

once upon a time by nadine gordimer

literary analysis

Once Upon a Time by Nadine Gordimer: A Literary Analysis

Introduction:

Step into the unsettling world of Nadine Gordimer's "Once Upon a Time," a chillingly relevant short story that transcends its seemingly simple fairytale structure. This post delves deep into a literary analysis of Gordimer's masterpiece, exploring its themes, symbolism, and masterful use of narrative techniques to expose the insidious nature of prejudice, fear, and the construction of "otherness." We will unpack the story's allegorical power, examine its social commentary on apartheid-era South Africa, and dissect its enduring relevance to contemporary societal anxieties. Prepare to unravel the layers of this deceptively simple yet profoundly powerful tale.

I. The Fairytale Framework and its Subversion:

Gordimer cleverly employs the familiar structure of a fairytale – "Once upon a time..." – to immediately disarm the reader. This seemingly innocent beginning lulls us into a false sense of security before plunging us into a narrative rife with anxieties and escalating violence. The story's initial idyllic setting, a seemingly safe suburban home, is gradually encroached upon by fear and paranoia. The narrative's subversion of the fairytale trope lies in its stark portrayal of escalating violence not fueled by magic or fantasy, but by the very real and terrifying consequences of prejudice and social division. The "happily ever after" is conspicuously absent, replaced by a chillingly realistic and brutal conclusion.

II. The Symbolism of Security and Isolation:

The central image of the high wall, initially built for security, ironically becomes a symbol of isolation and the self-imposed imprisonment of the family. This wall, built brick by brick, mirrors the construction of social barriers and the deliberate segregation that characterized apartheid South Africa. The increasingly elaborate security measures – electric fencing, alarms, guard dogs – represent the desperate attempts to maintain a sense of safety in a rapidly deteriorating social climate. However, these measures ultimately fail, highlighting the futility of trying to isolate oneself from the realities of a society ravaged by inequality and fear.

III. The Construction of the "Other":

Gordimer masterfully portrays the insidious process of "othering," where the

"outsiders" – initially undefined – become increasingly demonized and dehumanized. The family's escalating fear transforms the ambiguous "others" into a monolithic threat, justifying the increasingly violent measures taken to protect themselves. This process reflects the real-world mechanisms of prejudice and the dangerous ease with which fear can be manipulated to create division and justify oppression. The story highlights how easily generalizations and stereotypes can replace nuanced understanding, leading to a spiral of violence and dehumanization.

IV. The Role of Language and Narrative Voice:

Gordimer's use of language is both precise and suggestive. The narrative voice remains detached, almost clinical in its description of escalating violence, which only enhances the story's chilling effect. This detached narration underscores the dehumanizing effects of fear and prejudice, revealing how easily individuals can become complicit in violence without fully acknowledging the moral implications of their actions. The seemingly simple language reinforces the universality of the themes, allowing readers to recognize the parallels between the fictional world and their own realities.

V. The Enduring Relevance of "Once Upon a Time":

While rooted in the specific historical context of apartheid South Africa, "Once Upon a Time" transcends its historical setting. The story's themes of fear, prejudice, and the construction of the "other" resonate deeply with contemporary anxieties. The story serves as a potent warning against the dangers of unchecked fear, the insidious nature of prejudice, and the devastating consequences of social division. In a world increasingly characterized by social unrest and political polarization, Gordimer's tale remains profoundly relevant and serves as a powerful cautionary tale.

VI. Story Outline:

Name: Once Upon a Time by Nadine Gordimer: A Detailed Structural Breakdown

Contents:

Introduction: Overview of the story's setting, characters, and initial narrative hook.

Chapter 1: The Building of the Wall: Analysis of the symbolic significance of the wall and its escalating construction.

Chapter 2: The Growing Fear: Examination of the family's increasing paranoia and the dehumanization of the "other."

Chapter 3: Security Measures and Isolation: Discussion of the security measures and their ironic effect of increasing isolation.

