Once Upon a Time

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF NADINE GORDIMER

Nadine Gordimer was born in South Africa to a Lithuanian Jewish immigrant father and a Londoner mother. Gordimer was kept at home for much of her childhood, as her mom worried that Gordimer had heart problems. Gordimer took to writing during this time and published her first work of adult fiction by the age of 16. After a year studying at the University of the Witwatersrand, she moved to Johannesburg and married a dentist named Gerald Gavron in 1949. The pair had a daughter, Oriane, the following year but quickly divorced. By the 1950s, Gordimer was publishing short stories in prominent publications including *The New Yorker*. In 1954, she married an esteemed art dealer named Reinhold Cassirer, and they had a son named Hugo the following year. Reinhold died from emphysema in 2001. Gordimer got involved with the anti-apartheid movement in the 1960s, an interest catalyzed by the arrest of her best friend, Bettie du Toit, as well as the Sharpeville massacre. Gordimer's friendship with Bram Fischer and George Bizos—Nelson Mandela's defense attorneys during his 1962 trial—led Gordimer to work closely with Mandela himself, editing his impactful "I Am Prepared to Die" speech, which he gave from the defendant's dock at his trial. Around this time, Gordimer began rose to international acclaim, but the South African government responded by banning several of her books. While some were banned for only short periods of time, others (like *The Late Bourgeois World* and *A World of Strangers*) were banned for a decade or longer. She joined the African National Congress and even hid in her home members of the ANC evading arrest. She received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1991. Gordimer died in 2014 at the age of 90.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The implied backdrop of "Once Upon a Time" is apartheid-era South Africa, a time in South African history marked by racism, white supremacy, violence, and systemic oppression. South Africa officially gained independence from the UK in 1931, but the Afrikaner-led National Party won the 1948 elections, closely studied government-enforced racial segregation policies around the world, and implemented what they saw as the most effective ones to create the system of laws and governance known as apartheid. The population was divided into four groups: white people, Indian people, "colored" (mixed-race) people, and black people. Unlike the racism in countries like the U.S., there was no illusion of anything like "separate but equal"; rather, the apartheid government openly proclaimed an ideology of white supremacy. Apartheid guaranteed the white minority most of the nation's land, wealth, and political power; gave colored and Indian people limited political rights; and forced native black Africans to labor in what was effectively a form of slavery and to live in cramped slums (townships) and depleted rural areas (homelands or *bantustans*). Apartheid also created separate zones for each group to live in—something that's gestured to in "Once Upon a Time"—and prohibited intermarriage between people from the different groups. As domestic and international opposition to apartheid grew from the 1950s through the 1980s, the South African government became increasingly violent and repressive, slaughtered and imprisoned thousands of dissidents, and even developed nuclear weapons. In conjunction with international sanctions against the South African government, the internal anti-apartheid movement led by organizations including the African National Congress (ANC) campaigned for equality through both nonviolent methods (protest and civil disobedience) and armed resistance. Secret negotiations between the apartheid government and anti-apartheid leaders began in 1987, and the National Party began dismantling the apartheid system and legalizing opposition parties in 1990, when it also released prominent ANC leader Nelson Mandela from jail.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Like "Once Upon a Time," *Cry, The Beloved Country*, a novel by anti-apartheid activist Alan Paton, shows how economic inequality along racial lines sows seeds of mistrust. While "Once Upon a Time" largely centers on wealthy white neighborhoods, *Cry, The Beloved Country* charts how non-white people were pushed to the fringes of their own city and forced to live in makeshift camps called shantytowns, which were often riddled with disease, suffering, and crippling poverty. The most famous book on apartheid is Nelson Mandela's classic prison autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, while recent memoirs by black South African celebrities include Trevor Noah's *Born a Crime*, rapper Kabelo Mabalane's *I Ran for My Life*, and actress Bonnie Mbuli's *Eyebags & Dimples*. In her other works, Nadine Gordimer wrote extensively about how in apartheid South Africa, love quickly turned into tragedy, trust eroded between communities and within families, and individuals grappled with the relationship between their ideals and their material interests—all thematic threads that appear in her short story "Once Upon a Time." Some of Gordimer's most prominent novels include *The Lying Days*, *Burger's Daughter*, and the recent *No Time Like the Present*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Once Upon a Time

- **When Written:** Late 1980s and early 1990s
- **Where Written:** South Africa
- **When Published:** First version published in 1988 in the *Weekly Mail*; expanded version published in 1991 in Gordimer's short-story collection *Jump and Other Stories*
- **Literary Period:** Postmodern
- **Genre:** Short Story
- **Setting:** Unspecified but heavily implied to be South Africa during apartheid.
- **Climax:** The little boy is killed when he tries to cross the razor wire that's meant to protect the family's house from intruders.
- **Antagonist:** Fear and Racism
- **Point of View:** First Person and Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Banned Books. During apartheid, the South African government banned several of Gordimer's works. While some works were banned only for a matter of months, *The Late Bourgeois World* was banned for 10 years, and *A World of Strangers* was banned for 12 years.

Famous Friends. Gordimer worked closely with Nelson Mandela on his speech "I Am Prepared to Die," which he recited from the defendant's dock during his 1962 trial.

PLOT SUMMARY

The narrator, a writer, receives a letter from a man asking her to contribute a story to an anthology for children. When she declines, explaining that she doesn't write for children, this man insists that all writers should write a children's story. The narrator doesn't feel like "ought to" write anything. She then recalls the events of the previous night.

In the middle of the night, the narrator is awoken by the sound of footsteps on creaking floorboards. Her heart racing, the narrator strains to hear if the footsteps are approaching her bedroom. She already feels like the victim of a crime—she doesn't have a gun for self-defense or security bars on her windows, but she's just as fearful as the people who do. She recalls violent crimes that recently happened near her house.

The narrator soon realizes that the creaking sound isn't from an intruder. Thousands of miles below her home's foundation is a series of mines, and occasionally the hollowed-out rock walls collapse and crash down to the earth below, causing the narrator's house to shift and groan in response. She imagines that the mines are either out of use or that they're now a gravesite for all the miners—probably migrant workers—down below. Unable to fall back asleep, the narrator resolves to tell herself a bedtime story.

Her story begins with a man and a woman who are happily married. They have a little boy whom they love dearly, a trustworthy housemaid, a skilled gardener, a pool that's safely fenced in to prevent the little boy from falling in and drowning, a Neighborhood Watch sign to deter intruders, and all sorts of prudent insurance policies. Even though the family is insured against things like floods and fires, they aren't insured against riots, which are currently raging outside the city. To comfort his anxious wife—and because he knows how violent the riots are—the husband installs electronic gates at the front of the house. The little boy is mesmerized by the speaker system, which allows visitors to communicate with someone inside. He and his friends use it as a walkie-talkie.

When burglaries begin happening in the family's suburb, the couple installs security bars on the doors and windows as well as an alarm system. The little boy's cat sometimes sets off the alarm, and the neighbors' alarms are often set off by rodents or pets, too. The shrill sirens become so commonplace that they begin to sound more like cicadas or frogs humming in the background. Intruders often time their robberies for when the alarms are going off so that their comings and goings won't be heard.

Over time, unemployed black people begin looking for work in the suburbs. The woman wants to send food out to them, but her husband and the housemaid firmly caution her against it, insisting that the people outside are criminals. The family decides to make the wall in their garden even higher. However, the robberies continue throughout the neighborhood at all times of day and night. One day, watching the little boy's cat deftly scaling the wall of the house, the husband and wife decide to affix some sort of security system to the walls, too. A stroll around the neighborhood reveals all sorts of options: lances, spikes, and concrete walls studded with shards of broken glass. Meanwhile, the little boy happily runs along with his dog.

The couple settles on the most threatening security system of them all: a series of metal coils notched with **razor blades** that ascend the house's exterior walls. Once an intruder begins to climb through the coils, there is no way out—the jagged metal will rip the intruder to shreds no matter which way they move. The security system, which looks fit for a concentration camp, comes from a security called Dragon Teeth. The next day, workmen install the coils on the couple's house, and the metal shines aggressively in the sun. The man assures his wife that it will weather over time, but his wife reminds him that the metal is weather-proof. They hope the cat is smart enough to not scale the wall.

