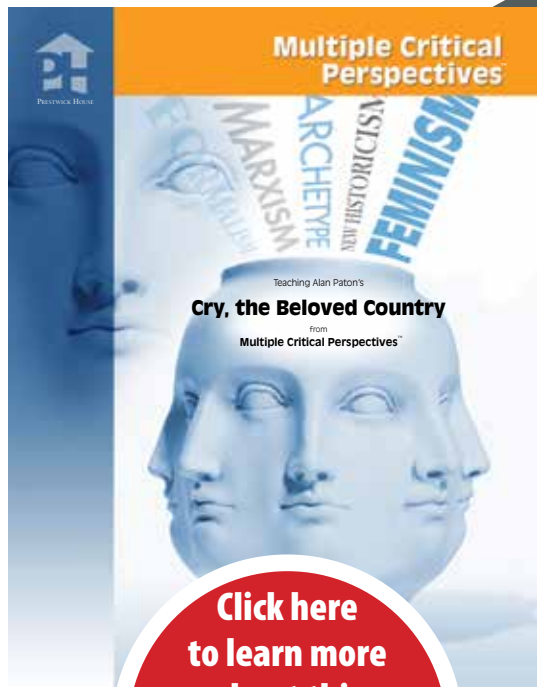




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Teaching Alan Paton's

Cry, the Beloved Country

from

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by

Debbie Price



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General Introduction to the Work

Introduction to *Cry, the Beloved Country*

CRY, *THE BELOVED COUNTRY*, by Alan Paton, is set in South Africa in the 1940s and depicts a country sharply divided by racial inequalities. Written by a white, native-born South African, the novel is frequently—and inaccurately—termed an anti-apartheid work. In fact, it was published in February 1948, scant months before the official establishment of apartheid, an institutionalized system of racial segregation that imposed second-class citizen status on all black South Africans. Paton, himself, became a leading opponent of apartheid, while his novel educated millions around the world about the plight of black South Africans.

The social, economic and political tensions against which the story is set were the results of centuries of conflict.

The portion of southern Africa that would eventually become the Republic of South Africa was originally inhabited by a variety of semi-independent tribal groups. The first Europeans to settle in South Africa were the Dutch, arriving in the mid-1600s. The Dutch were interested in trade, not colonization, so their presence caused little alarm among the native inhabitants. Eventually, however, the Dutch—who, after generations of living in Africa, called themselves Boers and considered themselves to be natives—settled deeper and deeper into the country, displacing the native populations.

The British arrived in the late 1700s, and a series of wars between the aboriginal Africans, the Boers, and the British erupted. Eventually, the British prevailed and established the Union of South Africa in 1910, setting in place the political, social, and economic systems that would eventually become institutionalized as apartheid.

The novel did help raise the social consciousness of white South Africa as well as the awareness of the rest of the world. Still, only months after the publication of *Cry, the Beloved Country*, the National Party gained power and instituted apartheid. Under apartheid, every South African was classified according to race, and the Group Areas Act enforced the physical separation of blacks and whites. Every aspect of South African life became racially segregated.

The novel, which awakened an international audience to conditions in South Africa has been a critical and commercial success for six decades, selling more than 15 million copies and inspiring two motion pictures.

New Historicism Applied to *Cry, the Beloved Country*



Notes on New Historicism

A common tendency in the study of literature written in, and/or set in, a past or foreign culture is to assume a direct comparison between the culture as presented in the text and as it really was/is. New Historicism asserts that such a comparison is impossible for two basic reasons.

First, the “truth” of a foreign or past culture can never be known as established and unchangeable. At best, any understanding of the “truth” is a matter of interpretation on the parts of both the writer and the reader. This is most blatantly evident in the fact that the “losers” of history hardly ever get heard. The culture that is dominated by another is often lost to history because it is the powerful who have the resources to record that history. Even in recent past events, who really knows both sides of the story? Who really knows the whole of the Nazi story? Or the Iraqi story? New Historicists argue that these unknown histories are just as significant as the histories of the dominant culture of power and should be included in any world view. Since they often contradict “traditional” (i.e., the winner’s) history, there is no way to really know the absolute truth.

Second, while the text under consideration does indeed reflect the culture in which it was written (and to some degree in which it is set), it also *participates* in the culture in which it is written. In other words, its very existence changes the culture it “reflects.” To New Historicists, literature and culture are born of one another. For example, although Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* certainly reflected the culture of the South during the mid-20th century, it also became a tool to raise awareness of, and change certain elements of, that culture.

Activity One

Using Examples from the Text to Discern the Economic Status of Native South Africans in the Late 1940s, before the Imposition of Apartheid

1. Copy and distribute the handout: *Cry, the Beloved Country*: New Historicism—Activity One Group Questions.
2. Divide the students into three groups or a number of groups divisible by three.
3. Assign each group (or allow each to choose) one of the topics listed below (from handout):
 - Life for rural natives.
 - Life for urban natives.
 - The effects of industry, i.e. mining, on native South Africans.
4. Have groups read their assigned passages and answer the questions.
5. Reconvene the class and allow each group to report its findings to the class.
6. As a class, discuss the final three questions:
 - Does this novel represent the view of the culture of power or of the oppressed culture? Why is this significant?
 - How might the passages have been different if they represented the other view?
 - Where would the truth lie?

