

My Children! My Africa!



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ATHOL FUGARD

Athol Fugard, South Africa's preeminent playwright, was born to an Afrikaner mother and an English father in a small town in South Africa's Great Karoo desert region. He was primarily raised in the provincial capital of Port Elizabeth, Eastern Cape. After dropping out of college to hitchhike his way across Africa, Fugard spent two years working on a ship and traveling around the world. Upon returning to South Africa, he married and started working at the Fordsburg Native Commissioner's Court in Johannesburg. This job allowed him to see the apartheid system's unjust policies firsthand. Next, Fugard went to work at South Africa's National Theatre Organization, where he learned to produce plays. Soon, he returned to Port Elizabeth and started writing plays of his own and staging them with his multiracial acting troupes, the Circle Players and the Serpent Players. For the next three decades, the struggle against apartheid became the consuming theme and purpose of Fugard's writing. His first major play, *The Blood Knot* (1961), won Fugard international recognition but also persecution and surveillance by the South African government. He faced multiple political trials, lost his passport, and was frequently forced to publish his work in England or the United States instead of South Africa. Many of his plays reached a wide audience when they were filmed and broadcast across the English-speaking world. In total, Fugard has written, produced, and performed in more than 30 plays spanning a wide variety of genres but almost always set in South Africa and concerned with the effects of apartheid. Among the most influential are [Boesman and Lena](#) (1969), *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* and *The Island* (1972), and *"Master Harold"...and the Boys* (1982). In the late 1980s and early 1990s, with plays like *My Children! My Africa!*, Fugard began to look toward the future and ask what it would take for South Africans to establish a just, multiracial democracy. He also began to examine his own personal and family history, and he spent long periods of time living and teaching in the United States from the 1990s onward. However, Fugard returned to South Africa in 2012, and he continues to write plays there.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

My Children! My Africa! is set in South Africa toward the end of apartheid, the period of white supremacist rule that lasted from 1948 to 1994. The apartheid government reserved virtually all political, economic, and social power for white people through a system of forced racial segregation. However, this system fell as the result of a decades-long international struggle led

primarily by the African National Congress, a political party that represented Black and Coloured (mixed-race) South Africans and is now the nation's ruling party. As high school student Thami Mbikwana points out during a monologue in *My Children! My Africa!*, the struggle for equality in South Africa is, in part, about the way South Africans learn their history. Apartheid-era history books teach South African history from a white perspective, starting with the Dutch settlement of Cape Town in the 1600s and focusing on the long conflict between the British Empire and the Boers (the descendants of Dutch colonists). However, the play suggests that building a democratic South Africa requires telling the nation's history from the perspective of all its people, and especially its Black majority, whose ancestors have lived in the area for thousands of years. In particular, the play implies that writing history for a democratic, multiracial South Africa requires emphasizing the long and bloody struggle against apartheid. Milestones in this struggle include the 1955 Congress of the People, when major political groups came together to form a multiracial coalition against apartheid, and the 1960 Sharpeville Massacre, when the police murdered dozens of Black protestors, setting off a wave of further protests. The uprising that forms a central plot point in *My Children! My Africa!* was part of a long wave of violent revolts that shook South Africa. Along with an international boycott campaign, these protests and revolts played a crucial role in building political momentum to end the apartheid regime, which gradually transferred power to a new democratic government from 1987 to 1994.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Like *My Children! My Africa!*, most of Athol Fugard's other plays are set in South Africa and examine relevant issues like apartheid, race relations, and the effects of European colonialism. His first major work, *The Blood Knot*, depicted a pair of Black brothers—one of whom can pass for white—who become divided and bitter when they internalize South Africa's racism. Fugard's [Boesman and Lena](#) depicts a mixed-race couple who are forced off their farm during apartheid and left to wander endlessly in search of a place to live. Fugard also co-wrote *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, about a Black South African man who steals a white man's identity in order to circumvent the apartheid regime's ID laws, with John Kani and Winston Ntshona. His collaborators were briefly imprisoned for their involvement in the play. Finally, Fugard's most widely-performed play is *"Master Harold"...and the Boys*, which is based on his own childhood friendship with two older Black servants. Besides Fugard, prominent South African playwrights include Gcina Mhlophe, Zakes Mda, and Fatima Dike. Gibson Kente is famous for his political musicals grounded in the everyday life,

culture, and musical styles of South African townships, like *Sikalo*, *How Long* and *The Call*. Anti-apartheid activist and Nobel Prize-winning author Natalie Gordimer is also remembered for novels like *Burger's Daughter* and *No Time Like the Present*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** My Children! My Africa!
- **When Written:** 1988–1989
- **Where Written:** South Africa
- **When Published:** Premiered June 1989
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Play
- **Setting:** Camdeboo, a small town in the Great Karoo desert, South Africa (principally in Zolile High School in the Black township of Brakwater)
- **Climax:** Mr. M confesses to being a police informant, and a violent anti-apartheid mob kills him.
- **Antagonist:** Apartheid; Racism

EXTRA CREDIT

Like Father, Like Daughter. Fugard based Isabel, one of the play's three protagonists, on his daughter Lisa. Like many young white South Africans, Lisa struggled to make sense of apartheid and translate her guilt into political action. In fact, Lisa played the role of Isabel when it was first performed in London and New York.

True Crime. Fugard based the story of Mr. M's death on a real-life newspaper article: during an anti-apartheid protest, a mob killed a small-town schoolteacher, allegedly for being a police informant. In fact, Fugard named his character after this real-life teacher, Anela Myalatya.



PLOT SUMMARY

Act 1 begins in Mr. M's classroom at the all-Black Zolile High School, where Black student Thami Mbikwana and visiting white student Isabel Dyson have a heated debate over women's rights. Thami's classmates vote Isabel the winner of the debate, and afterward, Thami and Isabel bond by talking about their families and their plans for the future. In a monologue, Isabel explains how truly seeing the Black township of Brakwater for the first time during the inter-school debate taught her that Black people are actually her equals. She feels like she's discovered "a new world" and is eager to return.

Next, Mr. M pays Isabel a visit. He proposes that she and Thami join a quiz competition about English literature, and she enthusiastically agrees. Mr. M hopes that the literature competition prize money could cover Thami's college tuition,

but Isabel wonders if Mr. M might be trying to impose his own wishes on Thami's future. In a monologue of his own, Mr. M quotes the ancient Chinese philosopher Confucius and explains that he has dedicated his life to education, which Mr. M considers the surest path to creating virtuous citizens and societies. Nevertheless, as he sees poverty and violence spreading around him, he also struggles to keep alive his hope for the future. He even starts to wonder if he is on the wrong side of history.

Isabel and Thami practice for the literature competition, quizzing each other about English poets' lives and works. When Thami comments that Black people should tear down white colonizers' statues, Mr. M furiously replies that this is a distraction from Black people's fight for political rights. Thami admits to Isabel that he thinks Mr. M is full of "old-fashioned ideas" like the literature competition. According to Thami, Mr. M supports the oppressive apartheid government by continuing to teach. Isabel begs Thami to reconcile with Mr. M, but Thami thinks it's impossible. Isabel is hurt, but she reaffirms that she deeply values her friendship with Thami.

Act 1 ends with Thami's monologue: he explains that he used to love school and dreamed of becoming a doctor, but now he realizes that what his country most needs is political change. Under the apartheid regime, the brightest Black students are still forced to work humiliating jobs and have no chance of social advancement. In school, they learn about European colonization—but they get their true education on the streets, where they learn about the history of the anti-apartheid movement.

At the beginning of Act 2, Thami tells Isabel that he's quitting the literature competition. The community protest movement is boycotting the school system, which means he can no longer compete. While Isabel doesn't want to lose her friendship with Thami, she explains that she understands the protest movement's goals: she now sees how apartheid laws are designed to keep Black people poor, landless, and trapped in subordinate roles, while the government teaches white people like her to view Black people as inferior. Then, Mr. M walks into the room and defends the school system: while he detests the official curriculum, he insists that words, not weapons, are the key to social change. Mr. M pleads with Thami to keep coming to school, and he reveals that the government wants him to report any students who stop attending. Thami calls Mr. M a traitor to the anti-apartheid movement.

Soon, the community violently rises up against the government. In a monologue, Mr. M recounts his horror at what he sees: policemen attack and arrest his young students, one of whom even writes "Liberation First, Then Education" on the wall.

Mr. M vigorously rings his **school bell** in his classroom and calls out his students' names. A rock shatters the schoolhouse's window, and Thami comes inside to tell Mr. M that the Comrades (the leaders of the protest movement) are after him

because of rumors that he is a police informant. Offering Thami his beloved **dictionary**, Mr. M again proclaims that words are the most powerful tool for political change. Then, he reveals that he is an informant: he thought it was the only way to stop the violence, but he's no longer sure he made the right decision.

Mr. M tells Thami why he became a teacher: on a school trip as a young boy, he looked out over the **Wapadsberg Pass** at the vast Karoo desert and asked his teacher about Africa. His teacher told him about all the continent's peoples, rivers, and mountains. When Mr. M realized it was possible to learn all this from books, he decided to become a teacher, too. But years later, he is disappointed to see what has become of Africa, of all its young people's promise and potential. He proclaims, "My children...my Africa," and tells Thami that he's not afraid to die for his values. He runs outside, where an angry mob awaits, and they kill him.

After Mr. M's death, Isabel visits Thami one last time. Thami has to leave South Africa because the police are after him, and Isabel is devastated about Mr. M's death. She doesn't understand how Mr. M's community could murder him, but Thami explains that Mr. M was a traitor and the community killed him in self-defense. Still, he and Isabel both admit that they loved Mr. M to the end, even if they disagreed with his worldview. They say goodbye in Xhosa, Thami's native language, and then part forever.

The play closes with Isabel alone at Wapadsberg Pass, paying her respects to Mr. M. She promises that she will dedicate her life to fighting for justice and equality in South Africa and beyond.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Mr. M (Anela Myalatya) – One of the play's three protagonists, Mr. M is a 57-year-old Black teacher who lives a simple life communing between his rented room and his classroom at Zolile High School in the township of Brakwater. Inspired by ancient Chinese philosopher Confucius's search for wisdom and his own childhood experience learning about Africa from one of his teachers, Mr. M hopes that teaching can change the world. By showing his students how to think critically about themselves and their society, Mr. M hopes that he can help them fulfill their dreams and contribute to Black South Africans' struggle for freedom and equality. He's particularly inspirational for Thami Mbikwana, his star student, and Isabel Dyson, a white student from another school who's paired with Thami for an inter-school debate. Nevertheless, Mr. M is forced to teach the government's curriculum, which presents South African history and culture from a white European perspective in order to make Black people accept their subordinate place in the apartheid system. Mr. M's commitment to education

therefore leads him to work within an oppressive system, which leads him into an ethical and political conflict with Thami. Mr. M has high hopes for Thami, whom he considers "a born leader" and wants to send to college with a scholarship from an English literature quiz competition. But Mr. M also alienates Thami by relentlessly imposing his own "old-fashioned" views on him. Mr. M insists that violence is never justified and believes that South Africa will achieve equality when white people agree to cede power to Black people under peaceful conditions. So, when a revolt breaks out in Brakwater, Mr. M is horrified and wants to stop the violence at any cost. He reports the movement's leaders to the police, which leads the protestors to turn against him and murder him outside his classroom. Although the circumstances of his death contrast with his optimism for Africa's future, the students he influences—whom he considers "children"—carry this optimism forward and dedicate their own lives to fighting for justice and freedom.

Thami Mbikwana – One of the play's three main protagonists, Thami is a brilliant, charismatic, ambitious Black student at Zolile High School who gets caught up in South Africa's turbulent political situation. Thami once dreamed of becoming a doctor, and his beloved teacher Mr. M hopes that he will be able to attend college. However, as a teenager, Thami sees how his community suffers under apartheid and decides that the best way for him to contribute to South Africa's future is through politics, not education. Thami gets involved in a series of community protests led by a group called the Comrades. This leads him to quarrel with Mr. M, who believes that Thami will waste his potential and put himself in danger by joining these protests. Over the course of the play, Thami also befriends Isabel Dyson, a white student from a private, all-white girls' school. After they first meet during an inter-school debate at the beginning of the play, Mr. M convinces them to join forces for an English literature quiz competition. They bond by telling jokes, sharing their aspirations, and talking about their lives, which are vastly different even though they live in the same town. Eventually, though, he reluctantly breaks off their friendship because the Comrades don't approve of Black people socializing with white people. At the end of the play, Thami tries and fails to save Mr. M from the angry mob that kills him, and then he goes into exile to join the international anti-apartheid movement. Despite their disagreements, Thami continues to love and respect Mr. M for his dedication to African youth. As part of a generation of young South Africans growing up during the struggle for democracy, Thami bridges his nation's past and future. He represents young Africans' great potential and sense of optimism, but his inability to pursue his dreams shows how these same young Africans face a tragic fate under the apartheid system.

Isabel Dyson – One of the play's three main protagonists, Isabel is a bright but naïve white student who attends a

segregated all-white school for girls and lives comfortably in an all-white neighborhood with her family. Because of the apartheid system, Isabel virtually never interacts with any Black people besides U'sispumla, a local woman who works as a maid in her family's house, and a deliveryman named Samuel. In fact, before she goes to the township of Brakwater for an inter-school debate at Zolile High School, Isabel had almost never seen how South Africa's Black majority lives. But when she visits, she's thrilled to see a totally "new world" and encounter Black people as equals instead of servants. As a result, she eagerly accepts Mr. M's proposal to join an English literature quiz bowl competition with Thami. Over the course of the play, through her friendship with Thami, Isabel also learns about Black South Africans' struggles against apartheid. She realizes that her nation's vast inequality isn't an accident: rather, her community has deliberately imposed poverty, violence, and desperation on Black South Africans. Although she does not understand Thami's willingness to join the violent community protest, she does her best to respect his decision and search for her own way to contribute to the anti-apartheid movement. When the community revolt begins and Thami tells her that they have to break off their friendship, Isabel is devastated but understands his decision. After Mr. M's death at the hands of an angry mob, Isabel grows even more distraught. In the play's closing scene, Isabel stands at the top of **Wapadsberg Pass** (the place where Mr. M first decided to become a teacher) and promises to dedicate her life to fighting for Africa's future. In addition to providing a model for white South African allies in the fight against apartheid, Isabel's political awakening shows how idealistic young people can rise to meet the specific political and social challenges of their day.

U'sispumla ("Auntie") – U'sispumla is a woman who works for Isabel's family as a maid and lives in "the location," an all-Black slum that's segregated from the white part of town. Isabel and her family call her "Auntie." At the end of the book, however, Isabel refers to her by her real name. Although Isabel and Thami talk about U'sispumla multiple times, she never appears onstage.

MINOR CHARACTERS

The Comrades – The Comrades are group that organizes the community in Brakwater and leads their uprising against South Africa's apartheid regime.

TERMS

Apartheid – Apartheid was the system of racial segregation that South Africa's white supremacist government imposed on the country's population from 1948 until the 1990s.

Brakwater ("The Location") – The play's primary setting is Brakwater, a township on the outskirts of Camdeboo (a

municipality in South Africa) where all the city's Black residents live. White townspeople euphemistically call Brakwater "the location."

Township – During South African apartheid (a period of legally enforced racial segregation), townships were racially segregated neighborhoods. They were usually located on the outskirts of cities, where non-white South African people were forced to live during the apartheid regime.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



PROTEST, DISSENT, AND VIOLENCE

[*My Children! My Africa!* is set in the final years of the apartheid regime, a white supremacist government that ruled South Africa from 1948 until the 1990s and imposed strict racial segregation on the population. The play follows the relationships among three people: the privileged white student Isabel Dyson, the brilliant Black student Thami Mbikwana, and the dedicated, idealistic Black schoolteacher Mr. M. When a militant protest movement sweeps over their town, Thami and Mr. M clash over their competing visions of political change. Thami believes the movement is just, even if it's violent, while Mr. M insists that true justice can only come about through nonviolent persuasion, even in response to a violent government. Rather than choosing one of its characters' sides, the play presents both Thami and Mr. M's views as valid in their own ways. It shows how violent resistance can be justifiable in response to a violent government, but also that this violence is often ineffective. It also rejects the idea that activists can change society by simply joining existing institutions, but it affirms that people must win hearts and minds if they want to achieve justice and equality. As such, *My Children! My Africa!* shows that speaking out against injustice is a legitimate form of political action, but also that activists must openly resist the government through this speech if they want to change a repressive, authoritarian society.](#)

In *My Children! My Africa!*, Mr. M and Thami embrace opposite political strategies to fight South Africa's oppressive apartheid system. Mr. M becomes a teacher because he hopes that young Black students can build a better society if they learn critical thinking skills. He believes that politics is fundamentally about shared ideas and values, which means transforming political institutions requires using reason and persuasion. Meanwhile, Thami believes that the best way to fight for freedom is by

joining the community's rebellion. He thinks that politics is fundamentally about power, which means that transforming society requires organizing the community and taking over political institutions, using force if necessary. Right away, then, readers see that the issue of how to dismantle apartheid doesn't have an easy answer.

