

Critical Analysis: “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas,”

a short, fictional story by Ursula Le Guin. Question-and-answer format. Text included.

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Question One: What is a utopia? Does Omelas meet the definition?

Omelas is a utopia, though not of the lifeless type that the word inspires. Le Guin notes that the inhabitants are not “bland utopians,” not “simple folk,” nor “dulcet shepherds” (2). The residents need not live simply—there can be all sorts of luxuries, wondrous technologies, drugs, beer, and orgies in the streets, because their happiness is not based on possessions, but rather, “a just discrimination of what is necessary,” “what is destructive,” and what is neither (2). This insight is the definition of a utopia; when everyone knows it, wars, slavery, and competition is not needed (2-3). The children are happy, and the adults, “mature, intelligent, [and] passionate” (2), with no need for a hierarchal church or government (2-3). The city is beautiful, the weather and harvests are kind and abundant, and most everyone healthy (5), yet this is just the icing on the cake. It is indeed a utopia, for all except the suffering child (4-5).

Question Two: What is the narrator's opinion of Omelas?

Our narrator sympathizes with the citizens of Omelas, even going so far as to name the child's plight as the source of all compassion in the town. “There is no vapid, irresponsible happiness”; all the residents know that “they, like the child, are not free” from the “terrible justice of reality” (6)—that one human, just as important as any other, must be dehumanized for the democratic benefit of the majority. Knowing of the child “makes possible the nobility of

their architecture, the poignancy of their music, the profundity of their science” (6); it drives and inspires, gives compassion and robs the people of their innocence. “To throw away the happiness of thousands for the chance of the happiness of one: that would be to let guilt within the walls indeed,” Le Guin reasons (6). The few that leave, leave without incident, in the dead of night never to return, as their quiet protest, going “through the beautiful gates” and farmlands, “to a place even less imaginable to most of us than the city of happiness” (7). The narrator seems to find the dilemma at Omelas to be acceptable, as he calls those who leave “incredible” (6), saying that he “cannot describe it at all,” but “they seem to know where they are going” (7). His opinion, like the adults in Omelas, is that idealism must yield to pragmatism; it is too much to ask for everyone to give up the niceties to save one person from a life of torture and suffering.

Question Three: What is the symbolic connotation of the locked, windowless cellar in which the lone child suffers?

The forsaken child is the rotten foundation which their beautiful society rests on. In the iconic words of Honoré de Balzac, “behind every great fortune there is a crime,” and the crime here is that the utopia of Omelas is supported on strict terms: “there may not even be a kind word spoken to the child” (6), lest he be pulled, even for a second, out of his “abominable misery” (5). Children learn the terrible fact between eight and twelve, and no matter how well their parents explain and justify it in advance, the new discovery is sickening and angering (5). It may take months or years, but they will come to accept the torture of one for the benefit of the many—pragmatism will rule over whatever ideals they once held, as they know that the very hour they would save the child, “all the prosperity and beauty and delight of Omelas would wither and be destroyed” (6). Quite a price indeed. We have ethical dilemmas in the real world

that are similar yet more murky, such as euthanasia for the hopelessly ill and elderly, triaging in disasters and on the battleground (not every limb, person, or finger can be saved), and wars that are supposedly¹ fought for the good of the world, but result in millions of deaths and injuries. The story of Omelas symbolizes them all, and as in all such systems, there are some who “walk straight out of the city” (7), never to return, unwilling to bear the guilt. Others gain peace of mind by deciding that the lost child could not possibly be human. He or she is sub-human, and is instead referred to as “it” (4-6), “too degraded and imbecile to know any real joy” (6), and thus the crime is just.

Question Four: In the story, do you find any implied criticism of our own society?

Le Guin criticizes “a bad habit” that trickles down from the “pedants and sophisticates” (2), the classy intellectuals that teach us to celebrate pain over pleasure, violence over peace, and despair over delight. We are taught that “happiness [is] something rather stupid,” while the “banality of evil and the terrible boredom of pain” (2) is replaced by fascination with death, deviance, and necromancy. A utopia is a backwards kingdom filled with happy, simple-minded subjects. In the real utopia, there are no careless princesses to be rescued by valiant princes, no arch-bishops to create the newest refinements to an oppressive religion, and no misguided soldiers to fight bloody wars in the name of freedom. You can be happy and peaceful without being a naïve, passionless simpleton. When we come to believe that “only pain is intellectual, only evil interesting,” we have come to “lose hold of everything else” (2). No technological wonders can provide happiness when our thinking is collectively flawed. “Joy built upon successful slaughter” will not do; we must be joyous like the citizens of Omelas, where “the victory they celebrate is that of life” (3), and not of death and suffering.

