradition, in turn creating another fundamental contradiction with which the novel is constructed. Similarly, if we attempt to define the meaning of "good" in relation to Stephen Kumalo, we might possibly redefine it with synonyms like humble, spiritual, loving, dutiful, and protective, but if we seek to refine this meaning yet again and define why these synonyms are "good," we must eventually confront the fact that Stephen Kumalo is defined as "good" with regard to the accepted moral standard of Western ideal. Thus from the start of the novel, we receive a Western bias that, whether Paton realizes it or not, in fact perpetuates colonial discourse, a concept that causes detriment for which both Arthur Jarvis and Paton himself seem wrought with guilt about. It is also important to note that, according to Acts 6:8, Stephen, "full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people." Stephen is the first Christian martyr (*King James Bible, Acts 6.8*). This appellation is an ironic prescription given Stephen's impotence in the story. Stephen's peculiar characterization simultaneously reaffirms his sympathetic stance to Western readers and further alienates any potential black South African audience. Indeed, during the painful confrontation between Stephen and James, Paton states "It is not easy for a white man to be kept waiting, but Jarvis waited, for the old man was obviously ill and weak", which summarily displays the hidden rhetoric of contemptuous tolerance displayed by white characters toward their black analogues (Paton, 211). The reader is certainly made to feel sympathy for Stephen, though it comes at the cost of his dignity.

Delving further into how Paton uses Stephen Kumalo, the reader cannot ignore his occupation as a Christian priest, which also defines much of his manner and characterization. Nowhere is the reader supplied with an explanation of Stephen's history, perhaps something explaining a reconciliation that happened somewhere along the line in his tribe between their traditions and the Christian faith. Instead, the faith of the reader is tested in that we must take this man at face value and believe that he is representing black South Africans. Perhaps this assumption is not a hard one to make for some, especially the American readership with which the novel enjoyed possibly its greatest financial and critical success, though when looking at it from a Postcolonial stance, Stephen Kumalo takes on the role of the "noble savage," respectful of European institutions and hegemony but never quite able to suppress the "shortcomings" of his African tendencies and reach equality with his white colleagues. Some, such as the author Ezekiel Mphahlele, have accused Stephen Kumalo of being a flat character, noting that the most significant character arc occurs in James Jarvis, a white man. Larson, writing well within the time of apartheid, asserts that this is a reason why the book has been spurned by more contemporary South African, often black, writers. He goes on to defend Stephen, saying "True, he does tremble too much, and his humility will not earn him the admiration of today's younger activists. But there are a number of times in Paton's story when we see him acting in ways that can be called anything but timid and meek....He quarrels with his younger brother and deliberately lies to him. He tricks his son's pregnant wife into making her believe that he desires her. Toward the end of the story, we are told that he once went up to the mountain alone, so he would not commit

adultery with a young school teacher” (Larson, 55). However, perhaps what Larson mistakes for character detail and development are indeed more evidence of Paton’s colonialist slant. Each of the enumerated examples of Stephen Kumalo asserting himself or displaying a wide range of emotion all in turn display what European standards of morality would define as negative behavior. This reinforces the idea of Paton’s noble savage, and reduces Stephen Kumalo as a representation of a suitably real black South African character. To recapitulate in author/critic Lewis Nkosi’s words, Stephen Kumalo was for subsequent generations “...an embodiment of all the pieties, trepidations, and humiliations we the young had begun to despise with such a consuming passion” (Larson, 55).

Although Larson and Nkosi have seemingly covered this ground adequately, the thesis of this investigation would be undermined if we did not apply the same rigorous explication to each of the major characters, even acknowledging some minor ones in the process. Since he is the character with perhaps the greatest traditional arch, James Jarvis makes an appropriate follow up to Stephen Kumalo. Before we address his personality and purpose in the novel, we should note what Baker has said of Jarvis’s home in *Paton’s Beloved Country and the Morality of Geography*, where he depicts Carisbrooke as “... a beautiful mountain looking down on the valley, sending water and hope, the peak of Omniscience” (Baker, 56). This description certainly ties in with the religious imagery referenced earlier, and seeks to establish James Jarvis as a flawed, but generous and benevolent savior in the end. James’s arc coincides with a traditional reading of the text, which outlines James’s ascent from the close-mindedness of classical racism to the epiphany of sympathy for black South

