Imagery and Structure in Nadine Gordimer's "Once upon a Time"

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Summary

In Nadine Gordimer's story "Once upon a Time" published originally in 1989, the white child caught in the barbed wire and then violently ripped free symbolises not only the death of white supremacy but also the birth of a new South African society. The multiple ironies of imagery and structure brilliantly clarify Gordimer's inverted fairy tale of a Yeatsian "terrible beauty".

Opsomming

Nadine Gordimer se verhaal "Once upon a Time" (oorpronklik gepubliseer in 1989) vertel van 'n wit kind wat in doringdraad verstrengel is en dan met geweld losgeskeur word. Dit simboliseer sowel die einde van wit oorheersing as die geboorte van 'n nuwe Suid-Afrikaanse bestel. Gordimer se omgekeerde feëverhaal oor 'n "verskriklike skoonheid" (wat aan Yeats herinner) word op 'n briljante wyse deur die veelvuldige ironieë van beeldspraak en struktuur belig.

> [W]hat we search for in fiction is not so much reality but the epiphany of truth.
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> (Nafisi 2004: 3)

Writing about Nadine Gordimer's 1991 collection "*Jump" and Other Stories*, Karen Lazar noted Gordimer's being "attentive to the 'morbid symptoms' that characterize South Africa's interregnum and which show no signs of letting up as the 1990s proceed" (Lazar 1992a: 787). Lazar recalls Gordimer's use of the phrase "morbid symptoms" as the epigraph from her 1981 novel *July's People*, and its origin in Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*.[1] Writing in the mid- to late-1980s, as the South African government's apartheid policies began to unravel, Gordimer seemed acutely aware

1. "The old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms." See Lazar's essay "*Jump" and Other Stories*: Gordimer's Leap into the 1990s" (1992a: note 13).

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of the political and social changes happening around her. From an interview in February, 1991 Lazar quotes Gordimer's later statement about her sense of her commitments to both her writing and to South African society:

> I think my purpose in life has never changed, it has been set simply on trying to write well, on trying to become a writer. But at the same time I am also a human being .... Writing is what I can do and I have put everything into it, whereas the things outside the writing, well, there are calculations there, those things are not done unreservedly. In other words, although I have given a lot of myself – and certainly all my conviction – to the struggle I have never given the whole of myself. There are many who may say that's my value, but perhaps on the contrary it's my limitation.
>
> (Gordimer quoted by Nicol 1991: 11 in Lazar 1992: 788)

Gordimer's sense of the strengths of these dual commitments is equally evident in her Nobel Prize Lecture "Writing and Being" from 1991:

> The writer is of service to humankind only insofar as the writer uses the word even against his or her own loyalties, trusts the state of being, as it is revealed, to hold somewhere in its complexity filaments of the cord of truth, able to be bound together, here and there, in art; trusts the state of being to yield somewhere fragmentary phrases of truth, which is the final word of words, never changed by our stumbling efforts to spell it out and write it down, never changed by lies, by semantic sophistry, by the dirtying of the word for the purposes of racism, sexism, prejudice, domination, the glorification of destruction, the curses and the praise-songs.
>
> (Gordimer 1999: 206)

Certainly much of Gordimer's fiction, especially from *July's People* (1981) and the stories in *Something out There* (1984) onward, can be viewed as working against the loyalties of the white South African society into which she was born.[2] In her important 1982 essay "Living in the Interregnum", Gordimer asserts that

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2. Karen Lazar observes that in her 1984 novella *Something Out There*, Gordimer is similarly concerned with whites' fear of the other "out there":

> "Something out there", with all its resonances of peripherality and externality, is the obverse formulation of the "laager", a metaphor which functions powerfully in and on the consciousness of most white South Africans and makes felt its resonances of self-protection and internality. Feeling even more threatened by the possibility of revolutionary change, many white South Africans from the 70s onward have expended increasing financial, psychic and other resources on their own self-enclosement and security.
>
> (Lazar 1992b: 54-55)

Lazar explains that "laager" originally "denoted a closed circle of wagons used in frontier wars by the Boers as a means of self-protection. It has come