Mr. M and Thami see the glaring flaws in each other's strategies: Thami points out that an oppressive government can't easily be persuaded, while Mr. M shows that violence can be inadequate and counterproductive. Thami insists that persuasion won't work against the authoritarian apartheid government, which ignores appeals to morality because it doesn't care about Black people. Moreover, Thami thinks that Mr. M is naive to join the school system in the hopes of transforming society. While Mr. M has always hoped to do good, he actually spent his days teaching a biased government curriculum designed to brainwash Black students into accepting their subordinate role in society. Because South Africa's existing institutions are based on racism and exclusion, Thami doesn't think that young Black students can change society by joining them. Rather, the most they can hope to do is receive a salary for helping oppress other Black people, like Mr. M. By the same token, Mr. M rejects Thami's political tactics. He fears that his students are sacrificing their potential by joining a pointless protest movement, which the government will crush with disproportionate, deadly violence. And he's proven right about this: the police tear gas and arrest his young students, and Thami is forced into exile. In this way, neither Mr. M nor Thami's preferred methods are without flaw.

But while there are important problems with both Thami and Mr. M's visions of political change, the play suggests that they are both also right in critical ways: Thami is right to be suspicious of "old-fashioned" institutions and consider violent resistance justified, while Mr. M is right to view persuasion as the real key to achieving political change. First, the play suggests that violence can be justified in response to situations like apartheid. For instance, after a group of protestors kills Mr. M, Thami justifies their actions as "self-defense"—by going to the police, Mr. M got many community members arrested, indirectly perpetuating violence against them. The only way for the community to stop him was through violence, so Thami concludes that killing Mr. M was legitimate self-defense, even if it was also a "blind and stupid" mistake. If violence is justified but ineffective, then the play argues that true political change requires persuasion. In an impassioned speech just before his death, Mr. M holds a stone in one hand and a **dictionary** in the other, as though comparing the power of persuasion to the power of physical force. As he has already told Thami, he doesn't believe that stones and bombs can stop an armored tank from killing innocent people, whereas words can persuade the driver to switch sides. Words, Mr. M exclaims, are "magical." Especially when they're faced with overwhelming force—like

the community members against the apartheid government—persuasion is the only way to transform society.

Although Thami and Mr. M are forced to choose between joining the rebellion or defending the government, the play shows that there's a better, third option: dissent. This relies on persuasion rather than violence, but it necessitates working outside the system rather than inside it. Fugard presents this solution at the very end of the play, when Isabel promises to dedicate her own life to the struggle for justice and equality. She sees that it's possible to appeal to people's sense of morality and justice, like Mr. M wants to do, while standing outside and against the oppressive system, like Thami. Of course, Isabel's decision is also evidence that persuasion works—even the perpetrators of injustice, like white people under apartheid, can change their minds and switch sides. In turn, this is also why Fugard wrote this play and staged it around the world in the final years of apartheid: he realized that, by morally objecting to oppressive institutions, dissent can help transform an oppressive society into a democracy based on equality and mutual respect.



APARTHEID, RACE, AND HUMAN CONNECTION

In *My Children! My Africa!*, Athol Fugard shows how the apartheid regime reserved wealth and power for white people by dividing South African society along a racial line and ruthlessly exploiting the Black majority. But the racial divide also serves another purpose: it geographically, socially, and politically separates groups of people from one another, in order to try and prevent white people from recognizing non-white people's humanity and fighting for social equality. Nevertheless, the play suggests that this attempt will always fail. Thami, Isabel, and Mr. M form powerful connections across divisions of race, class, and gender, even if apartheid ultimately wrenches them apart. Through these protagonists' relationships, the play shows that no political system can ever crush people's fundamental humanity—their capacity to see one another as equals and fight for a society based on this equality.

When Isabel visits the township of Brakwater and realizes for the first time that white and Black people are actually her equals, she learns that South African society is divided by design, not by nature. The town where Isabel and Thami live is sharply divided: on the white side of town, Isabel lives comfortably in a large house, attends a well-funded private girls' school, and dreams of becoming a journalist. Meanwhile, Thami lives in a slum full of metal shacks, studies in a bare concrete classroom, and has no job prospects besides working as a servant for white people. Black people cannot cross to the white side of town, and white people almost never visit the township. This racial divide materially benefits white people, and it also prevents them from forming true relationships with

Black people. However, Isabel *does* cross the racial divide when she participates in an inter-school debate with Thami. She initially thinks of her trip to the township as a “pioneering’ mission” to help educate intellectually inferior Black people. But during the debate, Isabel quickly realizes that white people and Black people are equals in every way: her opponent, Thami (who’s black), is just as intelligent, persuasive, witty, knowledgeable, and empathetic as she is. Thus, Isabel starts to question why white and Black people live in such obviously unequal conditions, if they are so obviously equal.

Isabel’s budding friendships with Thami and Mr. M show that oppressive social arrangements like apartheid can never fully blind people to one another’s humanity. Isabel and Thami build a good-humored friendship by sharing details about their lives, cracking jokes together, and teaming up for a literature quiz competition. Although they recognize that Black and white students are not *supposed* to be friends, their curiosity about each other’s lives, families, and hopes for the future brings them together. But when they eventually start talking about politics, Isabel realizes that her community is responsible for creating the profoundly unequal world that prevents Black people like Thami from realizing their full potential. Isabel and Thami’s friendship shows Isabel that her community has lied to her by teaching her that Black people are inferior and don’t deserve political equality. Similarly, Mr. M and Isabel also bond because they both love learning and care deeply about Thami. Mr. M tells Isabel she’s part of his “extended family” of students, and when Isabel explains that she has gained a totally new perspective on Black people (and on South Africa as a whole) by visiting Brakwater, Mr. M enthusiastically proclaims that “knowledge has banished fear.” This line sums up Isabel’s political awakening: the apartheid system is designed to make her fear Black people by preventing her from ever actually knowing them. But once she meets Thami and Mr. M, she sheds her fear and realizes that Black and white people are equal.

Apartheid brings Isabel, Thami, and Mr. M together, but it also breaks them apart. Through their fate, the play shows the inhumane brutality of the apartheid system—or any other system of social control that forcibly separates people into classes of superiors and inferiors. For example, the political situation cruelly breaks apart Thami and Isabel’s friendship. The Comrades, the group organizing the community protest, has decided to boycott the school and prohibit mixing with white people. Therefore, Thami has to quit the literature competition and stop seeing Isabel altogether. Isabel is devastated to hear this, although she doesn’t blame Thami: they both agree that they *want* to remain friends, but they understand that political tensions make it impossible. Similarly, politics also forces Thami and Mr. M apart, even though they never stop loving one another. They clash more and more throughout the play, as Thami decides to join the community revolt that Mr. M condemns. At the play’s climax, they meet in

the schoolroom and both realize that their loyalties to their respective values—Thami to the community and Mr. M to the value of education—are stronger than their loyalties to one another. These would not usually have to be in conflict, but because of apartheid, both men are forced to choose between their relationships and their values. After the community learns that Mr. M reported the protest leaders to the police, an angry mob kills him, and then Thami and Isabel secretly meet one last time to mourn him. Isabel is devastated: she cannot understand why Brakwater’s people killed their schoolteacher. Meanwhile, Thami admits that he always loved Mr. M and regrets not telling him this during their final meeting. Both Isabel and Thami recognize that politics tore them apart from Mr. M—they still recognize his essential goodness as a person, and this recognition inspires them to live meaningful lives in the future.

Taken as individuals, Isabel, Thami, and Mr. M all have noble intentions: they want to help each other, their communities, and their country become more equitable and just. Their friendship proves that apartheid can keep people apart but never erase their humanity. This system may convince many people to accept social divisions as right or natural, but it can never destroy the basic human curiosity that brings people together in service of ideals of community and equality.



EDUCATION

My Children! My Africa!, a play about South Africa’s transition from an apartheid (racially segregated) police state to a racially integrated democracy, is set primarily in a classroom. While the play’s three main characters—Thami, Isabel, and especially Mr. M—all see education as the key to living a valuable life, they strongly disagree about where that education should come from. While the schoolteacher Mr. M hopes that he can help young Black students develop critical thinking skills in his classroom, Thami rejects the education system’s colonial curriculum, and Isabel learns that the education system is strictly segregated to ensure that she and other white students have greater opportunities than Black students. In the play, Thami’s true education comes from his community, which teaches him about Black South Africans’ history, art, and culture, and Isabel’s education comes from her visits to the township of Brakwater (where Thami and Mr. M live). Even Mr. M realizes that the government’s Eurocentric curriculum is designed to teach students to accept white supremacy rather than thinking critically about it. Accordingly, the play suggests that education can certainly transform students by expanding their perspectives, but it can also be a tool of repression and control. To be transformative rather than repressive, schools have to teach from the perspective of students and their communities, which requires curricula centered around their specific national histories, political situations, and cultural traditions. Mr. M’s passion for teaching reflects a deep faith that

education can empower students and guide them toward a brighter future. Mr. M tells Isabel that he's invested in Thami, his star student, because he believes that Thami's curiosity and passion for knowledge will lead him to change South Africa for the better. He envisions the school system as a way to create more intelligent, empathetic, and responsible citizens who can improve the society in which they live. But when Thami chooses to join the town's protest movement, Mr. M is horrified to think that he might lose a shot at this bright future. In an impassioned speech just before his death, Mr. M holds up a stone in one hand and a **dictionary** in the other, which represents Thami's choice between going to school or participating in the rebellion. Mr. M announces that the stone only represents a single concept, while the dictionary contains all the concepts, ideas, and opportunities in the whole English language. He suggests that rebellion will narrow down Thami's options for the future, while education will give him a wider range of opportunities.

But the play's three protagonists also recognize that apartheid South Africa's education system is designed to control and oppress Black students, not help them fulfill their potential. Rather than learning about their own history, culture, and traditions, Black students are forced to learn about English literature, European culture, and the history of white settlement in South Africa. For instance, when Thami and Isabel join a literature quiz contest, they spend hours studying English writers like Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Lord Byron. They only mention Africa when reading "Ozymandias," Percy Bysshe Shelley's famous sonnet about an Egyptian statue. Like the curriculum as a whole, this poem presents Africa through a white colonizer's eyes, wrongly suggesting that Shelley has more important things to say about Africa than actual Africans. Thami and Mr. M both agree that this curriculum is substandard and oppressive, but they react to it in different ways. While Mr. M tries to teach his students to critique and reject the curriculum, Thami joins the community movement to boycott it altogether.

When the official curriculum fails him, Thami finds the true education he seeks in his community. After he learns about the history of the anti-apartheid struggle from his friends and neighbors, Thami starts thinking critically about his life and place in society. He concludes that this is the kind of education worth getting, because it will prepare Black South African students for the real challenge they have to meet: building an equitable and sustainable future for their nation. In fact, Mr. M fell in love with education under similar circumstances. As a young boy, he looked out over the vast Karoo desert on a school trip and asked his teacher what lay beyond it. The teacher named all the rivers, mountain ranges, and ethnic groups in Africa, which astonished the young Mr. M. When he realized that his teacher could learn so much from books, Mr. M decided to become a teacher, too. This event inspired him because it showed that education could help him understand

the world he lived in and live a more meaningful life in it.

Needless to say, there's a vast difference between the English books that Mr. M teaches in class and the vision of Africa that actually inspired him to become a teacher. Like Thami, Mr. M's passion for learning started with a curiosity about the world around him and a desire to improve that world through knowledge. But when Mr. M becomes a teacher, he ends up doing exactly the opposite: he teaches young Black South African people someone else's history, which prevents them from recognizing their own. Because the official curriculum fails South African students, Thami and Isabel have to pursue their education elsewhere: Thami learns from his community and Isabel learns through her visits to Brakwater. Nevertheless, the play suggests that schools *can* provide a real education if they teach students about their communities' own history, traditions, and achievements. In fact, beyond just suggesting that the South African education system should be reformed, *My Children! My Africa!* has also become part of the reform. By documenting anti-apartheid activists' courage, dedication, and sacrifice, Fugard's play can help South Africans understand their nation's rich history.



THE FUTURE OF AFRICA

As the play's title suggests, the three protagonists of *My Children! My Africa!*—Thami, Isabel, and Mr. M—are driven by a profound love for Africa and its people. In one way or another, all three dedicate their lives to building a better future for both their home country of South Africa and the continent as a whole. This dedication largely stems from their knowledge of how colonialism has devastated and impoverished the continent. In South Africa, colonial rule and apartheid have wasted Black people's potential by forcing them to live miserable lives as manual laborers in impoverished reservations and townships. Therefore, as they look forward to the end of apartheid, Thami, Isabel, and most of all Mr. M feel a strong sense of social and political responsibility to rebuild their nation and redeem their continent. With this, *My Children! My Africa!* suggests that Africa's future depends on its youth's capacity to learn about their past, remain hopeful for the future, and dedicate their lives to building an inclusive and equitable world.

All three protagonists are motivated by a sense that history has been unkind to Africa: European colonialism, in particular, has plundered the continent and impoverished its people. As a teacher, Mr. M's sense of responsibility for South Africa's youth comes from his awareness of this historical devastation. In his first monologue, he admits that he is distraught to see extreme poverty and constant violence around him. And in his final monologue, he describes a news report he saw that showed a starving Ethiopian man carrying his dead child to a mass grave. Mr. M views the starving man and child as a metaphor for the current state of Africa, which has been beaten down by

European imperialism, colonialism, and resource extraction. He sees these events as tragic because they have wasted young people's potential by forcing them into poverty, and he thinks contemporary and future Africans have a responsibility to act to change these conditions. Thami feels the same way, which is what leads him to abandon his childhood dreams of becoming a doctor and instead dedicate himself to the anti-apartheid struggle. As he explains in a monologue, South Africa's political system "doesn't allow the majority of our people any dreams at all." He sees his best and brightest peers get stuck in low-wage jobs serving white people, and he realizes that his country systematically wastes its young Black people's potential. If he keeps trying to help people through medicine, he realizes, the same thing might happen to him: the country will not let him achieve his own potential unless he insists on changing it. But by helping build a free and equitable society for Black South Africans, he can make it possible for future generations of young African people to achieve *their* potential. Finally, Isabel learns about apartheid's effects over the course of the play, particularly through befriending Thami and visiting his township of Brakwater. She soon realizes that apartheid—a system that white South Africans like her have created—is directly responsible for Black South Africans' poverty and suffering.

Nevertheless, all three protagonists also have profound hope for Africa's future and view themselves as partially responsible for shaping it. Mr. M yearns to build a better future for the next generation of Black South African youth, and he views teaching as a way to inspire his students (whom he calls his "children"). Mr. M treats Thami as an embodiment of young Africans' great potential—this is why he enters Thami in a literature competition in the hopes of winning him a scholarship to college. Similarly, just before Mr. M is killed, he grabs Thami and says, "My beautiful and proud young Africa!" Tragically, as he watches his students suffer brutal violence from the apartheid regime, Mr. M feels that he has failed in his mission to save them. Still, his idealistic hope also compelled him to play a part in shaping this future. Moreover, the play's conclusion shows that Mr. M actually *did* inspire and leave a lasting impact on South Africa's youth. Thami admits that he did deeply love and appreciate Mr. M, who strongly contributed to his feeling that he had a political duty to fight for justice. Ironically, this sense of duty led Thami to participate in the revolt of which Mr. M strongly disapproved. At the end of the book, Thami leaves South Africa to "join the [international anti-apartheid] movement." His decision shows that Mr. M did manage to pass down his sense of hope and his dedication to creating a better future. And in the play's final scene, Isabel shows that Mr. M inspired her, too. Standing atop **Wapadsberg Pass**, where Mr. M first decided to become a teacher, Isabel promises that she will live a useful life. This likely means dedicating her life to ending apartheid and, more broadly, serving the people of Africa. Her final line in the play, "the future is still ours," shows

that she carries on Mr. M's sense of hope for the youth and future of Africa.

In writing *My Children! My Africa!*, playwright Athol Fugard understood that he had a powerful platform in a pivotal historical moment. As they look ahead to democracy, the South Africans in Fugard's play recognize that they will finally have the chance—and the responsibility—to take an active role in building their nation's future. But they also realize that to fully appreciate this responsibility and make the best of their opportunity, they also need to understand the past. Therefore, they are profoundly hopeful because they understand that their generation, unlike many in the past, has a true opportunity to shape the future.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE SCHOOL BELL

Mr. M's school bell represents the consistency, formality, and safety of the education system. This contrasts with the brutal, chaotic realities of the apartheid system and the anti-apartheid revolts that Black students face outside school. The bell first appears in the play's opening scene, when Mr. M rings it to calm Thami and Isabel down during an unruly, passionate debate. Similarly, when Thami remembers his childhood, he starts by remembering the school bell, which he associates with the sense of confidence, safety, and hope that he has abandoned since getting involved in his community's anti-apartheid protest movement. In both these cases, the bell symbolizes how school can impose a false sense of order and continuity on life, which is far messier and more complicated than it looks from inside a classroom. Thus, while the play portrays school as a safe place for children to explore ideas and grow, the bell also represents the idea that school can give people a false sense of routine and comfort in an otherwise difficult or intolerable situation.

