Cry, The Beloved Country: The Role Of The City In A Novel

Cry, the Beloved Country, written by Alan Paton takes readers on a journey to experience the city of Johannesburg during the 1940's through the novels protagonist and focaliser, Stephen Khumalo. Stephen Khumalo, a priest from Ndotsheni finds himself having to move from the rural community of Natal to the city in search for his family members. His innocence of coming from his hometown leaves him confused and overwhelmed by the city's ways because of the stories he has heard about Johannesburg and it being a place of "detribalisation". This becomes evident in the provided extracts where all the things he sees and experiences are very unfamiliar to him and faces questions to which he cannot learn the answer leading him to lean onto what he knows best, faith. This essay will firstly discuss how the fast pace and vastness of the city is emphasised during Stephen Khumalo's experience to Johannesburg, secondly his reaction towards the city and how it contributes to his characterisation and lastly, how the extract relates to some of the broader themes and events of Cry, The Beloved Country.

The city is seen to be a very vast and fast paced as it is emphasised in the provided extract. As Stephen Khumalo arrives to Johannesburg and makes his way through the city, wherever he looks from the "left, to the right" he comes across "railway lines" upon "railway lines" and streets that he is "unable to count" (Paton, 2008, p. 9). As the trains pass in front of him, he realises that the "stations" too, are more than he had actually expected. The vastness of the city is showed through Paton's usage of repetition as well as diction which emphasises the fact that the trains are on the move to different directions because there are so many places and people that have to reach their everyday destination. As there are people still "waiting in their hundreds" for the train to arrive, the station is described as a "tunnel under the ground" (pg10). This can relate to the mining tunnels referring to the reason why people from the rural areas migrate to Johannesburg for; in order to seek work in the mines. It could also give reason as to why the train station is filled with "thousands of people (pg10), because it is not only the citizens belonging to the city, but others that may come from the rural areas and have found or are still looking for employment mainly in the mines. This becomes evident in chapter 4 of Part one where Stephen Khumalo finds himself travelling in a train with a group of miners pointing out mining landscapes. Which is why "the tunnel is full" because it is said at the beginning of the novel that once a person leaves for the city, they do not come back, which explains the fast pace of the city as people are "coming" and "going" to go about their daily lives in the city.

Stephen Kumalos' reaction during his journey in the city has a contribution towards his characterisation as his confusion and fear about Johannesburg becomes very evident. Stephen Kumalo is considered a figure of "peace, innocence and simple virtue" in the novel which is evident because of his profession of being a priest. As he makes his arrival to the city, he becomes completely out of his comfort zone as he becomes frightened and confused about his surroundings. This is evident when he comes across "high buildings" with a bottle displayed with "red and green lights" (Paton, 2008) going "on and off" and is written "black and white". The description of this, matches that of a Billboard that could be advertising a whisky bottle. It is not directly said but because Paton wants to let readers into his state of confusion that Stephen Khumalo is in because he does not understand what a billboard is nor its purpose, so one needs to see it through the narrator's perspective and try to imagine what is being described through the usage of words as it is "too much to understand" for Stephen Kumalo. His state of

fear is evident at the station when he comes across crowds of people and walks “carefully” and “holding tightly onto his bag”. This shows not only is he anxious about his surroundings but also anxious of his possessions. This can be because of the stories that Stephen Kumalo has heard about Johannesburg making him more fearful before he actually arrives. The stories he hears make up a part of who he is which is why he becomes fearful of crossing the street because of the story he heard about “Mpanza’s son” and gets the wrong idea of the robots thinking that when it is green, it is meant for him when in actual fact it is meant for the bus leaving him once again, confused. When Stephen Kumalo’s heart beats like a child, the simile makes it very evident that he is very naïve about the ways of the city and still has a lot to learn because the way in which he understood things of the city in his hometown is far from what they actually are in the city.

Cry the Beloved country is best known as a “Jim comes to Joburg” novel, best described as rural people moving to the city in order to find employment at the mines. In the provided extracts, the theme of fear because of what Johannesburg is normally associated with is evident. When Stephen Kumalo receives a letter about his sister Gertrude, confusion and fear prevails mainly because he does not know where they are and because the city is associated with another theme of “Moral degradation” which will be further elaborated. When Stephen Kumalo finds himself in the city, he becomes overwhelmed by fear because there are many things he does not understand about the city, example would be his knowledge about robots and crossing the road and understanding of the “high buildings’ with “red and green lights”. One of the other reasons of crime and fear is because of the criminal activities of the city. Black people normally migrated into the city with hopes of finding employment in the gold mines, however due to the segregation laws and inequality of the apartheid era, black people were forced to stay in overcrowded, informal housings of “Shanty town” which is introduced in chapter 10 of part One and the frustration of this oppression leads to crime, which could be one of the reasons why Stephen Kumalo held “tightly onto his bag” at the station. Another theme related to crime is that of “moral degradation”. Because of the little opportunities in the city, certain characters in the novel are left vulnerable leading them to moral loss guided by fear and crime in order for them to survive in the city. Examples are the characters like Gertrude, Stephen Kumalo’s sister who becomes involved in prostitution and selling booze and Absolem, Kumlao’s son, who gets involved in a gang and kills Arthur Jarvis, out of fear during a housebreaking. The way in which the city is described is unpredictable which is why the immense noise and fluctuation of cars and busses confuse Stephen Kumalo. It is very clear that because he is so naïve about the ways of the city, his faith becomes tested but does not get led into the temptation of the city and its ways and is evident when he says “Tixo, watch over me” and because along his journey to Joburg, instead of getting lost in its ways, he moves from a state of naïveté and innocence to a state of general enlightenment in a metaphorical sense of a “Jim comes to Joburg”.

In conclusion, this essay has discussed how the vastness and fast pace of the city is emphasised and also how the description of the city influences Stephen Kumalo’s reaction towards the city and also has an influence towards his character, and lastly how the experiences outlined in the extracts relate to the broader themes of Cry, the Beloved Country as a whole. These aspects can relate to the different experiences that one can face when one is unfamiliar to a certain place and how it can either grow you for personal knowledge or ruin you because fear of the unknown.

References

1. Dr. Bridget Grogan lecture slides
2. Paton, A., 2008. Cry, the Beloved Country. 3rd ed. Harlow: Pearson Education Ltd 2008.