ABOUT QUEY IN HOMEGOING

In his historical preface, [Noah](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/born-a-crime/characters/trevor-noah) explains how South African Christianity combines the colonizers’ religion with traditional beliefs. In South Africa, traditional shamans remain more common than Western doctors, and witchcraft cases frequently go to court, like when someone gets killed by lightning and an enemy of theirs gets charged with murder by witchcraft.

Just as Trevor’s mother combines traditional beliefs with Christianity, South Africans do not see a contradiction between Western and indigenous beliefs about crime, punishment, and social life—unlike the apartheid government.

**Active Themes**

Identity, Belonging, and Community Theme Icon

[Trevor Noah](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/born-a-crime/characters/trevor-noah) grows up surrounded by women; the only important male figure in his early life is his grandfather, the ironically named and happily-divorced [Temperance Noah](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/born-a-crime/characters/trevor-s-grandfather-temperance-noah), who is gregarious and extremely popular among [Soweto](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/born-a-crime/terms/soweto)’s women. He is bipolar, but the family does not know that until much later; he does bizarre things like driving a woman to her home three hours away because “no beautiful woman should have to wait for a bus,” or trying to start a boxing match, at the age of 80, with 12-year-old Trevor. Since she and Trevor are her father’s heirs, [Patricia](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/born-a-crime/characters/trevor-s-mother-patricia-nombuyiselo-noah) always worries about his other family members trying to poison them.

Temperance Noah’s irresponsibility and instability force the family’s women to take control over the daily labor of maintaining the household. Being raised by women and largely confined to the house profoundly shapes Trevor’s views on community, to which he sees family as central, and violence, which he sees as destructive and best replaced with love.

**Active Themes**

Love and Personal Growth Theme Icon

The house in [Soweto](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/born-a-crime/terms/soweto) is usually full of women: [Trevor](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/born-a-crime/characters/trevor-noah)’s aunt Sibongile, who dominated her wannabe abusive husband Dinky, and his grandmother [Frances Noah](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/born-a-crime/characters/trevor-s-grandmother-frances-noah), who is old but sharp and commanding, “still to this day very active and very much alive.” There is also [Koko](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/born-a-crime/characters/koko), Noah’s elderly and blind great-grandmother, who spends her days sitting in the house’s warmest spot by the stove, observing the family and chatting with Frances.

Sibongile’s treatment of her husband shows the irony in men’s insistence on maintaining control through violence when women truly control the home; like Sibongile and Patricia, Frances is steadfast and independent-minded, a trait which seems to run in the family.

**Active Themes**

Love and Personal Growth Theme Icon

This woman-centric household is the norm in [Soweto](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/born-a-crime/terms/soweto): whereas [Trevor](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/born-a-crime/characters/trevor-noah) is merely estranged from [his father](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/born-a-crime/characters/trevor-s-father-robert) because of race, other children’s fathers are either imprisoned, fighting [apartheid](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/born-a-crime/terms/apartheid) from abroad, or working elsewhere in the country. Women keep the community running and replace their husbands with God: religion is central to life and nightly meetings are commonplace, with prayer followed by songs and often five minutes of “amen.” On Tuesdays, prayer is at [Frances Noah](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/born-a-crime/characters/trevor-s-grandmother-frances-noah)’s house; Trevor loves singing and praying, and Frances loves his prayers because he speaks English, and “everyone knows” that “English prayers get answered first.” Frances has him pray for everyone present, and Trevor is delighted to be “helping people.”

Beyond fracturing South African society, apartheid also fractures South African families by offering men few truly free work opportunities; communities like Soweto run more or less autonomously without men, and prayer continues to offer women a means to sustain a sense of community, address and emotionally overcome their suffering, and feel that there is a sense of moral order in the universe despite their oppression. The family is also delighted to have Trevor pray in English because it is the language of the powerful, which points to the enduring irony of colonial religion in South Africa: native peoples have to believe that the same God they faithfully worship somehow blessed the Europeans who oppress them.