1 “Capable of being supposed.”

Page 1 is not interesting!

Ursula Le
Guin

The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas

With a clamor of bells that set the swallows soaring, the Festival of Summer came to the city Omelas, bright-towered by the sea. The rigging of the boats in harbor sparkled with flags. In the streets between houses with red roofs and painted walls, between old moss-grown gardens and under avenues of trees, past great parks and public buildings, processions moved. Some were decorous: old people in long stiff robes of mauve and grey, grave master workmen, quiet, merry women carrying their babies and chatting as they walked. In other streets the music beat faster, a shimmering of gong and tambourine, and the people went dancing, the procession was a dance. Children dodged in and out, their high calls rising like the swallows' crossing flights over the music and the singing. All the processions wound towards the north side of the city, where on the great water-meadow called the Green Fields boys and girls, naked in the bright air, with mud-stained feet and ankles and long, lithe arms, exercised their restive horses before the race. The horses wore no gear at all but a halter without bit. Their manes were braided with streamers of silver, gold, and green. They flared their nostrils and pranced and boasted to one another; they were vastly excited, the horse being the only animal who has adopted our ceremonies as his own. Far off to the north and west the mountains stood up half encircling Omelas on her bay. The air of morning was so clear that the snow still crowning the Eighteen Peaks burned with white-gold fire across the miles of sunlit air, under the dark blue of the sky. There was just enough wind to make the banners that marked the racecourse snap and flutter now and then. In the silence of the broad green meadows one could hear the music winding through the city streets, farther and nearer and ever approaching, a cheerful faint sweetness of the air that from time to time trembled and gathered together and broke out into the great joyous clanging of the bells.

Joyous! How is one to tell about joy? How describe the citizens of Omelas?

They were not simple folk, you see, though they were happy. But we do not say the words of cheer much any more. All smiles have become archaic. Given a description

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A society
of death:
abortions,
"mercy-
killing,"
fascination
w/ the
occult, the
image of the
troubled
self-mutilating
artist, the
continually
increasing
gruesomeness
of Halloween
decor.

such as this one tends to make certain assumptions. Given a description such as this one tends to look next for the King, mounted on a splendid stallion and surrounded by his noble knights, or perhaps in a golden litter borne by great-muscled slaves. But there was no king. They did not use swords, or keep slaves. They were not barbarians. I do not know the rules and laws of their society, but I suspect that they were singularly few. As they did without monarchy and slavery, so they also got on without the stock exchange, the advertisement, the secret police, and the bomb. Yet I repeat that these were not simple folk, not dulcet shepherds, noble savages, bland utopians. They were not less complex than us. The trouble is that we have a bad habit, encouraged by pedants and sophisticates, of considering happiness as something rather stupid. Only pain is intellectual, only evil interesting. This is the treason of the artist: a refusal to admit the banality of evil and the terrible boredom of pain. If you can't lick 'em, join 'em. If it hurts, repeat it. But to praise despair is to condemn delight, to embrace violence is to lose hold of everything else. We have almost lost hold; we can no longer describe a happy man, nor make any celebration of joy. How can I tell you about the people of Omelas? They were not naive and happy children--though their children were, in fact, happy. They were mature, intelligent, passionate adults whose lives were not wretched. O miracle! but I wish I could describe it better. I wish I could convince you. Omelas sounds in my words like a city in a fairy tale, long ago and far away, once upon a time. Perhaps it would be best if you imagined it as your own fancy bids, assuming it will rise to the occasion, for certainly I cannot suit you all. For instance, how about technology? I think that there would be no cars or helicopters in and above the streets; this follows from the fact that the people of Omelas are happy people. Happiness is based on a just discrimination of what is necessary, what is neither necessary nor destructive, and what is destructive. In the middle category, however--that of the unnecessary but undestructive, that of comfort, luxury, exuberance, etc.--they could perfectly well have central heating, subway trains, washing machines, and all kinds of marvelous devices not yet invented here, floating light-sources, fuelless power, a cure for the common cold. Or they could have none of that; it doesn't matter. As you like it. I incline to think that people from towns up and down the coast have been coming in to Omelas during the last days before the Festival on very fast little trains and double-decked trams, and that

