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"Once Upon a Time" by Nadine Gordimer: A Fairy Tale for Peace

Abstract I: Considerata dalla critica una delle più significative e drammatiche dichiarazioni contro l'apartheid, "Once Upon a Time" di Gordimer si presenta anche come una sapiente costruzione retorica. Ponendo al centro della narrazione l'imbarazzante tema dell'infanticidio, la scrittrice costruisce con insospettata e ironica leggerezza una favola che, pur soddisfacendo i requisiti del genere, si allontana da esso per un eccesso di dolore. Sarà la tragedia antica, promotrice di un amaro modello di pace, a dettare le forme e i contenuti del breve racconto che perfettamente rispecchia le tre unità aristoteliche, che ha una struttura classica, e i cui argomenti principali attingono al repertorio della mitologia greca.

Abstract II: Critically acclaimed as one of the most significant and dramatic anti-apartheid testimonies, "Once Upon a Time" by Gordimer is also an astute rhetorical construction. By placing the contentious theme of infanticide at the centre of the narration, and with a touch that is unexpectedly both light and ironic, the author creates a fairy tale that, while meeting the requirements of the genre, also manages to distance itself from this through weight of grief. It is classical tragedy – as the promulgater of a bitter model of peace – that dictates both the form and the content of this brief story, which perfectly mirrors the three Aristotelian unities, with its classical structure and principal arguments drawing on the repertoire of Greek mythology.

> Why is it that while the death of the novel is good for a post-mortem at least once a year, the short story lives on unmolested? It cannot be because – to borrow their own jargon – literary critics regard it as merely a minor art form. Most of them, if pressed, would express the view that it is a highly specialized and skilful form [...]. But they would have to be pressed; otherwise they wouldn't bother to discuss it at all [...]. Yet no one suggests that we are practicing a dead art form. And, like a child suffering from healthy neglect, the short story survives (Gordimer 1977: 263).

In 1989 Frederik De Klerk, head of the National Party (which would subsequently become the New National Party), driven by the moderates within his own party and the business community, succeeded Pieter Willem Botha as the President of South Africa. That same year Nadine Gordimer published a short story in the South African alternative journal, *Weekly*

Mail, "Once Upon a Time: a Fairy Tale of Suburban Life". In 1990 the almost definitive version of the story came out in the American journal, *Salmagundi*, and in 1991 the final one appeared in the collection *Jump and Other Stories*.

Nelson Mandela was released in 1990. Apartheid was officially abolished in 1991, the same year in which Nadine Gordimer was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. This sequence of dates, and the coincidence of the publication date along with the ground work laid for the abolition of apartheid, that is, the hope of the renewal of freedom, cannot but prompt us to reflect on the success of literature as a political act, or at least an objective the writer herself aimed at: that of a change in mentality.

> Ce que je peux faire en tant qu'écrivain blanc, c'est dire aux Blancs ce qu'ils ne veulent pas voir. C'est cela le grand problème: l'impossibilité de communiquer entre les communautés. La littérature peut contribuer à franchir ce gouffre, à le combler (Louvel 1994: 169).

Thus, in order to overcome this abyss of *omertà* and ignorance, in "Once Upon a Time" Nadine Gordimer tackles the most contentious of fictional themes, that of infanticide.

Edward Said observed (Said 1983: 16) that for a great many late-19th century – early-20th century writers, choosing characters who could not have children is a metaphor for a generalised condition of sterility, which affected all of society and the culture of the time. From Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1895) to Conrad's *A Tale of the Seaboard* (1904), to the great works of Modernism, *Ulysses* (1922) and *The Waste Land* (1922), along with (outside Britain), *Der Tod in Venedig* (1912) and Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913-1927). This literary panorama is populated by sterile couples and orphans, bachelors and old maids – even by women who cannot have children. There are significant predecessors in the Victorian novel (Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy, George Eliot), but it is above all in Modernism the state of absolute sterility Said was referring to takes a firm hold in English-language literature. *The Waste Land* is emblematic, as is the vision of childhood in D. H. Lawrence's *The White Peacock* (1911). The situation becomes exasperated in the aftermath of World War II in the output of the Angry Young Men, prior to the Beatles (for example, *A Picture to Hang on the Wall* 1966 by Sean Hignett).

As far as the United States are concerned, it is noteworthy how the attention of writers from North America has concentrated more on adolescence than childhood. From *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) by J. D. Salinger to *It* (1986) by Stephen King, in the words of Pessoa, it is precisely the myth of adolescence that seems to authorise the identification of the United States with "the West, future of the past", to which the Portuguese poet refers in his poetry (Pessoa 1984: 140).

