



Fear and Paranoia in Gordimer's "Once Upon a Time"

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Abstract — Nadine Gordimer's short story, "Once Upon a Time," is a masterful literary critique of the psychological and social pathologies engendered by the apartheid regime in South Africa. This paper argues that Gordimer employs the ironic structure of a bedtime story to expose how the paranoia of the privileged class becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, ultimately destroying the very security and innocence it seeks to protect. The analysis begins by examining the story's unique frame narrative, where the author's own irrational fear mirrors the larger societal neurosis, establishing a direct link between personal anxiety and collective political pathology. The paper then deconstructs the central allegory of the suburban family, whose escalating security measures—walls, gates, alarms, and finally, razor wire—symbolize a moral and social isolation that is both a cause and effect of the apartheid mentality. This "architecture of fear" is not presented as a rational response but as a spiraling obsession that creates its own prison. The tragic climax, in which the family's young son is gruesomely mutilated by the razor wire while enacting a fairy-tale narrative, forms the core of the argument. This paper contends that the child's death is not a random accident but the logical culmination of a system built on violence and exclusion. The fairy tale motif, subverted to a horrific end, serves to highlight the grotesque reality beneath the veneer of suburban "happily ever after." Ultimately, the paper concludes that Gordimer's story is a powerful indictment of a society where fear erodes humanity, demonstrating that the tools of oppression, no matter how justified by paranoia, will inevitably turn against their creators. The story stands as a timeless warning about the corrosive effects of building fortresses instead of communities.

Keywords — Apartheid Literature, Innocence, Ironic Fairy Tale, Nadine Gordimer, Paranoia, Security Aesthetics, Self-Destruction, Social Paranoia.

I. INTRODUCTION

Nadine Gordimer, a Nobel laureate whose work is inextricably linked to the moral landscape of apartheid South Africa, consistently probed the intricate relationship between public politics and private life. Her short story, "Once Upon a Time," is a devastatingly concise allegory that dissects the culture of fear permeating the white suburban psyche during the late apartheid era. Far from a simple moral fable, the story utilizes a complex narrative structure and the subversion of a classic genre to argue that the paranoia bred by systemic injustice creates a self-destructive feedback loop.

Through the tragic trajectory of a family whose security measures annihilate their own child, Gordimer illustrates that the architecture of fear, designed to keep danger out, ultimately incarcerates and destroys what lies within.

The story's brilliance is first evident in its frame narrative, which immediately blurs the line between personal neurosis and political reality. The narrator, Gordimer herself, is jolted awake by a sound she interprets as a burglar, only to discover it is the harmless settling of her own house. This moment of self-recognition—"I had no burglar bars on my windows... I have no pistol in the drawer... I was the one who had woken myself up"—establishes the central theme: fear is often an internal construct, a product of the mind that can be as real and consequential as any external threat [3]. This personal anecdote serves as a microcosm for the larger story she is about to tell. By framing the suburban parable within her own experience of irrational fear, Gordimer universalizes the condition while simultaneously rooting it in the specific, heightened anxieties of a society built on violent segregation. As scholar Dominic Head notes, this structure allows Gordimer to "implicate herself in the very psychology she is critiquing, suggesting that the disease of fear is pervasive and requires conscious, moral effort to resist" [4].

The family in the inner story represents the archetypal white suburbanites of apartheid South Africa. They are initially "happy and secure," possessing a son, a housemaid, and a comfortable life. However, their consciousness is mediated not by direct experience but by mediated reports of "riots, burglaries, and attacks in other areas." This consumption of fear, akin to what modern theorists would call a "moral panic," fuels a spiraling obsession with security. Their response is a physical manifestation of the apartheid ideology: separation through barriers. Each new security feature—the wall topped with "burglar bars," the gates, the alarm system, the "BEWARE BAD DOG" sign—is a logical progression in what Stephen Clingman terms the "aesthetics of control," a performative attempt to impose order on a world perceived as chaotic and threatening [1]. These measures are not merely practical; they are symbolic acts that reinforce the family's isolation and other the unknown populace beyond their walls. The trusted housemaid, a figure from that outside world, is rendered invisible in their security calculus, highlighting the selective blindness of their privilege.

The ultimate symbol of this corrosive paranoia is the coil of razor wire, euphemistically named “the Dragon’s Teeth” by the manufacturer. This moniker, borrowing from mythological imagery, perfectly captures the way the family mythologizes their own fear, transforming a tool of brutal violence into a heroic protector. The installation of the razor wire marks the point where defensive security mutates into an offensive, lethally indiscriminate threat. It represents the final stage in the moral decay of the community, where the preservation of privilege justifies the potential for lethal violence. This aligns with J.M. Coetzee’s exploration of apartheid’s psyche, where he observes that a regime founded on violence inevitably sees that violence seep into the domestic sphere, poisoning the most intimate human relations [2]. The home is no longer a sanctuary but a fortified compound, and the family becomes both the warden and the inmate of their self-made prison.

The story’s tragic irony culminates in the gruesome fate of the little boy. Driven by the innate human desire for adventure and narrative, he immerses himself in the fairy tale of a prince battling through a “terrible thicket of thorns” to save a princess. In a devastating convergence of fantasy and reality, the boy confuses the razor wire with the fairy-tale thicket. The garden, a traditional symbol of innocence and natural growth, becomes the stage for his mutilation. His enactment of a classic story of heroic triumph is brutally rewritten by the logic of his parents’ world into a story of horrific self-destruction. This climax is Gordimer’s masterstroke. The child, the embodiment of innocence and the future the parents sought to protect, is literally torn apart by the physical manifestation of their fear. As Judie Newman argues, “The fairy-tale genre is inverted; the quest for a ‘happily ever after’ through security results not in salvation, but in a blood sacrifice offered to the gods of paranoia” [6].

The final, harrowing image of the parents trying to disentangle their bleeding son from the razor wire is one of profound futility and condemnation. There is no external villain to blame; the agent of destruction is their own creation. The story offers no redemption, only the stark consequence of a life lived in fear. The security apparatus, built brick by brick and wire by wire, did not fail in its purpose; it succeeded perfectly in repelling an intruder.

The tragic flaw was the failure to recognize that in such a fortified environment, the only “intruder” capable of breaching the defenses is the innocent imagination of the child within. The family’s efforts to wall out the social crisis of apartheid resulted in the importation of that crisis’s most violent characteristics into their very home.

In conclusion, “Once Upon a Time” transcends its specific historical context to offer a timeless and universal warning. Gordimer’s use of the ironic fairy tale framework elevates the narrative from a simple political allegory to a profound exploration of the human psyche under siege. The story demonstrates that when a society chooses the path of fortification over connection, when it elects to build walls rather than bridges, it inevitably cultivates the seeds of its own destruction. The real “Dragon’s Teeth” are not the coils of steel, but the seeds of fear sown in the human heart, which grow into a thicket that chokes out love, trust, and ultimately, life itself. The story remains a chillingly relevant commentary on any society where privilege is maintained through segregation and paranoia, reminding us that the greatest danger often lies not in the unknown beyond the walls, but in the fortresses we build ourselves.

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