



Reviewing the relevance of selected themes in Alan Paton's (1903-1988) set work 'Cry the Beloved Country': From the author's perspective

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Abstract

This article mainly discusses the relevance of the selected themes in Cry the Beloved Country. These themes include forgiveness, compassion, comfort in despair, fear, religion, power, and migration were discussed as the relevant themes as appeared in the literary set work for English First Additional Language. However, the theme of racism was found out as irrelevant in the South African context. A qualitative research approach was used in this study. Data was collected using document analysis. The main source of information used was the novel 'Cry the Beloved Country'. The study recommended that the Department of Basic Education to expand the approval of this literary set work in schools because it explores interesting and informative themes. The study goes on to recommend that other schools should choose this novel as part of their literary work so that their learners will have a greater opportunity to learn an interesting novel that contains life lessons. I have also recommended to the Department of Basic Education to allow this novel to be taught to other grades below 12th grade.

Keywords: Themes, set work, English first additional language, department of basic education, teachers, learners

Introduction

The main purpose of this paper is to discuss the relevance of the selected themes in Alan Paton's novel 'Cry the Beloved Country'. This literary set work is one of the popular texts that have been most read both national and internationally (Foley 2006; Chiwengo, 2007; Van der Vlies, 2006) [3, 11]. In the context of South Africa, this novel was approved by the Department of Basic Education as the one of set work that should be taught to Grade 12 learners who are doing English as the First Additional Language. And learners are formally assessed based on the contents of this novel in Paper II, this paper is primarily covers the literature component.

Methods

The study has used a qualitative research methodology. Qualitative research methodology refers to an array of attitudes towards and strategies for conducting inquiry that are aimed at discovering how human beings understand, experience, interpret and produce the social world (Sandelowski, 2004 as cited in Hammersley, 2013) [7]. Data was collected using document analysis. Document analysis involves obtaining data from any number of written or visual sources such as diaries, novels, incident reports, pictures, advertisements, speeches, official documents, files, films, audiotapes, books, newspapers (Martella, Nelson, Morgan & Marchand-Martella, 2013) [9]. In the context of this study, the primary source of information used was the novel 'Cry the beloved country'. However, other literature has been used to supplement the nutrients of this study.

Research Findings and Discussions

As I have mentioned in the introductory statement that Cry the Beloved County explored different themes but this study was focusing on the scrutinising the relevance of the eight themes as found in the book.

1. Theme 1: Theme of forgiveness

One of the themes that is being explored in *Cry the Beloved Country* (1948) was forgiveness. In the context of the story, Reverend Stephen Kumalo forgives Absalom for killing Arthur Jarvis. He also forgives his sister, Gertrude for living as a prostitute. James Jarvis forgives Absalom for killing his son and does not hold Stephen accountable for Absalom's deed. Stephen forgives the young girl for falling pregnant without being married. This theme is teaching us as the audience the necessity to forgive irrespective on how painful the experience has you experienced. The good lesson is evident in the theme of forgiveness, the tragedy of the father, James Jarvis of losing his only son and Margaret Jarvis but they have shown a bravery through forgiving the Kumalo's family. This theme is relevant to be taught to our learners because it promotes the peaceful society that is forgiving each other without holding grudges. By exposing the learners to this theme, they can grow up with a positive mind-sets of forgiving than paying a revenge. This theme is planting the solid foundation of harmonious and peaceful atmosphere, therefore the learners when they reach the stage of adulthood, they will be well-informed and educated about the importance of forgiving.

2. Theme of compassion

The learners are not only taught the subject content at schools. They are even taught the values in education. Stephen Kumalo shows compassion towards the Jarvis family after his son murders Arthur. Msimangu shows compassion towards Stephen by assisting him in Johannesburg. James shows compassion towards the Kumalos by not blaming them for Arthur's death. Mrs Lithebe shows compassion when she accommodates Stephen and his family. This theme has shown a relevance of being covered in this novel because the pupils are being exposed to the culture of empathy and the spirit of being there for each other regardless of the skin colour, socioeconomic status and physical abilities.

3. Theme of comfort in despair

The other theme that is found in *Cry the Beloved Country* is the theme of comfort in despair. In the context of the novel, Father Vincent offers spiritual comfort to Stephen Kumalo when Absalom is sentenced to death. In addition to that, When James Jarvis realises that Stephen Kumalo's son is the one who killed his son, he offers him comfort. Stephen Kumalo provides comfort to Gertrude's son and Absalom's wife when he takes them back to Ndotsheni. Stephen Kumalo finds comfort in prayer, the Bible and meditation when Absalom is sentenced to death. This theme taught us as the learners the importance of supporting our loved ones during the difficult times. Since a person is a person through other people.

