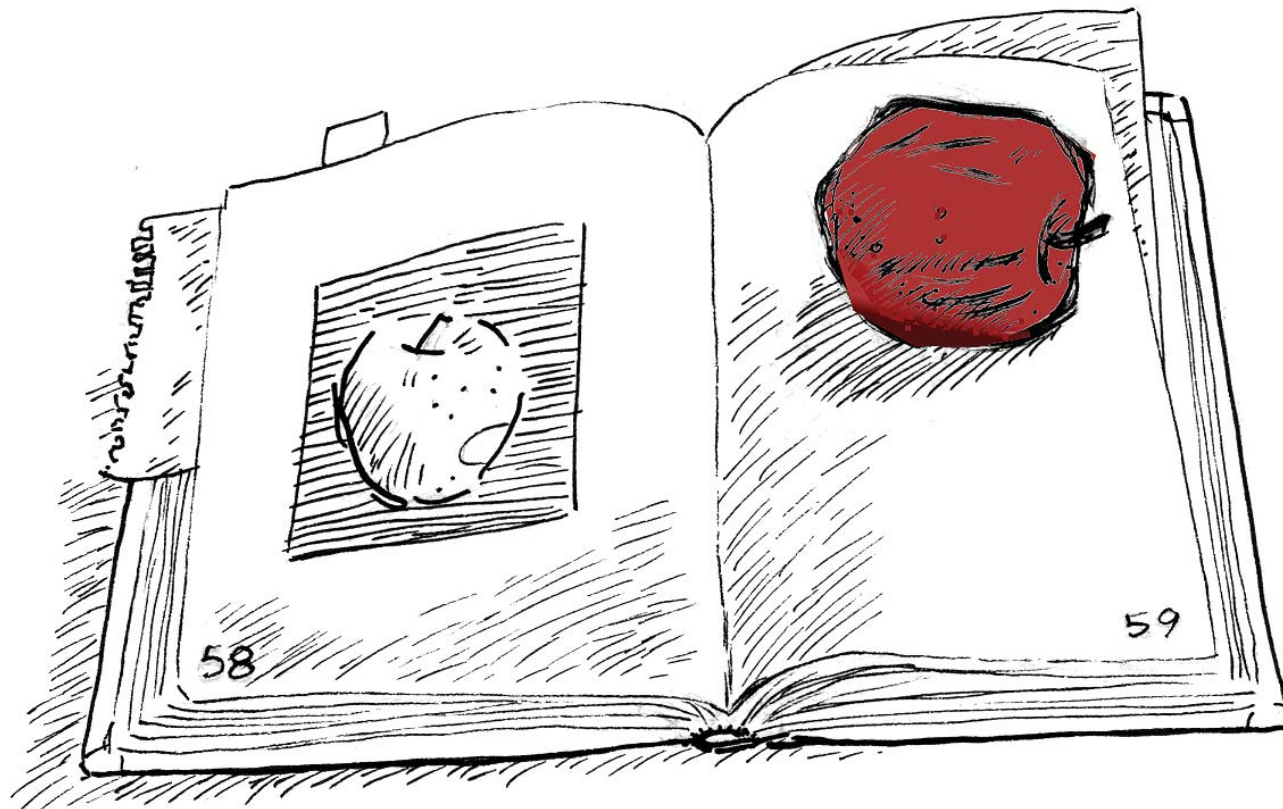


Nadine Gordimer



Once Upon a Time

The title of the story consciously triggers expectations in the reader.

- use of European Fairy Tale elements
- situations based on fantasy notion of contemporary reality
- themes reflecting notions of good versus evil
 - > recognizable figures of absolute good and absolute evil: hero and villain
 - > which result in a “happily-ever-after” ending for the “good characters,”
honor, recognition
 - > punishment for the wicked; committing violent crimes equates violent end
payment for dishonorable or immoral actions
- light reading rather than a heavy analytical discourse
 - > recognizable journey formula
 - > hero must perform tasks to win title of protagonist
 - > villain must perform crimes to confirm title of antagonist

Once Upon a Time

She does utilize:

- strong fairy tale archetypes, symbolic characters
- use of common phrases which exist in fairy tales
- typical rhetoric of fairy tale structures, common phrasing
- universal setting: vague details regarding place, characters, and time
- repetition of key phrases, utilizing a pattern of three
- concept of a “frame story” — story within a story
- use of subconscious themes of fear, building suspense in the reader
- gruesome details and violence
- exposition immediately establishes a source of stress from an unseen enemy

Once Upon a Time

However, Gordimer twists these notions to construct a dark narrative which comments on contemporary society and human nature.