Chapter 4: The Climax and Violence: Analysis of the violent climax and its implications.

Chapter 5: The Conclusion and Legacy: Interpretation of the story's ending and its enduring relevance.

Conclusion: Summary of key themes and their lasting impact.

VII. Detailed Explanation of the Outline Points:

Each point in the outline above would be expanded upon in a detailed section of the blog post. For instance, "Chapter 1: The Building of the Wall" would explore the initial construction of the wall as a response to petty theft, how the wall evolves into a symbol of social division and the increasing fortification mirrors the escalating political tensions of the time, connecting the literal construction of the wall to the metaphorical construction of racial divides in apartheid-era South Africa. Each subsequent chapter would similarly delve into the other aspects mentioned in the outline, providing detailed textual evidence and critical analysis to support the points made.

VIII. FAQs:

1. What is the main theme of "Once Upon a Time"? The main themes are the construction of "otherness," the dangers of unchecked fear, and the insidious nature of prejudice leading to violence.
1. What is the significance of the fairytale structure? The fairytale structure subverts expectations, creating an ironic contrast between the seemingly innocent beginning and the violent ending.
1. How does Gordimer use symbolism in the story? The wall, the security measures, and the undefined "others" all carry significant symbolic weight.
1. What is the role of the narrative voice? The detached narrative voice enhances the story's chilling effect by highlighting the dehumanization inherent in the family's actions.
1. What is the historical context of the story? The story is set against the backdrop of apartheid South Africa, directly addressing the social and political climate of the time.

1. How is the story relevant today? The themes of fear, prejudice, and the construction of the "other" are relevant to contemporary issues of social division and political polarization.

1. What is the significance of the ending? The ambiguous ending leaves the reader to contemplate the long-lasting consequences of fear and violence.

1. What literary devices does Gordimer use effectively? Gordimer uses symbolism, irony, and a detached narrative voice to create a powerful and disturbing effect.

1. What are the key critical interpretations of "Once Upon a Time"? Critical interpretations often focus on the story's allegorical nature, its exploration of fear and prejudice, and its enduring relevance to contemporary social issues.

IX. Related Articles:

1. Nadine Gordimer's Short Stories: A Critical Overview: A comprehensive analysis of Gordimer's short fiction, exploring themes and stylistic techniques.

1. Apartheid Literature: A Study of Social Commentary: Examines the role of literature in reflecting and critiquing the apartheid system.

1. The Power of Symbolism in Nadine Gordimer's Works: A focused exploration of symbolism in Gordimer's writing, using "Once Upon a Time" as a case study.

1. Fear and Prejudice in Post-Apartheid South Africa: Discusses the

lingering effects of apartheid on South African society and the enduring presence of fear and prejudice.

1. The Use of Narrative Voice in Modern Short Fiction: Explores how narrative voice shapes the reader's experience and interpretation of a story.
1. Literary Analysis of "Once Upon a Time": Exploring the Allegorical Dimensions: Delves into the allegorical nature of the story and its deeper meanings.
1. Comparing "Once Upon a Time" to Other Fairytale Subversions: Compares Gordimer's story to other works that subvert traditional fairytale tropes.
1. Nadine Gordimer's Legacy: A Study of her Impact on South African Literature: Explores Gordimer's contribution to South African and world literature.
1. The Social and Political Context of Nadine Gordimer's "Once Upon a Time": Provides a detailed historical and political background to the story, contextualizing its significance.