4. Theme of fear

Fear refers to conscious feelings and to behavioural and physiological responses (LeDoux, 2013) [8]. To have fear is naturally no one should be blamed. In this novel, we found a character named as Stephen Kumalo embarks on the journey to Johannesburg with a sense of trepidation. He has heard of the 'big city' and its effect on rural immigrants, for example moral degeneration, life of crime. He fears for what might be wrong with his sister, Gertrude. Hence another character as we learned from the story that, he (Absalom) was afraid when he shot Arthur Jarvis and he was also afraid when he was told he

will be hanged. Gertrude was afraid when her brother, Stephen, discovers what she does for a living. This theme has good-bad lesson since it taught learners to be aware in life in generally and be responsible at the same time to avoid being humiliated.

5. Theme of religion

Religion is an organized system of beliefs practices rituals and symbols designed to facilitate closeness to the sacred or transcendent, God, higher power or ultimate truth and reality (Behere, Das, Yadav & Behere, 2013) [1]. Since the biblical studies was abolished in South African schools, this theme of religion is exposing learners to the religious theme. In the literary set work of *Cry the Beloved Country* the theme of religion is being displayed when Father Vincent reminds Kumalo that because of his faith, his sorrow has replaced fear. Father Vincent also expresses the hope that Absalom may be able to repent and receive absolution. Reverend Stephen Kumalo believes that God has put His hands on Jarvis when Jarvis contributes to the community of Ndotsheni. At the end of the novel when Kumalo goes up the mountain to pray, he shows absolute dependence on God. Reverend Msimangu supports Stephen Kumalo emotionally during his trying times to keep the faith/not to lose hope. He decides to forsake all worldly possessions to focus on his faith. All these mentioned events show the resilient and power of religion and faith amongst the characters. Therefore, the learners' have been taught that during the period of sorrow, they should have faith and pray.

6. Theme of power

According to the story, power corrupts John Kumalo, who seems to be working for the cause (the fight against apartheid/for freedom/equality). His immunity to conscience is clear. He does not take his brother's feelings into considerations when Stephen tells him about the murder case. The power of forgiveness between James Jarvis and Stephen Kumalo. James forgives Stephen, although it is Stephen's son (Absalom) who kills James's son (Arthur). This theme remind learners to be firm in everything they are doing and be purpose-driven since at the end of the day, everything has its own result either good or bad.

7. Theme of migration

Migration refers to the movement of people and their temporary or permanent geographical relocation (Held, 2016) [6]. In the context of '*Cry the Beloved Country*, many of the characters have migrated from Ndotsheni to Johannesburg for various reasons. The learners are being taught that the various social ills such as poverty can contribute to the migration of people. As a result, the community officials need to ensure that they develop the local communities to avoid the movement of people from one place to another. The Kumalo family was negatively affected by migration. The drought and poor farming methods in the rural areas pushed members of the Kumalo family into the city in search of a better life. John Kumalo leaves for Johannesburg, becomes a corrupt politician. Gertrude's husband goes to Johannesburg in search of work and abandons his responsibility to his family. Gertrude, together with her young son, goes in search of her husband and becomes a prostitute. Absalom goes in search of Gertrude. He chooses a life of crime, eventually becoming a murderer. Johannesburg, an overcrowded city, has many socio-economic problems that impact negatively on members

of the Kumalo family. They are corrupted by the attractions of the city and as a result, the Kumalo family is fragmented.

8. Theme of Racism

Racism refers to an organized system, based on an ideology of inferiority that categorizes, ranks and differentially allocates desirable societal resources to socially defined 'races' (Bonilla-Silva, 1996) ^[2] as cited in Williams' (2004). In the context of this study, learners are being exposed to the theme of racism. However, it should be noted that the *Cry the Beloved Country* was written just before the apartheid regime was established in South Africa (Hall & James, 2000) ^[5]. The racial incident that is evident in this novel is when Reverend Stephen Kumalo takes a train from Ndotsheni to Johannesburg. The train was divided into sections for 'blacks' and 'white'. The non-Europeans section which was the term used to refer to Blacks, was the one which has accommodated Stephen Kumalo. Although this segregation is being covered in this book, and learners taught about the historical events of apartheid regime in South Africa. However, one would argue that this theme is currently outdated and irrelevant in the South African context, because in South Africa the issue of racism has been resolved in more than twenty years ago. Therefore, the need for exposing learners to the historical events is not necessary. The learners should be taught with the issues that are currently affecting them and how should they overcome those obstacles than focusing on the past experiences.

Recommendations

I have made the recommendations as follows

- The Department of Basic Education should further extend the approval of this set work at schools since is exploring interesting and informative themes.
- I recommend another schools to select this novel as part of their schools set work so that their learners will be offered with an opportunity to be taught such interesting novel that has involve good life lessons.
- I recommend the Department of Basic Education to allow this novel to be taught to another grades lower than grade 12s.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Department of Basic Education, has done a great work by approving this set work as being studied at high schools in South Africa. In addition, it cannot be ignored that this novel has interesting and informative themes that are relevant to the learners as the primary targeted audience and readers in a wider society.

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