Feminist Theory Applied to *Cry, the Beloved Country*



Notes on the Feminist Theory

Feminism is an evolving philosophy, and its application in literature is a relatively new area of study. The basis of the movement, both in literature and society, is that the Western world is fundamentally patriarchal (i.e., created by men, ruled by men, viewed through the eyes of men, and judged by men).

In the 1960s, the feminist movement began to form a new approach to literary criticism. Of course, women had already been writing and publishing for centuries, but the 1960s saw the rise of a feminist literary theory. Until then, the works of female writers (or works about females) were examined by the same standards as those by male writers (and about men). Women were thought to be less intelligent than men, at least in part because they generally received less formal education, and many women accepted that judgment. It was not until the feminist movement was well under way that women began examining old texts, reevaluating the portrayal of women in literature, and writing new works to fit the developing concept of the “modern woman.”

The feminist approach is based on finding and exposing suggestions of misogyny (negative attitudes toward women) in literature. Feminists are interested in exposing the undervaluing of women in literature that has long been accepted as the norm by both men and women. They have even dissected many words in Western languages that reflect a patriarchal worldview. Arguing that the past millennia in the West have been dominated by men—whether the politicians in power or the historians recording it all—feminist critics believe that Western literature reflects a masculine bias, and, consequently, represents an inaccurate and potentially harmful image of women. In order to repair this image and achieve balance, they insist that works by and about women be added to the literary canon and read from a feminist perspective.

Activity One

Identifying Feminine Stereotypes in Paton's Portrayal of Women

1. Copy and distribute the handout: *Cry the Beloved Country*: Feminist Activity One: Group Questions and Answers.
2. If you wish to use it, copy and distribute the handout: *Cry the Beloved Country*: Feminist Activity One: Female Archetypes and Stereotypes.
3. Briefly discuss with the entire class female archetypes and stereotypical “feminine” traits. It is more important to elicit opinions than to impose absolute definitions. You may or may not want to use the handout for suggestions.
4. Divide the class into four groups or a number divisible by four.
5. Assign each group, or allow each to choose, one of the following four characters from the novel:
 - Mrs. Kumalo
 - Gertrude Kumalo
 - Mrs. Lithebe
 - Absalom Kumalo's girlfriend
6. Have each group examine the text and answer the questions on the handout, providing specific evidence and examples from the novel.
7. Reconvene the class and have each group present a summary of its findings. Discuss the findings of each group.

Formalist Approach Applied to *Cry, the Beloved Country*



Notes on the Formalist Approach

The formalist approach to literature was developed at the beginning of the 20th century and remained popular until the 1970s, when other literary theories began to gain popularity. Today, formalism is generally regarded as a rigid and inaccessible means of reading literature, used in Ivy League classrooms and as the subject of scorn in rebellious coming-of-age films. It is an approach that is concerned primarily with *form*, as its name suggests, and thus places the greatest emphasis on *how* something is said, rather than *what* is said. Formalists believe that a work is a separate entity—not at all dependent upon the author's life or the culture in which the work is created. No paraphrase is used in a formalist examination, and no reader reaction is discussed.

Originally, formalism was a new and unique idea. The formalists were called “New Critics,” and their approach to literature became the standard academic approach. Like classical artists such as da Vinci and Michaelangelo, the formalists concentrated more on the form of the art rather than the content. They studied the recurrences, the repetitions, the relationships, and the motifs in a work in order to understand what the work was about. The formalists viewed the tiny details of a work as nothing more than parts of the whole. In the formalist approach, even a lack of form indicates something. Absurdity is in itself a form—one used to convey a specific meaning (even if the meaning is a lack of meaning).

The formalists also looked at smaller parts of a work to understand the meaning. Details like diction, punctuation, and syntax all give clues.

Activity One

Examining the Intercalary Chapter as A Tool for Inserting Thematic Material into the Novel

1. Copy and distribute the handout: *Cry, The Beloved Country*: Formalist Activity One: Group Questions
2. Divide the class into three groups or a number of groups equally divisible by three.
3. Assign each group, or allow each to choose, one of the following:
 - Chapter Nine
 - Chapter Twenty-three
 - Chapter Twelve: “Have no doubt it is fear in the land...For fear will rob him of all if he gives too much.”
4. Have each group read its assigned passage and then answer the following questions (on the handout).
 - Does this passage fit the definition of an intercalary chapter? Why or why not?
 - Whose viewpoint is presented in the passage? Who is speaking? From whose vantage is the action, situation portrayed?
 - Does the style of writing differ from the main narrative? If so, how and to what end?
 - Does this passage enhance the narrative or detract from it?
 - Could the same information, viewpoint or situation be presented within the narrative? Why or why not?
 - How does this passage support or illuminate a central theme of the novel?
 - What is the author trying to accomplish through the use of this technique? Is this technique effective?
5. Reconvene the class and have each group report its findings.
6. As a class, discuss the role of Paton’s intercalary chapters and evaluate the chapters’ effectiveness.

NOTE: It is not important for students to agree or even to come to consensus about the effectiveness of the intercalary chapters. The point of the discussion is to examine this structural aspect of the novel and evaluate it. Students must, however, be able to support their assertions with appropriate and accurate references to the plot, characters, theme, tone, etc., of the novel.