



The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas

A SHORT STORY BY URSULA K. LE GUIN

UTILITARIANISM

A PRESENTATION BY LAURENS T. ROSINSKI

The narrator of *Those Who Walk Away from Omelas* is very conversational, and likely the author, le Guin, herself; in fact, the entire short story, classified as speculative fiction, is not dissimilar to an essay. Therefore, I will be referring to the narrator as simply le Guin.



heads up ↑

What is *Omelas*?

The city of le Guin's principal concern, a utopia?

What is *Omelas*?

- Le Guin presents to us the city of *Omelas*, seemingly a true utopia. But the reader is unconvinced...
- She repeatedly, somewhat sardonically, persuades us that *Omelas* is perfect, while also noting the reader's—and by extension society's—aversion to believing in such a place.
- For example, le Guin describes society's erroneous impression that “only pain is intelligent, only evil interesting.”
- She assures us that the people of *Omelas* are “not dulcet shepherds [or] bland utopians.”
- They manage to be educated, peaceful, and happy all at once; not blissful due to ignorance. But do not think that *Omelas* is “goody-goody. [...] If so, please add an orgy.”

Thus, le Guin creates an important distinction: *Omelas* is whatever utopia we want it to be, whatever perfection is to us.

She is not entirely prescribing what a utopia is or how one is made! Instead, she uses *Omelas* for a thought experiment involving the perfect utopia. *But does a utopia have to come at a cost, and at what cost?*

Indeed, this utopia is not free...

Le Guin acknowledges our reluctance to believe in such a place, as we naturally think that there must be a flaw.

Therefore, to convince us of its credibility, le Guin shows us Omelas's one weakness:

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

In a basement under one of the beautiful public buildings of Omelas [...] there is a room. It has one locked door, and no window. [...] 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 [...]. In the room a child is sitting. It could be a boy or a girl. It looks about six, but actually is nearly ten.

Cont'd

So this poor kid is really, really miserable.

How does it exist in *Omelas*?
How is this allowed?

Le Guin is showing us *Omelas's* flaw, making *Omelas*, to us, believable, credible. But what is this flaw?

“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 haunched in the corner farthest from the bucket 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.

Cont'd

Not only is this poor child suffering immensely, but the people of Omelas know it! They even send little tourist groups to stare at it in disgust!

How is this possible? How can the people of this perfect utopia *Omelas* do this?

"The door is always locked; and nobody ever comes, except that sometimes [...] the door rattles terribly and opens, and a person, or several people, are there. One of them may come 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. [...] It is naked. Its buttocks and thighs are a mass of festered sores, as it sits in its own excrement continually.

They all know it is there, all the people of Omelas."

The Child

Le Guin describes a miserable child being horribly mistreated by the people of Omelas — but why are they mistreating it, and what does it mean?

Le Guin reveals to the reader what Omelas is built on, what it can thank its utopian state for: *this single “child’s abominable misery.”*

Le Guin explain that “all [Omelians] 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.”



But not all agree to these terms

These are the terms of *Omelas*.

Le Guin shows us the contract that Omelas offers its citizens, and she shows us those who don't accept the terms.

Is what they do the right thing? Is that the ethical decision? Is *Omelas* a paradise built on a necessary bargain?

“At times one of the adolescent girls or boys who go to see the child does not go home to weep or rage [as others do], 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. [...] 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.**”

Themes



Not *only* utilitarianism!

Salvation & The Crucifixion of Jesus

The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas is based on a quote from *The Brothers Karamazov* by Dostoyevsky. This quote in particular questions the morality of the Crucifixion of Jesus: **an innocent bears the sin (and suffering) of all others**. Does salvation come thus?

Le Guin initially credited William James in "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life," an 1891 essay, though; only later did she realize that the credit for the idea rightly belonged to Dostoyevsky.

"I[, Ivan,] challenge you[, Alyosha]: let's assume that you were called upon to build the edifice of human destiny so that men would finally be happy and would find peace and tranquility. If you knew that, in order to attain this, you would have to torture just one single creature, let's say the little girl who beat her chest so desperately in the outhouse, and that on her unavenged tears you could build that edifice, would you agree to do it?"

Utilitarianism

And of course: is it an ethical thing to punish an innocent one such as the child so harshly for the good of so many others?

The Last Paragraph & Utilitarianism

- “[A] place even less imaginable [than Omelas]. I cannot describe it at all.” → le Guin is saying that she does not know what this place, even more ethical and perfect than the utilitarian *Omelas*, is or looks like: she has no idea what this better moral theory, or better world, than utilitarianism is.
- In fact, “[it] is possible that it does not exist.” → while she has portrayed utilitarianism's flaw so clearly, she is not arguing that it is outright bad, for she does not know if something better even exists. She may dream of a better system but acknowledges that utilitarianism may still be best.
- But still, le Guin cannot reconcile the vile harm that is done to the innocent child. Still, she dreams of leaving for a better world, where that pain must not exist at all; she admires “the ones who walk away,” “[seeming] to know where they are going.” What could that place possibly be?

The Question of *Injustice*

- *Those Who Walk Away from Omelas* shows us one common criticism of injustice, and maybe the most important one: the **optimific** decision often not the **just** one.
 - → the innocent child, who is suffering great injustice for the benefit of others in *Omelas*.
- Le Guin rejects potential solutions to this problem:
 - Justice is intrinsically valuable and should therefore be included in the consequentialist calculation.
 - Injustice is never optimific; therefore, the problem Le Guin outlines is unrealistic.
- The first is easily dismissed as it would defeat the purpose of consequentialism and the second is impossible to prove.
- Le Guin asks us if we should sacrifice justice for the sake of good... but yet she dreams of an ethical system that doesn't require that sacrifice.