> "[t]he white writer has to make the decision whether to remain responsible to the dying white order ... or to declare himself positively as answerable to the order struggling to be born .... And to declare himself for the latter is only the beginning .... I have entered into this commitment with trust and a sense of discovering reality, coming alive in a new way ... for a South Africa in which white middleclass values and mores contradict realities has long become the unreality, to me."
>
> (Gordimer 1988b: 278)

The stories in *Jump* reveal further her commitment to engaging through her fiction the continuing political struggles and resulting violence still occurring in her society in the late 1980s.[3] In her review of *Jump*, Karen Lazar indicates Gordimer's extensive use of a recurring motif that emphasises the terrible dichotomies of South African society evident in the late 1980s: "Many of Gordimer's stories contain a centre and a periphery: house and backyard, suburb and township, interior and exterior. The dichotomisation of space invariably stands for the gulf between different zones of consciousness and being" (Lazar 1992a: 796). Gordimer employs these "different zones of being" in several stories in *Jump*, including "Once upon a Time", Safe Houses," and "Comrades". Jeanne Colleran examines a second recurring feature of the collection:

> As a kind of "intellectual montage" where real elements operate as part of the discourse, and signifiers, selected and charged, are "remotivated within the system" of new frames, the stories in *Jump* appropriate figurally – that most obsessive image of recent South African history, the dead child. Dead children – or tortured or damaged children – haunt the collection; they are found in nearly half of the stories, and appear in each of the collection's first three pieces as, first, the child offered up as sexual reward in "Jump"; then as the shredded little boy of "Once upon a Time"; and next as the malnourished baby brother, soon surely to die, of "The Ultimate Safari". Their near presence wordlessly, repeatedly insists: this is the cost, this is the cost, this is the cost.
>
> (Colleran 1993: 242-243)

The features identified by Lazar and Colleran coalesce in "Once upon a Time", a remarkable story that also ironically appropriates the formulaic opening and several features of traditional fairy tales. The story narrates the increasingly desperate efforts by a white couple in a suburb to shield themselves from the black residents of a nearby township who, the couple

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to mean closed-minded mentality, xenophobia, protected elitism" (p. 64). The couple's house in "Once upon a Time" becomes a similarly self-enclosed bastion against the threatening blacks in the townships.

3. "Once upon a Time" was initially published in *Salmagundi* 81 (Winter 1989: 67-73).

believe, are threatening their home; and ends with the brutal death of their son in the jagged, coiled barbed wire (manufactured by a company called DRAGON'S TEETH) that his parents have installed above the wall surrounding their house. The "bleeding mass of the little boy" (Gordimer 1991: 30) presumably dies as he is carried into his parents' house. The death of their child is thus the "cost", as Colleran writes, of his parents' attempt to secure their fairy-tale existence against the transient, marauding blacks. In the story's most terrifying irony, that which was meant to keep blacks out kills the white child within. Gordimer's ironic use of fairy-tale features, of what Lazar terms these "different zones of being", and of the recurring image of the dead child make "Once upon a Time" unique in *Jump*. Drawing upon these features, I propose a reading of the story's imagery and structure that emphasises the multiple literary and political ironies of its startling conclusion.

In the first-person prologue to her story Gordimer insists that she does not "write children's stories", and then relates how "last night" she was "wakened without knowing what had roused me" (Gordimer 1991: 23). She then describes a terrible fear of being attacked, for she has "the same fears as people who ... take ... precautions" such as burglar bars and guns under pillows. Two neighbours have been attacked recently: a woman murdered "in broad daylight in a house two blocks away," and "an old widower ... knifed by a casual labourer he had dismissed without pay" (p. 24). Her fears of an attack, however, are unfounded, for what she hears is the buckling of a rock face in a mine deep beneath her house where "men might now be interred ... in the most profound of tombs" (p. 24). This image of the horrifying death of black miners far beneath the ground heralds the "bedtime story" she tells herself that, despite her earlier denial, assumes the familiar form of a children's fairy tale: "In a house, in a suburb, in a city, there were a man and his wife who loved each other very much and were living happily ever after. They had a little boy, and they loved him very much" (p. 25). In this initial sentence of the story proper, the verb "were" has a dual function; it is, first, a plural verb for the dual subjects "a man and his wife"; simultaneously, it is also a past tense indicating that the state of being described at the beginning of the tale will no longer pertain at its end. This "state of being" encompasses both the family's initially idyllic existence in a whites-only suburb and the segregated squalor of the black townships from which the family desperately tries to shield itself.[4]

