

Interpretive vs. escapist



Interpretive vs. Escapist As defined by Arp and Johnson, commercial fiction, or escapist literature, is “fiction written to meet the taste of a wide popular audience and relying usually on tested formulas for satisfying such taste” (Arp 744). Arp and Johnson also state that literary fiction, otherwise known as interpretive literature, is “fiction written with serious artistic intentions, providing an imagined experience yielding authentic insights into some significant aspect of life” (Arp 745).

In “Once upon a Time”, Nadine Gordimer uses a unique combination of both interpretive and escapist literature styles to portray a message that there is no way to absolutely guarantee a person’s safety. Although Nadine Gordimer does use some elements of the escapist literature style to develop this piece of fiction, the story is primarily interpretive literature. Arp and Johnson state that “literary fiction plunges us, through the author’s imaginative vision and artistic ability, more deeply into the real world” (Arp 4).

In “Once upon a Time”, Gordimer leaves the reader to his or her own insights as to what could have been done to avoid the particular outcome. She does not point out any particular moral to the story, but instead lets the reader absorb the family’s plight. The escapist style is recognized in the bedtime story that the narrator creates—the story within the story. In this story the emphasis is on plot rather than on character development, and the characters are obviously lacking the full dynamic quality that the reader identifies in the round character.

Yet, again, unlike escapist literature, the conclusion of this story is far from the “happily ever after” endings of its type, and, being that there is no real

moral to the story, in this way also, it is thus rendered more interpretive. The interpretive style is also apparent in the author's choice of plot. The plot, unlike the typical escapist piece of literature, is non-linear; the ending, as opposed to the happy ending of an escapist literature piece, is indeterminate. In the beginning, the reader is introduced to a person who is experiencing anxiety, and this person then begins her own story.

The reader is never brought back to the story of the narrator. As the narrator's initial conflict remains unresolved at the closing of the story, the ending is indeterminate. In the bedtime story also, the problem is unsolved at the end. Instead, the narrator ends the story in a decidedly sardonic mocking of the traditional "They lived happily ever after" story. Due to both of these points, "Once upon a Time" would be described as a non-linear story. Though she is the most realistic character in the entire work of fiction, the character of the narrator is also more flat than round.

Her situation is described to the reader in painful detail and in such a way that the reader will identify with her. However, her behavior is very typical of a person in her position. Awakened in the middle of the night as she was and hearing "a creaking of the kind made by the weight carried by one foot after another along a wooden floor" (Gordimer 183), the reader could not expect anything else but fear. Her roundness is shown in her slight internal conflict. She believes that she should not be scared, yet she cannot make her imagination—or mind—yield to her will. I couldn't find a position in which my mind would let go of my body—release me to sleep again" (Gordimer 184). Although she is given an element of roundness, the narrator's character remains more flat than round. The man, holding the role of a father, a

husband, a son, and an employer in the story, is just what a reader would expect of an accommodating man in his position—in essence, the stereotypical man. This is shown in a number of ways. He played the role of supporting husband perfectly in always acknowledging his wife's concerns.

In order to calm her fears, “ he had electronically controlled gates fitted” (Gordimer 185), to provide further control of any outsiders' access to their property, as well as having the wall surrounding their property built higher. For the reason of pacifying the trusted housemaid, he had bars affixed “ to the doors and windows of the house, and an alarm system installed” (Gordimer 185). Throughout the story, the man acquiesces to one after another requests, changing little from the unafraid, doting provider that the author first introduces to the reader.

In the beginning of the story, the man is clearly unconcerned about his or his family's safety from such people as the wife worries about. On more than one occasion, he assured his wife that “ there was nothing to fear” (Gordimer 185). However, in the course of events, he attains some small quality of roundness in that his concern over his family's security evolves into an obsession, perhaps due to his wife's influence. During times that the family would go for walks, they would no longer pause “ to admire this show of roses or that perfect lawn” (Gordimer 187); instead “ the husband and wife found themselves comparing the possible effectiveness of each style [of each security system] against its appearance” (Gordimer 187). In changing his mind and/or in his allowance of the circumstances to change him, a slight element of roundness is added to the father's relatively flat character. The man's wife does not change by the end of this story, thereby showing her to

be a flat character—predictable, stereotypical, static, and, in this case, easily defined as “ good. ” However, in the course of the story, the reader will also see a side of her that conflicts with her fears, which gives her some roundness.

Women in general are typically more concerned than men with safety issues. Danger, whether real or perceived, is seen as a threat to their well-being, as well as to that of their loved ones. Be that as it may, the wife’s actions and fears are entirely understandable and predictable in “ Once Upon A Time. ” “ She was afraid that some day...people might come up the street...and open the gates and stream in” (Gordimer 185). Perhaps not entirely logical, but such behavior is considered the norm for women, thus displaying her flatness as a character.

However, at the same time, she also has a quality of roundness to her as well. Even though she advocates every extra security measure to protect herself and her family from “ such people” (Gordimer 185), from the streets, those are the very ones that she feels compassion for. “ The wife could never see anyone go hungry. She sent the trusted housemaid out with bread and tea” (Gordimer 186). The fact that she feels torn over the plight of these individuals and then her very attempts to isolate herself from them shows her internal conflict, thus giving a small element of roundness to her otherwise flat character.

In the little boy, Gordimer paints the picture of endearing, playful innocence as well as naivete. His naivete and playfulness is demonstrated in his “[fascination] with the [intercom] device” (Gordimer 185), as well as in his

tendency to imagine himself the hero in a fairytale story, which leads to his demise: “ he pretended to be the Prince who braves the terrible thicket of thorns to enter the palace and kiss the Sleeping Beauty back to life” (Gordimer 188). Interestingly enough, the boy has the smallest role throughout the story and yet he becomes the character that the narrator uses to bring his/her point home.

However, due to the fact that his character never undergoes any kind of change, he cannot be labeled as a round character. The trustworthy maid is also a stereotypical, flat character. This is suggested simply by her given name of “ trusted housemaid” (Gordimer 185). Despite the circumstances of the times and the distrust that the wife feels towards people of her kind, the man and his wife trusted the housemaid enough to leave her “ with responsibility for [their] possessions” (Gordimer 185). Also, not unlike the typical housemaid, she was an influence on her mistress.

The housemaid fed the wife’s fears of these “ people of another color” (Gordimer 185), telling the wife that “ these were loafers and tsotsis” (Gordimer 186). In pointing out the “ loafers”’ shortcomings, perhaps because of her insecurities, she redirected the wife’s attentions away from caring for these people—typical behavior from an employee anxious to keep her job. On account of this stereotypical behavior, as well as the fact that she remains a static character throughout the story, the housemaid is a flat character.

The last human character, the itinerant gardener, is also a flat character. The only thing that the author mentions concerning the gardener is that he was “

highly recommended by the neighbors” (Gordimer 184). The gardener’s one purpose in the story was to aid in getting the little boy out of the security coil. “...the itinerant gardener, whose day it was, came running...and tore his hands trying to get at the little boy” (Gordimer 188).

Typical of a man of service, he seemed willing to help in whatever way necessary. In the beginning of the story the narrator battles to control her own fears regarding physical security. The “ bedtime story” created to alleviate his or her discomfort attempts to convince the hearer or the reader of the fact that one’s fate is out of one’s control. The author uses “ Once upon a Time” to illustrate that there is no real way to guarantee anyone’s safety, no matter how hard the person tries.