That night, the woman reads her son the story of Sleeping Beauty, wherein the brave Prince must fight his way through a dense thicket of thorns in order to save Sleeping Beauty. The next day, the little boy pretends to be the Prince and decides that the metal coils encasing the house will be the thorns he

must climb. But the second he wiggles his way into a metal coil, the blades pierce his skin, and he writhes and screams in pain, ensnaring himself deeper and deeper into the wire. The housemaid and gardener come running, and the gardener tears up his hands trying to rescue the boy. The husband and wife run out in a panic as the house alarm—likely set off by the cat—begins to blare. Eventually, the little boy's bleeding body is removed with heavy equipment. The man, the woman, the housemaid, and the gardener are beside themselves as they carry the boy's remains into the house.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

The Narrator – The unnamed narrator, a woman writer, is the protagonist and narrator of the frame story. It is implied that, like the man and the woman in the inner story, the narrator lives in apartheid-era South Africa. And, like the couple, the narrator lives in fear that, since she has more than others (namely the impoverished black people who are oppressed under apartheid rule), others might take what she has. However, the narrator appears far more conscious of the racism that plagues her society than the characters in the inner story. It's implied that she's politically on board with ending apartheid and seems keenly aware of the suffering of the underclasses. Unlike the man and the woman, the narrator doesn't protect her house from intruders, a decision that's presumably because of her politics—after all, people around her are experiencing violence in their homes and she herself is afraid, so it seems like not protecting herself is a conscious ethical choice. However, when she hears a noise in the middle of the night, she immediately jumps to the conclusion that she's about to be killed or robbed. Although she's wrong—the sound is just the foundation of her house shifting—her knee-jerk reaction highlights how the inequality of material conditions breeds fear, which is the thematic crux of both stories. Having the right politics and making minor ethical decisions—signifying her unity with poor black South Africans by not barricading her house, even though that does nothing to change their material conditions—does not put the narrator's conscience at ease or keep her safe from the consequences of an oppressive society. Violence, the story suggests, is a natural consequence of living in an oppressive society, and there's nothing the narrator can (or should) do to insulate herself from it. In this vein, Gordimer seems to implicitly praise the narrator for her ability to squarely face the truth of her nation's awful social reality by telling herself the story of the man and the woman instead of a comforting bedtime story. With this, Gordimer seems to imply that telling truthful stories is a necessary (but insufficient) step toward rectifying social wrongs.

The Man / The Husband – One of the protagonists of the second story, the man is the woman's husband and the little boy's father. Though both the man and his wife are preoccupied with their material possessions, the man takes this to a greater extreme. Much of the story centers around his efforts to protect the family's possessions from outsiders—who, significantly, are poor black people oppressed under apartheid—like building a higher wall in the garden, installing electronically controlled gates, putting up threatening signs, and, eventually, outfitting the exterior of the house with lethal **razor coils**. He frames these actions as him graciously appeasing and protecting his fearful wife (who worries that the riots taking place outside of the city will eventually infiltrate their city and suburb), but it's clear that the man fears for his own safety, too. While his wife nonetheless feels badly for the beggars outside the gates of their house and wants to feed them, the man is adamant that the beggars are criminals "looking for their chance" and that by giving them food, the woman would only be "encouraging them" to keep begging or somehow make them more likely to rob the family's house. The husband's mother echoes this sentiment throughout the story, fueling her son's deep distrust toward outsiders. In the end, though, the man's efforts to protect the family backfire in a moment of grim irony when his young son gets caught in the vicious razor-wire wall and dies. With this, the story makes the point that walling people off from one another—whether it's physically though things like security systems or figuratively though racial labels—leads not to greater security but to devastating damage on all sides.

The Woman / The Wife – One of the protagonists of the second story, the woman is the little boy's mother and the man's wife. The woman is far more sensitive and compassionate toward other people's suffering than her husband is. When she sees black people begging outside the gates of her home, the woman orders the housemaid to bring food out to them, unable to bear seeing anyone go hungry. The housemaid refuses on the grounds that doing so would threaten her own safety—she insists that the beggars are criminals who will tie her up and lock her in the cupboard like they did to a neighbor's maid—and the husband emphatically agrees. Even though the woman is disheartened, she always ends up siding with her husband when it comes to matters of security, often repeating the line "You are right." The woman only utters the words "You are wrong" once, right after her husband assures her that the **razor wall** will weather over time and look less stark; she reminds him that the wall is weather-proof, so it will always look as threatening and shocking as it does now. Given that the razor wall is a symbol for the ruinous logic of apartheid, it seems that the story is saying that the violent apartheid rule won't simply "weather" or soften over time if people—specifically white people—sit back and do nothing. The woman also ties into the story's examination of storytelling. While the narrator from the frame story speaks to the importance of telling truthful but unsavory stories, the woman highlights how spinning falsely comforting ones leads

to further violence. When the woman tells her son a bedtime story one night about a Prince climbing through a thicket of thorns to rescue Sleeping Beauty and restore her with a kiss, she unintentionally encourages the little boy to play on the razor wall—where he meets his death. The story makes it clear that the couple never has a frank discussion with their son about what the wall is for and what it does; in fact, the woman specifically waits until her son is out of earshot before saying aloud that she hopes the cat will be wise enough to avoid the razor wall.

The Little Boy / The Son – The little boy is the only child of the man and the woman. Given his age, the little boy is largely oblivious to his parents' safety concerns throughout the story. They fear that the impoverished black people at the fringes of the community will riot in the suburbs and/or steal from the wealthy white people there, themselves included. For instance, while the husband and wife debate the merits of their neighbors' security systems (like broken glass embedded in concrete walls and lances affixed to metal grilles), the little boy races around the neighborhood with his pet dog, unaware of the violence creeping into the suburb. When the boy's parents install a metal wall of **coiled razors** along the walls of the house for extra protection against intruders, they worry that the little boy's cat will get stuck in it—the so-called "Dragon's Teeth" wall will shred any person that tries to climb over it or back out of it. Luckily, the little boy's cat wisely avoids the house's exterior from then on, but the little boy himself is not so fortunate, and his innocence causes him to tragically meet his death. The boy decides that climbing through the wire is the perfect way to roleplay the story his mother read him the previous night about a Prince who must face a dense thicket of sharp thorns to get to the Sleeping Beauty and kiss her back to life. The razor wall, though, is every bit as destructive as it promised: the little boy is instantly caught in the coils and dies a gruesome death. His body has to be hacked out of the metal coils, but his parents, the housemaid, and the gardener can't cut him out without hurting themselves and resorting to all kinds of heavy equipment. This highlights how the logic of separation and apartheid—symbolized by the razor wall—isn't easily dismantled and kills innocent people. It even bloodies the very people who thought they would benefit from it.

The Housemaid – The housemaid works for the man and the woman at their upscale house in the suburbs where only white people are allowed to live. It's implied that she's a black woman, as the story notes that the only black people allowed in the suburb are "trusted housemaids and gardeners." Indeed, the housemaid is often referred to as "the trusted housemaid" throughout the story, which, by extension, implies that the husband and wife view black people as untrustworthy by default—the housemaid is an exception. Like her employers, though, the housemaid is anxious and fearful of outsiders—she assumes that the unemployed black people hanging around the family's suburb are "loafers and *tsotsis*" (lazy people and criminals) who will tie her up when she's home alone and burglarize the place. In the story, wealth inequality breeds fear, and the housemaid is often made to shoulder that burden—even though her employers' wealth doesn't belong to her.

The Husband's Mother – The husband's mother is the little boy's grandmother and the woman's mother-in-law. Though little is directly revealed about her, she is often referred to as "that wise old witch" throughout the story, which is a reminder that this inner narrative is the bedtime story that the narrator is telling herself. In fairytales—including the story of Sleeping Beauty, which the little boy's mother tells *him* as a bedtime story—the witch is almost always the evil antagonist. It's interesting, then, that the narrator tacks on the word "wise," as it positions the husband's mother as a wise elder helping the hero succeed. Indeed, the husband's mother is brimming with advice: when she appears throughout the story, it's to remind the husband and wife to further insulate themselves from outsiders—namely, the impoverished black people who have been relegated to the fringes of the city under apartheid's strict racial segregation. (For example, she gifts her son and daughter-in-law bricks for Christmas so that they can make the wall surrounding their property higher and harder to climb.) In this way, the husband's mother largely functions as a mouthpiece for the dangerous spirit of fear, possessiveness, and distrust toward black people that abounds in the white suburbs. Far from helping the story's protagonists succeed, the husband's mother is a key part of the family's undoing.

MINOR CHARACTERS

The Gardener – The husband and wife's gardener is often referred to as "the itinerant gardener" throughout the story. He is the first one to find and attempt to save the couple's son when he gets stuck in the **razor wire**.

THEMES

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WEALTH INEQUALITY AND FEAR

Set in the 1980s in apartheid South Africa, Nadine Gordimer's "Once Upon a Time" shows how societies with tremendous wealth inequality are doomed to fail. The story begins with an unnamed first-person narrator who wakes up because of a noise in the night and believes that it's a home invasion. However, the noise is just the

house creaking, and to keep herself company while she lays awake in fear, the narrator tells a "bedtime story" of an unnamed family living in a segregated suburb. The central adult characters of this story—"the man" and "the wife"—are constantly concerned about their personal property, as there are break-ins throughout the neighborhood. The couple takes escalating measures to protect their house and things: building physical walls, installing security systems, and even erecting a lethal **razor-wire fence**. Both the frame story and the bedtime story are parables of inequality, showing the (presumably white) narrator and suburban family living in wealth while constantly fearing the wrath of those who have less. By showing how wealth inequality ruins even the lives of those who have everything, since they spend their lives consumed by fear, Gordimer points to the profound injustice and absurdity of societies whose resources are so unevenly shared.