At the end of the play, during the revolt in Brakwater, Mr. M still rings his school bell every morning, even though none of his students show up because they're involved in the protests. Although Mr. M insists that he wants to bring the world "to its senses," *he* clearly fails to understand his students' new reality. By ringing the bell, he shows that he is stuck in his old routine and unable to accept South Africa's new political circumstances. Indeed, in his final moments of life, Mr. M rings the school bell as he runs out into the angry mob that ends up killing him. Through this image, the play suggests that Mr. M dies in part because he failed to adapt his own values to South Africa's fraught political climate at this time.



MR. M'S DICTIONARY

Mr. M's dictionary represents the power of words, in the context of both education and political dissent. Although the dictionary briefly appears at the beginning of the play, it becomes more important during the play's climax, when Mr. M passionately presents his vision of social change to Thami. Holding a stone in one hand and the dictionary in the other, Mr. M declares that the stone is just one concept, while the dictionary contains the entire English language. In other words, by choosing to throw the stone—which symbolizes joining the violent revolt—Thami would limit himself to an ineffective tool. But by choosing the dictionary which symbolizes furthering his education and using persuasion to pursue political change—Thami can expand his range of opportunities and make a far greater impact. Mr. M then offers Thami this beloved dictionary, which represents the way he hopes to pass down knowledge and wisdom to his star student.





WAPADSBERG PASS

The view out over the Karoo desert from Wapadsberg Pass represents Africa's potential for a better future, as well as the protagonists' commitment to fight for this. Mr. M first realized that he wanted to become a teacher at Wapadsberg Pass: gazing out over the desert as a schoolchild, he was struck by its beauty and seemingly infinite expanse. When his teacher told him about all the rivers, mountains, and peoples that he would encounter if he walked across the whole continent from South to North, Mr. M realized both the power of knowledge and the vast beauty of Africa. As a teacher, he aimed to help young people achieve their potential and fulfill Africa's promise through knowledge. In turn, at the end of the play, Isabel Dyson comes to Wapadsberg Pass to pay her respects to Mr. M's memory and promise to dedicate her life to helping others. This shows how she carries forth Mr. M's sense of hope and shows that it's up to South Africa's young people to fulfill its potential in its post-apartheid, democratic future.

Act 1, Scene 1 Quotes

☞ You have had to listen to a lot of talk this afternoon about traditional values, traditional society, your great ancestors, your glorious past. In spite of what has been implied I want to start off by telling you that I have as much respect and admiration for your history and tradition as anybody else. I believe most strongly that there are values and principles in traditional African society which could be studied with great profit by the Western Civilization so scornfully rejected by the previous speaker. But at the same time, I know, and you know, that Africa no longer lives in that past. For better or for worse it is part now of the twentieth century and all the nations on this continent are struggling very hard to come to terms with that reality. Arguments about sacred traditional values, the traditional way of life et cetera and et cetera, are used by those who would like to hold back Africa's progress and keep it locked up in the past.

Related Characters: Isabel Dyson (speaker), Thami Mbikwana

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 4-5

Explanation and Analysis

In the opening scene of *My Children! My Africa!*, Isabel Dyson and Thami Mbikwana participate in a heated inter-school debate at Zolile High School (the all-Black school that Thami attends). The topic of their debate is whether men and women should study different curricula because of “essential physical and psychological differences” between them. The topic of this debate allows Fugard to introduce the questions about equality and education that, when applied to race rather than gender, eventually become central issues in the play. Namely, how does the South African government under apartheid (a period of legally enforced racial segregation) justify establishing separate education systems for Black and white students. Furthermore, what can young activists do to challenge this system?

In her speech during the debate, Isabel makes a persuasive argument for gender equality that can also reasonably be applied to racial equality. Even if there are some differences between men and women—or white and Black people—they are equal in all important ways and should receive the education. Nevertheless, Isabel also associates African traditions with gender inequality, as does Thami—who uses this association as a justification for defending the inequality. Even though Isabel makes a point of discussing



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Theatre Communications Group edition of *My Children! My Africa!* published in 1989.

her respect for African traditions, she goes on to suggest that those traditions are stuck in the past and Africa must move beyond them if it wants to catch up to the rest of the world.

In other words, Isabel imagines Africa's future as divorced from its people's distinctive culture and history, so that the continent can follow in the footsteps of Europe's culture and history instead. This shows that, despite her good intentions, Isabel is still thinking in the terms set out by apartheid. While her idea of the future represents the white supremacist attitudes toward Africa that were common at the time the play is set, Fugard imagines a different version of Africa's future: one that prioritizes equality of all kinds, and one that centers its people's cultures and histories rather than erasing them.

☝ ISABEL: This one was a riot!

THAMI (*Finger to his lips*): Be careful.

ISABEL: Of what?

THAMI: That word.

ISABEL: Which one?

THAMI: Riot! Don't say it in a black township. Police start shooting as soon as they hear it.

ISABEL: Oh. I'm sorry.

THAMI (*Having a good laugh*): It's a joke Isabel.

ISABEL: Oh ... you caught me off guard. I didn't think you would joke about those things.

THAMI: Riots and police? Oh yes, we joke about them. We joke about everything.

Related Characters: Isabel Dyson, Thami Mbikwana (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 8-9

Explanation and Analysis

After their impassioned debate about gender equality, Thami and Isabel start to chat about their families, communities, and hopes for the future. The two teenagers live in drastically different circumstances under apartheid (a period of racial segregation in South Africa): Thami is Black and lower-class, while Isabel is white and wealthy. Nevertheless, they start to bond when they realize that their lives are actually similar in many ways. Perhaps most significantly, they bond through their sense of humor, which


cuts across the racial line that divides them. As this passage shows, Thami "joke[s] about everything," including about the important political events of their time, which would have typically been a divisive and difficult topic for Black and white teenagers to discuss during apartheid. Specifically, Thami's joke is a reference to the wave of anti-apartheid revolts spreading throughout South Africa and the police's brutal crackdowns in response to them.

Most importantly, Thami's joke speaks to how people can bond based on universal human traits like humor, even in extremely divided and dangerous political situations like South African apartheid. In short, their ability to talk and joke with each other suggests that Thami and Isabel's curiosity about one another as individuals is a far stronger force of unity than apartheid is a force of division. Moreover, Thami's joke also shows how humor can be used to confront difficult topics and persuade others. Isabel would not have been comfortable talking about riots and police brutality otherwise, but Thami introduces the topic in a less threatening way by presenting it as a joke. He does not have to shy away from sharing the reality he's experiencing or the political attitudes he's developed in response to it, but he also doesn't alienate Isabel, whom he recognizes is more likely to be ignorant about apartheid than truly in favor of it.

Act 1, Scene 2 Quotes

☝ I've actually been into it quite a few times. With my mom to visit Auntie, our maid, when she was sick. And with my dad when he had to take emergency medicines to the clinic. I can remember one visit, just sitting in the car and staring out of the window trying to imagine what it would be like to live my whole life in one of those little *pondoks*. No electricity, no running water, no privacy! Auntie's little house has only got two small rooms and nine of them sleep there. I ended up being damn glad I was born with a white skin.

Related Characters: Isabel Dyson (speaker), Thami Mbikwana, U'sispumla ("Auntie")

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

In a monologue, Isabel Dyson reflects on what she learned by traveling to "the location" (the township of Brakwater) for the inter-school debate with Thami. She remembers that she had occasionally visited before with her family, but she

realizes that none of these visits led her to see the township in the same way as the debate did. In fact, these earlier visits *reinforced* Isabel's sense of social hierarchy and belief in white supremacy: the Black township's poverty seemed to prove that white people were inherently superior to Black people. Accordingly, although she saw how Brakwater's residents suffered, Isabel mainly learned to be grateful for being white instead of Black. In other words, she learned to see racial inequality as a natural and inevitable part of society. Because she benefited from that inequality, she did not feel the need to do anything about it—rather, she actually *celebrated* the inequality.

But when Isabel attended the inter-school debate and realized that the was no better than Black students she met, her perspective totally shifted. She realized that the township's poverty is actually proof of the profound injustice at the heart of South African society, and she started to ask what she could do to change the situation. Isabel's political awakening shows how making human connections across social divisions can lead people to better understand and fight against injustice. It also indicates that such social divisions will never be a strong enough force to prevent people—especially young people, who are still defining themselves and their place in the world—from forming bonds based on their shared humanity.

☝ I am not shy about making eye contact. Well, when I did it this time, when it was my turn to speak and I stood up and looked at those forty unsmiling faces, I suddenly realized that I hadn't prepared myself for one simple but all-important fact: they had no intention of being grateful to me. They were sitting there waiting to judge me, what I said and how I said it, on the basis of total equality. Maybe it doesn't sound like such a big thing to you, but you must understand I had never really confronted that before, and I don't just mean in debates. I mean in my life!

Related Characters: Isabel Dyson (speaker), Thami Mbikwana

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis


In this passage, Isabel recounts the experience that shattered her racist thinking and led her to realize that white and Black people are equal, even if they live in deeply unequal conditions in South Africa. When she arrived at the

inter-school debate in Brakwater, Isabel assumed that the Black students she was debating would probably be less intelligent, less sophisticated, and less fluent in English than she was. In other words, she thought that the Black students would be inferior to her, and so she thought that she was going to be teaching them—or even doing them a favor—simply by showing up for the debate.

Instead, Isabel learned that her assumptions were wrong: the Black students didn't see her as a charity worker, and the debate was just as serious as any other she'd participated in (if a little bit rowdier). Since she had to win the debate based on the strength of her arguments, she could no longer automatically take her racial superiority for granted, like most white South Africans in her community do every day. In short, by encountering Black people in conditions of “total equality” for the first time, Isabel realized that Black people *really are her equals*. This showed her that Black people's impoverished living conditions in South Africa are not the product of Black people's inferiority, but rather of society's unjust treatment.

☝ I discovered a new world! I've always thought about the location as just a sort of embarrassing backyard to our neat and proper little white world, where our maids and our gardeners and our delivery boys went at the end of the day. But it's not. It's a whole world of its own with its own life that has nothing to do with us. If you put together all the Brakwaters in the country, then it's a pretty big one—and if you'll excuse my language—there's a hell of a lot of people living in it! That's quite a discovery you know. But it's also a little—what's the word?—disconcerting! You see, it means that what I thought was out there for me...no! it's worse than that! it's what I was made to believe was out there for me...the ideas, the chances, the people...specially the people!...all of that is only a small fraction of what it could be.

Related Characters: Isabel Dyson (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

After Isabel realizes that white and Black people are equal, she starts to think about South Africa as a whole, and specifically the drastically unequal places that white and Black people live. Essentially, she starts to empathize with Black people and imagine the world from their perspective. So, while she used to see Brakwater as an irrelevant “backyard” that happened to be attached to her

comfortable white town, she now sees that it could just as easily be the other way around: her town could be a privileged enclave that just happened to be attached to Brakwater. On a larger scale, she realizes that Black people are not just white South Africans' "embarrassing" neighbors; rather, they're a vast community with families, dreams, and feelings of their own. In other words, they're human beings, and their experiences and concerns are just as important as white people's—which means that Isabel should make an effort to care about them and connect with them.

By extending her empathy past her white community's insular bubble to include South Africa's Black majority, Isabel realizes that within apartheid society, she is expected to care about "only a small fraction of" humanity. While she hasn't yet understood that this is part of what drives white South Africans to keep perpetuating the unjust apartheid system, she *does* realize that staying in her bubble will lead her to miss the vast majority of "the ideas, the chances, [and] the people" that are worth engaging with.

As a high school teacher, Mr. M considers it his mission to help young people "develop further and realize [their] full potential." In fact, he views this mission as a public service, a way of shaping Africa's future for the better. But over his decades as a teacher, he has seen countless "eager young mind[s]" go to waste because South Africa does not appreciate them or give them the opportunities they need to thrive. He worries that Thami, his star student, will end up in the same place, with his future crushed by the apartheid era's violence and inequality. But he views the literature competition as an opportunity to send Thami to college and keep his potential alive.



Of course, at the end of the play, it seems that Thami might have a bright future to look forward to, but for an entirely different reason: the protest movement might actually defeat apartheid and make it possible for Black people to pursue their lives and careers in freedom. This is all the more apparent to 21st-century readers and audiences, who know that the apartheid system fell and gave way to democracy just a few years after the first performance of *My Children! My Africa!*

Act 1, Scene 3 Quotes

☝☝ The truth is, I've seen too much of it Isabel. Wasted people! Wasted chances! It's become a phobia with me now. It's not easy you know to be a teacher, to put your heart and soul into educating an eager young mind which you know will never get a chance to develop further and realize its full potential. The thought that you and Thami would be another two victims of this country's lunacy, was almost too much for me.

☝☝ Knowledge has banished fear.

Related Characters: Mr. M (Anela Myalatya) (speaker), Isabel Dyson, Thami Mbikwana



Related Themes:  

Page Number: 20-21

Explanation and Analysis

When Mr. M proposes to Isabel that she team up with Thami for a quiz competition about English literature, she enthusiastically accepts. Beyond her intellectual curiosity about the competition, she wants to pursue her friendship with Thami, and she wants to spend as much time as she can learning about how Black people live in South Africa. Mr. M is delighted at Isabel's answer, and he explains that it felt like a "waste" for her and Thami to debate on opposite sides rather than working together. Then, he says this quote, which captures his sense of frustration and despair at the apartheid system's "lunacy."

Related Characters: Mr. M (Anela Myalatya) (speaker), Thami Mbikwana, Isabel Dyson

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

After Isabel explains how much she learned from participating in the inter-school debate with Thami and visiting Brakwater, she admits that she was apprehensive about going at first. Naturally, Mr. M understands this: he knows that white children in South Africa are taught to fear Black people, in part because this prevents them from getting to know each other and recognizing that they're actually more or less alike.

When Isabel remarks that her visit to Brakwater cured her of her fear, Mr. M enthusiastically replies that "knowledge has banished fear." This comment refers to two important ideas. First, it represents the way that individual experiences and relationships can help people transform their thinking about society as a whole—just as Isabel's thinking about race and society transformed through her visit to Brakwater and her budding friendship with Thami. Secondly, however, "knowledge has banished fear" also



refers to Mr. M's broader faith in education as a tool for transformation and progress. As a teacher, his goal is to help students banish their fear and ignorance with knowledge, so he sees Isabel's experience as an example of how education can turn young people into better friends, neighbors, and citizens.

Act 1, Scene 4 Quotes

☛☛ *(Thumping his chest with a clenched fist)* I've got a whole zoo in here, a mad zoo of hungry animals ... and the keeper is frightened! All of them. Mad and savage!

Look at me! I'm sweating today. I've been sweating for a week. Why? Because one of those animals, the one called Hope, has broken loose and is looking for food. Don't be fooled by its gentle name. It is as dangerous as Hate and Despair would be if they ever managed to break out. You think I'm exaggerating? Pushing my metaphor a little too far? Then I'd like to put you inside a black skin and ask you to keep Hope alive, find food for it on these streets where our children, our loved and precious children go hungry and die of malnutrition. No, believe me, it is a dangerous animal for a black man to have prowling around in his heart. So how do I manage to keep mine alive, you ask. Friends, I am going to let you in on a terrible secret. That is why I am a teacher.

Related Characters: Mr. M (Anela Myalatya) (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 27-28

Explanation and Analysis

During his monologue, 57-year-old schoolteacher Mr. M explains his career choice and describes his struggle to cope with the poverty, violence, and despair he encounters every day in Brakwater, the segregated township where he teaches. He uses the metaphor of "a mad zoo of hungry animals" to explain how he tries to manage his hopes and expectations. Although people might ordinarily think of hope as a positive, uplifting emotion, Mr. M argues that it can actually be destructive, since it depends on unrealistic expectations and can often lead to disappointment. His point is that, by projecting his own hopes and desires onto other people, he might fail or hurt them. At the same time, since he views teaching as a way of influencing promising young minds and shaping South Africa's future, he can only motivate himself to keep living if he holds onto hope.

Therefore, Mr. M's hope can lead to either fulfillment or catastrophe. On one hand, his hope can actually push him to

achieve what he hopes for, since it can motivate him to inspire young people to change the world for the better. On the other hand, it can also lead him to impose expectations and pass a sense of false hope onto his students, who end up bitter and resentful when they realize that South African society does not value them in the same way that Mr. M does. This is arguably what happens in Mr. M's relationship with Thami over the course of the play: Mr. M has such high hopes for Thami that he ends up alienating him and ruining their relationship.


Act 1, Scene 5 Quotes

☛☛ THAMI: His ideas about change are the old-fashioned ones. And what have they achieved? Nothing. We are worse off now than we ever were. The people don't want to listen to his kind of talk anymore.

ISABEL: I'm still lost, Thami. What kind of talk is that?

THAMI: You've just heard it, Isabel. It calls our struggle vandalism and lawless behavior. It's the sort of talk that expects us to do nothing and wait quietly for white South Africa to wake up. If we listen to it our grandchildren still won't know what it means to be Free.

