

MY CHILDREN! MY AFRICA!

SUMMARY

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~~My Children! My Africa! Summary~~

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~~Characters~~

~~Anela Myalatya (Mr. M.)~~

Informally known as Mr. M, he is a highly-respected and beloved teacher at Zolile High School in Camdeboo during Apartheid-era South Africa. Mr. M is Thami's favorite teacher (and the latter is his favorite student) and he desperately wants Thami to succeed, but fears that his involvement with a bad crowd will bring him down. As a result, he tries to get Isabel to work with Thami in an interschool literary competition in the hope of landing a scholarship for his favorite student.

~~Thami Mbikwana~~

In apartheid South Africa, to be young, gifted and black is not enough. Mr. M understands this, and so does Thami. Unfortunately, Mr. M thinks the way out is a scholarship, while Thami becomes convinced that words are not enough and so gets involved with an underground group of political activists seeking to meet violence with violence.

~~Isabel Dyson~~

Isabel differs from both Mr. M and Thami in one very significant way: she is white. She also attends Camdeboo High School, which is not just an all-girl school, but also an all-white school. She wins the debate with Thami which opens the play, develops a friendship with him and comes between teacher and student, both of whom she respects, when they enter into conflict with each other over how to deal with the political reaction to apartheid.

~~Play's Summary~~

~~Act I~~

A Bantu classroom at Zolile High School in South Africa, circa 1984. Anela Myalatya is a teacher currently moderating a debate between his student, Thami Mbikwana, and a student from a school in the affluent white neighborhood. The white student, Isabel Dyson, from Cambedoo High School, is declared the winner of the debate, but afterward the two students engage in conversation that results in a blossoming friendship. This stimulates Thami's teacher—known informally as Mr. "M"—to invite Isabel to join along with Thami in an interschool competition for the purpose of revealing that even in Apartheid-era South Africa, people of different races can work together toward a common goal. Of course, there's always the potential for the competition to net Thami a scholarship. Isabel admits that she had been somewhat anxious about how black students might react to a white student at first, but her friendship with Thami has convinced her that she should accept the invitation without worry.

Isabel arrives to prepare for the literature competition, but is questioned by Mr. "M" about the possibility that Thami might be involved in some trouble. Thami arrives before she can answer and as they start to study, it becomes increasingly apparent that their friendship has the potential to develop into something more romantic. When the topic of study veers into the darker and more dangerous waters of politics, Thami gets a dressing down from Mr. "M" for being involved in political protests that aims to vandalize rather than raise serious discourse. Thami clearly resists the suggestion that the vandals should discuss and dispute the injustices moving them to violence rather

than using violence, but manages to keep his temper under cover long enough for Isabel to move things back into the realm of studying for the competition.

Isabel extends an invitation to both of them to meet for tea at her house on Sunday. When the teacher leaves, Thami launches into a tirade against his out-of-touch thinking and old-fashioned ways, asserting that the violent behavior is absolutely necessary in the quest to achieve racial justice. The discussion grows increasingly heated as Isabel suggests that maybe Thami should just try talking with his teacher, and eventually she leaves in a state of heightened agitation.

Act II

While studying with Isabel, Thami announces that he has decided to withdraw from the competition. A planned protest against Bantu academic policies involves boycotting classes the next day. Isabel expresses her hope that they can still remain friends, but Thami is dubious. Mr. "M" shows up trying to get Thami to change his mind about backing out of the competition, but Thami is steadfast in his conviction that words alone are not nearly enough to enact genuine political change. At which point his teacher admits that the police have contacted him about naming names of those planning the boycott. Tensions boil, and everyone leaves under a cloud of anger.

The next day Mr. "M" shows up to a classroom utterly devoid of students. Despite the risk involved with breaking the boycott, Thami shows up with a warning that his comrades have denounced the teacher for naming names and his life may be jeopardy. Thami then tries to convince Mr. "M" now that time is the time to get involved and take action. The response from Mr. "M" is to speak of his love for Africa and to mourn for all the deaths that political disagreement has already caused. Thami tries to physically prevent Mr. "M" from leaving the school, but he does so anyway, and is immediately set upon by a murderous mob of thugs. Thami meets with Isabel to inform her of his plans to leave the country and join the resistance. Isabel admits that she cannot grieve for his murdered teacher. Thami lets her know about a place that the teacher used to visit to feel a sense of serenity and peace; a place that Isabel can go to for mourning without fear. She promises the dead teacher that she will not waste her life.