Gordimer makes clear that both the first-person narrator and the suburban couple in the narrator's story are relatively wealthy. While Gordimer doesn't give much information about the narrator's life, it's clear that she is not poor. She has her own house, she makes a living as a writer (an elite profession that separates her from the laboring classes), and she lives in a relatively well-off neighborhood. The narrator's neighbors protect their homes from robberies, and their belongings (such as a collection of antique clocks) demonstrate their excess wealth. Likewise, the suburban family in the narrator's story are, at least theoretically, "living happily ever after" among their fancy things: they have a home, a caravan, a car, a swimming pool with a fence, and even a housekeeper (whom Gordimer pointedly includes among a list of their belongings). Furthermore, they live in a white-only neighborhood that is physically segregated from the poorer black neighborhoods nearby, and there are "police and soldiers and tear gas and guns" to keep the rioting poor away. It's clear, then, that the narrator and the family in her story are beneficiaries of a system of wealth inequality. They are relatively well-off, while those who have nothing suffer.

Despite this, Gordimer emphasizes that neither the narrator nor the suburban family can truly enjoy the comforts that their wealth affords them; they believe that their wealth makes them a target, so they live in fear. The suburban wife explicitly articulates the fear at the story's center: she worries that the "people of another color" who live in the poorer parts of town "might come up [...] and open the gates and stream in." All the wealthy characters in the story share her fear. The couple's suburban neighbors have lives that are "hidden behind an array of different varieties of security fences, walls, and devices," showing how consumed they are by fear of intruders. And while the story's narrator chooses not to take similar measures to barricade her home, she admits that she has the "same fear" as those who do. This explains why, when she hears a sound in the night, the narrator immediately assumes that she's being robbed. This pervasive fear has catastrophic consequences: for one, Gordimer suggests that the wealthy characters aren't able to enjoy their lives because of it. When the wealthy family takes walks around their neighborhood, for instance, they "no longer pause to admire this show of roses or that perfect lawn," since all the beautiful aspects of the neighborhood are fenced off. And even inside their home, this couple seems primarily to discuss what further security improvements they can make—they are consumed not by happiness or love, but with their quest to keep others out. Of course, the most catastrophic consequence of their fear is the death of their son, who becomes caught in the razor wire fence that the couple ironically installed to protect him. His death at the hands of the security fencing shows that the real menace in this neighborhood is not the intruders that the residents fear, but their fear itself, which is irreparably corroding their lives.

Gordimer's primary concern, of course, is not that inequality (via the fear it inspires) ruins the lives of the wealthy; instead, she wants to show that widespread wealth inequality will inevitably ruin *all* of society. To illustrate this, the story's narrator explains that her house is creaking not because of intruders, but because it has been built on a mine; the ground underneath the house is literally gone, and the whole structure could presumably fall. In Gordimer's metaphor, the house is South African society and the mine is the system of exploitation and inequality that will inevitably lead to society's collapse. The social dynamics of South African mining clarify what Gordimer means: the laborers in the mines are black South Africans who work at great peril to themselves (the narrator references the likelihood that miners have died under her house), but the owners of African mines are typically white. This is a major arc of colonialism: wealthy white capitalists extract the labor and resources of a colony, becoming increasingly wealthy as the local population suffers and grows poor. In this light, the scenario that Gordimer describes—a terrified white woman living in a wealthy, segregated neighborhood built on an exploitative mine—is a perfect representation of what is wrong with South African society. Wealthy white people have so ruthlessly exploited black people that South African society—just like the narrator's house—faces inevitable collapse. And perversely, the white people who benefit from this deplorable system cannot even enjoy it while it lasts.

APARTHEID, RACISM, AND PROPERTY

"Once Upon a Time" is set during apartheid, a system of racial segregation and discrimination that was the law in South Africa from 1948 until the early 1990s. The story shows how white South Africans benefit from and perpetuate white supremacy—even those like the (presumably white) narrator who are aware of the profound injustice of apartheid but nonetheless enjoy a better life than black South Africans. Gordimer focuses in particular

on homeownership (the narrator, as well as the suburban husband and wife about whom she tells a story, own homes in segregated neighborhoods) to call attention to how property ownership—which was limited to white people starting in 1959—exacerbated inequality in apartheid South Africa. To Gordimer, segregated suburbs like the one the couple inhabit are an embodiment of colonialism, an attempt to consolidate white wealth through property ownership and to physically separate white South Africans from the black suffering on which their wealth is built. By showing how personal bigotry and structural segregation combine to perpetuate black suffering and white luxury, Gordimer condemns the racism at the heart of South African society.

The story's most explicit racism comes from the white suburban family who are terrified of black South Africans and indifferent to their suffering. The couple worries frequently that the riots outside of the suburb—in an area where "people of another colour [are] quartered"—will bleed into their own neighborhood. The husband tries to make his wife feel better by assuring her that "these people" are not allowed into the suburb and that there are "police and soldiers and tear gas and guns to keep them away." In all of this discussion, the couple shows a callous disregard for the suffering of those they're keeping out, many of whom are jobless and surrounded by violence in their neighborhoods. Gordimer even notes that police are shooting schoolchildren in black parts of town. This contrast between the suffering of black neighborhoods and the luxurious lives of the white couple emphasizes the cruelty of the couple's efforts to keep others out. Furthermore, Gordimer lampoons the couple's inability to see that their fear of black South Africans is racist: on the gate outside the couple's house hangs a warning sign featuring the silhouette of a masked robber whose skin color isn't visible. This last detail, Gordimer writes ironically, "proved that the property owner was no racist"—but it's obvious that the sign and the gate are aimed at black people alone. This highlights the white couple's refusal to see the obvious truth that their actions and indifference towards black suffering are harmful and racist.

In addition to showing the white couple's bigotry, Gordimer emphasizes the disastrous legacy of colonialism, demonstrating how structural racism is at the heart of apartheid. The story's clearest evocation of colonialism comes in the narrator's explanation of the mine under her house. Noting that indigenous black South Africans (she names the Chopi and Tsonga peoples) work the mines, the narrator says that these "migrant miners […] might [be] down there, under me in the earth […] or men might now be interred there in the most profound of tombs." By invoking the perilous labor of indigenous miners, the narrator is calling the reader's attention to the structural racism of South African society, in which black laborers do dangerous work for paltry wages to enrich white people, who own the country's profitable industries. In this way, the narrator is implying that the source of white wealth in South Africa is the exploitation of black labor. The story's focus on white homeownership (via the suburban couple and the narrator owning homes) further illuminates this structural racism. The narrator's house is literally built on top of a mine, which metaphorically shows how the luxurious lives of white homeowners in South Africa are built on a foundation of black suffering and exploitation. However, when poor black South Africans come to the white suburban neighborhood begging for work or food and sleeping on the streets, the couple chooses to build higher walls, thereby doubling down on their exploitative lives while ignoring the suffering of black people from which they have benefited. This perpetuates the cruelty and inequality of colonialism, effectively punishing black people for their poverty, which white people caused in the first place.

To show just how far-reaching apartheid racism is, Gordimer depicts even the suburban couple's black housekeeper perpetuating racist stereotypes and fearing other black people. Housemaids are only allowed into the suburbs as employees of white families, and it's implied that these workers have higher status than the poorer black people who are rioting and unemployed. Thus, it is not surprising that over time, the couple's "trusted housemaid" mimics the colonial mindset of the white family and develops a fear of the people outside of the suburb. After hearing of another housemaid being tied up and put into a cupboard during a burglary, the family's housemaid insists that the couple install more security features like burglar bars and a new alarm. Then, when those "who [are] not trusted housemaids and gardeners [hang] about the suburb," the couple's housemaid dissuades the wife from bringing them food. This shows how racist, colonial laws placed people of color who live and work in between black and white spheres, encouraging them to sympathize with wealthy white citizens. However, it's also possible that the housekeeper hasn't so much internalized racism as she's just aware that living in an unjust society breeds violence, and that in toeing the line between the black and white South African communities, she is directly in the line of fire.

SEPARATION AND THE ILLUSION OF SECURITY

Nadine Gordimer's "Once Upon a Time" takes place during South African apartheid—a term that literally means "apartness" and that represented the legalization of white South Africans geographically separating themselves from those who were black or "coloured" (mixed-race). During apartheid, large areas of South Africa were designated as spaces for white-only cities, and the government would force any nonwhite citizens out into other areas. The bulk of Gordimer's short story takes place inside a white-designated city, and the white suburban characters appear obsessed with maintaining the separation-based logic of

apartheid. Gordimer shows, though, that separating the nation on racial lines tore South Africa apart, and she symbolizes this devastation when the white couple loses their only son: he dies in the very barbed **wire** that the couple installed to keep away those of another race. Gordimer thus makes it clear that the sense of protection white people seem to enjoy under segregation is a fragile illusion, arguing that the desire for security and prosperity through separation is harmful for all groups.