Related Characters: Isabel Dyson, Thami Mbikwana (speaker), Mr. M (Anela Myalatya)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 43

Explanation and Analysis

When Thami and Isabel start practicing for their English literature quiz competition, it quickly becomes apparent that Thami and Mr. M no longer get along like they used to. In a private conversation after Mr. M leaves the stage, Thami explains his complicated feelings about Mr. M to Isabel, who struggles to understand her two friends' competing visions of social change and South Africa's future.



According to Thami, Mr. M is stuck in an "old-fashioned" way of thinking about social change. Mr. M believes that societies change when well-educated, articulate people join the government and transform it from the inside, or else when such people can persuade the government to change for the better. The problem is that, in South Africa, Black people like Thami and Mr. M himself have no power in the government, and the all-white establishment does not take their concerns seriously. As a result, Thami thinks, Mr. M's

“old-fashioned” ideas simply won’t work to change South Africa’s white supremacist government.

To make matters worse, “old-fashioned” thinkers like Mr. M oppose the measures that Thami thinks will actually lead to social change: popular protests and riots that force the government to respond and leave it with no choice but to change. While violent, these tactics are justified in Thami’s mind because he thinks they’re Black people’s only shot at freeing themselves from apartheid.

☝ I’ve told you before: sitting in a classroom doesn’t mean the same thing to me that it does to you. That classroom is a political reality in my life—it’s a part of the whole political system we’re up against and Mr. M has chosen to identify himself with it.

Related Characters: Thami Mbikwana (speaker), Isabel Dyson, Mr. M (Anela Myalatya)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 44

Explanation and Analysis

Isabel struggles to understand Thami’s disagreements with Mr. M. Most notably, Thami considers it wrong for Mr. M to work as a public schoolteacher, despite his noble intentions. This is because working for the school system really means working for the apartheid government. In school, Mr. M is forced to teach a misleading curriculum that focuses on white people’s achievements and diminishes those of Black people. While Mr. M thinks that he can still teach his students to think critically and become engaged citizens, Thami thinks that the official curriculum is a way to brainwash and oppress Black students.

After explaining his problems with the school system, Thami flatly tells Isabel that school holds different significance for them. For Isabel (as for most white South Africans, and most members of any country’s dominant racial group), school is simply a place where she spends her days and learns alongside her peers. She does not see the curriculum as controversial or ideological, so she doesn’t think she has to take a stand for or against it. For Thami, on the other hand, school does not necessarily stand for education or intellectual freedom—at least, not anymore. Rather, it’s “a political reality,” and he has to make a conscious decision about whether to endorse or resist its teachings. This is what leads Thami to question his relationship with Mr. M

and challenge Mr. M’s insistence that he ought to go to college—which might just present him with the same challenges he’s struggling with now.

☝ You used the word *friendship* a few minutes ago. It’s a beautiful word and I’ll do anything to make it true for us. But don’t let’s cheat Thami. If we can’t be open and honest with each other and say what is in our hearts, we’ve got no right to use it.

Related Characters: Isabel Dyson (speaker), Mr. M (Anela Myalatya), Thami Mbikwana

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis



After Isabel repeatedly insists that Thami ought to try and repair his relationship with Mr. M, Thami finally snaps and tells Isabel to stop giving him unsolicited advice. Isabel still does not fully agree with Thami’s view of the school system, his resentment toward Mr. M, or his sympathies for the protest movement—but she does firmly believe that none of these issues should get in the way of their friendship. Accordingly, just before she leaves at the end of the scene, Isabel says these lines to Thami.

Isabel views friendship as deeper and more powerful than any social division or petty disagreement. Because friendship is about fundamental trust and honesty, true friends help one another grow and change rather than abandoning one another when they reach a fierce disagreement (like Isabel and Thami’s disagreement about Mr. M). This kind of friendship is the basis for Isabel’s political awakening over the course of the book, and it’s similar to the kind of paternal love that Mr. M feels for Thami. Therefore, Isabel wants to establish whether she and Thami are true friends, or simply acquaintances working together for the purposes of the quiz competition. If they are true friends, Isabel promises, she will always grant him an audience, no matter how much she disagrees with them—but she would expect the same care and recognition from him, too. This further speaks to how Isabel’s friendship with Thami has helped her see him (and Black people more generally) as her equal whom she holds to the same standards as she holds herself.

Act 1, Scene 6 Quotes

☝ I don't think I want to be a doctor anymore. That praiseworthy ambition has unfortunately died in me. It still upsets me very much when I think about the pain and suffering of my people, but I realize now that what causes most of it is not an illness that can be cured by the pills and bottles of medicine they hand out at the clinic. I don't need to go to university to learn what my people really need is a strong double-dose of that traditional old Xhosa remedy called "*Inkululeko*." Freedom. So right now I'm not sure what I want to be anymore. It's hard, you see, for us "bright young blacks" to dream about wonderful careers as doctors, or lawyers, when we keep waking up in a world which doesn't allow the majority of our people any dreams at all.

Related Characters: Thami Mbikwana (speaker), Mr. M (Anela Myalaty)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

In his monologue at the end of Act One, Thami explains that he once wanted to help his community by becoming a doctor but has long since given up that dream. Instead, he now thinks the best way to serve other South Africans is by getting involved in the political struggle against apartheid. First, he believes that professionals with "wonderful careers" simply can't do enough to change the structure of South African society. Under apartheid, the few Black professionals have very little political power: they can't do much to change the conditions of Black people's lives, and they face oppression if they try. Secondly, Thami also suggests that it's wrong and pointless to strive for a successful, conventional career when "the majority of our people [isn't allowed] any dreams at all." It's more important to help the majority than to simply help oneself. This is part of why Thami disagrees so adamantly with Mr. M's view of the world and hopes for his students. In Thami's eyes, Mr. M is essentially trying to train a Black elite that will profit at the expense of other South Africans, just as the white elite does under apartheid.



In a way, Mr. M's failures exemplify both of these shortcomings: while he has a stable job as a teacher, he cannot make the impact he hopes to achieve. When he tries to inspire young people, he just as often deceives them instead, by giving them false hope about their prospects in South Africa's deeply racist society. In a sense, then, Thami rejects conventional pathways to success and achievement

precisely because he does not want to repeat the same mistakes that Mr. M has made.

☝ I look around me in the location at the men and women who went out into that "wonderful future" before me. What do I see? Happy and contented shareholders in this exciting enterprise called the Republic of South Africa? No. I see a generation of tired, defeated men and women crawling back to their miserable little *pondoks* at the end of a day's work for the white *baas* or madam. And those are the lucky ones. [...]

Does Oom Dawie think we are blind? That when we walk through the streets of the white town we do not see the big houses and the beautiful gardens with their swimming pools full of laughing people, and compare it with what we've got, what we have to call home? Or does Oom Dawie just think we are very stupid?

Related Characters: Thami Mbikwana (speaker), Mr. M (Anela Myalaty)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 49

Explanation and Analysis


When a white government official named Oom Dawie visits to tell Black schoolchildren that they will play a part in South Africa's "wonderful future," Thami struggles to believe him. Oom Dawie's promises—much like Mr. M's—present South Africa as a fair and egalitarian place where people from every community can thrive. But it's not, and Thami knows this firsthand, because he sees how South African society really works. While white people are able to live comfortably and have well-paying jobs, Black people work under horrendous conditions for very little money and live in decrepit shantytowns like Brakwater. The government's purpose isn't to build a "wonderful future" for all South Africans: it's to protect white people's property and power, while keeping Black people in desperate enough conditions that they are willing to work for low wages.

Thami wonders how Oom Dawie can possibly expect Black students to accept his cheery optimism for South Africa's future—in his view, the gulf between what Thami knows to be true and what Oom Dawie claims is simply too wide. Either Oom Dawie is lying to himself, or he's lying to the children; either way, he's selling false hope. Of course, this is exactly like Thami's criticism of Mr. M, whose optimism also

doesn't reflect the reality of apartheid South Africa. Thami believes that political struggle has to be Black South Africans' true source of hope, as there is no "wonderful future" for Black people under the current system.

☝ My head is rebellious. It refuses now to remember when the Dutch landed, and the Huguenots landed, and the British landed. It has already forgotten when the Old Union became the proud young Republic. But it does know what happened in Kliptown in 1955, in Sharpeville on twenty-first March 1960 and in Soweto on the sixteenth of June 1976. Do you? Better find out because those are dates your children will have to learn one day. We don't need Zolile classrooms anymore. We know now what they really are—traps which have been carefully set to catch our minds, our souls. No, good people. We have woken up at last. We have found another school—the streets, the little rooms, the funeral parlors of the location—anywhere the people meet and whisper names we have been told to forget, the dates of events they try to tell us never happened, and the speeches they try to say were never made.

Related Characters: Thami Mbikwana (speaker), Mr. M (Anela Myalatyia)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 50

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of his monologue, Thami contrasts the two kinds of education that he has received in his lifetime: his education at school and his education in the streets. At school, even under Mr. M's tutelage, Thami is forced to learn about South Africa from the perspective of its white settler colonists. In school, he has to learn "when the Dutch landed, and the Huguenots landed, and the British landed" to colonize African countries. But this is not his, his people's, or his land's history—rather, it's the history of the government that illegitimately rules over him, his people, and their land. Accordingly, Thami doesn't think that formal schooling does anything to help young Black students develop personally, grow creatively, or live fulfilling and prosperous lives. Instead, it brainwashes them into thinking that their own history and culture are insignificant.

But Thami has found an alternative to the school curriculum. In "the streets, the little rooms, [and] the funeral parlors" of his neighborhood, people are educating themselves without the need for schools or teachers like Mr. M. They carry and transmit the knowledge that truly

matters to them within their community. This knowledge is the history of their people and especially their lengthy struggle against the apartheid government, which has lasted practically as long as the regime itself. Thami considers this education superior to the education he received in school because it serves his community's social, emotional, and political needs: it gives them a sense of identity, purpose, and direction.

Act 2, Scene 1 Quotes

☝ I'm sure it's just my white selfishness and ignorance that is stopping me from understanding *but it still doesn't make sense*. Why can't we go on seeing each other and meeting as friends? Tell me what is wrong with our friendship?

Related Characters: Isabel Dyson (speaker), Thami Mbikwana

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 55-56

Explanation and Analysis

At the beginning of the play's second act, Thami reveals that he is quitting the English literature quiz competition and can no longer spend time with Isabel. The community leaders are boycotting the school system because of the inferior curriculum it imposes on Black students, and they are asking Black people to avoid meeting with white people in order to keep crucial information secret and stay safe. As a result, for purely political reasons, Thami and Isabel's friendship has to (at least temporarily) come to an end.



This devastates Isabel, who wonders what "is wrong with [their] friendship." She knows that their friendship is really about their connection as individuals, and not at all about racial or communal politics. She finds it intolerable that they would be forced apart for merely political reasons—but they are. This is one important element of the play's tragedy, and it's one of many tragic dimensions of South African apartheid. Even though Thami and Isabel's friendship is deep and genuine, they have to abandon it for shallow and impersonal reasons. Nevertheless, they both understand that the anti-apartheid cause is ultimately far more important than their friendship, so they have to sacrifice their friendship for the sake of long-term social progress.

MR. M: Do you think I agree with this inferior “Bantu Education” that is being forced on you?

THAMI: You teach it.

MR. M: But unhappily so! Most unhappily, unhappily so! Don't you know that? Did you have your fingers in your ears the thousand times I've said so in the classroom? Where were you when I stood there and said I regarded it as my duty, my deepest obligation to you young men and women to sabotage it, and that my conscience would not let me rest until I had succeeded. And I have! Yes, I have succeeded! I have got irrefutable proof of my success. You! Yes. You can stand here and accuse me, unjustly, because I have also had a struggle and I have won mine. I have liberated your mind in spite of what the Bantu Education was trying to do to it.

Related Characters: Thami Mbikwana, Mr. M (Anela Myalaty) (speaker), Isabel Dyson

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 57-58

Explanation and Analysis

When Mr. M walks in on Thami and Isabel's conversation about boycotting the school system, he challenges Thami to justify the boycott. Thami responds that the government is oppressing Black people by teaching them a low-quality, oppressive curriculum (which is called “Bantu Education”). Surprisingly, Mr. M agrees: he knows that the curriculum is biased and designed to stifle Black students' potential. But he thinks that it's better for the curriculum to be in his hands—so that he can circumvent and “sabotage” it—than in someone else's. Moreover, he believes that his students gain more from learning critical thinking skills in school than they lose from having the Bantu Education curriculum imposed upon them. In other words, he thinks that a bad education is better than no education at all, and that an effective teacher can still turn a bad curriculum into a good education.

Notably, Mr. M views Thami's brilliance and rebelliousness as evidence of his point: the Bantu Education curriculum hasn't dulled Thami's mind. Instead, Mr. M has sharpened it, and this has enabled Thami to critique and reject the curriculum. But Thami would likely have a different explanation: he learned to analyze society and take political action *despite* school, not because of it. The play's audience must decide for itself which of these explanations is true—or, more likely, how much truth there is in each.

Be careful, Thami. Be careful! Be careful! Don't scorn words. They are sacred! Magical! Yes, they are. Do you know that without words a man can't think? Yes, it's true. [...] If the struggle needs weapons give it words Thami. Stones and petrol bombs can't get inside those armored cars. Words can. They can do something even more devastating than that ... they can get inside the heads of those inside the armored cars. I speak to you like this because if I have faith in anything, it is faith in the power of the word. Like my master, the great Confucius, I believe that, using only words, a man can right a wrong and judge and execute the wrongdoer. You are meant to use words like that.

Related Characters: Mr. M (Anela Myalaty) (speaker), Thami Mbikwana

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 58-59

Explanation and Analysis

After Thami claims that Mr. M has taught him nothing and declares that he doesn't need “big English words” to change the world, this is Mr. M's impassioned reply. Violence can only do so much, Mr. M says, but words are “magical” because they can persuade. Their power does not rely on force, strength, or resources: rather, it relies on empathy, morality, and intellect. While violence is a one-time act that has no meaning except destruction, words gain power as they spread out over time and space. Of course, this explains both Mr. M's faith in education and his belief that respectful deliberation and debate are the best way to change South Africa's political system for the better.

Notably, the tenor of Mr. M's argument for words above weapons has changed. In the past, Mr. M insisted that violence was morally *wrong*, but here, he mainly argues that it's *ineffective*. Mr. M is arguing that words are a better weapon than weapons themselves, even if all weapons are legitimate in the struggle against apartheid. Mr. M is no longer proposing a choice between power and persuasion: now, he's arguing that persuasion *is* power. So, whereas in the past Thami might have thought that Mr. M opposed the protest movement, now he can see that Mr. M simply wants it to be *effective*. Thus, Thami can vehemently disagree with Mr. M's life choices, but that doesn't bear on the new political question of whether revolt or dissent is a better way to build power against the government.

Act 2, Scene 2 Quotes

☝ I ended up on the corner where Mrs. Makatini always sits selling *vetkoek* and prickly pears to people waiting for the bus. The only person there was little Sipho Fondini from Standard Six, writing on the wall: “Liberation First, then Education.” He saw me and he called out: “Is the spelling right Mr. M?” And he meant it! The young eyes in that smoke-stained little face were terribly serious.

Somewhere else a police van raced past me crowded with children who should have also been in their desks in school. Their hands waved desperately through the bars, their voices called out: “Teacher! Teacher! Help us! Tell our mothers. Tell our fathers.”

Related Characters: Mr. M (Anela Myalatya) (speaker), Thami Mbikwana

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 61

Explanation and Analysis

During the community’s revolt, Mr. M tries to go to the schoolhouse to teach for the day. However, the police block his route, and the utter chaos that surrounds him quickly proves overwhelming. Most troublingly of all, Mr. M has to watch his students participate in the violence and get attacked and arrested by the police. In this situation, the conflict between Thami and Mr. M’s values gets acted out in the community: Mr. M tries desperately to keep the peace, while Thami and the other rioters view the chaos as a way to express their demands for democracy. All the while, the apartheid government’s police force violently suppresses the protestors.

When Mr. M sees his students amid the protests, he feels like a failure in two ways. First, he has failed to protect them, and now he has to watch them suffer unnecessarily (and likely have their future prospects ruined by their arrests). Secondly, by deciding to join the violent protests, the students have essentially rejected Mr. M’s belief in changing society by changing public opinion and existing political institutions, while maintaining law and order. The children’s desperate cries from the police van indicate that they perhaps did not understand the extent of the dangers they faced from protesting.

Similarly, Sipho Fondini writes, “Liberation First, Then Education,” but then immediately contradicts himself by asking Mr. M for the spelling. His slogan is a way of calling for the government’s oppressive curriculum to be replaced by a fairer one that teaches all South African people’s history and culture, instead of just white people’s. But when

he asks for the spelling, this suggests education is also an important tool in the fight for liberation. Clearly, it is impossible to simply educate or simply liberate, and then do the other. Rather, the two have to work together: people should be educated in a way that helps liberate them, and their work for liberation (or activism) should also be educational.