the train station of Omelas is actually the handsomest building in town, though plainer than the magnificent Farmers' Market. But even granted trains, I fear that Omelas so far strikes some of you as goody-goody. Smiles, bells, parades, horses, bleh. If so, please add an orgy. If an orgy would help, don't hesitate. Let us not, however, have temples from which issue beautiful nude priests and priestesses already half in ecstasy and ready to copulate with any man or woman, lover or stranger, who desires union with the deep godhead of the blood, although that was my first idea. But really it would be better not to have any temples in Omelas--at least, not manned temples. Religion yes, clergy no. Surely the beautiful nudes can just wander about, offering themselves like divine soufflés to the hunger of the needy and the rapture of the flesh. Let them join the processions. Let tambourines be struck above the copulations, and the glory of desire be proclaimed upon the gongs, and (a not unimportant point) let the offspring of these delightful rituals be beloved and looked after by all. One thing I know there is none of in Omelas is guilt. But what else should there be? I thought at first there were not drugs, but that is puritanical. For those who like it, the faint insistent sweetness of *drooz* may perfume the ways of the city, *drooz* which first brings a great lightness and brilliance to the mind and limbs, and then after some hours a dreamy languor, and wonderful visions at last of the very arcana and inmost secrets of the Universe, as well as exciting the pleasure of sex beyond belief; and it is not habit-forming. For more modest tastes I think there ought to be beer. What else, what else belongs in the joyous city? The sense of victory, surely, the celebration of courage. But as we did without clergy, let us do without soldiers. The joy built upon successful slaughter is not the right kind of joy; it will not do; it is fearful and it is trivial. A boundless and generous contentment, a magnanimous triumph felt not against some outer enemy but in communion with the finest and fairest in the souls of all men everywhere and the splendor of the world's summer: this is what swells the hearts of the people of Omelas, and the victory they celebrate is that of life. I really don't think many of them need to take *drooz*.

Most of the procession have reached the Green Fields by now. A marvelous smell of cooking goes forth from the red and blue tents of the provisioners. The faces of small children are amiably sticky; in the benign grey beard of a man a couple of crumbs of rich

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No organized religion, no hierarchy.

Sex, drugs, & luxury!

Sure...

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pastry are entangled. The youths and girls have mounted their horses and are beginning to group around the starting line of the course. An old woman, small, fat, and laughing, is passing out flowers from a basket, and tall young men wear her flowers in their shining hair. A child of nine or ten sits at the edge of the crowd, alone, playing on a wooden flute. People pause to listen, and they smile, but they do not speak to him, for he never ceases playing and never sees them, his dark eyes wholly rapt in the sweet, thin magic of the tune.

He finishes, and slowly lowers his hands holding the wooden flute.

As if that little private silence were the signal, all at once a trumpet sounds from the pavilion near the starting line: imperious, melancholy, piercing. The horses rear on their slender legs, and some of them neigh in answer. Sober-faced, the young riders stroke the horses' necks and soothe them, whispering, "Quiet, quiet, there my beauty, my hope...." They begin to form in rank along the starting line. The crowds along the racecourse are like a field of grass and flowers in the wind. The Festival of Summer has begun.

Do you believe? Do you accept the festival, the city, the joy? No? Then let me describe one more thing.

The plot thickens.

In a basement under one of the beautiful public buildings of Omelas, or perhaps in the cellar of one of its spacious private homes, there is a room. It has one locked door, and no window. A little light seeps in dustily between cracks in the boards, secondhand from a cobwebbed window somewhere across the cellar. In one corner of the little room a couple of mops, with stiff, clotted, foul-smelling heads stand near a rusty bucket. The floor is dirt, a little damp to the touch, as cellar dirt usually is. The room is about three paces long and two wide: a mere broom closet or disused tool room. In the room a child is sitting. It could be a boy or a girl. It looks about six, but actually is nearly ten. It is feeble-minded. Perhaps it was born defective, or perhaps it has become imbecile through fear, malnutrition, and neglect. It picks its nose and occasionally fumbles vaguely with its toes or genitals, as it sits hunched in the corner farthest from the bucket

The promotion of moral relativity

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and the two mops. It is afraid of the mops. It finds them horrible. It shuts its eyes, but it knows the mops are still standing there; and the door is locked; and nobody will come. The door is always locked; and nobody ever comes, except that sometimes--the child has no understanding of time or interval--sometimes the door rattles terribly and opens, and a person, or several people, are there. One of them may come in and kick the child to make it stand up. The others never come close, but peer in at it with frightened, disgusted eyes. The food bowl and the water jug are hastily filled, the door is locked, the eyes disappear. The people at the door never say anything, but the child, who has not always lived in the tool room, and can remember sunlight and its mother's voice, sometimes speaks. "I will be good," it says. "Please let me out. I will be good!" They never answer. The child used to scream for help at night, and cry a good deal, but now it only makes a kind of whining, "eh-haa, eh-haa," and it speaks less and less often. It is so thin there are no calves to its legs; its belly protrudes; it lives on a half-bowl of corn meal and grease a day. It is naked. Its buttocks and thighs are a mass of festered sores, as it sits in its own excrement continually.