- notice the time line is deconstructed, composed of a “now” mentality of the author/narrator and the fictional time of the inner story
- the fairy tale she creates is a **parable** in disguise
 - > based on a realistic situation; without magical elements
 - > has an overt social commentary with an overt moralistic message; sarcasm
 - > composed as a terse autobiographical narrative
- the characters are psychological symbols, rather than models of good or evil
 - > the characters are displayed as examples of human behavior, allegorical; they are not fleshed out representations of specific individuals, rather they are over-generalizations of how people react to situations
- these characters are not absolutes; not specific representations of good nor bad

Once Upon a Time

Gordimer follows and transforms fairy tale notions by:

- showing in the main frame story the psychological nature of this genre
 - > in a sense, the outer story defends the need for scary stories
 - > the narrator creates the worst example of “children’s story” she can conceive in reaction to the faceless, nameless critic
- interior narrative begins in reverse; the characters are already “living happily ever after” (128), yet the story ends in tragedy, with a death
- repetition of key phrases: “YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED” (128)
- mentions typical fairy tale concepts with modern twists, new definitions:
 - “wise old witch” (128)
 - “electronic harpies’ discourse” (129)

Once Upon a Time

Parallels / Differences Between the Two Stories

Exterior Tale

Gordimer herself as subject

Deals with a Faceless Critic

Conflict results in insomnia

First person narration

Interior Tale

Suburban couple as subject

Deals with Mother-in-law as Critic
and faceless Society

Conflict results in tragedy

Third person narration

Ironically both critics are well-intended antagonists— however, in the end both cause disruptions to the lives of their targets.

Once Upon a Time

Items to Consider:

- *What is the setting? What time period is it?*

Once Upon a Time

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- *What is the setting? What time period is it?*

Although the story was written and published in the late Twentieth Century, the setting is an universal suburban upper class landscape sometime after World War II. Little emphasis is placed on a crucial position of time.

We have an undefined contemporary time in an undefined country with nameless characters.

Once Upon a Time

Items to Consider:

- *What is the setting? What time period is it?*
- *Why is this crucial to the plot?*

Once Upon a Time

Items to Consider:

- *What is the setting? What time period is it?*
- *Why is this crucial to the plot?*

This vague notion of time and place allows anyone to relate to the situation on some level. No matter your feelings towards the characters' actions, you can relate to the situation because it is a very common, modern scene.

Once Upon a Time

Items to Consider:

- *What is the setting? What time period is it?*
- *Why is this crucial to the plot?*
- *What is the conflict type presented in the second story?*

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- *What is the setting? What time period is it?*
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Human versus human

Aesop's Fables

“The Man, the Boy, and the Donkey” || attributed to Aesop

A man and his son were once going with their donkey to market. As they were walking along by his side a countryman passed them and said, “You fools, what is a donkey for but to ride upon?” So the man put the boy on the donkey, and they went on their way. But soon they passed a group of men, one of whom said, “See that lazy youngster, he lets his father walk while he rides.” So the man ordered his boy to get off, and got on himself. But they hadn't gone far when they passed two women, one of whom said to the other, “Shame on that lazy lout to let his poor little son trudge along.” Well, the man didn't know what to do, but at last he took his boy up before him on the donkey. By this time they had come to the town, and the passersby began to jeer and point at them. The man stopped and asked what they were scoffing at. The men said, “Aren't you ashamed of yourself for overloading that poor donkey of yours — you and your hulking son?” The man and boy got off and tried to think what to do. They thought and they thought, until at last they cut down a pole, tied the donkey's feet to it, and raised the pole and the donkey to their shoulders. They went along amid the laughter of all who met them until they came to a bridge, when the donkey, getting one of his feet loose, kicked out and caused the boy to drop his end of the pole. In the struggle the donkey fell over the bridge, and his forefeet being tied together, he was drowned.

Try to please everyone, and you will please no one.

“The Man, the Boy, and the Donkey.” *Folktales of Aarne-Thompson-Uther*.
D. L. Ashliman, trans. 2009. Web. 10.29.2011.