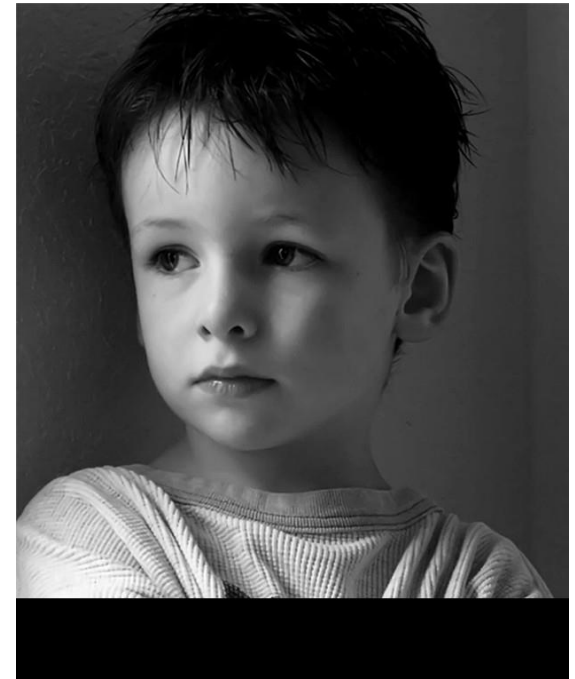


TO A SMALL BOY WHO DIED IN DIEPKLOOF REFORMATORY

ALAN PATON (1903-1988)



MORE ABOUT THE POET

Alan Paton was born on January 11, 1903 in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. After graduating from Maritzburg College in 1918, he studied at the University of Natal, where he graduated with distinction in physics. After leaving school, Paton became a science teacher in 1925. For three years he taught at Ixopo High School, then moved to Pietermaritzburg to teach at Maritzburg College. In 1928 Paton married Doris Olive Francis, and two years later they had their first son, David. A second son, Jonathan, was born in 1936. Even early in his career Paton took a strong interest in race relations, joining the South African Institute of Race Relations in 1930. In 1935 he left his teaching position to become the principal of the Diepkloof Reformatory for delinquent urban African boys near Johannesburg. In the 1950s, Paton began to take a more active interest in politics, becoming the vice-president of the Liberal Party and, in 1956, the party chairman.


Paton eventually became National President of the Liberal Party until 1968, when the government forces the Liberal Party to disband under the Prohibition of Interference Act that prohibited non-racial political parties. During his term with the Liberal Party, Paton gave evidence to mitigate the treason sentence for Nelson Mandela during his 1964 trial. In 1967 Doris Olive Paton died, and two years later Alan Paton married Anne Margaret Hopkins. Paton continued to write throughout his life, publishing a third novel, *Ah, but Your Land is Beautiful*, in 1981 and two of a projected three volumes of his autobiography in 1980 and, posthumously, in 1988. Paton died in April of 1988 at Lintrose, Botha's Hill in Natal.




TO A SMALL BOY WHO DIED IN DIEPKLOOF REFORMATORY

Small offender, small innocent child 1
With no conception or comprehension 2
Of the vast machinery set in motion 3
By your trivial transgression, 4
Of the great forces of authority, 5
Of judges, magistrates, and lawyers, 6
Psychologists, psychiatrists, and doctors, 7
Principals, police, and sociologists, 8
Kept moving and alive by your delinquency, 9
This day, and under the shining sun 10
Do I commit your body to the earth 11
Oh child, oh lost and lonely one. 12





Clerks are moved to action by your dying; 13
Your documents, all neatly put together, 14
Are transferred from the living to the dead, 15
Here is the document of birth 16
Saying that you were born and where and when, 17
But giving no hint of joy or sorrow, 18
Of if the sun shone, or if the rain was falling, 19
Or what bird flew singing over the roof 20
Where your mother travailed. And here your name 21
Meaning in white man's tongue, he is arrived, 22
But to what end or purpose is not said. 23
Here is the last certificate of Death; 24
Forestalling authority he sets you free, 25