My Children! My Africa! Themes

Race Theme

Race is the most prominent theme in *My Children! My Africa!*. Athol Fugard is a white South African, and saw the impact of apartheid second-hand through the experiences of his black friends and the black actors in a theater group he worked with. He wrote *My Children! My Africa!* to expose some of the ongoing struggles of apartheid in the 1980s, particularly related to education. Apartheid was a system of segregation laws that kept black South Africans from the spaces and resources to which whites had privileged access. In *My Children! My Africa!*, two of the characters are black, and one is white. Isabel, the white character, initially thinks that the black characters will be grateful to her for visiting their school and will not equal her intelligence and personhood. However, she comes to love both Thami and Mr. M, and recognize through them the way the difficulty and importance of the struggle against apartheid. Thami and Mr. M are both proud of their race and their racial heritage, even if they have different ideologies about what it is necessary for an individual to do to end apartheid.

Education Theme

In South Africa at the time shown in *My Children! My Africa!*, schools for white and black South Africans were completely segregated. This is shown in the play by Isabel and Thami attending different schools, and the fact that Thami did not receive an equal education to Isabel is shown by Isabel's shock and disgust at how simple and dull Thami's school seems. However, the play shows that even black South Africans raised in these segregated areas had the intellect to succeed in

academics and in life, if the government would have allowed them the chance. The subject of teaching and teachers is also very important to the play. All of the characters are either teachers or students, and the traditional relationship between teachers and students is shown through the characters of Thami and Mr. M. Mr. M keeps an emotionally distant relationship and often tells Isabel that he will tell Thami what to do rather than ask him. Secretly, Mr. M tells Isabel that Thami is his favorite student and that his biggest goal, after all his years of teaching, is for Thami to succeed.

~~Loyalty Theme~~

Thami's loyalties to different people are tested throughout the play. At the beginning, Thami's strongest loyalty is perhaps to Mr. M. He does as Mr. M wishes, competing in debate and leading Mr. M to believe that he might go on to higher education. However, he also knows that he must be loyal to himself and his people, and he starts to feel conflicted about the education system set up by the government for black South Africans. Once Isabel enters his life, he is also loyal to her for some time. They practice together for their competition, meeting regularly and supporting one another by researching and studying. However, after some time, he breaks her loyalty as a teammate and friend by quitting the team and saying that he probably cannot see her anymore. His loyalties have been pulled away from both Isabel and Mr. M by his new loyalty to the Comrades and the Cause, which come to dominate his life choices.

~~Friendship Theme~~

The theme of friendship in *My Children! My Africa!* is most salient in the friendship that develops and then falters between Isabel and Thami. Though separated by race and gender, it seems at the beginning of the play that they will beat the odds and form not only a successful team but a friendship, or even a closer relationship. However, when Thami joins the Comrades, they want him to break off any contact with white people, and he must drop off the team and even tells Isabel that they shouldn't see each other at all any more. Isabel tells him, "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" (p.51). One of the questions raised by the play is whether Thami and Isabel's friendship could have worked out, given their many differences and the tense moment in South Africa's history. In any case, because the Comrades believe that friendships between whites and blacks are against the Cause, Thami feels that he has no choice.

~~Politics Theme~~

Some would say that all works of art are political in nature. However, some pieces of literature are written with the explicit purpose of challenging people's political views and awareness of political issues. *My Children! My Africa!* is an example of such a play. Athol Fugard wrote the play based on the experiences of black people he knew and his daughter's experience growing up as a white woman during apartheid. The play asks about the individual's responsibility in relation to questions of social justice. Mr. M believes that a broken or prejudiced political system must be attacked from the inside, with knowledge. In contrast, Thami believes that such a political system must be destroyed with force. Isabel's relationship to the political issue of apartheid was perhaps most analogous to the audiences who first saw Fugard's play. They were bystanders to the political issue, perhaps directly benefited by the dominant political system. Isabel becomes aware of the political problems that she ignored as a child, but does not involve herself in actually dismantling the system, involving herself in neither Mr. M or Thami's ideologies of change.

~~Names Theme~~

One's name holds a piece of one's identity, and having many names often shows the many different relationships one has with others. In *My Children! My Africa!* one crucial aspect of names is how

they reveal one's heritage as Bantu or English, which correlates highly with one's race. Isabel struggles to pronounce Mr. M's full name and the names of others in Thami's class, showing how uncomfortable she is pronouncing Bantu words, since she is white, comes from an English-speaking family, and attends an English-speaking school for white children. Thami and Mr. M, on the other hand, have no problem pronouncing Isabel's name or the names of any of the authors they discuss; white, Western culture is a constant presence in their lives. Mr. M even shortens his name purposefully so that all students can pronounce it, even though he is strict and traditional about most things in his classroom. One can also choose the name they are called or gain a name as part of their reputation. Thami and Mr. M discuss this in Act II, Scene I. Mr. M calls Thami a "silly boy" (p.65) and when Thami tells him not to, he asks if he should call him "Comrade Thami"(p.65) instead. This is because the resistance fighters called themselves comrades; Mr. M uses this title ironically, to emphasize Thami's link to them. Thami counters that people call Mr. M names: "stooge, sell-out, collaborator "(p.66). Again, these names are said to hurt Mr. M by linking these ideas to his identity.

