

**Gordimer's *Once Upon a Time*:
A Tale of the Disastrous Legacy of Apartheid in South Africa**

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Nadine Gordimer 1923-2014

Courtesy: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Nadine-Gordimer>

Abstract

The Nobel Laureate Nadine Gordimer has written numerous novels, essays and short-stories on the South-African way of life. Through her works, she has not only highlighted the plight of the black and coloured people living in South Africa, during Apartheid, but she has also underlined the predicament of the white liberals in South Africa, who existed in a very small number, in the country. Her works were much preoccupied with the political, social, cultural and

psychological impacts of power during Apartheid, that people often wondered, what her subject matter would be, when apartheid will eventually come to an end. But Gordimer has chosen other themes and has proved that the end of the Apartheid era by no means brings an end to her vocation as a writer. She has opted new themes that concern life, death, insecurities, fatal diseases and many other.

But the most interesting part of her writing during the apartheid regime, towards the end of it and after the end of it, has been her skill to delve deep into the psychology of people, irrespective of their class, colour and gender. It is this very insight, this very observation and this very understanding of human nature which makes her stand above the rest and makes her one of the greatest writers of the world. This paper attempts to look into that ability of Nadine Gordimer to look deep into the psychology of people, paying particular attention to “*Once Upon A Time*”.

Keywords: Apartheid, South Africa, *Once Upon A Time*, Nadine Gordimer, racial struggle

Gordimer’s Writings

Gordimer has very keenly observed the nuances of the shifting of power from Whites to Blacks towards the late 1980’s. Through her writings, Gordimer has always been a champion of the blacks. But at the same time, her keen observation does not fail to see, how insecure the whites feel, when they are robbed of the power – which they used to enjoy over the majority of blacks.

July’s People

The dilemma is beautifully taken up by Gordimer in her novel, *July’s People*, where Maureen, fails to accept the reversal of power between her and her servant. Gordimer has often projected the plight of the liberal whites, who always remained the sufferers, even when whites were in power and even when blacks came into power, because in both the situations, they were trusted neither by racial whites nor by blacks. Gordimer’s keen observation doesn’t fail to understand that:

“Just as there are people physically maimed by the struggle between white power and black liberation, there is psychological, behavioural damage that all of us in South

Africa have been subject to in some degree, whether we know it or not, whether we are whites who have shut eyes and electronically- controlled gates on what was happening to blacks, or whether we are blacks who have been transported and dumped where the government wished, tear-gassed and shot, detained, forced into exile, or have left to join the liberation army which came into being when no other choice remained. Violence has become the South African way of life.” (*Living in Hope and History* 140)

Gordimer’s *Once Upon a Time*

Gordimer has taken up this very disastrous aftermath of the racial struggle as the theme of her beautiful short-story, “*Once Upon a Time*,” which appeared in 1989. In this particular story, she has dealt with the insecurity of the white populace, towards the end of the apartheid regime. The story deals with a family, which comprises a man, his wife, his mother and his son who live peacefully in a white suburb. They have a faithful maid and a gardener for the maintenance of their home. They have virtually everything which a happy family can ever desire for. But despite having a beautiful home, a car, a swimming pool and a pet dog, they don’t have peace of mind. Fear keeps lurking in their hearts. The fact that the blacks have been wronged for a very long period of time by the whites, makes them suspect that blacks can now harm the white people. Another reason for feeling threatened by the black people was that the couple was very well aware that the blacks were economically very poor and the instinct for survival can lead them to commit crime.