Gordimer takes care to show that this is a world of separation based on race, and that wealthy, white South Africans believe this separation will make their lives better. In the suburb in the bedtime story that the (presumably white) narrator tells, the wife is frightened when she hears of violence and looting happening against white South Africans. Her husband is quick to assure her that there are "police and soldiers and teargas and guns" working to keep any non-white South Africans (people "of another colour") away from the suburb. He says this to cheer his wife up, showing that the couple feels safer and more comfortable knowing that black South Africans are being kept "outside the city." Still, Gordimer emphasizes how the white couple in the suburb wants even more separation between races; all the white suburban families install some sort of security system—alarms, bars, gates—to keep others away. In order to live their most prosperous, happy lives, the white families clearly feel that they must be separated from other races.

However, this separation is much less useful than white South Africans would like to believe, since security systems prove ineffective and geographical segregation doesn't end up keeping the different races apart. First, Gordimer shows that the physical security measures just don't work. When the unnamed couple buys an alarm, not robbers but "pet cats and nibbling mice" frequently trip the system. This happens so often—and to so many of the other white families in the neighborhood—that noise from all the alarms unnecessarily going off provides cover for thieves to saw through bars and steal things. Additionally, Gordimer shows how the geographical separation that the white couple craves is unsustainable. The suburb is clearly wealthier than the space where "people of another colour are quartered," and eventually black South Africans make their way into the suburb to seek money or a job. The white inhabitants feel the suburb is "spoilt" by the "presence" of black South Africans, who now line the streets and sleep leaning against the gates of the white families' homes. The suburban couple also hires black South Africans as housekeepers and gardeners, proving that white South Africans will negate their own logic of separation when it benefits them. With this, the story shows that white people don't actually want to be totally segregated—white people want to have black people come and go on their terms, which means serving white people in their homes but otherwise not being around. So not only does segregation not work, it's not really intended to work, in that the families want trusted gardeners and housekeepers to come do all of their housework.

Of course, beyond just being ineffective, this forced separation is devastating. The white suburbanites suffer from their own preoccupation with separation since they imprison themselves in the fortresses they build to keep others out. Gordimer makes this clear when she has the unnamed couple admire the pure, "concentration-camp style" of the razor wire they choose to adorn their wall. More critically, the non-white South Africans clearly suffer on account of this separation because they have little or no access to wealth or prosperity. The black South Africans who populate the streets of the suburb in the bedtime story are jobless and likely homeless, contrasting sharply with the abundance of the suburb. Moreover, before the bedtime story even begins Gordimer includes the fact that "migrant miners" (indigenous Africans) are working in terrible conditions in the ground far below these wealthy neighborhoods. This underscores the spatial divisions between races in "Once Upon a Time" and how this separation is designed to put one race above all others. However, when the couple's son dies in the razor wire at the end of the story, Gordimer makes a conclusive statement that all these systems, measures, and precautions designed to separate races in South Africa are absolutely destructive and will ultimately ruin all parts of society.

STORYTELLING

Before this story even begins, Gordimer makes an obvious association: she titles the piece "Once Upon a Time." In doing this, she evokes conventional fairy tale tropes—a hero, a damsel in distress, a happy ending—only to dismantle them and show how dangerous this kind of simplistic fairytale thinking can be. On the most zoomed-out level, it seems that Gordimer believes storytelling to be good, since she's telling a story to communicate a clear moral about apartheid South Africa. However, the stories told inside the story itself seem only to lead to violence and fear rather than genuine happily ever afters. The narrator is a writer who is gripped by fear (partly because of stories she's heard about violence around her) and who tells herself a horror story about injustice and fear to occupy herself while she's unable to sleep. Then, within that story about a suburban husband and wife, there are other instances of frightening stories inadvertently or deliberately leading to violence and fear. However, there is a key difference between the way storytelling plays out in the frame story and the bedtime story: Gordimer suggests that telling truthful stories like the narrator does is a necessary (but insufficient) step toward rectifying social wrongs, whereas telling falsely comforting ones—or drawing the wrong moral from scary ones—like the suburban family does leads to further violence.

First, by positioning this story as a fairy tale, Gordimer implies

that there will be a clear hero, a clear villain, and likely a happy ending. She wants to engage with the readers' preconceptions of stories that begin with "Once Upon a Time" so that the plot of her story is extra shocking. The omniscient narrator claims that the suburban family is "living happily ever after" over and over, a claim that the author goes on to wholly reject. The couple lives in fear of aggression by people who are just "looking for their chance" to invade. In this way, the couple sets themselves up as victims in distress, telling themselves a story that places others in the position of villains. By punishing the couple at the end with the death of their son, Gordimer clearly complicates the couple's good (us) versus evil (them) logic. Gordimer also evokes the trope of "wise old witch" through the character of the husband's mother. She helps pay for bricks in the wall around the couple's house and gives a book of fairy tales to the couple's son. But, unlike many fairy tales where there are wise elders guiding heroes down the right path, the "wise old witch" is a key part of the family's undoing. When the wife reads to her son from this book of stories, he associates thickets of thorns with the **barbed wire** on the family's fence, and by trying to mimic the action of the Prince, he dies. Gordimer thus suggests that the "story" of the generational advice passed down in apartheid society will be damaging as it is so tainted with racist ideas.

Thus, Gordimer gives her white characters a choice: fall into the trap of imagining oneself as the victim, or understand the danger inherent in simplistic, fairy tale logic. In the beginning of the story, the narrator mentions that as soon as she hears a noise and is frightened, she is "a victim already." But this character goes on to destroy this thought in her own mind: she reminds herself that her house is built on "undermined ground," indicating that her status as victim should be reevaluated. This allows the author to refocus her priorities and tell herself a gruesome but pointed story. Additionally, this narrator's rejection of writing a children's book is likely a parallel for Gordimer herself not wanting to tell a tale that conventionally situates the white, wealthy people of South Africa as good and everyone else as bad; this was the message coming from the white South African government, just as the request in the story to write a children's book is coming from an authoritative "someone." Gordimer's "Once Upon a Time" and the unnamed author's decision to tell a gruesome story are both meant to combat conventional narratives. By contrast, the couple in the white suburb believe themselves to be soon-to-be victims and rather than face the reality of their social situation, and so they take the easy way out and heighten security. To make her point obvious, Gordimer even has the company that they use to install the wire be called "Dragon's Teeth". The couple does not understand the irony of using "dragon's teeth" as a defense, but a reader would. Seeing themselves as the victim is clearly wrong—if anything, they are on the side of the dragon.

Gordimer lastly uses the little boy to demonstrate how even people without preconceived notions of good and evil will eventually be ensnared in this simplistic way of thinking. By imagining himself the hero of the story "Sleeping Beauty" and innocently believing in the simplistic fantasy of fairy tales, the little boy tragically ends up dying. The white parents, who less innocently believed in the fairy tale-like narrative they told themselves, caused the death of their child. In the story of Sleeping Beauty, an evil witch conjures thorns and a dragon around Sleeping Beauty to prevent her from being rescued—just like how the suburban couple puts up the thorny wire from the "Dragon's Teeth" company. So while the suburban couple thinks that they're heroes and that everyone else is a villain from whom they need to protect themselves, they are actually much like the bad witch in Sleeping Beauty—they are not being honest about their role in the story. The story the white narrator tells herself provides a sharp contrast, as in the frame story, she is somewhat villainous sitting in her house safely on top of a mine full of (presumably) dead indigenous miners. The only way to look at something as ugly as apartheid, Gordimer consequently suggests, is to upend conventional tropes of who is a hero, victim, or villain.

Gordimer tries to attack apartheid from all angles in this story. As a writer, she suggests that stories can be an effective critique of the unjust social system; though the effectiveness of this kind of protest can be debated, Gordimer clearly believes in the power of writing. She is highly cautionary, though, of any story that is too simplistic in its dealing with morality, as fairy tales so often are. Thus, she evokes the fairy tale trope only to upend it and show that one-dimensional narratives in an unjust society (here, apartheid) should be greatly distrusted.

SYMBOLS

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

THE RAZOR WIRE

The razor wire is symbolic of apartheid, which destroyed South African society by keeping different races apart. Apartheid is an Afrikaans word that literally means "aparthood" or "separateness," so the razor wire—which is meant to violently separate the white family from black intruders—reflects the legal and military infrastructure of apartheid, which kept the races separate by force.

