**“Once Upon a Time” (1989) by Nadine Gordimer**  
  
**Pre-reading Questions:**

1. Have you ever heard of Nadine Gordimer? Do you happen to know where she is from?
2. In order to understand a story well is it vital to understand the storyteller’s background? To what degree?
3. What is apartheid? What can you tell us about South Africa?
4. If you were offered a job in South Africa, would you take it? Why or why not?
5. What would be the possible advantages of living in South Africa? What would your potential concerns be? What do you think your family would say about your moving there?
6. The story you are going to read is presented to the reader as a fairy tale. Think of some well-known fairy tales. Who is the typical audience? Is there often violence in fairy tales? Discuss some examples.
7. In addition to violence, fairy tales often contain moral lessons. What are some of the morals of the fairy tales that you know?

**Discussion Questions:**

1. This fictional tale begins with a “nonfictional” introduction. Can you think of any other such stories that have similar introductions?
2. Do you find such nonfictional introductions to be effective openings for fictional stories?
3. The story begins with the writer describing how she was awakened by a disturbing noise in the middle of the night. She thinks that the noise has two possible causes. What are they? Which cause is more frightening?
4. How does Gordimer’s nonfictional introduction help to get the reader in the right mood to hear this rather horrifying fairy tale?
5. Do you find Gordimer’s nonfictional “hook” effective?
6. What about her violent conclusion? How did it make you feel? Was it effective?
7. Do you think this story is too violent? This story is meant for adults not children, yet children’s fairy tales often contain similarly shocking violence. Should we tell fairy tales to our children even if they are violent?
8. If fairy tales normally contain a moral lesson, what would you say is the moral of “Once upon a Time”?

**Discussion Questions:**

1. Fate often plays a role in fairy tales. What role, if any, does fate play in Gordimer’s tale?
2. What do you think are the motivating factors behind the attitudes and actions of the main characters in the story?
3. Would you say that the husband and wife are racists?
4. Is it possible that the housemaid is more racist than the parents? Why or why not? Who is more to blame?
5. The young boy’s fate, at least in part, is the result of his “pretending” to be in a fairy tale. Which other characters may contribute to this fateful end as a result of the “tall tales” they have heard? How so?
6. What kinds of consequences do the stories we tell our children have on their lives?
7. Think about ads for home protection systems. What messages do they give visually and verbally? What emotions do they play on?
8. How can the wall in the story be seen as a symbol?
9. When you think of a wall, what do you picture? What does your wall keep in and keep out?  How does “Once upon a Time” support or change your picture of a wall?
10. Think about walls. What similar messages do they send?
11. What are some of the most famous walls in the world? Why were they built? Were they successful in fulfilling their purpose?
12. Many people support building an enormous wall across the entire border between the U.S. and Mexico. Why would they want such a wall? What message would it send? Would it effectively fulfill its purpose?
13. Is it possible to live without walls? Without borders? Imagine a world without borders? What kind of world would that be? Would you like to live in such a world?