Act 2, Scene 3 Quotes

☝ *Mr. M alone in Number One Classroom. He is ringing his school bell wildly.*

MR. M: Come to school! Come to school. Before they kill you all, come to school!


Silence. Mr. M looks around the empty classroom. He goes to his table, and after composing himself, opens the class register and reads out the names as he does every morning at the start of a new school day.

Johnny Awu, living or dead? Christopher Bandla, living or dead? Zandile Cwati, living or dead? Semphiwe Dambuza...Ronald Gxasheka...Noloyiso Mfundweni...Steven Gaika...Zachariah Jabavu...Thami...Thami Mbikwana...

(Pause) Living or dead?

Related Characters: Mr. M (Anela Myalatya) (speaker), Thami Mbikwana

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 62

Explanation and Analysis

At the beginning of this fateful scene, Mr. M calls out to his students from the classroom, even though it’s clear to the audience that none of them will attend. He rings his school bell and reads the roster out loud, in an attempt to impose some degree of normalcy on a completely unprecedented situation. In short, Mr. M goes through the motions of his ordinary life because he cannot bear to face the realities that he and his students are facing. He views his classroom as a safe haven, one of the few places his students ever go where someone truly values them and cares about their future.

But by creating this safe haven for his students for so many years, Mr. M has also shielded himself from the harsh reality of life on the streets in Brakwater. Accordingly, Mr. M’s students like Thami—who are being attacked or even killed


during the protests—are better prepared to deal with the situation they face than their overly idealistic teacher, who increasingly seems to be losing touch with reality.

☝☝ (Picks up his dictionary. The stone in one hand, the book in the other) You know something interesting, Thami...if you put these two on a scale I think you would find that they weighed just about the same. But in this hand I am holding the whole English language. This...(The stone) is just *one* word in that language. It's true! All that wonderful poetry that you and Isabel tried to cram into your beautiful heads...in here! Twenty-six letters, sixty thousand words. The greatest souls the world has ever known were able to open the floodgates of their ecstasy, their despair, their joy!...with the words in this little book! Aren't you tempted? I was.

(Opens the book at the flyleaf and reads) "Anela Myalatya. Cookhouse. 1947." One of the first books I ever bought. (Impulsively) I want you to have it.

Related Characters: Mr. M (Anela Myalatya) (speaker), Thami Mbikwana

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 63-64

Explanation and Analysis

The last time Mr. M and Thami meet, Mr. M passionately echoes writer Edward Bulwer-Lytton's classic adage that "the pen is mightier than the sword." In this instance, Mr. M argues that his dictionary is mightier than the stone that protesters threw into his classroom window. Although they have the same physical weight, Mr. M explains, the stone has no greater meaning, while English language has a potentially infinite variety of meanings—so much that countless people have dedicated their whole lives to exploring those meanings. The stone (which symbolizes violent unrest) leads Thami nowhere, while the dictionary (which symbolizes education and verbal persuasion) could lead him absolutely anywhere. In turn, the stone will not win anyone over to the anti-apartheid cause, while the dictionary could win anyone and everyone over to it.

Accordingly, the comparison between the stone and the dictionary represents Mr. M's belief that language is a more powerful tool for political change than physical violence, but also his faith in education as a tool for personal

transformation and improvement. After flipping through his dictionary, Mr. M offers it to Thami, but Thami refuses to take it. The dictionary becomes a token of Mr. M's love but also a symbol of his sometimes overbearing and dictatorial influence on Thami, who hopes to forge his own path in life and pursue change through more radical means.

☝☝ I sat here before going to the police station saying to myself that it was my duty, to my conscience, to you, to the whole community to do whatever I could to put an end to this madness of boycotts and arson, mob violence and lawlessness...and maybe that is true...but only maybe...because Thami, the truth is that I was so lonely! You had deserted me. I was so jealous of those who had taken you away. Now, I've *really* lost you, haven't I? Yes. I can see it in your eyes. You'll never forgive me for doing that, will you?

Related Characters: Mr. M (Anela Myalatya) (speaker), Thami Mbikwana

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 66

Explanation and Analysis

When Mr. M admits that he went to the police and reported the leaders of the community revolt, he starts to break down and struggles to explain his actions. He gets caught between two competing explanations, one based on moral principles and one based on ruthlessness and jealousy. In fact, these explanations parallel his debate with Thami over whether politics is truly about ideas and principles or just sheer power.

On one hand, Mr. M truly believes that changing South African society would require a prolonged process of collective deliberation, as opposed to the "madness of boycotts and arson, mob violence and lawlessness" that was occurring all around him. This meant that it was essential to stop the violence. On the other hand, Mr. M starts to admit that he acted out of bitterness and anger, as he could not stand to see his students (especially Thami) join someone else's movement instead of his own.



In reality, Mr. M seems to have acted out of a mixture of these two motives. He acted in accord with his principles, but he *also* acted out of bitter jealousy at losing Thami and watching his entire life's work as a teacher go up in flames. Mr. M recognizes that, by lashing out, he was unlikely to accomplish anything besides alienating Thami. In fact, he


clearly understands that he betrayed his community and even seems to regret his actions. Nevertheless, he and Thami have to grapple with the fact that the deed is done, and there is nothing more Mr. M can do but accept the consequences of his actions.

●● Something grabbed my heart at that moment, my soul, and squeezed it until there were tears in my eyes. I had never seen anything so big, so beautiful in all my life. I went to the teacher who was with us and asked him: “Teacher, where will I come to if I start walking that way?”...and I pointed. He laughed. “Little man,” he said, “that way is north. If you start walking that way and just keep on walking, and your legs don’t give in, you will see all of Africa!” [...] “Has teacher seen all that?” I asked. “No,” he said. “Then how does teacher know it’s there?” “Because it is all in the books and I have read the books and if you work hard in school little man, you can do the same without worrying about your legs giving in.”

He was right Thami. I have seen it. It is all there in the books just as he said it was and I have made it mine.

Related Characters: Mr. M (Anela Myalatya) (speaker), Thami Mbikwana

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 67-68

Explanation and Analysis

Mr. M tells Thami about the moment he decided to become a teacher. Standing atop Wapadsberg Pass in the mountains and gazing out over the desert below, Mr. M was struck by the landscape’s astonishing beauty, which he associated with the beauty of Africa as a whole. When his teacher explained that he had learned all about Africa’s people, mountains, and rivers simply by reading books, Mr. M realized that books could take him to places where his body could not physically go. He learned to see education as a source of freedom—a portal into other places, times, and people’s perspectives. But through this freedom, he could also learn about himself and plan for his own (and his country’s) future.

Just like Thami gained his true education from the protest movement, then, Mr. M gained his true education by reading about Africa and learning about all the people, places, and historical and cultural achievements that the

school system never taught him about. And by showing others how to take advantage of their education, he hoped to provide them with a measure of this same freedom. This was his contribution to his nation, his continent, and the future. Despite his great moral failure in going to the police, and even though the content of his lessons may not have inspired his students, Mr. M hopes that he can leave behind a love for learning so that future generations will understand the power that books and ideas have to transform their lives and societies.

●● (Pause) Not knowing their names doesn’t matter anymore. They are more than just themselves. The tribesmen and dead child do duty for all of us Thami. Every African soul is either carrying that bundle or in it. What is wrong with this world that it wants to waste you all like that...my children...my Africa!

(Holding out a hand as if he wanted to touch Thami’s face) My beautiful and proud young Africa!

Related Characters: Mr. M (Anela Myalatya) (speaker), Thami Mbikwana

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 69

Explanation and Analysis



After explaining the source of his love for learning, Mr. M tells Thami about his conflicting feelings of pride, hope, and despair for the future of Africa. He remembers watching a report about a starving Ethiopian man on the news and feeling that this was a metaphor for the fate of all Africans, who have been brutalized over the centuries by slavery, colonialism, hunger, poverty, and vicious systems like apartheid. For Mr. M, the most devastating aspect of this violence is that it has prevented people from flourishing. It wastes young people’s minds, lives, and potential by forcing them into menial jobs rather than letting them pursue their dreams. And it wasted Mr. M’s own life, too, by leading him to die pointlessly, under senseless circumstances.

In the wake of such profound violence, Mr. M asks where Africans can find a sense of pride and dignity. He believes the answer to this question is in future generations, and specifically in young people like Thami, who might finally have the chance to fulfill their potential and rule their own nations democratically. So, while Mr. M’s hope is rooted in the trauma and despair of the past, this only makes it stronger and more urgent.

Act 2, Scene 4 Quotes

☞ There is nothing wrong with me! All I need is someone to tell me why he was killed. What madness drove those people to kill a man who had devoted his whole life to helping them. He was such a good man Thami! He was one of the most beautiful human beings I have ever known and his death is one of the ugliest things I have ever known.

Related Characters: Isabel Dyson (speaker), Thami Mbikwana, Mr. M (Anela Myalaty)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 71-72

Explanation and Analysis

After Mr. M is killed by a violent mob of protestors, Isabel is devastated. She cannot properly mourn him, however, because she cannot make sense of what has happened: she viewed Mr. M as a savior for his community, so it makes no sense to her that the community would kill him. The only explanation that Isabel can find for Mr. M's death is "madness"—the community must have been acting irrationally, she thinks, or else they would never have killed him. Meanwhile, the play's audience already knows that Mr. M died because he and the mob approached the fight against apartheid in opposite, incompatible ways.

Isabel wonders how horrible things can happen to good people like Mr. M, and she asks what she can do to honor the memory of a man who died alone, without any family. Of course, Mr. M already pointed out that apartheid's brutality is precisely the way it crushes the hopes and dreams of good, noble, and benevolent people. Isabel still finds this truth too profoundly disturbing to accept, even though the depth of its injustice is precisely what motivates activists like her and Thami to fight the apartheid government.

☞ I don't call it murder, and I don't call the people who did it a mad mob and yes, I do expect you to see it as an act of self-defense—listen to me!—blind and stupid but still self-defense.

[...]

Try to understand, Isabel. Try to imagine what it is like to be a black person, choking inside with rage and frustration, bitterness, and then to discover that one of your own kind is a traitor, has betrayed you to those responsible for the suffering and misery of your family, of your people. What would you do? Remember there is no magistrate or court you can drag him to and demand that he be tried for that crime. There is no justice for black people in this country other than what we make for ourselves. When you judge us for what happened in front of the school four days ago just remember that you carry a share of the responsibility for it. It is your laws that have made simple, decent black people so desperate that they turn into "mad mobs."

Related Characters: Thami Mbikwana (speaker), Mr. M (Anela Myalaty), Isabel Dyson

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 73-74

Explanation and Analysis


As Isabel struggles to understand Mr. M's death, Thami reminds her of the harsh realities that his killers were facing. They agree that it's impossible to give sense or meaning to Mr. M's death, but Thami implores Isabel to at least try to understand how the killers felt. They could not try Mr. M in court, they could not know if he would betray them again, and they could not know if they were personally in danger because of his actions. Their resultant killing of Mr. M, Thami points out, was not "mad" but actually perfectly rational, albeit tragic. This is how the community's actions can be "blind and stupid" at the same time as they are legitimate self-defense. Just like someone who kills the person attacking them, the community responded disproportionately but still reasonably. And Thami thinks that Isabel ought to sympathize with them as much as she does with Mr. M, who also made a rash mistake.

In the end of this passage, Thami passionately implores Isabel—and his white audience members—to seriously consider the condition of Black people who have suffered under genocidal, colonial, and white supremacist governments for more than a century without any true legal recourse. Building a democratic future for South Africa, he argues, requires taking the brutality of colonialism and apartheid into account at every turn. One important part of

this is for the perpetrators of colonialism and apartheid—white people and their descendants—to recognize and correct for their crimes. This includes Isabel, even if she didn't personally commit any crimes. Like all white South Africans, she “carr[ies] a share of the responsibility” for the policies that have privileged her and enriched her family at Black people's expense, and she must also “carry a share of the responsibility” for overturning these policies and building a democratic society. Isabel has spent the whole play asking about her own place and responsibility in South Africa, and Thami has given her a straight answer: as a white person, it's her responsibility to help correct the historical wrongs that her community has inflicted on Black people.

☝ THAMI: *Sala Kakuhle* Isabel. That's the Xhosa good-bye.
ISABEL: I know it. U'sispumla taught me how to say it. *Hamba Kakuhle* Thami.

Related Characters: Isabel Dyson, Thami Mbikwana (speaker), U'sispumla (“Auntie”)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 77

Explanation and Analysis

The last time Thami and Isabel meet, they say goodbye in Xhosa, the native South African language that is Thami's mother tongue. Moreover, Isabel has also learned to call her family's maid by her real name, U'sispumla (instead of just calling her “Auntie”).

This brief exchange is deeply significant because it demonstrates that Thami and especially Isabel's attitudes about South African identity have changed. By saying goodbye in Xhosa, they subtly acknowledge native Africans' right to claim South Africa as their own country. In contrast, the apartheid government and education system present South Africa as essentially white, a country of settlers who also happen to rule over the natives who live nearby.

This harkens back to the quiz competition that Thami and Isabel were supposed to participate in, the subject of which was English literature. While their study of English writing and culture suggests that their history and identity as South Africans is closely tied to England, their decision to speak in Xhosa shows that they are acknowledging native South Africans' place in the nation, which is exactly what the anti-apartheid movement is calling for through a transition to democracy. For Isabel, in particular, this signals that her

political awakening is complete: she now understands South Africa as a multiracial country and feels a sense of responsibility toward the nation's Black majority.

Act 2, Scene 5 Quotes

☝ I've brought you something which I know will mean more to you than flowers or prayers ever could. A promise. I am going to make Anela Myalatya a promise.


You gave me a little lecture once about wasted lives . . . how much of it you'd seen, how much you hated it, how much you didn't want that to happen to Thami and me. I sort of understood what you meant at the time. Now, I most certainly do. Your death has seen to that.

My promise to you is that I am going to try as hard as I can, in every way that I can, to see that it doesn't happen to me. I am going to try my best to make my life useful in the way yours was. I want you to be proud of me. After all, I am one of your children you know. You did welcome me to your family.

(A pause) The future is still ours, Mr. M.

Related Characters: Isabel Dyson (speaker), Thami Mbikwana, Mr. M (Anela Myalatya)

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 78

Explanation and Analysis

In the closing lines of *My Children! My Africa!*, Isabel Dyson is standing atop Wapadsberg Pass, at the place where Mr. M gazed out over the desert at the beauty of Africa and decided that he wanted to become an educator. As a way of paying her respects to Mr. M, Isabel promises to “make [her] life useful,” by which she means dedicating herself to serving the people of South Africa. She remembers how Mr. M complained of their country's propensity to waste young Black people's lives through poverty, violence, and a lack of opportunity. Having seen this waste up close—particularly through the way that Mr. M's own life was wasted—Isabel vows to take a stand against it.

Isabel's final monologue shows how the play's events have inspired and educated her. She is completing the process of political awakening that she started at the beginning of the play, when she first met Thami and Mr. M at Zolile High School. Her friendships with both of them have shown her that she lives in a profoundly unequal, unjust society—but also that she has a special power to fight that injustice as a

young white woman. Through these friendships, then, she learned that the best way to spend her life is to fight to make her country more just and inclusive.

In turn, Isabel's awakening shows that Mr. M succeeded in his mission to shape South Africa's youth. Not only did Isabel learn from Mr. M, but she also plans to fulfill and

continue spreading his legacy by devoting herself to the service of others. She also carries on his sense of hope for the future, based on a belief in the power of words, education, and persuasion. Indeed, Isabel's very transformation is proof that this power exists—or that words can change the world by inspiring people to action.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

ACT 1, SCENE 1

During an energetic debate at Zolile High School, everyone is shouting over one another, and Mr. M calls out for order. Thami has accused Isabel of claiming that women are naturally “more emotional than men,” but Isabel is loudly objecting to this: she actually claimed that women are naturally “more intuitive than men.” Mr. M quiets them by ringing a **bell** and then reads from a **dictionary** to remind them that debates are supposed to be “orderly and regulated.” He asks them to stop shouting and explains that it’s time for their three-minute closing statements.

Thami is the first to give his closing statement, and the audience goes wild when he stands up. He glibly says that they should view him like an oracle representing the beliefs of their ancestors and traditional culture. Women’s liberation, Thami argues, is a foreign concept invented by the same Europeans who have enslaved and exploited Africans for centuries. He claims that women can’t do men’s jobs because they’re physically weaker and belong in the home. He jokes that he couldn’t breastfeed a child, and he encourages the audience to vote in his favor. Then, Thami sits back down.

The play’s riotous opening scene foreshadows the political disagreements happening during South African apartheid, a period of legally enforced racial segregation during which the play is set. Isabel and Thami’s debate over the differences between men and women is a clear parallel to the central debate in apartheid South Africa: whether and how to achieve equality for Black and white people in South Africa. Moreover, the “orderly and regulated” debate format presents one vision of how such political questions should be resolved: through persuasion and respectful deliberation. But the play’s characters (and audience) will soon be forced to ask themselves whether this kind of politics can really succeed outside of the classroom in apartheid-era South Africa.