When the suburban husband and wife install the razor wire, they've explicitly chosen it for its violence: "Placed the length of walls, it consisted of a continuous coil of stiff and shining metal serrated into jagged blades, so that there would be no way of climbing over it and no way through its tunnel without getting entangled in its fangs. There would be no way out, only a

struggle getting bloodier and bloodier, a deeper and sharper hooking and tearing of flesh." This quote explicitly shows the violence that the couple envisions will keep poorer, black South Africans off their property—but it also foreshadows the ironic ending of the story, in which the couple's own young son dies horrifically in this exact way. This suggests to readers that the collateral damage of apartheid isn't one-directional: even though white people think they'll only benefit from forced segregation, the razor wire cuts both ways, and the family ends up destroyed by it when their son dies. The razor wire can also be interpreted as a description of the logic of apartheid itself: the system of violently separating the races inevitably becomes, like the razor wire, "a struggle getting bloodier and bloodier, a deeper and sharper hooking and tearing of flesh." It's a horrible, violent system that, once in place, destroys everything around it.

It's also worth noting that Gordimer consistently associates the razor wire—symbolic of apartheid—with evil. The suburban family chooses razor wire in the first place because it evokes a concentration camp—Gordimer uses that term—in its no-frills style. With this, Gordimer evokes the German Holocaust and also suggests that the family is imprisoning themselves with the razor wire, even as they think they're keeping themselves safe. The name of the security company, Dragon's Teeth, also evokes evil, hearkening to the Sleeping Beauty story that the wife tells her son as a bedtime story on the night before his death. In some versions of Sleeping Beauty, the evil fairy conjures a dragon alongside the thorns to keep the Prince from rescuing Sleeping Beauty. So, in Gordimer's story, the family is the evil fairy, conjuring the thorns to create a malicious barrier that—in order to have a happy ending—has to come down. The metaphorical significance is that wealthy white people who benefit from black exploitation have conjured apartheid—in the way the evil fairy conjured the thorns—and, in order to have a just society, apartheid must be destroyed.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Bloomsbury edition of *Jump and Other Stories* published in 1991.

Once Upon a Time Quotes

"I have no burglar bars, no gun under the pillow, but I have the same fears as people who do take these precautions, and my windowpanes are thin as rime, could shatter like a wineglass. A woman was murdered (how do they put it) in broad daylight in a house two blocks away, last year, and the fierce dogs who guarded an old widower and his collection of antique clocks were strangled before he was knifed by a casual labourer he had dismissed without pay.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 21-22

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the narrator explains why she's so fearful of the creaking sound echoing throughout her house in the middle of the night. She knows that she doesn't have much of anything in the way of a security system protecting her from the outside world, and she's acutely aware of the violence that has been unfolding in her own neighborhood. Considering these two details, she reasonably assumes that the creaking sound belongs to an intruder who is going to rob and/or kill her.

Given the narrator's awareness and fear of the instances of violence in her neighborhood, it may seem surprising that she doesn't have any sort of security system insulating her from the terrifying outside world. It logically follows, then, that her lack of protection is a conscious choice. Indeed, the bedtime story she goes on to tell critiques a suburban couple who so desperately try to insulate themselves from their oppressed black neighbors, seeing them as a threat to both their safety and their perfect life. So in not protecting her home with all sorts of security mechanisms and insulating herself in this way, the narrator is attempting to show her solidarity with oppressed black South Africans. In other words, while the narrator has every reason to be fearful, she also seems to grasp that the violence in her neighborhood is born out of living in an unjust, oppressive society. Having a gun under her pillow or burglar bars on the windows will do nothing to change the underlying current of bigotry and inequality that incites violence.

> The misbeats of my heart tailed off like the last muffled flourishes on one of the wooden xylophones made by the Chopi and Tsonga migrant miners who might have been down there, under me in the earth at that moment. The stope where the fall was could have been disused, dripping water from its ruptured veins; or men might now be interred there in the most profound of tombs.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

Here, the narrator realizes that the creaking sound she mistook for an intruder's footsteps was actually the sound of the house settling: thousands of miles below the narrator's house is a mine, and the hollowed-out rock walls sometimes collapse and crash down on the earth below, reverberating upwards and shaking the house's foundation. In this passage, the narrator thinks of the kind of people who work in such mines: black migrant workers, particularly Chopi and Tsonga people, which are both groups native to South Africa.

Besides providing important context—it's one of the few moments that explicitly make it clear that the story is set in apartheid-era South Africa—this detail also paints a broader picture of what life is like for poor, black South Africans in this time and place. The miners' work is dangerous for an array of reasons (exposure to dust and toxins being particularly bad for a miner's health), but it can also be outright deadly—here, the narrator speaks to the very real possibility that if there were any miners down in the mine that day, they are probably dead now from the rock caving in. The dangerous nature of the job implies that the black migrant workers are considered expendable and replaceable. These workers are relegated to such a low place in society that they literally work beneath people's feet, out of sight and out of mind, and even their deaths would be nothing more than a faint creaking of the houses sitting thousands of miles above the mine.

> In a house, in a suburb, in a city, there were a man and his wife who loved each other very much and were living happily ever after. They had a little boy, and they loved him very much. They had a cat and a dog that the little boy loved very much. They had a car and a caravan trailer for holidays, and a swimming pool which was fenced so that the little boy and his playmates would not fall in and drown. They had a housemaid who was absolutely trustworthy and an itinerant gardener who was highly recommended by the neighbours.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Gardener, The Housemaid, The Little Boy / The Son, The Woman / The Wife, The Man / The Husband

Related Themes:

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

This passage marks the beginning of the inner story within the frame story—a bedtime tale that the narrator is telling herself to try to fall asleep after the anxiety and fear of thinking there was an intruder in her house. Even though the story doesn't start out with the standard "Once upon a time" opening, the name of the overarching story itself plus the line about "living happily ever after" suggests that this story is a fairytale. However, while the story paints a picture of happy idealism—the family loves each other, their staff is reliable, they have a pool, their child is safe from mishaps, they take vacations—there is nevertheless a feeling that something isn't quite right. While classic fairytales chart protagonists struggling and then end with them living happily ever after, this particularly story begins with the family living happily ever after—an indication that things aren't likely to get better for the family, only worse.

Besides foreshadowing the tragedy to come and introducing the theme of storytelling in an explicit way, this passage also touches on the themes of racism and separation. The family is clearly concerned with safety, seen through the way they fence in their pool and carefully vet their staff. This suggests that the family seeks to separate or insulate themselves from the outside world, which is the first indication that the outside world isn't a safe, stable, or happy one. In this vein, the story states that the "housemaid [...] was absolutely trustworthy" and the "itinerant gardener [...] was highly recommended by the neighbours," implying that many housemaids and gardeners—who, notably, are all black in the world of the story—*aren't* trustworthy or reliable. This kind of sweeping generalization points to the atmosphere of inequality, racism, and fear that apartheid created.

> They were [...] subscribed to the local Neighbourhood Watch, which supplied them with a plaque for their gates lettered YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED over the silhouette of a would-be intruder. He was masked; it could not be said if he was black or white, and therefore proved the property owner was no racist.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Woman / The Wife, The Man / The Husband

Related Themes:

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

At the beginning of the bedtime story about the suburban family, the narrator lingers on the image of the couple's Neighborhood Watch sign, which both shows their membership within the organization and is meant to deter potential intruders. This sign again underscores the family's concern with safety and the way they seek to insulate themselves from the dangerous outside world, but it also speaks to the way that separating oneself from others creates an illusion of safety. The sign sets up an us-versus-them dynamic of suburban residents and outsiders and is meant to make potential intruders feel watched and unwelcome, but the sign itself doesn't actively protect the residents or keep intruders at bay—it's still just a sign. It's implied that it makes the residents feel safer, but this sense of safety is only an illusion that is easily punctured. As the story goes on to show, robberies still abound in the neighborhood and even appear to increase in frequency.

What's most striking about this passage is the mention that the "would-be intruder" on the sign is merely an outline of a body rather than a colored-in image of a person, and the intruder has a mask on, so it's impossible to discern the intruder's race. Even though this supposedly "prove[s] the property owner [is] no racist," the implication here is that the homeowners unequivocally assume intruders to be black. In other words, the suburb's residents see their oppressed black neighbors as villains poised to spoil the residents' perfect lives, but they smugly—and falsely—present themselves as non-racists.

> [...] [The housemaid] implored her employers to have burglar bars attached to the doors and windows of the house, and an alarm system installed. The wife said, She is right, let us take heed of her advice. So from every window and door in the house where they were living happily ever after they now saw the trees and sky through bars, and when the little boy's pet cat tried to climb in by the fanlight to keep him company in his little bed at night, as it customarily had done, it set off the alarm keening through the house.