It was to be the task of the children from the literary terrain of the former colonies – India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, South Africa, Australia, Canada and the Caribbean – to help the adults come to terms with the fragmentary nature of existence, to live in a world of broken mirrors, of which many of the shards have been lost, thus making it impossible to retrieve a vision of the past and of history (both individual and collective) in its entirety.

The children of the postcolonial narrative not only retrace the deeds and feats of the

nations they belong to, filtering them through their childlike eyes; above all, like imperfect figures of innocence, which is a positive sign, they place themselves in contexts filled with future foreshadowings that are often, however, decidedly negative.

And so it is that, around the time of the passage from the second to the third millennium, in Britain children are appearing more and more in literature as elusive or distant creatures in a world populated by adults who are too caught up by their own fear of growing up to accept them, yet in postcolonial narrative children represent at one and the same time both hope for the future and the paradoxical repositories of historical memory, re-experienced through a fantastical re-elaboration of other stories and/or the memory of past events re-elaborated through the eyes of a child, even at the cost of their own life.

Jeanne Colleran underlines a recurring theme in Nadine Gordimer's collection which I have mentioned above, *Jump and Other Stories*:

> 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).

From *Midnight's Children* (1981) by Salman Rushdie to *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* (1994) by Peter Carey, from the character of Maya in Bulbul Sharma's *Banana-Flower Dreams* (1999), or the character of Chuyia in Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Water* (1996), or Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* (1994), and many others: postcolonial children, to a greater or lesser extent, are often fairy-tale children.

Italo Calvino reminds us that

> fairy tales are true. Taken as a whole, and in their continually repeated yet ever varied cross-section of human experiences, they amount to a general explanation of life […]; they are a catalogue of the destinies that humankind may encounter […] the persecution of the innocent and the possibility of redemption as the terms of an internal dialectic within every life; […] the shared fate of succumbing to enchantments – that is, of being determined by complex and unknown forces, and the effort to free oneself and be able to choose freely understood as an elemental duty, along with that of freeing others (Calvino 1988: 19).

"Once Upon a Time" consists of two parts and begins with a first-person account in which the author explains that she has been asked to write a short story for children to be published in an anthology; but she refuses as she has the artistic right to write only what she wants. Next moment, as she is lying in bed, she is horrified to be awakened by a sound that

she thinks might be a burglar or a murderer, but she then realises that her fear was nothing real, since the sound which shocked her was just a creaking sound in the house. To calm herself down, she starts to tell herself a bedtime story.

The second part of story is narrated in the third-person and describes a family consisting of a father, mother, a little boy, a trustworthy housemaid and a gardener. The members of the family love each other and they also have a cat and a dog. Since the family is living in a suburb where burglaries and riots are frequent, they try to enhance the security system of their house. Despite having a sign on their gate that reads "YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED", the wife is still very scared as she wants to be sure that their house is safe from the homeless, the thieves, and the crooks that roam their street. As unemployment rises, the housemaid and the wife beg the husband to increase the level of security. The husband's mother is then described as "the wise old witch" (Gordimer 1991: 25) who gives the family some money as a Christmas present to make their brick wall higher, and gives the boy a Space Man suit and a book of fairy tales. The family decides to have rolls of razor wire from a company called "DRAGON'S TEETH" installed along the top of their wall and now the house looks much safer, so that they can once again aspire to live "happily ever after" (25). That evening, the mother reads a bedtime fairy tale to the boy. The next morning, the boy pretends to be the Prince from the fairy tale, "Sleeping Beauty", and tries to make his way through the razor wire. But he bleeds heavily and by the end, when the adult manages to cut him out and carry him to the house, he has died. The death of their child is thus the "cost", as Colleran writes, of his parents' attempt to safeguard their fairy-tale existence against the transient, marauding blacks. It is the story's most terrifying irony that what was meant to keep blacks out, kills the white child within. Gordimer's ironic use of fairy-tale features, what Lazar terms these "different zones of being" (Lazar 1992: 783-802) and the recurring image of the dead child, make "Once upon a Time" unique in *Jump*.

The title of the story immediately brings to mind two aspects: first of all, it acts as a warning for the reader, who is alerted, even before getting into the text, that they are about to read a fairy tale (it has the same function as the notice put on the gate of the happy family, "YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED"). Furthermore, the title "Once upon a time" creates distance in terms of time and place, which removes the story from contingency, signifying the transposition of a structure into the imagination that is reproduced in every life (this is how Freud speaks of Oedipus, a remote myth that nevertheless speaks of a complex that is relevant in every generation). In any case, fairy tales are open texts, as Jakob Grimm himself already noted in 1813: "All fairy tales were set down long, long ago, in infinite variations, which means that they are never definitively set down"[1].