**Active Themes**

Racism, Apartheid, and the Cycle of Poverty Theme Icon

Resilience Through Religion, Education, and Humor Theme Icon

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[Soweto](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/born-a-crime/terms/soweto) is “magical” because of its “aspirational quality”; it has little infrastructure and no formal businesses, but everyone manages to “find a way to make a life for themselves.” It’s possible to buy *anything* out of someone’s house. Because they have little money, people buy their groceries and build their homes piecemeal: they get a piece of land from the government and gradually build it up from a shanty to a multi-room house over the course of generations. [Frances Noah](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/born-a-crime/characters/trevor-s-grandmother-frances-noah)’s house has two rooms—everyone sleeps on the floor in one of them, and the other is for everything else. They also rent out shanties in their backyard and, like everyone else in Soweto, have a driveway but no car.

Precisely because the apartheid government does nothing for black South Africans and keeps them confined in neighborhoods like Soweto, success would not mean leaving Soweto, but rather transforming it (and their lives) for the better, and they realize that they are the only ones who can do anything to achieve their dreams. The driveway clearly captures this image of aspiration; even if people never get to the point of buying cars, the hope of possibly getting one in the future keeps people going and creates a paradoxically “magical” atmosphere in the township.

**Active Themes**

Racism, Apartheid, and the Cycle of Poverty Theme Icon

Resilience Through Religion, Education, and Humor Theme Icon

**Related Quotes with Explanations**

The one thing that is impossible to improve is the toilet: there’s no running water indoors, and people share communal toilets with other families. Newspaper substitutes for more expensive toilet paper, and the flies are a source of constant fear for young [Trevor](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/born-a-crime/characters/trevor-noah). One day, at age five, when pouring rain promises a perilous journey to the outhouse, Trevor decides to go inside—the adult Trevor interjects, joking that defecating is a powerful and profound act, which forces everyone to “forget how famous or how rich we are” and have “a moment of pure self-awareness.” So that day, Trevor savors the comfort of going inside on the piece of newspaper—until he realizes that [Koko](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/born-a-crime/characters/koko) is still there, sitting by the stove, sniffing the air and realizing “that something was wrong.” Trevor slowly finishes, freezing whenever Koko asks, “who’s there?” He stashes the newspaper under the rest of the trash.

Sanitation marks the limit of what individual aspiration can accomplish, because it requires government investment in infrastructure. However, Noah’s joke about the universality of using the toilet responds to the assumption that Soweto’s lack of sanitation makes its inhabitants’ experiences of the world fundamentally different from those of people outside the township’s walls (or those likely to be reading this book). Of course, it also points to Noah’s own humiliating “moment of pure self-awareness” when Koko suspects what he is doing.

**Active Themes**

Racism, Apartheid, and the Cycle of Poverty Theme Icon

Resilience Through Religion, Education, and Humor Theme Icon

Later that day, when [Frances](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/born-a-crime/characters/trevor-s-grandmother-frances-noah) comes home, [Koko](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/born-a-crime/characters/koko) exclaims that “there’s something in the house,” which she could hear and smell before. Frances can smell it too—and when [Trevor’s mother](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/born-a-crime/characters/trevor-s-mother-patricia-nombuyiselo-noah) gets home, so can she. She discovers the “shit in the bottom of the dustbin” and proclaims that it must be the work of a demon. She wakes [Trevor](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/born-a-crime/characters/trevor-noah) up in a frenzy and takes him outside to burn the soiled newspaper. He is horrified as all the neighborhood’s grandmothers file in for a mass prayer meeting.

The connection between the chapter’s preface and content becomes clear: like South Africans hold court trials to address witchcraft, Trevor’s family holds a prayer meeting to address an event that, in reality, has nothing to do with good and evil, God and the devil. However, Trevor is also clearly telling this story because of its hilarity; this illustrates his ability to turn what was humiliating at the time into humor in retrospect.

**Active Themes**

Identity, Belonging, and Community Theme Icon

Resilience Through Religion, Education, and Humor Theme Icon

[Patricia](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/born-a-crime/characters/trevor-s-mother-patricia-nombuyiselo-noah) makes [Trevor](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/born-a-crime/characters/trevor-noah) pray to “kill the demon,” but he knows he cannot pray for “God to kill the thing that left the shit,” so stumbles through a halfhearted prayer for the whole “big misunderstanding” to be cleared up. After “amen,” the meeting disbands, and Trevor apologizes to God; he realizes that “this was not cool,” especially because he distracted God from more important business.