Africans which triggers repentance and selflessness. However, when we look at this arch from a post-colonial perspective, this ascent not only brings James to benevolence, but also to a more modern attitude about his racism. Perhaps James doesn't view blacks as inherently inferior to whites after familiarizing himself with his son's work, but there is no evidence he is willing to abandon the comfortable hierarchy he has enjoyed his own life, as shown by the physical staging of his character versus others (the geography of his home, his seat atop horseback versus Stephen's standing on foot) as well as his seemingly begrudging respect for Stephen (Paton, 307). This comfortable hierarchy, it should be noted, is perhaps one Paton himself enjoyed for his lifetime, again reflective of his undeniable Eurocentrism. If we were to probe into this character's psyche, perhaps we could come to the conclusion that, wracked with the grief of losing his son, then his wife, James is simply martyring himself through material possessions and charitable works to fill the void of personal loss. In this light, his character seems more narcissistic than reconciled with the natives of his country, as he self-pityingly says "I am no saintly man" while trying desperately to portray himself as such (Paton, 308). There is no mistaking the fact that James is privileged in *Cry, the Beloved Country*, as it seems that the impetus for change lies with him, a wealthy white man, before it can trickle down to his supposed inferiors. To put it in appropriate biblical terms, we can turn to the aptly titled Book of James 5:16 "The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective." Although other characters (namely, every black character) have had equally or more visceral experiences at the hands of the racist divide, most of our attention and in turn, our greatest sympathy, seems to be targeted towards James Jarvis.

One might argue that the plight of Absalom is the greater tragedy, but Paton's rhetorical method of pitting a "savior" like Arthur Jarvis against a misguided child like Absalom again puts the white character in the seat of privilege. No matter how liberal the reader, it is hard to feel worse for Absalom than for the Jarvises. As noted by Baker, one must wonder if the God meant to save South Africa is a white man himself (Baker, 57).

James Jarvis's character depends heavily on Arthur Jarvis, who is something of a non-entity in the novel, existing only through artifacts like personal belongings and his writing, as well as the memories of other characters. Conventionally, we can read Arthur Jarvis as a sort of Christ-like figure whose life is sacrificed, though his enlightened message lives on. The fact that he is murdered by Absalom, a black youth, and that his father James then forgives Stephen Kumalo for that act is supposed to be a touching gesture of a greater understanding that transcends race. However, this two dimensional reading is a weak one. For instance, we might look to Arthur's murder as another sign of Paton's view of blacks and "noble savages" in the sense that though he attempted to reform, Absalom will always fall into his primitive, sinful ways, an attitude similar to that of Paton's depiction of Gertrude. In prison, Absalom is displayed to attempt to conform to western norms, requesting of his father that "If [my] child is a son, I should like his name to be Peter", a clear biblical reference (Paton, 240). When pressured into marrying, another western institution, it is noted that for Absalom, "where his eyes are there is no marriage" suggesting an inability to normalize to dominant society (Paton, 242). Even during his last appearance in the novel, Absalom "caught his father by the knees" depriving him

of any solemn dignity in his darkest hour (Paton, 242). Absalom's role may leave the reader wondering if, perhaps, it would have been a wiser choice to have a white radical racist murder Arthur for his racial sympathies, thus providing some sort of admission of guilt for all whites in Paton's authorship. Still, we must look at what Paton did write, and he certainly provided other materials for which we can interpret Arthur's character. One prominent feature of his character is his devotion to his hero, indicated by "hundreds of books, all about Abraham Lincoln" which can be interpreted in at least two ways, or a mixture of both (Paton, 176). Arthur's preoccupation may be hero-worshipping of a white man who benefited blacks in America, similar to Arthur's agenda. With this reading, we are simply to draw comparisons, and to assign the qualities we know about a popular historical figure to this character that is dead or absent from the entire novel. Still, if we don't want to simply dismiss the Lincoln/Arthur parallel as lazy character development, we could say that perhaps Paton is comparing Arthur to Lincoln in regard to how freeing of the slaves and the American Civil War were fueled as much by political and economic factors as they were by the social issue of slavery, and that this practical conception of history hints that Arthur's interests may be vested in the betterment of South Africa as a whole, with improving black lives as a byproduct of such. He attributes the persecution of blacks as having "impeded the growth of the country," supporting this pragmatic reading of his motives (Paton, 179). However, given all that we have come to understand about Paton's numerous other Eurocentric depictions and his biographical background, it seems unlikely that this alternative motive was an intentional device. Still, since the reader doesn't ever meet Arthur in the

conventional sense during the novel, it is impossible to ignore it as a possibility, making him a less enlightened character, and something more of a colonialist. Finally, we should look at the solutions Arthur and James have for black South Africa: increased literacy through education, reformatories, restoration of the land, and donation of money to institutions like black boys clubs (Paton, 247). However, these “solutions” are mere Eurocentric slant that prescribe Western institutions to solve native problems, further imposing colonial discourse upon black South Africa. The Jarvises seem to sympathize with blacks, but their response to this is to desire blacks to be whiter, for their own good.

