

“Once Upon a Time” Background

Nadine Gordimer (1923-2014) was a South African writer, political activist and recipient of the 1991 Nobel Prize in Literature. She was recognized as a woman "who through her magnificent epic writing has been – in the words of Alfred Nobel – a very great benefit to humanity". Gordimer's writing dealt with moral and racial issues, particularly apartheid in South Africa.

“Once Upon a Time” was first published in 1989, while South Africa was still under apartheid. Several of her novels were banned by the apartheid government. *A World of Strangers* (1958) was banned for 12 years. Gordimer says she came to politics through writing, not the other way around.

Terms to know...

- **Apartheid** - word meaning "separateness", or "the state of being apart", literally "apart-hood; a system of racial segregation in South Africa enforced through government legislation from 1948 to 1994. Under apartheid, the rights, associations, and movements of the majority black inhabitants and other ethnic groups were curtailed, and white minority rule was maintained. The government segregated education, medical care, beaches, and other public services, and provided black people with services that were inferior to those of white people.
- **Parody**- an imitation of the style of a particular writer, artist, or genre with deliberate exaggeration for comic effect; synonymous with satire
- **Fairy Tale**- a type of short story that typically features fantastical characters (elves, dwarves, wizards, etc.) and usually magical enchantment. In less technical contexts, the term is also used to describe something blessed with unusual happiness, as in "fairy tale ending"
- **Motif**- a repeated word or symbol in a literary work

Examples from *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly*: The acacia tree (5, 7, 17, 30, 52, 63-64, 71, 133)

Examples from “Harrison Bergeron”:

“George...had a little mental handicap radio in his ear. He was required by law to wear it at all times.”

“A buzzer sounded in George’s head”

“George was toying with the vague notion that maybe dancers shouldn’t be handicapped. But he didn’t get very far with it before another noise in his ear radio scattered his thoughts.”

“The realization [that the earthquake like noise on TV was Harrison] was blasted from his mind instantly by the sound of an automobile collision in his head.”

“Gee- I could tell that one was a doozy.”

Trace the motif of the fairy tale, “Once Upon a Time” and think about elements of plot. How do you see the elements manifested in this story?