

**Reflections:**

*A Student Response Journal for...*

# *Cry, the Beloved Country*

*by Alan Paton*

written by Nicole Guertin

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## *Cry, the Beloved Country*

All references are taken from the Scribner Edition of *Cry, the Beloved Country*.

### **Notes on the 1987, 1959, 1948 Editions**

1. Some have said that one of the most important characters in the novel is the land of South Africa itself. Write about a place that has figured prominently in your life. It may be someplace you have lived, vacationed, visited, or only read about. Write an article for a travel brochure that describes the area's physical characteristics and the significance it has had in your life. You may choose to begin your description with a sentence similar to Paton's own first sentence of the novel: There is a...
2. Based on the information in the notes, what do you think the prevailing tone and atmosphere of the novel will be—hopeful, fearful, despairing, humorous, etc.? Write as though you are a weather forecaster describing the emotional tone, or “climate,” of the book. Create a five-day forecast in which you predict the overall emotional weather the characters will experience throughout the novel. Include smaller tones you sense as daily variations in the forecast (thunderstorms, drizzle, partial sun, clouds, fog, wind, heat lightning, solar or lunar eclipses, etc.)

You may begin with this sentence: And in your five-day forecast, it's going to be (overall weather, eg. “hot”) in the Beloved Country... Then, write a paragraph explaining your choices of weather to reflect the emotions and atmospheres you expect to see in the novel.

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3. One of the things we often desire to know when we begin reading a story is whether or not it is “true.” Paton confesses that some of the events he describes in the novel are “a compound of truth and fiction. In these respects therefore the story is not true, but considered as a social record it is the plain and simple truth.” What do you think he means? Write a paragraph in which you explain your understanding of what Paton is saying. Write a second paragraph explaining what you think is the line between fiction and nonfiction. In your opinion, can *any* details or events in a work of nonfiction be made up? If so, how much can be fiction for the work as a whole still to be considered non-fiction?
4. Paton dedicates the novel to two “unselfish and determined friends,” Mr. and Mrs. Burns. Even though they barely knew him, the Burns went out of their way to help Paton get the novel published—reading the manuscript, writing letters, making phone calls, typing out the manuscript, hunting it down at the post office, etc. Recall a time when someone did something for you that was extraordinarily helpful. Write a letter to this person thanking him or her for the help. In your letter, describe what he or she did and explain how it has made a difference in your life.

## **Introduction**

5. In the introduction, the author explains that the book took its title from Paton's poetic admonishment for the land to cry out against the social injustices in South Africa. From your own knowledge and experiences, what do you think are the most important or problematic social issues in the United States? Free write about social problems you see that affect large groups of people living in your country. Imagine what the land's response to these and to the people might be. Should it mock the people, weep for them, ignore them, chastise them, warn them, etc? If you were writing a book focusing on one of these issues and its affect on the people of the United States, what would the issue be and what would you title your book?

## **Book I**

### **Chapter 1**

6. In this opening chapter, the author describes two very different scenes, one lush and flourishing, and the other dry and barren. He says that the land is dying and can no longer provide what the people need to live and prosper. Reflect on a place in your own life that you have seen change drastically over time. It may be change for the better or for the worse. It may be natural change or industrial change. Describe it in two paragraphs, the first about its former state and the second about its condition now. You may begin the first paragraph, "There was a..." and the second paragraph, "But now it is..." Do you like the changes? Are you nostalgic for the old place? Which do you think is better? Do not directly express your feelings about the differences, but try to choose words that make clear which state you prefer.

## Chapter 2

7. When Stephen Kumalo and his wife receive the letter from Johannesburg, they take their time in reading it. “How we desire such a letter,” his wife says, “and when it comes, we fear to open it.” Do you understand their mixed feelings? Think about a time when you had strong opposing feelings about something—anticipation and fear, joy and sadness, desire and hatred, etc. Describe the situation and explain why you felt both ways about it.

## Chapter 3

8. As Kumalo waits for the train to arrive that will take him into Johannesburg, he is so lost in his own thoughts, fears, questions and stories of others’ tragedies in the big city that he is not aware of what’s going on around him. He doesn’t even hear the sound of the whistle grow louder as the train approaches Carisbrooke station. Do you remember a time when you were so caught up in your thoughts that you were oblivious to your surroundings? Write about that time as though you are another person watching yourself in the situation. Take on the perspective of a third-person omniscient narrator who can both describe the external setting and events and tell the details of the thoughts, fears, and questions that preoccupy you. One possible way to begin is: (your name) sat in the middle of (what activity or event) lost in his/her own thoughts. It was as if he/she didn’t even see what was going on right in front of his/her face...
9. At the end of the chapter, the narrator says that Kumalo has “shown his little vanity, told his little lie, before these respectful people” on the train. About what has the priest been untruthful? Write a paragraph as though you are explaining this accusation to another classmate who didn’t catch Kumalo in his “lie.” Would you classify Kumalo’s action as a “lie”? If not, how would you describe what he did? How does it affect your opinion of the old priest?

## **Chapter 4**

10. When he arrives in Johannesburg, Stephen Kumalo is robbed by a man who said he would buy the priest's bus ticket so Kumalo wouldn't lose his place in line. Appreciative of the offer of help and not wanting to seem ungrateful or ignorant, Kumalo gives the stranger his money. The man disappears around a corner, and Kumalo never sees him again. Have you ever been in a new place where you were unfamiliar with the rules or procedures or dangers? Have you ever been taken advantage of by someone you thought was trying to help you? Have you struggled with the conflicting desires to be wary, and at the same time, to be polite? Drawing on your own experiences and knowledge, brainstorm a list of rules of thumb for travelers or for people going into unfamiliar situations. What should they look out for? What questions should they be prepared to ask? What should they never, ever do? Then, write two other responses Kumalo could have made to the man when he was uncomfortable. How could he have politely refused the man's offer of help?