4. The phrase "were living happily ever after" occurs three times: on p. 25, just after the story's narrative begins; on p. 26, as the family begins looking out through bars on all the windows; and finally on p. 30 where they are all living happily because the Dragon's Teeth security wire has been installed above the wall that surrounds the house and presumably provides ultimate security. As the story progresses, Gordimer's recurring use of the formulaic "were living happily ever after" becomes increasingly ironic, until finally the

These diametrically opposed locales represent the "different zones of consciousness and being" in "Once upon a Time" that Lazar (1992a: 796) asserts recur in Gordimer's fiction. David M. Smith finds Gordimer's fictional treatment of the geopolitics of apartheid essential to understanding both its institutionalised racism and its ultimate demise. Writing particularly of Gordimer's description of a black township in *Burger's Daughter*, Smith explains that Gordimer "captures something of both the life and the landscape of apartheid" (Smith 1992: 1). Smith continues:

> [Gordimer] hints at the central significance of urbanization under apartheid: that those places imposed by the white government on the black majority have taken on a life of their own, rebounding on the system to its discomfort and ultimate demise. Very simply, urbanization under apartheid, no matter how carefully the state contrived to control it, has undermined apartheid itself, bringing South African society and its cities to the brink of significant if still uncertain change.
>
> (Smith 1992: 1)

Writing similarly about Gordimer's fictional treatment of urbanisation in South Africa, Dominic Head finds a searing contradiction in that "the expanding settlements indicate the failure of the strategies of strict spatial control; on the other hand, the presence of blacks in townships adjoining cities is tacitly required since these people comprise much of a city's required workforce. There is a self-defeating element in this contradiction" (Head 1994: 31). In "Once upon a Time" this black workforce, with its determined consciousness or "zone of being", is precisely what the boy's parents attempt to exclude from their property even as they rely on black workers – a "trusted housemaid and the itinerant gardener" – to perform domestic chores. Among the most powerful ironies in "Once upon a Time" is that rather than an openly violent attack upon the fairy-tale existence of the story's family, like the ones that the story's narrator knows have happened recently in her neighbourhood and that she fears may happen to her, the urbanisation policies of apartheid that Smith describes undermine the story's white family from *within* as they manically pursue an elusive security that their own racism precludes.[5]

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verb "were" assumes a simple past tense amid the shattering horror of the final image.

5. Karen Lazar writes that "[i]n the 70s and 80s the Nationalist government's ideological onslaught against black liberation movements propagated an image of a dangerous, subhuman, foreign force lurking on and within the country's borders" (1992b: 54). In "Letter from Johannesburg" (1985), Gordimer observes that for most whites in the mid-1980s, there remained stark contrasts between the lives of whites in suburbs and those of blacks in the townships:

The contrasting physical and psychic territories, or locales, of "Once upon a Time" create the space within which Gordimer uses several traditional features of children's fairy tales to create a frightening, nearly unbearable irony. Besides the formulaic "living happily ever after" it has an apparently simple narrative that progresses quickly to its conclusion. The impetus is the wife's increasing insecurity about their home in the suburb and her husband's sincere attempts to reassure her of their safety. Gordimer thus establishes two parallel story lines: as the wife becomes increasingly fearsome and her husband buys and installs more sophisticated security devices, the violence and riots initiating "where people of another colour were quartered" (Gordimer 1991: 25), i.e. in the segregated but proximate townships, proliferate and press ever closer to the family's increasingly guarded and isolated dwelling. The family's quest for security begins with their joining the Neighbourhood Watch that supplies them with a plaque that reads "YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED". The wife fears that someone might tear off the plaque and storm into the house, so, despite his insistence that there are "police and soldiers and tear-gas and guns" to keep the intruders away, her husband installs "electronically-controlled gates" that demand speaking into a receiver before entering even as "buses were being burned, cars stoned, and schoolchildren shot by the police in those quarters out of sight and hearing of the suburb" (p. 26; note that this sentence also mentions presumably dead children). Capturing the fecund imagination of children, Gordimer tells us that the "little boy was fascinated by the device and used it as a walkie-talkie in cops and robbers play with his small friends" (p. 26), just as, in his innocence, he will imagine the Dragon's Teeth of the coiled barbed wire as a fearsome challenge in another child's game.