Related Characters: The Woman / The Wife, The Narrator (speaker), The Little Boy / The Son, The Housemaid

Related Themes:

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

After hearing of a neighbor's maid who was tied up by thieves so that they could ransack her employer's house, the housemaid implores the husband and the wife to add more security features to their home. The housemaid's anxiety in this passage is palpable—she understands that, in a situation where she's left alone in the house, she would be automatically responsible for all her employers' possessions, and she would be the one to suffer were thieves to break in. It is this burden, not necessarily her concern for her employers' belongings, that spurs her to ask for a more robust security system. At the heart of this moment is the sense that anyone connected to relative wealth in an unequal society will inevitably spend their lives afraid. It's interesting, too, that the housemaid herself is black, though her call to reinforce the house with burglar bars doesn't necessarily point to her own inherent racism. It's possible that she's internalized racism and is therefore fearful and suspicious of her own race, but it's also likely that she just has a keen understanding that violence will always be a symptom of living in an unjust society.

This passage also underscores how trying to wall oneself off from other people can be more harmful than helpful. Ironically, the family is now "living happily ever after [...] through bars," which is bleak way to live and certainly far from "happily ever after." Even though the burglar bars are meant to keep intruders out, they actually keep the family *in*. Instead of protecting themselves, the family is imprisoning themselves. Even the cat—the most mobile character in the story—experiences this, as its usually unrestricted movement is now monitored, broadcasted, and ultimately restrained.

> The alarms called to one another across the gardens in shrills and bleats and wails that everyone soon became accustomed to, so that the din roused the inhabitants of the suburb no more than the croak of frogs and musical grating of cicadas' legs. Under cover of the electronic harpies' discourse intruders sawed the iron bars and broke into homes, taking away hi-fi equipment,
>
> television sets, cassette players, cameras and radios, jewellery and clothing, and sometimes were hungry enough to devour everything in the refrigerator or paused audaciously to drink the whisky in the cabinets or patio bars.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

After the husband and wife install an alarm system, other neighbors follow suit—but the alarm systems don't have the desired effect. The alarm systems are comically ineffective and are no more impactful than the steady hum of cicadas or the croaking of frogs that one can easily tune out. Rather than adding a layer of protection as intended, the alarms only add noise and distraction that allow burglars to slip in and out of homes undetected. This ironic twist emphasizes how trying to separate oneself from others is often counterproductive or outright impossible. Though an alarm system provides the illusion of safety, it doesn't actually make the suburb's residents any safer—and it even harms them in the process by making them more vulnerable. In other words, the logic of separating people leads not to greater security but to devastation.

As the novel unfolds, it builds out this idea through the family's very last attempt at bolstering their home's security: affixing razor-sharp wire to the house's exterior. It becomes clear that Gordimer is using the razor wire as a metaphor for the twisted logic of apartheid, which centers around keeping people apart. Like apartheid, the wire ultimately hurts the very people who thought they would benefit from it, and the same is true here with the alarm systems.

> The wife could never see anyone go hungry. She sent the trusted housemaid out with bread and tea, but the trusted housemaid said these were loafers and *tsotsis*, who would come and tie her up and shut her in a cupboard. The husband said, She's right. Take heed of her advice. You only encourage them with your bread and tea. They are looking for their chance…

Related Characters: The Man / The Husband, The Housemaid, The Narrator (speaker), The Woman / The Wife

Related Themes:

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

As more and more black people begin to enter the exclusively white suburb in the narrator's story—some looking for work, some loitering, some begging—the wife feels called to help. However, her brief moment of compassion is immediately squashed: both her husband and her housemaid affirm that the beggars outside are opportunistic criminals just "looking for their chance" to hurt or steal from the family. The housemaid even uses the word *tsotsis*, which is slang for something like "hooligan" or "criminal." This disapproving term doesn't automatically mean that the housemaid—who is implied throughout the story to be black—is racist or a betrayer of her own race. It's possible that it reflects her internalized racism, but it may also simply showcase her understanding that her fellow oppressed black South Africans desperately turn to violence and crime because of the deeply unjust society they live in. Whatever the reason, the housemaid nonetheless knows that in toeing the line between the black and white spheres of society, she is in danger herself.

> When the man and wife and little boy took the pet dog for its walk round the neighbourhood streets they no longer paused to admire this show of roses or that perfect lawn; these were hidden behind an array of different varieties of security fences, walls and devices. […] While the little boy and the pet dog raced ahead, the husband and wife found themselves comparing the possible effectiveness of each style against its appearance […].

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Little Boy / The Son, The Woman / The Wife, The Man / The Husband

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

At this point in the story, robberies and intrusions are continuing to take place despite residents' mounting

security systems, some of which are detailed here. In particular, this passage speaks to the way that trying to insulate oneself from others can be more of a form of imprisonment than protection, which is a thread that runs throughout the story. Where there once were cheerful gardens and manicured lawns now stand towering walls and fences, making the neighborhood seem bleak and dangerous rather than warm and inviting. In trying to protect themselves from the outside world, these residents actually build monuments to their fear and imprison themselves.

It's also significant that the husband and wife wait to discuss "the possible effectiveness of each style against its appearance" until their young son is out of earshot. This foreshadows the little boy's profound ignorance at the end of the story when he tries to climb the razor wire wall affixed to the outside of the house—his parents' latest security feature—pretending to be the Prince fighting his way through a thicket of thorns to get to Sleeping Beauty. Throughout the story, there's no indication that the little boy has any idea what South Africa's social and political climate is like. Of course, the little boy is young, and it's perhaps understandable that the parents try to make space for him to have a carefree and innocent childhood. However, the story also leaves readers with the overwhelming feeling that nothing about apartheid-era South Africa is carefree and innocent, and in crafting this kind of falsely comforting narrative for their son, the parents actually have a hand in his demise. In other words, the story showcases how the stories that people tell themselves and others matter, and that telling the wrong story can be disastrous.

> One evening, the mother read the little boy to sleep with a fairy story from the book the wise old witch had given him at Christmas. Next day he pretended to be the Prince who braves the terrible thicket of thorns to enter the palace and kiss the Sleeping Beauty back to life: he dragged a ladder to the wall, the shining coiled tunnel was just wide enough for his little body to creep in, and with the first fixing of its razor-teeth in his knees and hands and head he screamed and struggled deeper into its tangle.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Husband's Mother, The Little Boy / The Son, The Woman / The Wife

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

After having the razor wall installed, the woman reads her son the story of Sleeping Beauty. Wanting to be brave like the Prince in the story, the little boy resolves to climb the razor wall, determining that it's not all that different from the menacing thicket of thorns that the Prince had to face in order to save Sleeping Beauty. But in the fairytale, the Prince makes it through the thorns unscathed, and there's a happy ending. Having heard this particular ending, the little boy doesn't seem to recognize that this kind of cheerful ending isn't a given in real life. He quickly meets this hard truth, as he cries out in pain the very moment that the razor wire grazes his skin. Through the boy's gruesome death, Gordimer makes a larger comment about storytelling, suggesting that the stories people tell themselves—particularly falsely comforting stories—can be lethal.

While this case of storytelling gone wrong is the most overt, it's not the only one in "Once Upon a Time." After all, this chilling story about the little boy is what the narrator is telling herself after a restless night—instead of telling herself a comforting bedtime story to help herself drift off to sleep after a frightening moment that made her think about awful social realities, she does the courageous thing and tells herself a story that tries to reckon with the complex and horrible truth of apartheid. It seems that the message here is, in part, that telling truthful stories is a necessary—but also inadequate—step towards fixing social wrongs, whereas telling falsely comforting ones leads to further violence.

The boy's decision to climb the wire and his subsequent death also happens extremely fast; the bulk of the story is slow-moving and centers around his parents' constant preoccupation with ever-new security features. That the story tumbles so quickly from this point onward seems to reflect the way that violence and devastation can snowball in atmospheres of fear, injustice, and inequality.

> […] the alarm set up wailing against the screams while the bleeding mass of the little boy was hacked out of the security coil with saws, wire-cutters, choppers, and they carried it—the man, the wife, the hysterical trusted housemaid and the weeping gardener—into the house.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Little Boy

/ The Son, The Gardener, The Housemaid, The Woman / The Wife, The Man / The Husband

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

While the story about the suburban family begins with them "living happily ever after," it ends with this moment of utter devastation as the little boy's parents and their employees bring the boy's body into the house after his grisly death at the hands of the razor wire. The gruesome description of the boy's body as a "bleeding mass" points back to an earlier description of the razor wire's destructive power: were an intruder to climb the razor coils—or even attempt to climb back *out* of the wire—it would be "a struggle getting bloodier and bloodier." Initially, the husband and wife assumed that, at worst, they would wake up one day to find a burglar caught in the wire—a death that, while still morbid and menacing, would at least mean that the wire was doing its job of protecting the family from harm. Instead, though, the wire harms the family rather than protecting them, as it leads to the death of an innocent person, their young son.