In the English-speaking world, the re-writing of fairy tales is widespread, above all by women. For instance, *Transformations* (1971) by Ann Sexton, seventeen poems inspired by as many fairy tales by Grimm, among which is "Briar Rose (Sleeping Beauty)", is very interesting in this context.

As occurs elsewhere, in Sexton and in Gordimer fairy tales – minor myths that cross

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[1] Letter written by Jacob Grimm to Von Arnim, 29th October 1810, in Steig & Grimm 1904, III, 271.

our lives (Ravasi 2014: 89) – provide an opportunity to investigate oneself and experiment with mythobiography[2], that is, a type of narration that explores the events surrounding the search for meaning, where the telling creates its own sense.

In "Once Upon a Time", Gordimer is the opening narrator who invents and tells the fairy tale, thus placing herself on the edge of the narrative. In this case she appears both as a character and as the author, and so is simultaneously the object of a rhetorical plot and the subject of another – both insider and outsider with respect to the action – and thus perhaps a suitable allegory of the position of the white South African writer.

The story is carefully constructed. In the first part the writer creates the setting, not of the narration, but of the state of mind necessary to the reader in order to read the second part, which is not typographically separated from the first except for a white space. A silence. A pause. A gap. An omission, perhaps.

What stands out for me in the first part is how Gordimer, in describing a real situation (finding yourself alone in bed, terrified by a noise, in a house that is relatively unprotected in the face of the threat from outside) manages to condense three interpretative levels of the text. Indeed, the initial situation from which the fairy tale in the second part is generated, can be read from the point of view of a white South African living in Johannesburg during those years (where "the fierce dogs who guarded an old widower and his collection of antique clocks were strangled before he was knifed by a casual labourer he had dismissed without pay" [Gordimer 1991: 24]); that is, a woman who is forced to experience her femininity in terms of victimhood ("A woman was murdered – how do they put it – in broad daylight in a house two blocks away, last year", 24); and from the point of view of a writer. Regarding this last aspect, the message is clear: a writer cannot be forced to write in a certain genre ("A certain novelist said every writer ought to write at least one story for children. I think of sending a postcard saying I don't accept that I 'ought' to write anything", 23). When this happens, as the end of the story demonstrates, the situation is overturned and what was a fairy tale becomes a nightmare. Fear leads the woman, the white South African writer, to rapidly regress into childish terror: the child is afraid of the night just as adults are scared of death. In order to cope with this fear, fairy tales are invented.

Cristina Campo writes perceptively: "The teller of fairy tales is mysterious, but we know that every perfect event hinges on one person; that only the invaluable experience meted out by fate to an individual can reflect, like an enchanted chalice, the dream of a multitude" (Campo 1987: 143).

It may be that whoever writes fairy tales is similar to a person finding a four-leaf clover who, according to Ernst Junger, then gains the sight and occult powers. The writer starts the narration as a way of giving pleasure and suddenly the fairy tale turns into a magnetic field where inexpressible secrets from her life and that of the others come flooding in from all sides, taking shape as figures. For that again, when the nature of the narrative involves the constant use of metaphors, this opens up the possibility of making use of the dangerous yet remarkable gift of secrets. That this mystery is present in any fairy tale worthy of the name is demonstrated by every element in the fairy tale.

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[2] According to the therapeutic meaning that Romano Màdera applies, in Màdera & Tarca 2003.

First of all, beauty. In fairy tales, the catalyst for the action is always something that represents pure beauty, yet clearly also represents something else:

> 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. They had a cat and a dog that the little boy loved very much (Gordimer 1991: 25).

Beauty and fear, the tragic poles of the fairy tale, are together the terms of contradiction and reconciliation. The more material fears do not manage to distract the protagonists of the fairy tale from the more unreal beauty, and the nature of the mad quest is revealed through the nature of the tests that they have to overcome. In Gordimer's story, the parental couple functions as one, solid protagonist. Indeed, the characters do not have names and are "a man" and "his wife". The two of them repeatedly respond to the bewitching call that, each and every time, throws them back into the clutches of the Leviathan of fear. They are attracted to beauty, "they were living happily ever after" (25)[3], but they are ensnared by fear: "YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED".