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once upon a time by nadine gordimer literary analysis: *No Time Like the Present* Nadine Gordimer, 2012-03-15 Nadine Gordimer is one of our most telling contemporary writers. With each new work, she attacks - with a clear-eyed lack of sentimentality, and an understanding of the darkest depths of the human soul - the inextricable link between personal life and political, communal history. The revelation of this theme in each new work, not only in her homeland South Africa, but the twenty-first century world, is evidence of her literary genius: in the sharpness of her

psychological insights, the stark beauty of her language, the complexity of her characters and the difficult choices with which they are faced. In *No Time Like the Present*, Gordimer brings the reader into the lives of Steven Reed and Jabulile Gumede, a 'mixed' couple, both of whom have been combatants in the struggle for freedom against apartheid. Once clandestine lovers under racist law forbidding sexual relations between white and black, they are now in the new South Africa. The place and time where freedom - the 'better life for all' that was fought for and promised - is being created but also challenged by political and racial tensions, while the hangover of moral ambiguities and the vast and growing gap between affluence and mass poverty, continue to haunt the present. No freedom from personal involvement in these or in the personal intimacy of love. The subject is contemporary, but Gordimer's treatment is timeless. In *No Time Like the Present*, she shows herself once again a master novelist, at the height of her prodigious powers.

once upon a time by nadine gordimer literary analysis: *My Son's Story* Nadine Gordimer, 2003-11-03 This is a passionate love story; love between a man and two women, between father and son, and something even more demanding- a love of freedom.

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by the three senses: sight, sound, and smell.

once upon a time by nadine gordimer literary analysis: None to Accompany Me Nadine Gordimer, 2012-03-15 Set in South Africa, this is the story of Vera Stark, a lawyer and an independent mother of two, who works for the Legal Foundation representing blacks trying to reclaim land that was once theirs. As her country lurches towards majority rule, so she discovers a need to reconstruct her own life.

once upon a time by nadine gordimer literary analysis: The Marrow of Tradition Charles W. Chesnutt, 2024-02-07T17:03:10Z Following the events of the Wilmington Massacre of 1898 and the sensationalist news reports and novels that framed the events as a race riot incited by members of the black community, *The Marrow of Tradition* was written as a critical response to these harmful reports and provided a perspective that had otherwise been ignored. Developed out of the stories and accounts provided by members of the black community in Wilmington and from his own experience growing up and living in North Carolina, the novel is a probable accounting of the events leading up to and surrounding the Wilmington massacre. On a hot and sultry night, Major Carteret sits anxiously beside his wife, Olivia, as she enters early labor. After the fall of the Southern Confederacy, Major Carteret's family, one of the oldest and proudest in the state, fell to ruin, culminating in the deaths of his father and eldest brother. Only through winning the hand of Olivia Merrell did his fortunes turn around, and he goes on to found the *Morning Chronicle*, which becomes an influential paper among the discontented citizens. With the rising political power of the newly enfranchised black community, Major Carteret wishes for a radical change in direction for his state. Yet with the inauspicious birth of his child, his beliefs will come to be tested. Across town, a young Dr. Miller returns to Wilmington to lead a newly established hospital on the old Poindexter estate. Seeking to fulfill the growing need for medical care in the black community of Wilmington, Dr. Miller established a hospital that further served as a school for nursing with future aspirations for it to become a medical school. While respected among his colleagues, the young generation of black community members, Dr. Miller faces the challenges of being a black doctor from an older generation, and the growing restrictions being established by Jim Crow laws across the state. This book is part of the Standard Ebooks project, which produces free public domain ebooks.

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intensifying clamor of the streets outside. But as the line between idealism and violence becomes increasingly blurred, the friends are driven apart—one into the deepest peril, as the movement gathers inexorable force, and the other into the safety of exile in the American Midwest. There, pretending to be an exchange student, he falls in love with a social worker and settles into small-town life. Yet this idyll is inescapably darkened by the secrets of his past: the acts he committed and the work he left unfinished. Most of all, he is haunted by the beloved friend he left behind, the charismatic leader who first guided him to revolution and then sacrificed everything to ensure his freedom. Elegiac, blazing with insights about the physical and emotional geographies that circumscribe our lives, *All Our Names* is a marvel of vision and tonal command. Writing within the grand tradition of Naipul, Greene, and Achebe, Mengestu gives us a political novel that is also a transfixing portrait of love and grace, of self-determination and the names we are given and the names we earn. This eBook edition includes a Reading Group Guide.