Childhood and Coming of Age Theme

Childhood is one of the most important themes in *My Children! My Africa!*, as might be guessed from the appearance of the word "children" in the play's title. The play can be seen as a "Bildungsroman" or coming-of-age literature, since over the course of the play both Thami and Isabel mature in many ways. Thami makes the life decision not to further his education but instead to leave the country and join a movement of black people fighting physically for change. Isabel realizes how closed-minded she was throughout her childhood, interacting with black people only rarely and with them in service roles. She comes to see Thami as a close friend and Mr. M as a mentor. The theme of childhood is stressed through flashbacks. Thami tells a story to the audience about how he used to love school when in Second Form, and was even asked to read an essay he wrote to the entire school. He takes the audience through his growth from Second through Tenth Form; he progresses from enthusiasm to cynicism about the education system. Mr. M also tells a flashback story about when he was around ten years old, around the same age Thami was in his story, when he argues with Thami in their last scene together. Mr. M tells Thami about the teacher who inspired him to love books, showing how little Mr. M changed, following that inspiration to read and teach until it brings him to his death.

Q & A

1. What are differences between Thami's and Mr. M's ideologies of change?

Thami believes that there must be a violent uprising that forces the government to end apartheid or at least change some of its laws and policies. In contrast, Mr. M believes that change must come slowly and happen by black people becoming educated so that they can influence lawmakers with their words and ideas.

Thami sees Mr. M's ideology as too slow and sympathetic to the white people; he believes that Mr. M feels this way because he is old and was raised all his life within a backwards system that he has come to believe is okay. Mr. M, on the other hand, feels that Thami and Comrades' cause lacks stability and morality.

2. Does the play indicate the author's viewpoint on whether it is better to fight with words or stones ?

Mr. M warns Thami that words are stronger tools for change than stones or even bombs, since words can influence white people to make large changes to apartheid where stones can only express anger and incite violence in return.

Thami and Mr. M are both presented as strong, intelligent characters. But because Fugard was not black or directly part of the resistance to apartheid, it could be guessed that Fugard is more likely to believe in Mr. M's ideology, since he was an intellectual himself and wrote plays focused on the injustices of apartheid rather than participating in acts of physical violence. He also creates something of a martyr figure in Mr. M, who is killed for his difference in ideology even though he was a poor black man himself.

3. What is the significance of Isabel being a female? Why do you think the playwright made this choice ?

Athol Fugard carefully chose to make gender equality as well as racial equality a theme his play. He does this in two big ways: by making the character of Isabel a girl, and by making the debate at the beginning of the play about women's rights to education in South Africa. Linking the ideas of gender and racial equality could help non-blacks and people outside of South Africa to begin to understand the struggle of black people during apartheid.

4. Was the ending of the play hopeful or tragic? How was it hopeful or tragic for each of the characters?

The end of the play should be read as tragic, since Fugard intended the play to help people to understand the terrors of apartheid and provoke them to seek change.

At the end of the play, Mr. M has died, and Thami has given up any dreams of higher education to join in the movement for change through physical violence. Some might not see this as tragic, but it is clear that Mr. M's goal for him will not be fulfilled. Isabel promises to fulfill Mr. M's goal, but because she is white and not Mr. M's favorite student, this is not really an equal substitution. Isabel always had hope for her future, since she is white, but the play ends with the black characters not achieving what they want.

Metaphor and Similes in the BOOK

1 "Enthusiasm for your cause is most commendable but without personal discipline it is as useless as having a good donkey and a good cart but no harness" (Simile)

2 "My unruly behavior? I caught that disease in the location, I'll have you know." (Metaphor)

2.1 Isabel speaks this quote jokingly to Mr. M early in the play. However, Isabel's use of the metaphor of the location giving someone disease suggests the complex and incendiary dynamics between the characters, since it refers implicitly to the belief that the segregated areas in which blacks lived were dangerous and could "infect" one with bad behavior.

"I've got a whole zoo in here, a mad zoo of hungry animals...and the keeper is frightened!" (Metaphor)

In this quote, spoken directly to the audience, Mr. M talks passionately about the emotions inside of him. He uses this metaphor of animals in a zoo to show how he tries and fails to control his emotions, and how powerful and fierce they can be. This instability is a result of his internal conflict over how to best serve his students and his country under apartheid.