The Family and Its Insecure Feeling

The family depicted in the story, represents Whites in general, who felt extremely insecure in the changed environment and who inculcated imaginary fears within themselves, and in order to keep themselves protected from the wronged black populace, they took all possible precautions and safety measures. Incidents like burglaries in the neighbourhood and riots outside the city scared them beyond limits and they tried their best to ensure their safety by fitting electronically-controlled gates, by getting burglar-bars fitted, by setting the alarms, by raising the walls of the house and finally by installing “... 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”. (*Jump and Other Stories* 29) The safety instrument was so much effective, that “there would be no way out, only a struggle getting bloodier and bloodier, a deeper and sharper hooking and tearing of flesh”. (*Jump and Other Stories* 29) Having taken all the possible security measures, the family felt self-assured that no outsider can now dare to creep into their house. But they hardly imagined that their little son barely understood the imaginary fears of the whites against the blacks and the logic behind the installation and the procedure of the working of these instruments. For him, the receiver kept at the electronically-controlled gates was no better than a “walkie-talkie” (*Jump and Other Stories* 26) to play with his friends. Even the “DRAGON’S TEETH” (*Jump and Other Stories* 29) for him was some kind of an adventurous device to play with.

“Dragon Teeth”

Unfortunately, the little boy’s mother had narrated a fairy tale to him, the previous night, and the poor child imagined himself to be the Prince of that particular fairy tale and attempted to show his courage, by trying to enter the house through the devastating device, namely, “DRAGON’S TEETH,” (*Jump and Other Stories* 29) imagining it to be a grove of spikes. As Gordimer puts it:

“... 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”. (*Jump and Other Stories* 30)

And, thus the poor child becomes the victim of the imaginary and precautionary fears of the parents rather than any outside burglar or invader. Through this story, what Nadine Gordimer seems to suggest is, that the damage done by apartheid will not come to an end immediately. The legacy of apartheid, its devastating social, psychological and economic effects will continue to affect the people of all races, even after it comes to an end.

Story within the Story

In the story, *Once Upon a Time*, Gordimer employs the technique of story within the story. When the story begins, the writer suddenly wakes up in the night due to some strange sound and she gets scared as she believes that someone is approaching towards her room. She is scared, as she realizes:

“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 wine glass”. (*Jump and Other Stories* 23-24)

The fear in her heart makes her recall the recent murders that were committed, by men invading the homes of people. But soon she realizes that her fear was uncalled for, as, “there was no human weight pressing on the boards, the creaking was a buckling, an epicentre of stress”. (*Jump and Other Stories* 24) Actually the reason of the sound was the mine work and not the intrusion of intruders.

Godimer’s Implicit Suggestions

But what Nadine Gordimer seems to suggest through this particular episode, is that even after apartheid comes to an end, the disastrous effects, whether economical or psychological, will take a very long time to come to an end. The whites - both who had wronged the black populace for so many years and the ones who were liberal, would not be distinguished by the wronged black populace. As a result, all the Whites, will have to remain scared and frightened all the time.

Thus, Nadine Gordimer, through this short-story seems to suggest that the disastrous legacy of apartheid will continue, long after the policy comes to an end. And the whites will have to consistently live under fear and take necessary precautions. They will have to live in self-created prison-houses. But the irony is that even this over- precaution on their part can lead to their self-destruction, as is depicted through the life of the white family in the story.

Gordimer, through this story, also seems to suggest that not only the precautionary gadgets can harm the scared Whites, as happens in the case of the little boy, but the other precautionary measures taken by the whites, including not employing the poor blacks and not offering them food, can also bring about their destruction, as the ones craving for food will be

left with no option but to commit crime. The only solution to bring an end to the post-apartheid violence, is creating economic justice in the society. Gordimer rightly observes:

“I believe we must create material justice before we can hope to eliminate the kind of violence that has become a tragic habit in South Africa. Given that base, I believe there is a good chance of decent relations between black and black, black and white in our country, whatever languages they speak, whatever their ethnic origins may be”.
(*Living in Hope and History* 145)

Thus, the story, *Once Upon a Time*, beautifully takes up the issue of the violence in South Africa, and it skillfully analyzes the root cause of this violence which is both the fear in the whites as well as the unemployment, poverty and starvation of the Blacks.

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