It could be said that Msimangu is a more idealized version of Stephen Kumalo in that he adheres even more closely to the Western code of behavior, so our time might be better spent engaging the character of John Kumalo, the carpenter (another biblical reference) and outspoken social reformer. On the surface, it appears as though Paton has set up John Kumalo to be representative of more violent and radical upheavals in South African reform, making him the antithesis of his brother in many ways. By characterizing him as having a “booming voice” but lacking intelligence or heart, as well as being “corrupt and deceitful,” Paton hopes to show the folly of black South African radicals (Paton, 221). However, it is likely more a case of Paton robbing black South Africa of representation yet again. One main point of interest is the bus boycott, which John seems to be a part of. This realist depiction parallels actual boycotts that happened in South Africa, and seems to be a useful tool in social reform. Also, if we look at John’s speech to the black South Africans of Johannesburg, we see that he is urging for propriety of blacks through ownership and representation, rather

than the continued exploitation of workers for white benefit. These solutions can leave the reader wondering, regardless of Msimangu's negative prescription of John (Msimangu is something of an Uncle Tom, anyway) and John's duplicity in saving his own son, if John is really so bad after all. Perhaps his negative portrayal is indicative of the concealed feelings of intimidation Paton felt toward the blacks in his life, which would in large part be criminals trying to reform. Although he advocates change in racial dynamics, Paton seems unwilling to acknowledge black South Africa on its own terms, which perpetuates an attitude of disrespect and furthers colonial discourse. Of John, Paton notes that "he's dangerous... it's the voice..." as well as including a more veiled critique of how Gertrude's friends "laugh and talk idly and carelessly," both of which serve to illustrate Paton's paternalistic urges to control and silence black voices, in this case criticizing them quite literally (Paton, 222, 225).

Finally, it is appropriate to engage perhaps the most important symbolism in the text, the motif of light versus dark that manifests most prominently in the conclusion of the novel: "Ndotsheni is still in darkness, but the light will come there also... But when that dawn will come, of our emancipation, from fear of bondage and the bondage of fear, why that is a secret" (Paton, 251). As Marcus points out in his *Exploring Man's Inhumanity To Man*, "Since African natives live in the valleys, not the highlands, the rising sun must first dispel the mists of fear hanging over those valleys" (Marcus, 613). The burden on these natives can only be fulfilled with the coalescence of native culture into the fold of Western Civilization.

### **VIII. Paton's Enduring Appeal**

Paton's underlying biases and prejudices have been thoroughly explicated by Larson, Crawford, Hogan, et al. but *Cry, the Beloved Country* continues to be taught and read, and not simply as an anachronistic, colonial text. Indeed, the novel's inclusion in Oprah's Book Club shows that the aspects of exoticism and white guilt in Paton's writing that initially won him accolades persist, becoming commodities in the current literary marketplace. Eva Illouz deems Oprah's strategy of marketing such books "the glamour of misery," and asserts that the Oprah industry "initiates, stages, and performs narratives of suffering and self-improvement," demonstrating that paternalism and liberal guilt are alive and well, thriving at an unprecedented level due to Oprah's multinational media conglomerate's influence (*Oprah Winfrey and the Glamour of Misery*). According to his 1992 retrospective review of the work, Roger S. Clark attributes much of his activism against South African injustice to *Cry, the Beloved Country*, positing the idea that it enjoyed great success in America because it spoke universal truths about all racial tensions (Clark, 653-656). We must be diligent, though, and keep in mind that Clark is also white, and illustrates once again the appeal to liberalism this novel holds.

In *Cry, the Beloved Country and the Failure of Liberal Vision*, Stephen Watson states that "Paton wrote his first and most famous novel at a time when liberalism still seemed to provide an answer to South Africa's problems... it represents the culmination of the heyday of white liberal optimism and confidence" (29). In the age of Occupy Wall Street and *Kony 2012* in America, this "white liberal optimism" is more important to understand than ever. *Cry, the Beloved Country* offers western readers a voyeuristic glimpse into South African

suffering, conveniently mediated by Paton's Eurocentric biases, and serves as a mirror for contemporary political advocacy groups.

It is impossible to completely reconcile the hyperbolic reviews of *Cry, the Beloved Country* with the body of scholarship that dismantles its colonial, cultural, and racial prejudices. It is also unnecessary, though, since labeling the book as either enlightened or racist falls into the same binary system that perpetuates colonial and racist discourses. In the end, a reconsideration of this novel seeks not to have the last word in this ongoing analysis, but instead attempts to open the doors for further possibility. In this way, *Cry, the Beloved Country* transcends the arena of Postcolonial studies to engage the reader in an understanding of how our culture's literary values change over time, how a crucial misreading can persist in the popular consciousness, and how issues of race, culture, country, and politics only continue to grow in complexity and importance.

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