

## Summary "Once Upon a Time"

Nadine Gordimer's 1989 work "Once Upon a Time" follows many of the devices and elements of a fairy tale (hence the title, which is use of the ubiquitously in fairy tale) begins with a framing element, in which Nadine Gordimer herself is a character that is asked to write a short story for a children's book. She does not want to, rejecting the idea because she does not view it as her duty, as the person asking her to write the story says it is, and also because she doesn't think that an artist of any sort should be forced to create work on demand. This, she thinks, goes against the idea of artistic freedom.

The night following her rejection of the story, the character Gordimer is awakened by a noise that she can't at first identify. After realizing it isn't a robber or someone else looking to do her harm (it's only the floorboards, it turns out), she decides to tell herself a story in order to fall back asleep.

This story is the heart of "Once Upon a Time," is told from the third person point-of-view, and follow a husband, wife, and their son. The family members, Gordimer explains, truly love each other and this love can be seen in what they have—from a nice house and nice possessions to financial security and even hired help in their suburban home. With so many good things going on in their lives, the man's mother, who some say is a wise witch, suggests that the family takes steps to protect themselves—they wouldn't want to lose what they have, after all. The family follows this advice, enrolling in numerous plans and options to help protect themselves.

Despite all this, the family slowly becomes more and more paranoid about the events going on outside their house. There are riots and burglaries in the non-white parts of the town they live in. To allay her fears, the husband installs more security around their house—this time he erects a wall and electronic gates. The burglaries get closer to home for the family—as close as next door, where the maid is assaulted—and the family decides to up their security measures again, this time with metal

bars on the windows and a burglar alarm, which is overly sensitive and often—because it is so sensitive—sets off other alarms in the neighborhood.

The burglaries don't stop, however, and in fact get worse because the thieves now take advantage of the noise caused by all the alarms to break into homes. Other families decide to fire their help—a move which the main family does not do. Instead, they start to limit their interactions with their own maid as their paranoia grows. The newly hired employees in the neighborhood turn to loitering and this again unnerves the family. They build their wall higher, further ensconcing themselves against what they view as the constant threat of the outside world.

The escalation continues when the husband and wife decide that if their family cat can get up and over their wall with such ease, anyone can. Instead of building the wall higher, they install metal barb-like implements at the top (something they've seen on their neighbors' walls) in order to combat the perceived threat from wall-climbing burglars.

Feeling they are safe within their now-fortress, the mother decides to read to her son from a book of fairy tales given to him by the mother-in-law. The story she decides on is "Sleeping Beauty," wherein the valiant Prince must climb through barbs in a thorny thicket in order to save the princess. The boy, taking this all in, views the spikes at the top of their outer wall as these same thorns and decides to try and replicate the deed.

Once on the top of the wall, he becomes trapped, his body getting cut and scraped by the shards of metal all around him. The more he struggles, the worse it gets and the parents come out to his screams, seeing the gardener desperately trying to free the boy. When the gardener finally gets the boy free, he's dead, and is brought back into the house.

One of the major themes in this piece is understanding and having a fear of the Other. The family, we see often, is afraid of the outside world, of everything that isn't related to them. More specifically, this story speaks to the issue of race and the tensions that occurred in apartheid South Africa. The

more a group of people attempts to insulate themselves against the outside world and any threats they think are there, the worse off they are going to be in the long run.