Thami is clearly confident and popular among his peers. His pride in African tradition reflects his generation’s budding political consciousness and desire to free itself from European rule. But by associating gender equality with European colonialism, he plays into the misleading notion that all African cultures are rooted in ancient traditions and strict social hierarchies, which are stuck in the past. Over the course of the play, the protagonists learn to abandon this assumption as they look forward to the end of apartheid. Instead, they learn to ask a different question: how can Africans build a new culture and society for the future?



Next, it's Isabel's turn to give her closing statement. Unlike Thami, she's serious and intensely focused. She declares that she values African tradition as much as anyone, but traditional gender roles are now holding Africans back. In the 20th century, physical strength doesn't determine people's success anymore, so women can work the same jobs as men. Men and women might differ in intelligence or emotion, she contends, but this doesn't make one superior to the other. In fact, she concludes, the idea that such "differences" justify treating the sexes unequally can easily be applied to oppress "any other 'different' group."

The debate is over, and Mr. M calls for all the students to vote. He reminds them that this vote is a serious responsibility, so they should vote for the stronger arguments, not the person they like better. He repeats the topic of debate: because of "essential physical and psychological differences," men and women should follow different syllabi in school. The students vote 17 in favor and 24 against. Mr. M congratulates Isabel on her win, and Thami compliments her for her closing statement. She explains that Thami's arguments infuriated her—it almost seemed like he really believed in them. Thami responds that he *does* believe in them, which shocks Isabel.

Mr. M is delighted to see Thami and Isabel continue to debate, and he praises Isabel for her great achievement: she's debating at Thami's school, where he's one of the most popular students. He also praises the audience for voting impartially and listening attentively, and he thanks Isabel for coming to debate. He has to go to a staff meeting, so he leaves Thami and Isabel alone to pack up their things.

Isabel says that Mr. Myalatya is a great teacher—she says his name slowly and asks Thami if she pronounced it right. She did, Thami says, but everyone just calls him Mr. M. Thami. He and Isabel awkwardly agree that they both enjoyed the debate, even though neither of them expected to. Isabel gets Thami to admit that he's never debated a girl—and a white girl, at that. Thami tells Isabel that she debated well, and she explains that she strongly believes in her arguments.

Despite pointing out her respect for African tradition, Isabel accepts Thami's assumption that gender inequality is in accordance with African tradition, while equal rights is in accordance with European modernity. Moreover, her discussion of men and women's jobs shows that she views the world in a narrow way because of her privilege: she is talking about the jobs that middle-class white people do in South Africa, not the jobs that the debate's Black audience members will be forced into under the apartheid system. However, by mentioning how "differences" can justify unequal treatment, she also points out the connection between the classroom debate over gender inequality and the nationwide reckoning with apartheid. Here, she cites the idea that apparent differences between two groups don't justify treating those groups unequally in society. This is the fundamental principle behind the anti-apartheid struggle, which contends that South Africa's different racial and ethnic groups should be equal despite their social and cultural differences.



By voting for Isabel in the debate, the high school students affirm their commitment to equality. It's significant that the debate is specifically about the curriculum that should be taught in schools, as it speaks to how education plays a central role in students' formation as citizens. The curricula they study will help determine which values they carry into adulthood.



The audience's decision suggests that, even in a divided society like apartheid South Africa, people can choose their political ideas based on open dialogue and logical reasoning rather than political ideology. By setting up this debate, Mr. M has given his students a model for how political discussions and decision-making should happen in a free society more broadly.



At this time, due to racial segregation under apartheid, it wasn't common for Black or white South Africans to interact with people of other races. This explains why Thami and Isabel are uncomfortable around each other at first. Nevertheless, they begin to bond (albeit awkwardly) because of their respectful curiosity about one another. They are clearly interested in overcoming the racial line that separates them.



Isabel says that the debaters at her school are too polite and matter-of-fact, so she loved debating at Thami's school, where everyone was enthusiastic and the whole event "was a riot!" Thami jokes that she shouldn't say "riot" in his Black township, since the "police start shooting as soon as they hear it," and Isabel apologizes—but Thami breaks out in laughter and explains that he was joking. Isabel is surprised that he'd joke about something like police violence, but he assures her that "we joke about everything." He says she should tell her family that she had a great time at a riot in a township, and Isabel comments that her parents have no sense of humor at all.

Isabel tells Thami that her family runs the town pharmacy. They're an ordinary "happy family," except for the fact that she disagrees with them about everything. She says that Thami can ask her anything he wants about her life—she starts by explaining that she wants to be a writer and likes hockey. Thami asks what Isabel had for breakfast, and she describes the bowl of oatmeal that Auntie, the family's maid, prepared her that morning. Thami says that she must be a writer, since he's hungry just listening to her description.

Next, Isabel asks Thami about his family, the Mbikwanas. He jokes that they're average, hardworking Black people, and he's the family's 100,000th generation. His parents work in Cape Town, and he's living in the country with his grandmother and sister while he goes to school. He jokes that it's safer than "the big city" and starts laughing.

Now more comfortable, Isabel goes through the names on Thami's class roster and sits down at his wooden desk. She notices that other names are carved into it, but not his. Thami explains that he doesn't want to leave any trace of himself at school. Isabel is surprised—she admits that school's been pretty fun and straightforward for her, but she imagines that it's easy for Thami, too. He says that he used to love school, but then "everything changed." Now, he's counting the days till it's over, even though he doesn't know what he'll do afterwards.

Thami's joke about the word "riot" is a reference to the play's political context—it takes place during the growing militant protest movement against apartheid, which the police are violently suppressing. By depicting Thami and Isabel joking about such a serious matter, the play shows that their friendship transcends political divisions. In other words, they can both comfortably acknowledge what is happening in South Africa without assuming that they will be on opposite sides just because Thami is Black and Isabel is white.



Isabel feels like her life is perfectly ordinary, but she doesn't fully recognize how her many privileges (as a white person under apartheid) make her life far easier than Thami's. For instance, the Black maid, "Auntie," takes care of Isabel's daily needs. Although Isabel and her family call Auntie by an affectionate, familial-sounding nickname, it can also be read as somewhat condescending, since Auntie isn't really a part of their family. Isabel doesn't seem to recognize that the racial divide between her family and Auntie means that there's a significant power imbalance between them. This reflects how the apartheid system both exploits Black people for white people's benefit and blinds white people to the humanity of the Black people they exploit.



If Isabel's family life is typical for white South Africans, then Thami's is typical for Black South Africans. Their budding friendship therefore represents the kind of bond that could form between any white and Black youths in South Africa, if they weren't thwarted by segregation.



The names carved into the desk represent other students' commitment to school. Thami's ambivalence about school reveals that he does not value education in the same way that Isabel does. Namely, while Isabel takes education for granted as a normal part of any child's growth and development, Thami no longer views it this way. His comment that he enjoyed school until "everything changed" implies that he now views education as part of South Africa's broader social and political system, which advantages white people by oppressing Black people.



Isabel comments that she's planning to get a journalism degree and points out that Mr. M seems to have high hopes for Thami. But Thami insists that he will never follow Mr. M's advice. He complains that Mr. M wants to make decisions for him but doesn't care what he wants or thinks. Isabel admits that adults have done the same to her. She says she's going to report on their debate for her school newspaper. Thami is impressed that her school has a newspaper, and he gives her a copy of his speech. Although they clearly want to keep talking, Mr. M's bell rings, signaling that it's time to go.

Thami implies that his dissatisfaction with school is connected to his disagreement with Mr. M, who represents the very institutions that Thami wants to reject. Still, despite all their differences, Thami and Isabel bond over a common experience: as they come of age, they want to define their futures for themselves. In fact, this experience also serves as a metaphor for South Africa's predicament in general, as the country is looking ahead to the future possibility of a democratic government that represents all of its people.



ACT 1, SCENE 2

In a monologue, Isabel describes Brakwater, the Black township on the outskirts of town, where Thami lives. The town's white residents just call it "the location" and consider it an undesirable eyesore. While the town is full of well-maintained old buildings like Isabel's family's shop, "the location" is full of corrugated metal shacks, potholes, and trash. Isabel remembers visiting and imagining living there—like her family's maid, Auntie, who shares a two-room shack with eight family members. Isabel says that she's lucky to be white.

Apartheid has divided Isabel and Thami's city in two: the best services, buildings, and infrastructure are reserved for white people, while Black people are forced to live in a slum. Notably, white residents like Isabel do not think critically about this arrangement, even though it's specifically designed to benefit them. This is largely because they rarely visit. Isabel understands that Black South Africans live in far worse conditions, but she cannot fully conceptualize what their lives are like. So, when she remarks that she's lucky to be white, this suggests that she sees the division in South African society but does not yet understand where it comes from or what it's like to be a non-white person under apartheid.



Isabel explains that she went to Brakwater after her school principal invited her to an inter-school debate there. She and her two teammates were excited for the debates, which they saw as a "pioneering" mission, and reminded themselves to use simple language, because English isn't the Black students' native language. She was astonished to debate in such a "bleak, depressing, dingy classroom," and although she was uncomfortable there, she was confident in her debating skills and excited to show the Black kids how to do it well.

Before attending the debate, Isabel assumed that she would naturally be a better debater. She viewed the debate as a "pioneering mission," language invokes the European colonization that Thami referenced in the previous act. Isabel expected to be teaching the Black students, not learning from them. Of course, she thought that she would be superior simply because she is white, and the other students would be worse debaters because they are Black. This shows how white supremacist ideas were considered common sense for many white South Africans—after all, white supremacy was the apartheid government's explicit ideology. Meanwhile, Isabel's surprise at the "bleak, depressing, dingy classroom" where the debate was held further speaks to the idea that within apartheid South Africa, white people tend to be somewhat ignorant of the poor living conditions that non-white people are expected to endure.



But when Isabel got up to speak and looked out the audience, she explains, she realized that they weren't there to celebrate her generosity: they were there to judge her arguments, "on the basis of total equality." This was the first time Isabel ever interacted with Black people as equals. Like most white South Africans, she knows some Black people—like Auntie, her maid, and Samuel, the deliveryman for the pharmacy—but in Brakwater, she was in "their world" as an outsider for the first time. She felt horribly "exposed!" Although she started off shakily, her teammates assured her that she finished strong. Indeed, during her opening address, she realized that speaking to this new audience let her see herself in a new light.

Isabel concludes that this was a transformative experience for her: it showed her "a new world" that she hadn't realized was there. She used to see the location as her town's "embarrassing backyard," but now she sees that it's "a whole world of its own." It's an amazing realization, but it's also unsettling, because it means there's so much more to the universe than the place where she grows up. Isabel is eager to get to know more of it.

Through interacting with Black people "on the basis of total equality," Isabel realized that her earlier assumptions were totally wrong: white and Black people really are equal. This revelation came about easily after she debated with Thami and spoke with him briefly, which shows how easy it is for people to recognize one another's equality and form genuine connections when they're given the chance to collaborate and socialize across racial lines. In turn, this helps explain why the apartheid system is so obsessed with enforcing social divisions: this prevents white South Africans from joining other groups' fight for equality and democracy.



Rather than looking down on Brakwater as an insignificant and shameful "backyard" to the main town, Isabel now sees it from its residents' perspective. "The location" is "a whole world of its own," and it's a dignified place that's just as important as her own neighborhood. This transformation in her perspective shows that Isabel is starting to empathize with Black people and recognize the injustices they face under apartheid.



ACT 1, SCENE 3

Mr. Mylatya comes onstage and surprises Isabel, whom he calls "Miss Dyson." He's been looking everywhere for her, and he's delighted that Isabel knows to call him "Mr. M"—he says that she's like part of his "extended family" of students. She asks him to just call her "Isabel," and he asks if she would be interested in visiting his school again. Isabel gladly accepts and explains that she enjoyed the last debate because both she and the audience got to be a little "unruly."

Mr. M proposes that Isabel and Thami should work together as a team, because it was "a waste" to watch them fight each other. He comments that his job is full of such wastes: he constantly watches his curious young students stagnate and fail because of "this country's lunacy." He explains that he has proposed that Thami and Isabel enter an upcoming quiz tournament about English literature as an inter-school team. Isabel enthusiastically agrees; Mr. M warns her that it won't be easy, but she doesn't mind. Mr. M is delighted, too—he wasn't sure what she would say, and he definitely didn't expect such a positive response.

The informal rapport between Isabel (who's white) and Mr. M (who's black) shows that they manage to understand and respect each other across South Africa's racial divide. By treating his students as a metaphorical "extended family," Mr. M shows that he feels responsible for their development and accomplishments. This is why he views teaching as inherently political: it allows him to influence South Africa's future by shaping its youth.



At the same time as Mr. M feels responsible for his students' fate, he is distraught to watch the "lunacy" of apartheid deprive them of opportunities and waste their potential. He sees the literature quiz competition as a way to help Thami succeed, because it's one of the few realms in which racism won't stop him. Isabel and Thami's collaboration for the quiz competition is also a metaphor for the way Black and white South Africans have to work together to overcome apartheid and build a better future for their country.



Mr. M asks why the debate mattered so much to Isabel, and she explains that it allowed her to meet Black people in a way she never could otherwise. In fact, people like her mother have never met Black people as equals, so they're frightened of the idea. Isabel admits that she was apprehensive about visiting the location at first, but her friendly conversation with Thami changed all that. Mr. M concludes that "knowledge has banished fear," and he's overjoyed.

Isabel asks Mr. M about the literature competition, and he explains that the winning schools will get 5,000 Rand for books. She asks if he's asked Thami yet, but Mr. M says he plans to tell Thami what to do, because he's "an old-fashioned traditionalist" about education. Isabel says this seems "dictatorial," but Mr. M explains that Black African people emphasize respect for authority more than white people do.

Isabel asks if Thami is Mr. M's favorite student, and Mr. M jokes that it's unfair to pick favorites but then confirms Isabel's hunch. He explains that Thami is eager to learn and endlessly curious—he's clearly "a born leader" who can help change South Africa for the better. In fact, Mr. M hopes that the quiz competition will help Thami get a university scholarship. Isabel loves this idea, and Mr. M is happy to see her enthusiasm. He says that they'll start preparing for the competition next week.

ACT 1, SCENE 4

In a monologue, Mr. M quotes Confucius, who said that the love for knowledge led him to forget food, sadness, and even old age. But Mr. M jokes that he hasn't managed to forget these things and might be the only Black Confucian around. He reads and rereads a short book about Confucius, who is full of wisdom. For instance, in old age, Confucius told his disciples that "he could do whatever his heart prompted" without acting immorally, and Mr. M thinks it would be amazing to live like that, with freedom and a clear conscience.

Through meeting Thami and Mr. M, Isabel realized that her previous assumptions about Black people were wrong—there's nothing inherently inferior about them. Mr. M's proclamation that "knowledge has banished fear" reflects both the way that education can transform people's lives and the way that overcoming social divisions can actually be as simple as meeting people from another group.



Mr. M's "traditionalist" (or "dictatorial") attitude toward Thami contrasts with his deference and respect for Isabel. While Mr. M chalks this up to African tradition, it also clearly has to do with the fact that Isabel is white and therefore has considerable power over him in apartheid South Africa, despite being much younger than him.



Mr. M has deep faith in Thami's potential and views the quiz competition as a way for him to fulfill that potential. Nevertheless, Mr. M strongly believes that he knows what's best for Thami, even if Thami is likely to disagree. Mr. M specifically hopes that Thami can become a leader through powerful institutions like universities, even though these institutions' place in South African society is up for debate during the anti-apartheid movement.



Mr. M hopes that he can inspire young people through education in the same way that his unlikely role model, the Chinese philosopher Confucius, has inspired him to pursue wisdom and moral perfection. At the same time, Mr. M recognizes that he falls short of Confucius's ideal. This shows that Mr. M recognizes his own limitations and views education and self-improvement as lifelong processes.



Every day in the location, Mr. M sees things so horrible that the newspapers can't even print them. Because of the brutal violence and hardship he sees, he can't totally trust his instincts, unlike Confucius. Mr. M's heart is like a zoo fully of unruly animals, including hate, despair, and especially hope, which he only keeps alive by teaching. Sometimes, he feels like he's sacrificing young people to feed this monstrous hope. He's 57 and unmarried, and he lives out of a tiny room in the Reverend's house. His entire life takes place between this room and the school—he's constantly rushing back and forth between them, because when it comes to making history, there's no time to waste.

South Africa's political situation is the key force holding Mr. M back: he finds it difficult to stay morally pure and optimistic when he sees injustice all around him every day. In fact, this speaks to the broader question of how South Africans can imagine and build a democratic future after suffering brutal white supremacist rule for centuries, under colonial empires and then the apartheid government. Because Mr. M dedicates all his time and energy to teaching, he feels that he has to maintain hope, even if it's unrealistic or counterproductive. Otherwise, his life would lose its purpose.