Though the riots are suppressed, many burglaries occur in the suburb and so the family's maid "implore[s] her employers to have burglar bars attached to the doors and windows of the house, and an alarm system installed" (p. 26). From every room in the house "where they were living happily ever after" the family now sees through bars that ironically identify their house as the prison it is becoming. Gordimer's narrator imagines these alarms in all the supposedly safe houses, set off perhaps by pet cats and dogs, keening uselessly to each other "across the gardens in shrills and

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> All of us [whites] go home to quiet streets, outings to the theatre and cinema, good meals and secure shelter for the night, while in the black townships thousands of children no longer go to school, fathers and sons disappear into police vans or lie shot in the dark streets, social gatherings are around coffins and social intercourse is confined to mourning.
> (Gordimer 1985: 309)

This stark dichotomy underlies the paralysing fear that motivates the white family's pursuit of "total security" in "Time".

bleats and wails that everyone soon became accustomed to, so that the din roused the inhabitants of the suburb no more than the croak of frogs and musical grating of cicidas' legs" (p. 27).[6] Ironically useless, these "electronic harpies" (p. 27) actually obliterate the noise of saws that the feared intruders use to cut the supposedly burglar-proof bars and steal everything they can, including a bottle of single-malt scotch, a loss "made keener by the property owner's knowledge that the thieves wouldn't even have been able to appreciate what it was they were drinking" (p. 27).

As more housemaids and gardeners are laid off, the now unemployed labourers "hung about the suburb" (p. 27). As their presence increases, the husband's mother, a "wise old witch", in traditional fairy tales an embodiment of evil, warns against taking on "anyone off the street". In an apparently innocent gesture of goodwill, the mother sends the trusted housemaid out to give the unemployed people "bread and tea", but her housemaid warns the mother that these people are "loafers and *tsotsis*, who would come and tie her up and shut her in a cupboard" (p. 27), an even more isolated space than her own home is becoming. Her husband also warns her against such ill-advised charity, for "[y]ou only encourage them with your bread and tea. They are looking for their chance" (p. 28). The wife agrees with her husband, and also believes now that the wall around their house should be higher. Thus "the wise old witch ... paid for the extra bricks as her Christmas present to her son and his wife – the little boy got a Space Man outfit and a book of fairy tales" (p. 28). Here Gordimer emphasises the most sustained irony of her story, for building the brick wall higher increases not the family's security but rather its isolation.[7] In a further ironic use of the stock figure of fairy tales, this "wise old witch", while ironically undermining the family's sense of security with the higher brick wall, simultaneously feeds the boy's innocent but ultimately fatal

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6. p. 27. The word garden occurs thrice in the story: on p. 27 as the alarms call to one another; on p. 28 indicating where the boy's tricycle is kept; and on p. 30 when the husband and wife "burst wildly into the garden". The image of the garden suggests the Biblical Garden of Eden, a place of initial innocence and freedom; however, the garden in this story is only a place of death. In the final paragraph the coiled barbed wire is called a "thicket of thorns", perhaps suggesting the child as a figure of Christ who was "crowned with thorns" as he suffered a hideous death for the sake of others. The boy's violent death as the cost of the birth of a new social reality in South Africa suggests that the boy is, like Christ, sacrificed so that others – here white as well as black South Africans – may live in a new society.

7. In "Speak Out: The Necessity for Protest", Gordimer writes that "[t]he margin of safety white South Africans feel they must claim for themselves extends yearly" (1971: 92). In yet another irony of this story, the parents and the father's mother reverse this trend by continually refortifying their house and turning increasingly inward for their elusive security.

imagination by buying him a book of fairy tales and a Space Man outfit, thereby propelling him with these gifts meant to stimulate his imagination into his fatal battle with the barbed wire dragon on top of the brick wall. While the husband's mother appears to be acting kindly towards her son's family and especially her grandson, in Gordimer's story her gifts finally prove fatal and ironically she ultimately fulfils the traditional role of a malevolent witch. As the reports of intrusions increase, the mother and father innocently walk round their neighbourhood looking at the latest security devices, and after many weeks decide on a new barricade:

> It was the ugliest but the most honest in its suggestion of the pure concentration-camp style, no frills, all evident security. Placed the length of walls, it consisted of 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. There would be no way out, only a struggle getting bloodier and bloodier, a deeper and sharper hooking and tearing of flesh. The wife shuddered to look at it. You're right said the husband, anyone would think twice .... And they took heed of the advice on a small board fixed to the wall: Consult DRAGON'S TEETH The People For Total Security.
>
> (Gordimer 1991: 29)

Gordimer's narrator brilliantly describes both the actual shape and composition of the device and its terrible symbolism. One sees first what the adult would see: the continuous, hollow roll of wire wound into a coil and "serrated into jagged blades" that protrude into the *interior* of the coil. Fixed on top of the now higher wall, this coil completely encircles the fortress that the family's home has become. One sees secondarily what a child might see: a giant, serpentine dragon, fangs protruding from its hideous mouth; or a tunnel,[8] deep and long which only the bravest dare enter (i.e., the "terrible thicket" of the story's final paragraph), and that promises at its end a miraculous delivery into heroism. Emboldened by fairy tales of knights in shining armour (surely a Space Man outfit would do!), here was an irresistible challenge: DRAGON'S TEETH.[9]

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8. Gordimer deftly anticipates this image of the coiled barbed wire as a tunnel. Earlier in the story the narrator describes the "people who were not trusted housemaids and gardeners" who "hung about the suburbs because they were unemployed" (p. 27). Some "sat about with their feet in the gutters, under the jacaranda trees that made a green tunnel of the street – for it was a beautiful suburb, spoilt only by their presence ..." (p. 27). The tunnel made by the trees is green and alive; that made by the coiled barbed wire is shining and deadly.

9. That the "security device" DRAGON'S TEETH ironically devours a child it was installed to protect is not only a terrifying irony but also exemplifies Karen Lazar's point that

In *The Uses of Enchantment*, Bruno Bettelheim explains *precisely* the state of mind that impels the young boy to challenge this metallic dragon.

> Only by going out into the world can the fairy-tale hero (child) find himself there; and as he does, he will also find the other with whom he will be able to live happily ever after .... The fairy tale is future orientated and guides the child ... to relinquish his infantile dependency wishes and achieve a more satisfying, independent existence.
>
> (Bettelheim 1977: 11)

In his chapter "Life Divined from the Inside", Bettelheim describes the sense of adventure and reward that inheres in most traditional fairy tales:

> Fairy tales intimate that a rewarding, good life is within one's reach despite adversity – but only if one does not shy away from the hazardous struggles without which one can never achieve true identity. These stories promise that if a child dares to engage in this fearsome and taxing search, benevolent powers will come to his aid, and he will succeed. The stories also warn that those who are too timorous and narrow-minded to risk themselves in finding themselves must settle down to a humdrum existence – if an even worse fate does not befall them.
>
> (Bettelheim 1977: 24)

Believing that he is protected by his Space Man outfit, and emulating the heroes he has encountered in his book of fairy tales, the young boy seeks "to discover his identity and calling" (Bettelheim 1977: 24) by challenging this hideous monster that has suddenly appeared on top of the wall around his house. The culminating irony of Gordimer's adoption of this traditional fairy-tale motif is that in this looming battle between the dragon and the would-be hero, the dragon will win.[10]

> Gordimer's stories almost always involve a radical shift in power relations of some kind: between antagonists, sexual or political, or between what those antagonists stand for more broadly. The trajectory of a mere word in a story may often be enough to signal such a shift: as in the case of *Jump* which signifies domination yielding to self-disgust.
>
> (Lazar 1992a: 787)

In "Once upon a Time", the very name of the security device signals a hideous shift from attempted domination of the blacks "out there" to self-destruction of the couple's only child.