You that did once arrive have now departed 26
And are enfolded in the sole embrace 27
Of kindness that earth ever gave to you. 28
So negligent in life, in death belatedly 29
She pours her generous abundance on you 30
And rains her bounty on the quivering wood 31
And swaddles you about, where neither hail nor tempest, 32
Neither wind nor snow nor any heat of sun 33
Shall now offend you, and the thin cold spears 34
Of the Highveld rain that once so pierced you 35
In falling on your grave shall press you closer 36
To the deep repentant heart. 37

Here is the warrant of committal, 38
For this offence, oh small and lonely one, 39
For this offence in whose commission 40
Millions of men are in complicity 41
You are committed. So do I commit you, 42
Your frail body to the waiting ground, 43
Your dust to the dust of the veld, - 44
Fly home-bound soul to the great Judge-President 45
Who unencumbered by the pressing need 46
To give society protection, may pass on you 47
The sentence of the indeterminate compassion. 48



Stanza 1 (lines 1 - 5)

Small offender, small innocent child
With no conception or comprehension
Of the vast machinery set in motion
By your trivial transgression,
Of the great forces of authority,



(The poet thinks about the small boy in the coffin. The boy did something wrong, but the speaker sees him as innocent and his death caused the authority much work)

reformatory (title): an institution for juvenile offenders

conception: idea

trivial: silly, petty, small value

transgression: infringement, violation

Stanza I (lines 6 - 9)

Of judges, magistrates, and lawyers,
Psychologists, psychiatrists, and doctors,
Principals, police, and sociologists,
Kept moving and alive by your delinquency,

(There are many people who earn a living by dealing with case of disobedience)

psychologist (line 7): person who studies the human mind

psychiatrist (line 7): person who treats mental diseases

sociologist (line 8): person studying the development and laws of society

delinquency (line 9): misconduct, wrongdoing, disobedience

Stanza I (lines 10 - 12)

This day, and under the shining sun
Do I commit your body to the earth
Oh child, oh lost and lonely one.



(In the sunshine the speaker sees to it that the boy is buried.)

Euphemism – “so do I commit you,...Your frail body to the waiting ground” – the poet buries him

Stanza I - Summary

- The poet thinks about the small boy in the coffin. Although the boy was an offender, the poet regards him as an 'innocent child' who has no idea of the extensive labour his small offence has caused the authorities
- Judges, magistrates, lawyers, psychologists, psychiatrists, doctors, principals, policemen and sociologists all earn their living by processing such cases of delinquency.
- In the sunshine the poet sees to it that the 'lost and lonely' boy is buried.

Stanza 2 (lines 13 - 17)

Clerks are moved to action by your dying;
Your documents, all neatly put together,
Are transferred from the living to the dead,
Here is the document of birth
Saying that you were born and where and
when,

(The death of the child has caused a lot of work for clerks everywhere. All documents in connection with the boy need to be changed or cancelled after his death. The poet looks at his birth certificate which states where and when he was born)

Stanza 2 (lines 18 - 23)

But giving no hint of joy or sorrow,
Of if the sun shone, or if the rain was falling,
Or what bird flew singing over the roof
Where your mother travailed. And here your name
Meaning in white man's tongue, he is arrived,
But to what end or purpose is not said.

(The birth certificate of the child shows nothing of the joy and sorrow of that day, the weather and whether a bird was singing on the roof. He looks at the boy's name, which means 'he has arrived' but which does not say for which purpose he was born.)

travailed: laboured (during childbirth)

Stanza 2 (lines 24 - 28)

Here is the last certificate of Death;
Forestalling authority he sets you free,
You that did once arrive have now departed
And are enfolded in the sole embrace
Of kindness that earth ever gave to you.

(The speaker looks at the death certificate, which has prevented authorities by setting the boy free from prosecution..As the coffin is lowered into the grave, the earth enfolds the boy with kindness, like a mother embracing a child.)

Forestalling: deterring

Personification: “forestalling authority he (Death) sets you free”

Stanza 2 (lines 29 - 31)

So negligent in life, in death belatedly
She pours her generous abundance on you
And rains her bounty on the quivering wood

*(The boy was neglected in life, in death the earth pours a
wealth of soil on to the coffin, which trembles with the
impact.)*

negligent: careless, indifferent

generous abundance: unselfish wealth

bounty: generosity

Stanza 2 (lines 32 - 37)

And swaddles you about, where neither hail nor tempest,
Neither wind nor snow nor any heat of sun
Shall now offend you, and the thin cold spears
Of the Highveld rain that once so pierced you
In falling on your grave shall press you closer
To the deep repentant heart.