ACT 1, SCENE 5

Isabel is exhausted after a hockey match and arrives late to her meeting with Mr. M. Her team lost badly, and she admits that she's a sore loser—she almost wanted to hit one of her teammates for being too slow. She asks if Mr. M has any advice, but he says that he's also a bad loser and would love to hit some people with a hockey stick. He jokes that it's because he's unmarried and isn't used to compromising. Isabel says that, unlike them, Thami is a good loser. She reports that they've become good friends over the last few weeks, but she thinks Mr. M should give Thami the freedom to speak his mind and treat him more like an equal.

In suggesting that Mr. M treat Thami with more respect, Isabel clearly recognizes that Thami no longer agrees with Mr. M's judgment about what is best for him. She sees Mr. M treating her like an equal, so she thinks he ought to treat Thami the same way—after all, she and Thami have developed a friendship as equals. But, in reality, Mr. M has to account for the fact that Thami is Black and Isabel is white—which means that freedom and success in South African society will look different for each of them.



Mr. M asks Isabel if she thinks Thami is happy with his life, because he's not always totally forthcoming. Isabel says that Thami seems to be happy but has problems, like anyone else. Mr. M asks about these problems, since he worries that there's trouble brewing in the location and that Thami might be getting involved. He asks if Isabel has heard anything about this from Thami, and she's shocked—she says that, even if she knew, she wouldn't tell Mr. M because that would mean betraying Thami. Mr. M apologizes for the reckless question.

Mr. M's lack of insight into Thami's life shows how their disagreements have driven them apart: Thami no longer trusts Mr. M, even though Mr. M still cares dearly about Thami and wants the best for him. Still, Isabel points out that Thami is now old enough to make his own decisions, and Mr. M confronts the limits of his power as an educator.



Thami comes onstage with his sports gear. Like Isabel, he also lost his match. However, he's proud of his team's effort and thinks they just need some practice. Isabel announces that she was right: Thami is a good loser. They banter back and forth a bit; they're clearly good friends now.

Isabel's prediction about Thami's reaction to losing the match shows that they really seem to understand each other. Indeed, their rapport with each other further shows that they have built a genuine friendship on the basis of equality.



It's time to start preparing for the competition. Thami holds a stone behind his back, and Isabel correctly guesses which hand it's in, so she gets to ask the first question. She quizzes Thami on the English Lake Poets—Wordsworth, Southey, and Coleridge—and has him recite a verse from each. But he forgets Southey's poetry and doesn't know which of them was expelled from school. Mr. M keeps score: Isabel is ahead, three to two.

Now, it's Thami's turn to ask the questions. He asks Isabel to identify the poet with deformed feet who died in a war in Greece—she knows it's Lord Byron, but she can't remember his or his wife's full names, nor his father's profession, nor which poet carved his name into a rock. Thami's now ahead six to four, but it's Isabel's turn to ask the questions again. She asks three questions about Shelley, but Thami gets them all right. He reveals that he spent all night studying Byron and Shelley, so Isabel starts asking him about Keats instead. Thami doesn't know Keats's profession or epitaph, so Isabel gets two more points.

Mr. M asks Thami and Isabel to start focusing on actual poems. They take turns quoting from John Masefield's "Sea Fever" and then Shelley's "Ozymandias." Both of them know all the lines by heart. Isabel points out that the statue Shelley describes in "Ozymandias" is real but fell long ago. Thami remembers that, in the illustrated Bible he read as a child, thousands of slaves worked for the pharaohs, who were guarded by just a few soldiers. Isabel jokingly asks if he's insinuating that they rebelled. Thami replies that "we" have some pharaohs to take down, too. When Mr. M asks who "we" is, Thami clarifies that it's "The People," which includes everyone who identifies with the fight for freedom.

It's significant that, although they're in South Africa, Isabel and Thami have to study English literature. This reflects the apartheid education system's bias toward European culture: it teaches South Africans the history and literature of the people who colonized them, rather than their own. By teaching them that all significant cultural and historical achievements came from Europe, this education system encouraged Black South Africans to devalue their own history. This is why, in many ways, the apartheid education system contributed to racist oppression rather than helping students resist it.



Isabel and Thami have to memorize seemingly irrelevant details about dead poets' lives, which underlines how the apartheid education system is totally out of touch with its students' actual interests and concerns. The quiz competition presents education as a game of accumulating trivia that's divorced from the current social and political climate in South Africa. If education is going to help transform young people's lives, as Mr. M hopes, students have to learn things that are relevant to their actual experiences, cultural traditions, and histories.



The poem "Ozymandias" is significant, as it's the only work of literature Thami and Isabel study that actually discusses Africa. However, it presents Egypt from the perspective of a British explorer, which shows how the quiz competition—like the South African education system more broadly—is oriented around a European perspective. By implicitly suggesting that Europe's culture and history are superior to Africa's, this dominant perspective supports the apartheid government's claim to power. But Thami clearly sees history where the poem only sees beauty. By pointing out how the pharaohs built their statues using slave labor and connecting this to modern South Africa, he points out how both Shelley's poem and South African politics hide the oppression that they're fundamentally based on.



While Mr. M insists that he's one of "The People" who desperately want freedom, he argues that knocking down statues is a distraction from the real fight for freedom. He proposes that Black South Africans can put up their own statues, but Thami thinks that white people would tear them down. Mr. M furiously interrupts Thami and tells him to pick a better strategy to fight for freedom. Thami reluctantly agrees, and then Isabel intervenes and directs the conversation back to literature. Mr. M has to go, but he asks Isabel and Thami to make a list of 20 novelists while he's gone. Before he leaves, Isabel invites him and Thami to visit her house and have tea with her family. Mr. M accepts on both his and Thami's behalf, and then he leaves.

Isabel promises Thami that her parents will treat him well, but he is bitter at Mr. M for answering in his place. Isabel again asks Thami whether *he* wants to meet her family for tea. He asks if her family is nervous about her friendship with him, but Isabel promises that they sincerely want to meet him. She also laments that she always has to worry about accidentally setting off a conflict between Thami and Mr. M and asks what's been going on lately. Thami says that there's been nothing unusual, but Isabel knows there's something wrong—she can tell from the way Thami and Mr. M look at each other.

Thami admits that he thinks Mr. M has no idea what other Black people are experiencing or what South Africa is going through. The people are demanding change now, but Mr. M is too "old-fashioned." He views protests as lawlessness, and he seems to believe that white people will suddenly "wake up" one day and decide to give Black people freedom. Isabel asks if her and Thami's partnership in the literature competition is one of Mr. M's "old-fashioned ideas." Thami initially avoids the question but then admits that it might be, although their friendship is definitely genuine. Isabel implores him to talk to Mr. M, even though it might go against the norm of about obeying authority. She worries that Mr. M views his investment in Thami and the literature competition as his career's "crowning achievement," so he should understand Thami's real beliefs.

In this section, the play's audience finally learns what Thami and Mr. M disagree so adamantly about. Thami strongly supports the militant anti-apartheid movement that is fighting for Black political and economic power in South Africa. In contrast, Mr. M believes that it's possible for Black people to gain power without threatening the existing white establishment. Despite his emphasis on reason and persuasion, then Mr. M hypocritically refuses to even tolerate Thami's viewpoint. This suggests that Mr. M's real motivation for defending a slower, more peaceful form of political change might be something else entirely. For instance, it might concern his need to justify becoming a teacher.



Isabel gets caught between Thami and Mr. M and struggles to remain loyal to both of them. Indeed, the play implies that she might have to choose between them in the future. She now sees that Mr. M disrespects Thami's choices, but she does not yet understand why their discussion of statues, pharaohs, and oppression is so timely. In other words, she does not fully understand the political situation underpinning the anti-apartheid movement.



Thami thinks that Mr. M fails to understand the desperation that other Black South Africans face because of his comfortable job and his dogmatic commitment to education. According to Thami, Mr. M thinks that even South Africa's oppressive apartheid government will eventually "wake up," listen to reason, and turn itself into a democracy. By extension, he thinks that promising young people like Thami can change South Africa by getting an education and persuading the government to change. But Thami thinks that Mr. M's hope is false and counterproductive. Where Mr. M has faith in ideas, Thami he sees politics as fundamentally about power, because he recognizes that the apartheid government has never conceded to Black people's demands for equality.



Thami yells at Isabel to leave him alone but then calms down and explains that his disagreement with Mr. M isn't just personal. It's also about Mr. M's decision to join the school system, which is part of South Africa's oppressive apartheid government. Isabel understands what Thami is saying, but she still asks him to talk to Mr. M because she thinks it's important for them to reconcile. However, Thami doesn't care, and he tells Isabel to stop giving him advice. Upset, she apologizes and promises to stay out of Thami and Mr. M's conflict in the future. Before she gets up to leave she tells Thami that she cares deeply about their friendship—but they should only use that word if they're willing to be totally honest with each other.

Mr. M became a teacher because he hoped to help young people achieve their potential, but Thami thinks that Mr. M actually ends up undermining this potential. This is because Mr. M feeds his students false hope and teaches them a biased, oppressive curriculum. Accordingly, because Mr. M had the wrong theory of how political change should work, he ended up worsening the problem rather than helping to resolve it. Thami's impassioned reactions show that he cares deeply about South Africa's political situation and views his own future as closely tied to that of his country. But Isabel's insistence that their friendship is genuine and based on honesty shows that she doesn't want to let the political situation come between them, as it has come between Thami and Mr. M.



ACT 1, SCENE 6

In a monologue, Thami sings a song in Xhosa, his native language, about going to school and hearing the bell ring. When he was seven, he used to sing this song on his way to school in the morning. He loved school so much that he would show up early. When he was 10, he wrote his life story for an assignment, and the teacher was so impressed that she asked him to read it for the entire school. In his composition, he promised to work hard in school, become a doctor, and treat Black people for free.

In his earliest memories, Thami felt a strong sense of belonging and responsibility to his community—including both his ethnic group and the broader racial community of Black South Africans. Like Mr. M, Thami used to see education as the key to advancing in life, fulfilling his potential, and uplifting his people. He defined success as academic and professional accomplishment within South Africa's existing institutions, but he also thought that this individual success was the best way to help his community.



In the eight years since, Thami admits, he gave up on becoming a doctor because he realized that Black people need freedom, not medicine. He thinks it's unfair for Black people to want to succeed in a society that “doesn't allow the majority of our people any dreams at all.” He no longer trusts the educators who promise that he'll succeed by doing well in school.

Thami's mindset shifted when he decided that changing South African society was more important than succeeding within it. First, he decided that Black people needed to act collectively rather than individually. And second, he realized that, if he did succeed, this would still be at the expense of other Black people who never got the same opportunities as him. He now sees the school system as part of the broader oppressive structure that maintains apartheid and prevents Black people from pursuing their dreams.



Every year, the regional Bantu Schools inspector Oom Dawie visits Zolile High School to give a speech. This year, he promised the students that they were going to join the elite, and all of South Africa's people were going to “share” in the country's “future.” But Thami wonders what future he's talking about; the best students he knows who have graduated and are working humiliating jobs for white people in order to survive. Everybody can see the stark inequality between white and Black South Africans, so Oom Dawie is talking as though Black people are either blind or stupid.

Oom Dawie's rhetoric about the future is similar to the dangerous sense of hope that Mr. M talked about in his monologue. However, Thami points out that both men seem unrealistic and out of touch with Black people's reality. In fact, Thami sees Oom Dawie's promise as a manipulative lie, designed to convince Black people to buy into a system that oppresses them. Mr. M's decision to become a public school teacher is an example of this mistake.



Thami no longer cares to learn what they want to teach him in school. While schools teach him the history of colonization in South Africa, Thami thinks that the truly important events in South Africa's history are the Congress of the People in Kliptown in 1955, the Sharpeville massacre in 1960, and the Soweto uprising in 1976. But South Africans won't learn this history in classrooms—to learn their own history, they have to teach each other in their homes, neighborhoods, and workplaces. Thami cries out, "AMANDLA!" ("power!").

Where Oom Dawie and Mr. M's sense of hope is too blind and idealistic, Thami offers a more realistic alternative. While Mr. M believes in knowledge, Thami believes in power. Thami's sense of hope is based on his faith in the anti-apartheid movement's commitment to changing society and his knowledge of history. But he has learned this history from his community, not from the school system, which has failed him by teaching him about his country from someone else's perspective. This shows that education can transform students only when it centers their own perspectives.



ACT 2, SCENE 1

Isabel and Thami are studying for their literature quiz competition. Isabel starts telling Thami about the short biographies she's prepared of various English writers, but she soon realizes that Thami isn't listening. He says that he needs to talk, but he doesn't know how to start. He doesn't want to mislead Isabel or make her feel like he's blaming her for anything—but he has a problem. Isabel tells him to just tell her what's going on, and she guesses that he's quitting the competition. He says yes, and she admits that she was kind of expecting it. She explains that even she is starting to see the institutionalized oppression in South African society and understand how it has taught her to look down on Black people.

The English literature quiz competition becomes less and less relevant to the real issues that Isabel and Thami face in their daily lives. Their true education appears to be happening elsewhere. For instance, since befriending Thami and Mr. M, Isabel has started seriously reflecting on the world around her, and she has realized how apartheid benefits white people like her at Black people's expense. She now understands why politics seems far more urgent than school does for Thami.



Isabel asks how Thami plans to tell Mr. M about his decision to quit the competition, but he says Mr. M won't have a choice. She asks if he's at least willing to have a conversation with her about it, but he says there's nothing to talk about, since everyone knows what's happening. She calls it "unrest," but he calls it "Isiqalo," or "The Beginning." Isabel asks what this has to do with poetry. Thami explains that the community (led by a group called the Comrades) has decided to go on strike and boycott the school. Mr. M doesn't know yet—he wasn't invited to the meeting—and nobody knows how long the boycott will last. Isabel asks if she and Thami will be able to eventually continue with the competition, but Thami refuses to answer.

Even though Isabel has started to understand how apartheid oppresses Black people, she and Thami still view the growing riots in Brakwater from entirely different perspectives. While Isabel's white community sees them as "unrest," or a bothersome challenge to the status quo, Thami's Black community sees the riots as "The Beginning" of a longer fight for power, freedom, and democracy. The Comrades associate schools with the apartheid government, which explains why they are boycotting them. Namely, the school system is one arm of the government's campaign to brainwash the population and subjugate Black people.



Isabel also asks if she and Thami can at least stay friends, but he doesn't respond. She realizes that their friendship must have just been one of Mr. M's "old-fashioned idea[s]." At first, she tells Thami that he can go ahead and leave, but then she yells for him to come back. She knows that her race is probably the issue, but she just doesn't understand why they can't stay friends. Thami explains that he doesn't personally see any problems with their friendship, but word will get around in the community (for instance, through Isabel's maid U'sispumla), and it could end badly for him. The Comrades have agreed not to mix with white people for the time being.

Isabel asks whether Thami is really fighting for freedom by letting the Comrades tell him what to do. But just at that moment, Mr. M walks in. He's calm and solemn, unlike in the past, and he's been listening in on Isabel and Thami's conversation. He tells Isabel to repeat her question to Thami, but she refuses, so he asks Thami directly. Thami explains that the Comrades' temporary policy against meeting white people is about discipline. The government is taking away Black people's freedom, he says, not the Comrades. And one way it's doing so is by giving Black people a low-quality education. Mr. M agrees—in fact, he declares that he hates teaching the government's Bantu Education curriculum and actively tries to sabotage it in the classroom.

Mr. M explains that he always wanted to help young students learn to think for themselves and resist the government, so Thami's rebelliousness is a sign that he has succeeded. But Thami insists that Mr. M didn't teach him anything: he really learned to think from the people in his community, not from school, and he has no need for "big English words." Mr. M disagrees—he says that words are "magical." They're all that give people true power and separates them from animals. Rocks and bombs can't stop an armored tank, Mr. M argues, but words can persuade its driver to switch sides.

Isabel is devastated to think that her friendship with Thami might have been a charade put on by Mr. M. When she considers this possibility, the real question she's grappling with is whether she and Thami could ever form a real friendship, given the racial segregation and volatile political situation in South Africa. Fortunately, Thami affirms that their friendship was always real, as it was based on their genuine curiosity and interest rather than an ulterior motive. In other words, while apartheid could not prevent Thami and Isabel from bonding as friends and equals, it nevertheless tears them apart out of political necessity.



Thami and Mr. M's confrontation brings out their opposite views of the education system: Thami views it as primarily a source of oppression and Mr. M sees it as primarily a source of liberation. Both of them have to compromise certain principles for the sake of their loyalty to the greater good. Mr. M recognizes that the government curriculum is oppressive, but he teaches it because he believes that he can help his students anyway. Similarly, Thami stays politically loyal to the Comrades, even though they're imperfect and force him to sacrifice his personal loyalty to a beloved friend.



Although Mr. M and Thami agree that the apartheid education system is oppressive, Mr. M still thinks that it's possible to advance the cause of equality and justice from within that system. This is because, while the content of the government curriculum may have been oppressive, the skills that students can learn through education—critical thinking and analysis—will serve them throughout their lives, in a variety of contexts. If words are "magical," then education is a way to capture this magic. Mr. M also points out a clear problem with the Comrades' strategy: while violence can directly target the apartheid government, its scope is limited, and it quickly fades. In contrast, words can travel across space and time, multiplying their influence in the process. While Black freedom fighters are badly outmatched in terms of weapons, they are nonetheless white people's equals in terms of reason and persuasion. This is why Mr. M so desperately wants Thami to go to college: he doesn't just think that nonviolent protest is better than violent revolt, but he also thinks that it's the only effective way to change society.