10. Bruno Bettelheim observes that the Arabian Nights tale "The Fisherman and The Jinny" gives "an almost complete rendering of the fairy-tale motif which features a giant in conflict with an ordinary person" (1977: 28). Gordimer's appropriation of this motif exemplifies Bettelheim's point that "[i]n other cultures the same motif may appear in a version where the evil figure

The final paragraph is complex, terrifying, and nearly unbearable. One evening the boy's mother reads him a "fairy story" from the book his grandmother had innocently given him for Christmas. However, as the fairy tales encourage him to his fatal battle with the dragon, the grandmother here ironically emerges as the traditionally evil "wicked witch" that, as in "Hansel and Gretel", kills children.[11] The next morning, his imagination tragically fired by the story of adventure he had heard the night before, the boy, "pretend[ing] to be the Prince who braves the terrible thicket of thorns[12] to enter the palace and kiss the Sleeping Beauty back to life", uses a

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materialises as a big, ferocious animal which threatens to devour the hero, who, except for his cunning, is in no way a match for this adversary" (p. 29). The boy in "Time" attempts to outwit this metallic monster that has appeared on the wall of his house by using a ladder to climb up to its lair and then protecting himself with the Space Man outfit that his grandmother, the wise old witch of the story, has given him. In giving her grandson this presumably protective shield against the dragon he must battle, the apparently benign grandmother becomes an ironically evil witch whose gifts of the fairy tales and Space Man suit lead indirectly to the boy's gruesome death from the dragon's teeth.

11. "The old woman had only pretended to be kind; she was in reality a wicked witch, who lay in wait for children, and had only built the little house of bread in order to entice them there." ("Hansel and Gretel" in *Grimm's Fairy Tales* 1944: 91). While the grandmother in "Time" does not devour her grandson, the "gift" of the book of fairy tales and the Space Man outfit urge him towards his fatal battle with the dragon.

12. In perhaps another irony of Gordimer's use of the Sleeping Beauty story, in the Brothers Grimm's tale "Little Briar-Rose", their version of the Charles Perrault tale "La Belle au Bois dormant", when a king's son hears about the "thorny hedge" that has deterred other young men who have tried to rescue the sleeping princess, he asserts: "I am not afraid, I will go and see the beautiful Briar-rose". As Gordimer's narrator says that the young boy "braves the terrible thicket of thorns to enter the palace and kiss the Sleeping Beauty back to life" (p. 30), we may reasonably surmise that the night before his battle the boy's mother reads to him the Brothers Grimm's version of the Sleeping Beauty story. There, when the king's son comes to the palace to kiss the princess awake, he is welcomed by the thorn-hedge that had rebuffed others because he is the long-awaited perfect suitor: "When the King's son came near to the thorn-hedge, it was nothing but large and beautiful flowers, which parted from each other of their own accord, and let him pass unhurt, then they closed again behind him like a hedge" (*Grimm's Fairy Tales*: 240). Perhaps Gordimer's young hero, thinking himself the anointed rescuer of a trapped princess, ventured into the barbed wire expecting it, like the hedge in "Little Briar-Rose" that he has heard about the night before, to part; instead, the dragon's teeth eat him alive.

ladder[13] to climb to the top of the wall where his nemesis waits: the "shining coiled tunnel ... just wide enough for his little body to creep in" (Gordimer 1991: 30). To achieve his heroic quest, to "find the other with whom he will be able to live happily ever after" (Bettelheim 1977: 11), he must travel into the belly of the beast and slay it. Yet the dragon is vicious: "[W]ith the first fixing of its razor teeth in his knees and hands and head he screamed and struggled deeper into its tangle" (Gordimer 1991: 30). The dragon's teeth, "shining metal serrated into jagged blades," have caught the little boy and will not let him go; the more he struggles, the more he is cut; everywhere. The Space Man outfit is no defence against the monster's teeth that devour him, and the princess will not this time be rescued from the dragon's lair. The calm of the family's garden is shattered by the horrid cacophony that Gordimer insists we hear: the terrified, screaming child whose "bleeding mass" is "hacked out of the security coil" and carried into the house; the adults wailing at this hideous vision; and the ubiquitous, blaring alarm, calling now to other alarms "across the gardens in shrills and bleats" (p. 27) not to warn of intruders from outside but to scream the death of an innocent child within this most efficient safety device.