The unintended and devastating destruction that the wire causes speaks to the equally devastating and destructive logic of apartheid. The racial separation and unequal distribution of wealth that apartheid upholds is meant to benefit white South Africans, but in supporting apartheid (seen symbolically though their choice to install the wire wall), the suburban couple is actually killing innocent people in the process (here, their own son). That the little boy has to be "hacked out" of the wire with a whole array of heavy machinery also emphasizes how the dangerous logic of apartheid isn't easily dismantled. Like the razor wire itself, apartheid and the social unrest that stems from is "a struggle getting bloodier and bloodier." As the little boy's lifeless body is carried into the house and the story comes to a close, Gordimer leaves readers with the idea that apartheid devastates all parties involved—even the very people it is supposed to benefit.

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.

ONCE UPON A TIME

When someone writes to the narrator to ask if she'll write a short story for children, she declines on the grounds that she doesn't write for children. The letter-writer pushes back, saying that he once heard a novelist insist that all writers should write at least one short story for children. The narrator considers writing back that she doesn't feel like she has to write anything.

The story immediately introduces the theme of storytelling through the narrator's occupation as a writer, the fact that she's narrating these events to the reader, and the man's request that she contribute a short story to an anthology. The narrator's refusal to tell a certain kind of story—in this case, a children's story—begins to hint at the idea that people must be careful about the stories they tell themselves.

The narrator recalls being woken up suddenly the previous night by a creaking sound, which sounds suspiciously like someone walking on a wooden floor. Ears perked, she strains to hear the creaking sound to discern if it's moving closer to her bedroom door. She doesn't have security bars on the windows, nor does she have a gun, but that doesn't mean she's not fearful. The narrator recounts how, last year, a woman was murdered inside a house two blocks away in the middle of the day, and an old man and his vicious guard dogs were killed by a worker whom the man had let go without pay.

It seems that the narrator's choice to not protect her home from intruders is a conscious one. Clues throughout the story—plus Gordimer's own history—suggests that this story is set in apartheid-era South Africa, which was a time of severe violence, racism, and white supremacy. Given this context, readers can reasonably assume that the narrator—implied to be a white woman—is making a political and ethical decision not to insulate herself from the non-white people who are moved to violence and criminality under such an oppressive system. However, that doesn't mean she's not afraid of the very real threat of violence unfolding in her own neighborhood, as she immediately assumes that she's about to be killed or robbed.

Lying in bed in the dark, the narrator already feels like a victim of a crime, and her heart beats wildly in her chest. However, she soon realizes that the creaking sound isn't from an intruder's footsteps. Her house is built atop of mines, so whenever chunks of hollowed-out rock fall away thousands of feet below where the narrator sleeps, the foundation of the house creaks slightly.

The narrator's fear gestures to the idea that the inequality of material conditions breeds fear, which is a thread that runs throughout both the frame story about the narrator and the inner story that's still to come. With that in mind, the fact that the ground underneath the narrator's house is falling away points to the way that, like the hollowed-out rock undermines the foundation of the house, inequality gradually undermines the foundations of society and may one day destroy it entirely.

As her pulse slows, the narrator thinks of the Chopi and Tsonga migrant workers who toil away down in the mines. She imagines that the mine underneath her house may be no longer in use, or it may now be the gravesite of all the men who were working there before the rock fell away. Unable to fall back asleep, the narrator begins to tell herself a bedtime story.

The mention of the Chopi and Tsonga people—ethnic groups native to Mozambique, South Africa—further situates this story in apartheid-era South Africa. That the narrator assumes the workers toiling away in the mines are black migrants paints a picture of a sociopolitical environment in which black people have few opportunities for economic advancement and must take dangerous—and presumably low-paying—jobs. It's also metaphorically significant that the black workers are laboring in mines far below the city, reflecting their position at the very bottom of apartheid's social pyramid.

In the narrator's story, a loving husband and wife and their beloved little boy are "living happily ever after" in a suburban house. The little boy has a cat and dog, both of whom he loves dearly. The family has a trailer for camping and a swimming pool that's enclosed by a fence to prevent the little boy from falling in and drowning. The housemaid is "absolutely trustworthy," and their "itinerant gardener" came highly recommended—after all, the husband's mother, "that wise old witch," had warned them to not just hire anyone off the street.

The story begins in an almost singsong-y way, as the narrator lists all of the family's possessions—suggesting that material possessions will play a key role in the story—and paints their life as nothing short of idyllic. Though the story doesn't actually begin with the words "Once upon a time," the story's title and the mention of "living happily ever after" both lead the reader to believe that this story will be a modern children's fairytale. However, the narrator begins the story with the family living happily ever after—usually the very last line in fairytales—which suggests that this peaceful, perfect life is about to be dismantled. The mention of the gates around the pool to keep the boy from drowning also feels somewhat jarring and morbid in the midst of so much cheerfulness, foreshadowing the tragedy to come. The mention of the gates around the pool and the "absolutely trustworthy" staff also suggests that the family is concerned with safety.

The family has medical insurance and disaster insurance, and they're members of the local Neighborhood Watch organization, hence the plaque reading, "YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED" that's affixed to their front gates. On the plaque is the silhouette of a masked intruder, but it's impossible to tell if he's black or white, which "therefore proved the property owner was no racist."

Once again, it's clear that the family is preoccupied with safety and does everything in their power to insulate themselves from disaster. The idea that the ambiguous silhouette on the Neighborhood Watch sign "proved the property owner was no racist" is ridiculous, as it's made abundantly clear throughout the story that this family—and others in the suburb—fear black intruders in particular, which is whom the sign is aimed to deter. That the ambiguous skin color of the intruder on the sign is somehow evidence of anti-racism seems to be a narrative that the family is telling themselves to make them feel like morally upstanding people.

The one thing the family's insurance doesn't cover, however, is riot damage. But the riots take place outside of city limits, where black people are "quartered," and black people are only allowed into the suburb as "reliable housemaids and gardeners." Still, the wife fears that "such people" might one day invade their suburb and surge through their front gates; her husband reminds her that law enforcement officers have guns and tear gas "to keep them away."

The word "quartered," which means "housed in a specific place," brings to mind images of slave quarters—housing that is crowded, dilapidated, and intentionally set away from white people (as is the case here, too). The word also carries with it an element of control: the apartheid government has the power to tell black people where to live and where they can and cannot go, corralling and commanding them like animals rather than treating them as human beings with agency. Beyond this, the family refers to black people as "them" or "such people," and the family also characterize black people as animals by suggesting that they must be tamed or controlled by violence. Separation is a key theme throughout the story—like black people being forced to live separately from white people—and it appears again in this passage through the distinction of "reliable housemaids and gardeners." This implicitly suggests that black people are unreliable by default, while a select few stand apart.


To appease his wife—and because extreme violence is taking place just outside the city—the man has electronically controlled gates installed in front of the house, complete with a speaker system that allows visitors to relay a message to someone inside the house. The little boy is delighted and uses it as a walkie-talkie when he plays cops and robbers with his friends.

This passage continues to build on the theme of separation by showing how it can create an illusion of safety. The couple believes that adding this extra barrier—electronically controlled gates—around their property will somehow insulate them from the violence that springs from living in an unequal, oppressive society. Meanwhile, the little boy's fascination with the speaker system—coupled with his playful game of cops and robbers—emphasizes his young age and also implicitly suggests that his parents haven't talked to him about what the gates are specifically for or what is going on more broadly in their community. Even though the boy is quite young, the story repeatedly implies that his parents are in the wrong for not openly discussing racism, inequality, and their own fear with him.


Burglaries begin taking place across the suburb, and the couple's housemaid knows of a fellow housemaid who was tied up and locked in a cupboard by robbers while her employers were gone. This worries the couple's housemaid because she, too, is often left alone in the house and in charge of her employers' possessions. She implores the couple to add security bars on the windows and doors and to invest in an alarm system; the wife agrees, and the extra security features are promptly installed. The family now sees the sky and nature outside through metal bars, and the little boy's cat sets off the alarm at night.

The housemaid's deep anxiety of being in charge, however temporarily, of her employers' possessions speaks to the way that wealth inequality creates fear. Her feeling that she's going to be tied up and locked in a cabinet echoes the narrator's instant assumption in the frame story that the creaking sound in her house is an intruder who is there to rob or kill her. But while the narrator makes the ethical decision not to barricade her house (signifying her ideological unity with black South Africans, even though this does nothing to change their material conditions), the family in the inner story rushes to fortify their house and belongings in whatever way they can. Significantly, neither reaction alleviates fear: the family just continues to add more and more security features to their house, while the narrator understands that her decision doesn't make her impervious to the consequences of an oppressive society. And while the family thinks they're protecting themselves from the outside world, the image of them looking at the sky and trees through barred windows suggests that they're actually imprisoning themselves.