The parental couple is required to be simultaneously in two worlds: that represented by the happy oasis of their home, and the outside world, made up of people of "another colour" (25), of riots, violence and danger. The price of their happiness increases in proportion to the growth of their fear of others, of the Other. Defence strategies are intensified: first, electronic gates, then bars on the windows, and then with the money given by the "wise old witch", wall fortifications, until the final, fatal safety measure is reached.

That the nameless hero, the Different one, the Chosen one, is their "little boy" is demonstrated by the way in which the boy experiences the adults' fears and their safety measures from the very beginning of the story to its end. He observes the installation of the electronic security devices: "The little boy was fascinated by the device and used it as a walkie-talkie in cops and robbers play with his small friends" (26). And when the husband and his wife evaluate the effectiveness of the cruel systems of protection, "the little boy and the pet dog raced ahead" (29).

Similarly, the boy sees the barbed wire on the house, which is "the ugliest but the most honest in its suggestion of the pure concentration-camp style" (29) as a dragon to be fought, with briars to be destroyed in his passage through them in order to reach his longed for goal.

Just like in a court dance, in Gordimer's text good and evil exchange masks, and that the security measure then transforms into a lethal dragon only becomes apparent in the unthinkable dimension that the fairy tale leads to. Thus, the child lives in a world of upside-down mirrors. And with what assistance does the young mortal creature pass through

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[3] The phrase "were living happily ever after" occurs three times: on p. 25, just after the story 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 maximum security. As the story progresses, Gordimer's recurring use of the formulaic "were living happily ever after" becomes increasingly ironic, until finally the verb "were" assumes a simple past tense amid the shattering horror of the final image.

these fires, these mirrors? Angels and guides are not lacking: the fairy godmother ("the wise old witch"), the good genie ("and itinerant gardener"), the faithful nanny ("a trustworthy housemaid"), animal friends ("a cat and a dog that the little boy loved very much"); but they are not enough because on every fairy tale – as on every life – an impenetrable, crucial enigma comes to bear: fate, choice, and guilt.

The apparent simplicity – also linguistic – and brevity of the narration conceals a complex wealth of references and resonances, a sophisticated structure which, as we shall see below, is strongly influenced by ancient tragedy.

If there were more space available here, the Russian linguist and anthropologist Vladimir Jakovlevič Propp's *Morphology of the Tale* would be a useful means for bringing order to the magma of meanings that emerge from a reading and, even more, from a re-reading of Gordimer's text; it is a useful means not just for bringing the characters into focus, or the "spheres of action" (which in any case are Propp's seven: the villain, the donor, the helper, the princess – or 'sought-for-person'– and her father, the dispatcher, the hero – seeker or victim – and the false hero, and are all present in Gordimer's story), but also because, as in Propp, they are mere vessels for actions, mechanisms for distributing the functions around the story.

I would like to briefly mention that in Propp's analysis it is not important who the character is – dragon, young girl or prince – but what the character does. This is where the framework arises of the thirty-one functions identified by Propp in accordance with a pre-existing, variable order, ranging from estrangement/distancing and prohibitions (functions 1 and 2), to the function of the donor and the reaction of the hero (functions 12 and 13), as well as punishment and marriage or coronation (functions 30 and 31). These functions, which are found – whether consciously or not – in all the most famous stories, and of course also in Gordimer's, as a whole represent an alphabet of ideas that helps to build, yet also to deconstruct, an event, a plot, or any kind of narrative, making it more engaging and 'logical' in the mind of its readers, and therefore more effective in the transmission of the message that has to be communicated. And this is indeed a great objective, fully achieved, in Gordimer's political fairy tale.

If there was more space, we could also turn to the studies of the psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim in order to gain a better understanding of the deeper significance and existential conflict in Gordimer's text, which are at times only hinted at in the text. For instance: *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, describes and explains the mental state of mind that drives the boy to challenge the metal 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 1976: 11).

In addition, in the chapter "Life Divined from the Inside", Bettelheim describes the sense of adventure and reward present in the most traditional fairy tales, as in "Once Upon a Time":

> 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 1976: 24).

Unfortunately, the space available only allows me to touch briefly on this. I would like to conclude by suggesting that the role of reader be left off and that of spectator be taken on. Because, ultimately, it seems to me that what Nadine Gordimer offers on the stage of her story is the enactment of a real drama, which perfectly mirrors the three Aristotelian unities of time, place, and space; it is structured according to a rigid, classical framework, which draws on the repertoire of Greek mythology for its principal themes.

First of all, the genre chosen by the writer, tragedy, is the most suitable for channelling a strongly political message which, it hardly needs to be said, underpins the composition of the story: I will just mention that Greek tragedy is a theatrical genre in which the staging, for the inhabitants of 5th-century classical Athens, was a ceremony with strong social and political implications.