While the death of the child is hideous enough, both in its literal imagery and in its maddening reversal of the purpose of the dragon's teeth – "Total Security" – that brutally reverses the traditional conclusion of fairy tales, Gordimer's brilliantly ironic imagery and structure suggest a second, more overtly political meaning. The "continuous coil of stiff and shining metal", which the narrator also describes as a tunnel, suggests a woman's uterus, through which a child is born. The parents' racist desire for total separation from South Africa's blacks, as opposed to integration with them, leads indirectly to their son's death, to his being "in" this jagged womb; as Colleran argues this is the "cost" of a racist geopolitics that attempts permanent separation between whites and blacks. But in this story, originally published in 1989, the image of the terribly bloodied and disfigured child hacked from his serrated womb may also symbolise a new South African society being born amid unspeakable violence, terror, and bloodshed announced by thousands of suddenly useless security alarms howling as the screaming child dies. Recall here Gordimer's reference in her essay "Living in the Interregnum", originally delivered in New York in 1982,[14] to the white writer having to decide "whether to remain responsible

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13. In yet another echo of a familiar fairy tale, the boy climbing a ladder resembles the prince in "Rapunzel" who climbs up Rapunzel's tresses to reach her.

14. In his introduction to Gordimer's "Living in the Interregnum", Clingman outlines political events relevant to her address in 1982, including the independence of Mozambique, Angola, and Zimbabwe and the emergence of

to the dying white order ... or to declare himself positively as answerable to the order struggling to be born" (Gordimer 1988b: 278). In the context of Gordimer's reference as early as 1982 to the "dying white order" and to the "order struggling to be born", "Once upon a Time", published seven years later, may be seen as Gordimer's terrifying depiction of this dichotomy: the death of the white order imaged in the mangled child, and the violent birth of a new political order that extracts an unbearable cost. Recall also some of P.W. Botha's actions in 1989 upon becoming leader of the Nationalist Party: he began allowing large multiracial marches against apartheid, especially in Johannesburg and Cape Town; met with Archbishop Desmond M. Tutu; and prepared for the release of Nelson Mandela from prison in 1990. With these events the vision of a new, multiracial society gradually became visible in South Africa even as that vision reified the bloody history of apartheid. Since the child must be "hacked out of the security coil with saws, wire-cutters, choppers" this hideously unnatural and lethal "birth" from the dragon that is apartheid itself indicts white South African society for maintaining through violence even into the late 1980s a political system that might have relinquished apartheid much sooner and thus allowed a "natural birth" of a new multiracial society. In the final image of "Once upon a Time", this emerging society is forcibly extracted from the apartheid monster in a bloodbath of white South Africans' own creation. By resisting integration so long, white society has created an ironic "birth-in-death" that kills their innocent children even as that which they resisted so long must finally be born. Only the death of their own can convince whites cowering beneath the dragon's teeth that their dream of "total security" is impossible.

Two further ironies emerge from the political reading of this scene that I propose. The first to reach the struggling boy and to "scream with him" are "the trusted housemaid and the itinerant gardener", two black servants from a township who ironically work *within* the house and who try to rescue him: "the itinerant gardener tore his hands trying to get at the little boy" (Gordimer 1991: 30). The black servants' presence in the final paragraph, and the gardener's selfless attempt to rescue the boy, indicate blacks' necessary presence at the birth of this new, suddenly *multiracial* society here present in miniature *in this house,* and their simultaneous attempt to rescue the innocent child – in essence the future generation of white South Africa – from the fangs of apartheid. Second, the boys' parents and the black servants carry "the bleeding mass of the little boy" back into the house which they had attempted to fortify; this house is now a place of death, and will never again be secure. In this fairy tale, the apartheid dragon still lives, and must be slain by others. The man and his wife who *were* living happily ever after will never do so again.

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several organisations fighting apartheid, including a black trade-union movement (Clingman in Gordimer 1988b: 261).

In an interview with Karen Lazar, Gordimer lamented the "tremendous waste that took place over the years and years and years, and also the mindless and criminal violence that has come to this country as a result of poverty and the conditions of apartheid" (Lazar 1997: 159). Early in "Time" the narrator tells us that the Neighbourhood Watch to which the happily married couple belonged supplied them with a plaque for their gates that read "YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED" (Gordimer 1991: 25). Given its probable composition in late 1988 or early 1989, before its publication in *Salmagundi* in 1989, Gordimer's tale itself may be read as a warning to South Africa about the inevitable consequences of its history. In the multiple ironies of its imagery and structure "Once upon a Time" supplies an "epiphany of truth" that Azar Nafisi says we seek in fiction: Gordimer's unflinching vision, couched ironically in a children's bedtime story, of a new South African society – a Yeatsian "terrible beauty" – that now must be born violently from within a monstrous apartheid.

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