Mr. M asks Thami to convince his classmates to come to school despite the planned boycott, but Thami refuses: his peers made a deliberate, informed decision. Mr. M reveals that the government is asking him to make a list of the students who boycott school. They won't be allowed to re-enroll, and he doesn't want Thami on the list. Thami asks if Mr. M will really make the list, but Mr. M refuses to answer, so Thami says that he also has no obligation to answer Mr. M's questions.

Mr. M's dilemma is similar to Thami's choice between his friendship with Isabel and his commitment to the protest movement. When the government asks Mr. M to collaborate with its policing efforts, he has to choose between protecting his beloved students or standing by his ethical commitment to nonviolent political methods. In turn, if he collaborates with the government, then students really will lose the chance to receive an education if they choose to participate in the protests. In theory, none of these dilemmas have to exist in the first place: where it not for apartheid, Thami and Isabel could remain friends while Thami protests, the students could attend school and go the protests, and Mr. M could defend his students by staying silent. But the tragedy in this play is, because of the political context, the characters are forced to make these difficult moral decisions between two options that wouldn't otherwise conflict.



Mr. M explodes and screams that Thami is “a very, very silly boy” for giving up his chance at an education. Before Thami goes, he tells Mr. M that the neighborhood considers him a sellout and traitor who does the government's bidding. Thami even tried to defend him. But now, Thami says, Mr. M can make his list and put Thami on top of it. He walks out. Isabel then yells, “this fucking country!” and also exits the scene.

This scene's dramatic conclusion shows how politics finally tears Thami, Mr. M, and Isabel apart. The play's three protagonists are all selfless and well-intentioned—they all want to dedicate their lives to serving their communities, including one another. But because of Thami and Mr. M's disagreement—which leaves Isabel caught in the middle—the three protagonists are tragically torn apart.



ACT 2, SCENE 2

Hopeless and alone, Mr. M monologues about the “nightmare” of trying to get from his home to the school during the riots. All the possible routes were blocked by policemen and protestors, so he couldn't make it. Instead, he started wandering the area, watching cars and buildings burn while the police chased after children.

When the community starts protesting, Mr. M's worst fears come true and Brakwater descends into violence. He considers this violence a “nightmare” because it overturns the orderly routine that gives his life meaning: his daily commute between home and school. This violence shows that he has not been able to convince his community that education and persuasion are the best ways to improve society.



Mr. M passed a young student writing on the wall: “Liberation First, Then Education.” The student even asked Mr. M if he spelled the words correctly. Mr. M saw children packed into a police van—they called out to him, too, and asked him to contact their parents. Mr. M tried to close his eyes and forget what he was seeing, but he couldn't. Other children started throwing rocks at the police, who fired tear gas back at them. Choking on the gas and clinging to a lamppost, Mr. M told himself he had to “Do something” to “Stop the madness!”

Mr. M views himself as his young students' guide and protector, so he is devastated to see them attacked and arrested by the police. Beyond causing pain and grief, this also suggests that Mr. M has failed to do his job of protecting and empowering his students. In particular, the student's graffiti directly contradicts Mr. M's deep-seated belief that education can help lead to political change on its own. But when the student calls out to Mr. M to check his spelling, this ironically undermines the graffiti's message by pointing out the importance of education.



ACT 2, SCENE 3

Standing alone in his classroom, Mr. M vigorously rings **the school bell** and calls for the children to go to school, “before they kill you.” He reads the names off his class register, including Thami’s, and asks himself if each of his students is still alive. He wonders what he can still teach them: his lessons were designed to prepare them for the world of the living, not the dead. He fears that his “wonderful words” will prove totally useless.

Suddenly, stones break through the classroom window. Distraught, Mr. M concludes that one of his students must be alive. He rings his **bell** and yells out for them to “come to school!” Then, Thami enters. He tells Mr. M not to ring his bell—the Comrades see it as a provocation, because Mr. M is going against the boycott. But Mr. M says that he’ll maintain the school schedule and keep ringing the bell every day, until the world “come[s] to its senses.” Mr. M asks if Thami is at school to learn, but when Thami says no, Mr. M remarks that there’s not much revolutionaries could benefit from learning in school.

Mr. M holds a stone in one hand and his **dictionary** in the other. He declares that the stone is merely one word, whereas the dictionary contains the entire English language, which the great writers Thami and Isabel were studying dedicated their lives to exploring. The dictionary is one of Mr. M’s oldest books, and he tries to give it to Thami, who refuses and explains that he’s coming as a warning. But Mr. M says that he knows and Thami is wasting his time.

Thami explains that he’s not just warning Mr. M about ringing **the school bell**: rather, the townspeople have reported that he’s a police informant, and he’s in imminent danger. The people are planning to burn down the school and kill Mr. M. The only way Mr. M can survive is by publicly apologizing, renouncing his association with the school, and joining the boycott movement. Thami says that he can vouch for Mr. M’s innocence, and the people will believe him. But Mr. M isn’t so sure: he doesn’t think it’s possible to reason with an angry mob.

By ringing his school bell and calling out to his students, Mr. M desperately tries to replicate the sense of order and safety that he used to feel while teaching. He feels that he has failed in his mission to protect his students, and this leads him to question whether his lifelong faith in “wonderful words”—or learning and persuasion as a means to political change—has been misplaced.



Thami tries to intervene and stop Mr. M’s breakdown. As a result of the riots, Thami and Mr. M’s roles are reversed: Mr. M tries but fails to maintain his position of authority, and Thami ends up becoming responsible for his teacher’s safety. This shows that, despite all their conflicts in the past, Thami still cares deeply about Mr. M’s well-being. In fact, Thami and Mr. M’s ability to care for each other despite their disagreements suggests that it’s possible to heal deep political divides, like the one that separates Black and white South Africans.



The stone represents physical force, while the dictionary represents the power of language to incite change. While the rioters choose to attack the apartheid government with violence, Mr. M argues, persuasion is a far more effective and wide-ranging tool, and education is a never-ending and inherently fulfilling pursuit. By refusing the dictionary, however, Thami demonstrates that he has firmly chosen the rioters’ side.



Regardless of whether the rumor about Mr. M being a police informant is true, the community now sees him as an enemy—even though he dedicated his whole life to protecting that same community. By offering to help Mr. M, Thami shows that he understands and appreciates his teacher’s noble intentions. But despite these intentions, Mr. M now has to choose between loyalty to his principles and loyalty to the neighborhood’s people.



Mr. M asks Thami why he's trying to save him, but Thami avoids eye contact and says that the rebels will lose credibility if they harm innocent people. Mr. M apologizes for thinking that Thami wanted to save his teacher. Then, he confesses that his execution wouldn't hurt the cause, because he's guilty: he did go to the police and report the people he thought were responsible for the unrest. He declares that he felt a sense of duty to help stop the lawless unrest—or maybe, he admits, he really just felt lonely and aimless without Thami and was jealous of the Comrades for winning him over. But now he can see that Thami will never forgive him.

Mr. M declares that he would sell his soul for one more lesson with his students, because he dedicated his entire life to teaching. He remembers the moment he started dreaming of it: when he was 10 years old on a school trip, he got out of a bus to take a bathroom break on top of **Wapadsberg Pass** in the mountains. He looked out over the vast Karoo desert and was captivated by its beauty. Ten-year-old Mr. M asked his teacher what he'd find if he walked endlessly North toward the horizon, and the teacher said he would encounter all the rivers, mountain ranges, and peoples of Africa. He asked the teacher he'd seen them all, but the teacher replied that he knew about them from books.

Over the years, Mr. M has also learned all about Africa through books. When he's feeling down, he imagines traversing the whole beautiful continent, starting from **Wapadsberg Pass**. This exercise always made him proud to be African—until something he recently saw on television changed his mind. The news showed a starving Ethiopian man carrying his child's body to a mass grave. Mr. M was furious that the report didn't name the man or the child. He thinks that the man and child represent all Africans, whose lives and potential the world plans to just waste. He exclaims, "my children...my Africa," then reaches out for Thami and says, "My beautiful and proud young Africa!"

More stones break through the classroom's window: a mob has assembled outside. Mr. M tries to leave, but Thami doesn't let him. He says that he'll go tell the mob that Mr. M is innocent, but Mr. M asks why he wants to lie—is it just for his "Cause"? Thami says yes, and Mr. M replies he doesn't need to hide from the truth. He knows he will die, but he's not afraid. He starts to ring his **school bell** as he runs outside, where the mob kills him.

Mr. M presents two alternative explanations for his behavior: first, he might have gone to the police in order to remain consistent with his moral principles, and secondly, he might have simply done it out of pain and jealousy. In fact, these two explanations correspond to Thami and Mr. M's differing views of politics: as a game of power and as a game of principles, respectively. Mr. M might have reported the protest leaders to the police because of an idea (his moral principles), or he might have done so as a way to gain vengeance and enact control (power).



Mr. M's story from his childhood bears a remarkable resemblance to Thami and Isabel's political awakenings. Namely, all three are inspired by learning something new about the world around them. Just as Mr. M learns about Africa from his teacher, Isabel learns about apartheid by visiting Brakwater, and Thami learns about the anti-apartheid movement from people in his neighborhood. In all three cases, learning inspires people when it's relevant to their lives and communities. This is why Mr. M believed in the value of education, but during the anti-apartheid movement, his students were learning far more in the streets than in school.



Mr. M also ties the view from Wapadsberg Pass to his sense of pride as an African person. Namely, he sees Africa as unified in its beauty, potential, and brutal experiences under European colonialism. Like the students who are forced to give up on their dreams, the Ethiopian man ends up nameless and insignificant simply because of the place he was born. The news report further dehumanizes the man by failing to even name him. By reaching out to Thami, Mr. M indicates that he does not want his star student to fall into the same insignificance and irrelevance. He remains hopeful for Thami's—and Africa's—future, even if the past gives him little reason to be optimistic.



In the play's climax, Mr. M rejects Thami's offer of help and willingly faces his own death, whether for the sake of his moral principles or out of rage and despair. On one hand, it's possible that he is not willing to compromise his belief in nonviolence and faith in education in order to cooperate with the mob. On the other, it's also possible that he cannot stand to see Thami and his other students choose the mob over him. As with all the other political actions in this play, the audience must choose between these two competing explanations: principles and power.



ACT 2, SCENE 4

Isabel comes to visit Thami. She is deeply uncomfortable because of the uprising but willing to hear whatever Thami wants to tell her. He says that he wants to say goodbye to her, but she's confused, since he essentially already did, the last time they met three weeks ago. Thami explains that it's different now: he's leaving town.

Isabel anxiously explains that she thought Thami wanted to talk to her about something else, and she pulls out crumpled-up newspaper article that describes the mob burning Mr. M alive. She explains that she can't stop thinking about it and doesn't know how to cope—she even tried to visit the location and figure out what happened, but the police didn't let her in. She just wants to understand why they killed Mr. M, who dedicated his life to the community.

Thami explains that Mr. M was a police informer, and that all the people he named for the police are in jail now. Isabel struggles to believe that this could be true, but Thami reveals that Mr. M told him firsthand. Mr. M only went to the police once, Thami admits, and he was clearly confused and regretted it. At this, Isabel suggests that Mr. M wasn't truly an informer, because he was doing what he thought was right. He didn't deserve to be murdered. Thami tells her to watch her language: he wasn't murdered, since the people killed him in self-defense. Isabel is furious and speechless—she doesn't believe that an angry mob attacking a helpless man could possibly be considered self-defense.

Thami interrupts Isabel and launches into an angry monologue. Killing Mr. M was “blind and stupid,” he argues, but it really was self-defense: Mr. M's testimony has already gotten five people arrested, and more are sure to follow. This is why Thami has to run away: the people don't know that Mr. M only went to the police once. And if a white person betrayed other white people in the same way, they would be found guilty of treason and executed, just like Mr. M. Thami implores Isabel to imagine how Black people feel when they learn that a neighbor has betrayed them to their oppressors. They cannot take him to court—in fact, white people's laws are responsible for turning normal Black people into violent mobs and are therefore also partially responsible for Mr. M's death.

During their tense final meeting, Isabel and Thami struggle to make sense of recent events. Still, they manage to overcome the community's deep division and meet on their own terms. In fact, Thami's decision to say goodbye before leaving town forever suggests that he deeply values his friendship with Isabel and feels that he owes her an explanation.



Isabel saw Mr. M as a role model for how to inspire others and fight for justice, so she's tormented by his death at the hands of the same community he sought to protect. Because of the apartheid laws and the police's violent crackdown in Brakwater, she cannot easily visit the township or learn more about what happened.



Thami recognizes that Mr. M likely made an impulsive decision to go to the police because he couldn't stand watching his beloved Brakwater descend into violence. Nevertheless, the mob made exactly the same kind of impulsive decision in killing Mr. M. While Isabel clearly understands Mr. M's perspective and considers the mob's response obviously unjust, Thami understands both sides of the equation—the community's and Mr. M's. Rather than assigning blame, he sees the situation as the tragic result of two incompatible moral visions clashing: Mr. M's pursuit of order and the mob's pursuit of justice.



Thami doesn't see a contradiction between believing that killing Mr. M was a form of self-defense, on the one hand, and believing that it was wrong and unnecessary, on the other. In a democratic society, mob justice is considered wrong because it's possible for citizens to settle disputes and punish crimes through the law. But in apartheid South Africa, Black people do not have this right, and so they have to use whatever tools are available to them. Accordingly, even though Mr. M considered going to the police as a way of preventing violence, Thami views it as an act of violence against the community.



Isabel tries to speak but hesitates, and Thami pleads with her to speak honestly. She asks where Thami was, and why he didn't stop the mob. He knows that she's really asking if he was part of the mob, and she admits that the thought crossed her mind. Distraught and helpless, she explains that Thami is the only one who understands her love for Mr. M. Thami admits that he did try to warn him, but Mr. M ran into the crowd anyway, maybe because he regretted his actions and knew he would never be able to teach again. Isabel says that she still cannot understand Mr. M's "stupid," senseless death. Thami admits that he also loved Mr. M, despite their conflicts, and regrets never reconciling with him or voicing his appreciation.

Isabel and Thami struggle to understand why Mr. M ran out into the mob. Thami suggests that he did so out of regret, as he realized that his actions contradicted his values. Another possibility is that Mr. M believed so strongly in the value of education and peaceful dissent that he was willing to die for it. Either way, Mr. M's senseless death is an indirect reflection of the apartheid regime's unnecessary violence against Black people. It resembles the way apartheid wastes young people's lives, dreams, and potential. Notably, Thami and Isabel reiterate their love for Mr. M, which suggests that perhaps his death will not go to waste. Namely, by inspiring Thami and Isabel, Mr. M did achieve his mission of shaping South Africa's future—even if he died in the process.



Isabel asks if the police are after Thami, and he says yes. It would be too dangerous to return to his family in Cape Town, so he's leaving South Africa to go "join the movement." Isabel, on the other hand, has no idea what to do or where to go. She called the police and tried to get a burial for Mr. M, but she wasn't able to convince them. Thami suggests that she remember Mr. M by going to the top of **Wapadsberg Pass**, where Mr. M first realized he wanted to teach. He then says goodbye to Isabel in Xhosa, and she replies with the same goodbye, which U'sispumla taught her.

The clash between Thami and Mr. M's political tactics leads to tragic consequences for Thami, too: because Mr. M reported his students to the police, Thami is forced into exile. While Thami can still play a role in the anti-apartheid movement, he ends up forced to sacrifice his plans and potential in South Africa, just as Mr. M predicted. Meanwhile, when Thami and Isabel say goodbye in Xhosa, this shows that Isabel has fundamentally shifted her view of her country: she now sees Black people's languages and cultures as central to South Africa's identity. This reflects the way that South Africans have had to build a new, multi-ethnic, multi-racial concept of national identity in the years after apartheid.



ACT 2, SCENE 5

Alone onstage, Isabel announces that she feels close to Mr. M. She's at the top of **Wapadsberg Pass**, and she knows that Mr. M is somewhere north, beyond the horizon. To pay her last respects to him, she makes a promise rather than bringing flowers. She remembers Mr. M telling her how many people waste their lives, and she promises that she will do everything she can to make her life useful, like Mr. M's. She remembers Mr. M saying that she was "one of [his] children," and she tells him that "the future is still ours."

At Wapadsberg Pass, the place that represented Africa's vast beauty and great promise to Mr. M, Isabel vows to follow in Mr. M's footsteps and strive to fulfill his vision for the future. This shows how, despite his tragic death, Mr. M truly did inspire his "children" and thereby leave a lasting impact on South Africa. Isabel's vow is also a model for how white South Africans can become allies in the nation's fight for racial justice. Finally, her closing line, "the future is still ours," represents the sense of cautious optimism and collective responsibility that young South Africans must adopt in order to help their country successfully transition to democracy.





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