Sad.

They all know it is there, all the people of Omelas. Some of them have come to see it, others are content merely to know it is there. They all know that it has to be there. Some of them understand why, and some do not, but they all understand that their happiness, the beauty of their city, the tenderness of their friendships, the health of their children, the wisdom of their scholars, the skill of their makers, even the abundance of their harvest and the kindly weathers of their skies, depend wholly on this child's abominable misery.

The children are indoctrinated.

This is usually "explained" to children when they are between eight and twelve, whenever they seem capable of understanding; and most of those who come to see the child are young people, though often enough an adult comes, or comes back, to see the child. No matter how well the matter has been explained to them, these young spectators are always shocked and sickened at the sight. They feel disgust, which they had thought themselves superior to. They feel anger, outrage, impotence, despite all the explanations. They would like to do something for the child. But there is nothing they can do. If the child were brought up into the sunlight out of that vile place, if it were

→ The children are good inside but not for long..

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cleaned and fed and comforted, that would be a good thing indeed; but if it were done, in that day and hour all the prosperity and beauty and delight of Omelas would wither and be destroyed. Those are the terms. To exchange all the goodness and grace of every life in Omelas for that single, small improvement: to throw away the happiness of thousands for the chance of the happiness of one: that would be to let guilt within the walls indeed. *democracy in action*

The terms are strict and absolute; there may not even be a kind word spoken to the child. *This is some sort of an experiment — how many will leave?*

Just as in wars, the trodden must be reduced to sub-human levels in the minds of the people.

Often the young people go home in tears, or in a tearless rage, when they have seen the child and faced this terrible paradox. They may brood over it for weeks or years. But as time goes on they begin to realize that even if the child could be released, it would not get much good of its freedom: a little vague pleasure of warmth and food, no doubt, but little more. It is too degraded and imbecile to know any real joy. It has been afraid too long ever to be free of fear. Its habits are too uncouth for it to respond to humane treatment. Indeed, after so long it would probably be wretched without walls about it to protect it, and darkness for its eyes, and its own excrement to sit in. Their tears at the bitter injustice dry when they begin to perceive the terrible justice of reality, and to accept it. Yet it is their tears and anger, the trying of their generosity and the acceptance of their helplessness, which are perhaps the true source of the splendor of their lives.

Pragmatism vs. idealism

Theirs is no vapid, irresponsible happiness. They know that they, like the child, are not free. They know compassion. It is the existence of the child, and their knowledge of its existence, that makes possible the nobility of their architecture, the poignancy of their music, the profundity of their science. It is because of the child that they are so gentle with children. They know that if the wretched one were not there sniveling in the dark, the other one, the flute-player, could make no joyful music as the young riders line up in their beauty for the race in the sunlight of the first morning of summer.

The narrator justifies.

Now do you believe in them? Are they not more credible? But there is one more thing to tell, and this is quite incredible.

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At times one of the adolescent girls or boys who go to see the child does not go home to weep or rage, does not, in fact, go home at all. Sometimes also a man or woman much older falls silent for a day or two, and then leaves home. These people go out into the street, and walk down the street alone. They keep walking, and walk straight out of the city of Omelas, through the beautiful gates. They keep walking across the farmlands of Omelas. Each one goes alone, youth or girl, man or woman. Night falls; the traveler must pass down village streets, between the houses with yellow-lit windows, and on out into the darkness of the fields. Each alone, they go west or north, towards the mountains. They go on. They leave Omelas, they walk ahead into the darkness, and they do not come back. The place they go towards is a place even less imaginable to most of us than the city of happiness. I cannot describe it at all. It is possible that it does not exist. But they seem to know where they are going, the ones who walk away from Omelas. *They walk away without changing the system, or helping the child.*

"A democracy is nothing more than mob rule, where fifty-one percent of the people may take away the rights of the other forty-nine." — Thomas Jefferson
Quote applies here; the rights of one are trodden for the good of many.

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