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once upon a time by nadine gordimer literary analysis: *Burger's Daughter* Nadine Gordimer, 1980-11-20 A riveting history of South Africa and a penetrating portrait of a courageous woman. -- The New Yorker A must read fiction of South Africa from the winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature This is the moving story of the unforgettable Rosa Burger, a young woman from South Africa cast in the mold of a revolutionary tradition. Rosa tries to uphold her heritage handed on by martyred parents while still carving out a sense of self. Although it is wholly of today, *Burger's Daughter* can be compared to those 19th century Russian classics that make a certain time and place come alive, and yet stand as universal celebrations of the human spirit. Nadine Gordimer, winner of the 1991 Nobel Prize in Literature, was born and lives in South Africa.

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once upon a time by nadine gordimer literary analysis: *A Study Guide for Nadine Gordimer's "Once Upon a Time"* Gale, Cengage Learning, 2016 A Study Guide for Nadine Gordimer's *Once Upon a Time*, excerpted from Gale's acclaimed *Short Stories for Students*. This concise study guide includes plot summary; character analysis; author biography; study questions;

historical context; suggestions for further reading; and much more. For any literature project, trust Short Stories for Students for all of your research needs.

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Black life, and recognises the beauty and strength that lies within each of us.

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once upon a time by nadine gordimer literary analysis: *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer* Nadine Gordimer, 1990 *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer* edited by Nancy Topping Bazin and Marilyn Dallman Seymour Nadine Gordimer is one of the contemporary world's most admired writers of novels and short stories. This volume collects three decades of her interviews. In them she presents her attitudes toward her art and its interconnection with the oppressive, volatile politics in her native land. She has traveled extensively to other countries only to discover that no matter how white her skin she is indeed African and the only country she can call home is South Africa. If you write honestly about life in South Africa, apartheid damns itself, she says. She is ruthlessly honest, and her fiction has played the vital role of communicating in detail to the rest of the world the effects of apartheid upon the daily lives of the South African people. To maintain her integrity, she writes as though she were dead, without any thought of how anyone will react to what she has written. She remains heroically undaunted both by the banning of three of her novels by the white government and by the protests of radical blacks who assert that whites cannot write convincingly about blacks. She is concerned neither with the image of blacks nor with the image of whites, only with revealing the complexity, the full truth. This truth condemns the racism upon which apartheid is built. In her nine novels and eight volumes of short stories, Gordimer digs deeper and deeper until she has thematic layers. These include betrayal-political, sexual, every form and power, the way human beings use power in their relationships. Her accounts in these interviews of how she works and of which writers she admires will fascinate readers, scholars, teachers, and students alike. Co-editors Nancy Topping Bazin retired from the faculty of the English and women's studies departments at Old Dominion University, and Marilyn Dallman Seymour retired from the staff of the Government Publications Department of the Old Dominion University Library.

once upon a time by nadine gordimer literary analysis: *A Bird in the House* Margaret Laurence, 2010-01-26 One of Canada's most accomplished authors combines the best qualities of both the short story and the novel to create a lyrical evocation of the beauty, pain, and wonder of growing up. In eight interconnected, finely wrought stories, Margaret Laurence recreates the world of Vanessa MacLeod – a world of scrub-oak, willow, and chokecherry bushes; of family love and conflict; and of a girl's growing awareness of and passage into womanhood. The stories blend into one masterly and moving whole: poignant, compassionate, and profound in emotional impact. In this fourth book of the five-volume *Manawaka* series, Vanessa MacLeod takes her rightful place alongside the other unforgettable heroines of *Manawaka*: Hagar Shipley in *The Stone Angel*, Rachel Cameron in *A Jest of God*, Stacey MacAindra in *The Fire-Dwellers*, and Morag Gunn in *The Diviners*.

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