(The soil wraps itself round the boy, who will be protected against all storms and weather. The rain of the Highveld caused him discomfort in the past, will now hug him and feel regret.)

swaddles: wraps / tempest: violent storm / repentant: feeling regret

Personification: “And are enfolded...And swaddles you about”

Personification: “Neither heat nor snow...Shall now offend you”

Metaphor: “the thin cold spears/Of the Highveld rain” – the raindrops are compared to spears – stabbing and cold.

Stanza 2 - Summary

- The boy's death has caused a lot of work for clerks everywhere. All documents in connection with the boy need to be changed or cancelled after his death. The poet looks at his birth certificate which states where and when he was born, but which shows nothing of the joy and sorrow experienced on that day, the weather conditions and whether a bird was singing on the roof while his mother was giving birth. He looks at the boy's name, which in the language of the white man means that 'he has arrived' but which does not say for which purpose he was born.

Stanza 2 – Summary Continues

- The poet looks at the boy's death certificate, which has deterred authorities by setting the boy free from all earthly prosecution. The boy has now passed on from his earthly life to eternal life. As the coffin is lowered into the grave, the earth enfolds the boy with kindness, like a mother embracing a child.
- In his life the boy was neglected and now in death the earth is too late by pouring its 'generous abundance' of soil on the coffin, which trembles with the impact.

Stanza 2 – Summary Continues

- **The soil wraps itself round the boy (like a mother wrapping a child in a blanket), who will be protected against all tempests, hail, wind, snow and the heat of the sun. The rain of the Highveld that caused him so much discomfort in the past, will now fall on his grave and press him closer to the earth's heart, which will hug him and feel regret.**

Stanza 3 (lines 38 - 42)

Here is the warrant of committal,
For this offence, oh small and lonely one,
For this offence in whose commission
Millions of men are in complicity
You are committed. So do I commit you,

(The speaker looks at the certificate that commits him to the institution for his petty offence, and in which millions of other people have participated.)

warrant of committal: the document/certificate granting the right that he may be committed to the reformatory

complicity: partnership (usually in evil action) / *committed*: buried

Hyperbole – ‘millions of men’ – the poet implies that mankind is responsible for the crime the boy committed. Nobody taught him right from wrong.

Stanza 3 (lines 43 - 48)

Your frail body to the waiting ground,
Your dust to the dust of the veld, -
Fly home-bound soul to the great Judge-President
Who unencumbered by the pressing need
To give society protection, may pass on you
The sentence of the indeterminate compassion.

(The speaker now buries him, to turn to dust. The boy's soul must go home to God who is unhindered by the need to provide protection to society and who will receive him with mercy)

Judge-President: God / unencumbered: unhindered / indeterminate: indefinite, not fixed / compassion: mercy, pity, empathy

Personification: “the waiting ground”

Stanza 3 - Summary

- The poet looks at the certificate that granted the right for him to be admitted to the institution for the petty offence he committed, and in which millions of other people have participated.
- So the poet commits the boy's body to the earth (buries him) to turn to dust. The boy's soul must go home to God who is unhindered by the need to provide protection to society (reformatories) and who will receive him with mercy and forgiveness.

THEME/INTERPRETATION

The poet feels sorry for the lonely little boy, who died at the reformatory. In the poem there is an undertone of criticism directed at society and the authorities who were respectively responsible for the fact that the boy was committed to the reformatory for the crime he committed, and that he was punished by being sent there.

THEME/INTERPRETATION

The boy's death and burial is described in such terms as if to say that his death has brought him relief, and that he will find greater happiness and forgiveness in the bosom of the earth than he experienced in his life on earth.

The poem compels the reader to think about crime, punishment, the role society plays in these, and the legal systems used to bring juvenile delinquents back on track. Who were the people really responsible for the boy's attitude, his crime and his punishment?

Personification

- “forestalling authority he (Death) sets you free”
 - “And are enfolded...And swaddles you about”
 - “Neither heat nor snow...Shall now offend you”
 - “the waiting ground”
-
- The earth is compared to a mother embracing her child, showing greater kindness by protecting the boy against storms and other elements of nature.