The story "Once Upon a Time" is clearly a tragedy in the etymological sense of the term. The Greek noun, *trago(i)día*, τραγῳδία, derives from the union of the roots of "goat" (τράγος / *trágos*) and "sing" (ᾄδω / *á(i)dô*), as attested to in Horace's *Ars poetica*; it therefore means "song for the goat". The animal (whether it be a kid or a lamb, or in our case, a child) is to be taken here as meaning the first fruits as an offering representing the best thing that man can deprive himself of, an extreme sacrifice, an implacable warning: "the bleeding mass of the little boy was hacked out of the security coil with saws, wire-cutters, choppers" (Gordimer 1991: 30).

The principal themes dealt with in tragedy look to Greek mythology. Often, they focus on bereavement in some form, or in any case they showcase universal values, "A voice in the echo-chamber of the sub-conscious?" (23), a shared experience in the life of everybody and every society, such as:

Love and hatred: the man, his wife, the child, the cat and the dog all "loved each other very much and were living happily ever after" (25). Nonetheless, the man and his wife were looking forward to installing a security system made "of pieces of broken glass embedded in cement along the top of walls, there were iron grilles ending in lance-points" (29). What they ultimately chose was basically the one best suited for expressing their fear and hatred of the other.

The contrast between peace and war, between "the last muffled flourishes on one of the wooden xylophones made by the Chopi and Tsona" (24), and the clashes and riots in which "buses were being burned, cars stoned, and schoolchildren shot by the police" (25).

The relationship between good and evil:

> It was the ugliest but the most honest in its suggestion of the pure concentration-camp
> style, no frills, all evident efficacy. Placed the length of walls, it consisted of a continu-

ous 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 (27).

Greek tragedy is structured in a rigid framework: it generally begins with a prologue (from *prò* and *logos*, a speech that precedes), wherein a character introduces the play and explains the background to it: in Gordimer's story all of the first part effectively carries out the function of the prologue. This is followed by the *parodos* (ἡ πάροδος), the entry on stage of the fairy tale: "I couldn't find a position in which my mind would let go of my body - release me to sleep again. So I began to tell myself a story, a bedtime story" (23).

In the ancient play, the action on stage takes place over the course of three to five episodes (*epeisòdia*); in Gordimer's text the episodes (five) follow on each other in a *crescendo* of tension brought about both by external events as well as by the psychic tension of anticipating them, because as tragedy teaches us, a glorious adventure may befall the innocent just as the sins of the fathers fall on their children.

The function carried out by the chorus is central, which in a tragedy represents a collective character that participates in events as much as the actors themselves[4]. While in *The Eumenides* by Aeschylus the chorus is formed by the terrible Erinyes, here we have the "electronic harpies" (27) and the high-pitched sound of the alarms. These "called to one another across the gardens in shrills and bleats and wails" (27) and proleptically appear beforehand at the moment the bars on the windows are being installed and the cat sets the alarm off: it continues to accompany every episode and in the final one – that is, the exodus of the tragedy – it goes off again, together with the cries of the useless rescuers.

The unity of space and time in tragedy represents the falling of past events into the present and, showing the fallaciousness of the consensual history that the subject intended to tell of himself, it destroys him, causing his death or irreversible amputation, like the blinding of Oedipus, like the bleeding mass of the little boy.

Distances in space and in time in which the fairy-tale story has taken place, animate a space that depends on this: neither the narrator nor his audience can visit concretely that space or that place, it is devoid of any objectionable reference, and therefore stands out as ahistorical (*unhistorical*). The distance of the scene of the myth is structural to the epic or to the original story of the culture in which it is narrated, and its *metahistorical* reality is attested by the rites and cults that put at the heart the heroes and gods that are the actants.

The ahistorical character of the fairy tale puts this expressive form on the side of the night dream, which is given to the subject and belongs to him, but with respect to which the subject has not exercised any choice: we do not doubt that it is our dream that we remember when we wake up, but we can never consider the authors of it.

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[4] According to Aristotle, "The chorus too should be regarded as one of the actors; it should be an integral part of the whole, and share in the action, not in the manner of Euripides but of Sophocles" (Aristotle 1961: 18, 7).

Whether this is a fairy tale or a tragedy, "Once Upon a Time" leaves its mark on our memories just like the dragon's teeth do on the child's skin. It is a paradigmatic story, because it is permeated by a digging ethic, and because it avoids every temptation to remain on the surface, and lastly because it provides us with an important moral lesson.

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