The neighbors' alarm systems are also triggered by cats or mice. Alarms go off so frequently in the suburbs that they begin to sound like cicadas or frogs humming in the background of everyday life. Thieves take advantage of this and carry out their robberies while the alarms are blaring so that homeowners don't hear them coming and going, arms laden with jewels, television sets, and expensive clothing.

The security systems in the suburb are comically ineffective—for one thing, they're triggered by the entirely harmless things like mice and pet cats, and for another, they end up being totally ignored. While the people in the neighborhood think that insulating themselves from outsiders with an alarm system will make them safer, this feeling of safety is only an illusion. Indeed, the blaring alarms actually prove to be an effective cover for thieves coming and going, emphasizing how trying to separate oneself from outsiders will inevitably fail.

Eventually, other black people besides just "trusted housemaids and gardeners" begin loitering in the suburbs, looking for work—but the man and his wife heed to the husband's mother's warning about not hiring people off of the streets. Moved by the sight of people begging, the woman orders the housemaid to bring them bread and tea, but the housemaid refuses, insisting that the beggars are *tsotsis* (criminals) who will tie her up. The husband agrees and tells his wife that she would only be "encourag[ing] them" and that "They are looking for their chance."

The story often uses the phrase "trusted housemaids and gardeners" or "reliable housemaids and gardeners." In repeatedly making the distinction, the story is showcasing the way that white people like the husband and wife make sweeping generalizations about black people. They imply that black people are inherently unreliable and untrustworthy, and that there are only a few exceptions to this rule. In this passage, it is the housemaid, a black woman, who contributes to the oppression of those of her own race. However, this doesn't mean that the housemaid herself is racist. Instead, it seems that the housemaid realizes that her position as the maid for an upper-class white family puts her in danger. When "Once Upon a Time" was published in the late 1980s, crime was at an all-time high: between 1980 and 1990, burglaries rose by 31 percent, while serious offenses rose by 22 percent. This surge in crime was at least partially a reaction to a new constitution implemented in the mid-1980s that guaranteed parliamentary representation to "colored" (mixed-race) people and Asian people but not black people. Given this context, it's clear that the housemaid's fear of the tsotsis*—South African slang for "hooligans" or "criminals"—is justified and hinges on the broader sociopolitical environment rather than personal discrimination.*

When the husband realizes that the electronic gates, alarm system, and security bars won't prevent an intruder from climbing over the wall into the garden, the wife suggests that they make the wall higher. For Christmas, the husband's mother, "the wise old witch," gifts the couple with extra bricks for their wall. The little boy receives a book of fairytales and a Space Man costume.

The mounting security measures surrounding the couples' home mirrors both their own mounting fear and uneasiness and the increasingly fraught political atmosphere in South Africa. It's significant that the husband realizes that their previous investments in home security aren't comprehensive and fool-proof—while the husband is under the impression that a higher wall is the answer, the story implicitly suggests that it's actually impossible to fully separate oneself from others. Meanwhile, the small detail about the little boy's Christmas presents is another reminder of his innocence and youth, which contrasts starkly with the heavy anxiety, fear, and political unrest coloring the rest of the story. The book of fairytales coupled with the repetition of the phrase "wise old witch" is yet another nod to the story's fairytale title—"Once Upon a Time"—and paves the way for the story's return to the theme of storytelling near the end of the narrative.

The robberies and intrusions continue in the suburb at all hours of the day and night. One day, as the husband and wife discuss this, they watch the little boy's cat effortlessly scale the seven-foot wall. The side of the wall facing the street is marked up with the cat's paw prints—as well as the outline of the kind of shabby running shoes that the loiterers in the suburb wear.

The footprints up the side of the wall are another indication that one can't fully wall themselves off from other people, and that trying to insulate oneself like this brings a false sense of security. Even though the couple's security system is multilayered (and getting more robust by the day, it seems, with all of the couple's additions), it's still not infallible. Earlier, the story noted how the cat often set off the security alarm, and now the cat easefully scales the front wall.

Later, the man and his wife take the little boy and his dog out for a walk around the neighborhood. While the couple used to leisurely admire their neighbors' roses or perfectly manicured lawns, they now scrutinize their neighbors' various security systems. Some people have opted for the utilitarian option of shards of glass embedded in concrete walls, while other neighbors attempt to blend spears, iron grilles, and lances into their specific architectural styles. When the little boy runs ahead, the husband and wife discuss the pros and cons of each security system.

What were once cheerful family homes have turned into austere compounds, showing how the inequality of material possessions churns up fear and distrust. Instead of being horrified by this new normal, the couple intends to join in and build even more monuments to their fear. Indeed, the different materials listed in this passage—concrete, glass, iron, paint—almost make the security systems seem like outrageous art projects.

Eventually, the husband and wife settle on a security system that is by far the ugliest of them all—it looks like something out of a concentration camp—but is hopefully the most effective in warding off intruders. The security system consists of a series of metal coils attached all the way up the length of the house. Each coil is spiked with jagged **razor-sharp thorns**, ensuring that anyone who tries to climb up the coils—or even climb *out* of the coil—will immediately be shredded to bits in "a struggle getting bloodier and bloodier."

That the couple picks a security system that looks fit for a concentration camp—Gordimer explicitly uses this term—again rehashes the idea that in trying to protect and insulate themselves from the violent outside world, the family is actually imprisoning themselves. In this way, all of these security measures are just as destructive for would-be intruders as they are for the family itself, which is an idea that will continue to build as the story comes to a close. The razor wire symbolizes the ruinous logic of apartheid. Like a would-be intruder struggling to free themselves from the wire's thorny grasp, those oppressed under apartheid rule are trapped in "a struggle getting bloodier and bloodier."

The next day, workmen from the Dragon's Teeth security company install the **razor wire** on the house where the family is "living happily ever after." Now wrapped in metal, the house gleams harshly in the sun. The husband assures his wife that the metal will weather over time and take on a softer look, but she tells him that he's wrong—the metal is weather-proof. They both hope that the cat won't try to scale the walls anymore. Luckily, the cat stays either in the little boy's bed or in the garden and doesn't try to climb.

While at the beginning of the narrator's bedtime story about the family, the phrase "living happily ever after" painted a cheerful picture of a happy family who was indeed living out a life fit for a fairytale, now it's used ironically. No part of the family's life—which is clearly marked by fear and self-isolation—seems happy anymore. The cat was the last creature that enjoyed mobility, and now even the cat is imprisoned inside the compound. Given that the razor wire is a symbol for apartheid, it's significant that in this passage, the wife firmly informs his husband that he's wrong about the metal weathering. Her disagreement seems to imply that the violence, fear, and oppression wrapped up in apartheid rule won't simply soften or go away over time by doing nothing, and telling oneself this narrative is unproductive.

At night, the woman reads the little boy the story of Sleeping Beauty from the book of fairytales that the husband's mother got him for Christmas. The following day, the little boy pretends to be the brave Prince who must fight his way through a dense thicket of thorns in order to get to Sleeping Beauty and awaken her with a kiss. Deciding that the new **razor wire wall** will be the perfect thicket of thorns, the little boy lugs a ladder over to the way and wriggles into a coil.

In the story of Sleeping Beauty, an evil witch puts a curse on Sleeping Beauty that puts her to sleep until her true love wakes her with a kiss. But to keep the Prince—who is her true love—from reaching her, the witch surrounds Sleeping Beauty in a thicket of thorns. In the end, the Prince gets through the thorns and saves Sleeping Beauty. That the little boy reenacts this story by climbing the razor wire highlights how the stories people tell themselves can be lethal.

Immediately, the **razor thorns** dig into the little boy's skin, and he screams in agony, inadvertently entangling himself deeper and deeper into the wire. The housemaid and gardener come running first, screaming, and the gardener tries unsuccessfully to get the little boy out, badly wounding his own hands in the process.

Given that the razor wire is a symbol for the ruinous logic of apartheid, this passage emphasizes how apartheid hurts innocent people (here, the little boy and the gardener who is trying to fish him out). It even harms the very people who thought they would benefit from it (the suburban family who thought the security system would keep them safe from harm).

The husband and wife come running out next, and the house alarm begins to blare, most likely set off yet again by the cat. The little boy's body, now a "bleeding mass" is "hacked out" of the **razor wire** with several types of heavy equipment. The man, his wife, the housemaid, and gardener carry "it" into the house.

This gruesome passage again speaks to the way that the stories people tell themselves can be dangerous and even outright deadly. The little boy's family is always telling themselves a story in which they are the heroes and their oppressed black neighbors are the villains, the intruders and vagrants that threaten them and spoil their otherwise perfect lives. But this story that they're telling themselves is racist and completely divorced from the reality of the situation, in which the white family is benefiting from the exploitation of poor, black South Africans. The family telling themselves the wrong story leads to tragedy when their son dies in the process of reenacting a fairytale (it's implied that he dies since his body is referred to as "it"). But on a broader scale, telling the wrong story also props up the social norms that Gordimer suggests will destroy society.

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