

## AN ANALYSIS OF THE UTOPIA QUESTION IN URSULA LE GUIN'S "THE ONES WHO WALK AWAY FROM OMELAS"

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Published in 1973, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" is a short story by Ursula Le Guin which represents the true dynamics of a 'utopian' society to the readers. The narration begins with the introduction of the city of Omelas, and the joyous citizens of this place; later develops into a much terrifying and terrible image of the child who must suffer for the existence of Omelas. Throughout the story Le Guin emphasizes the significance of the duality of this city, and reflects the various comprehensions of this exact same place by different characters like the suffering child or the flute-playing child. Quite significantly, the narrator is another important power that enables the readers to be included in the narration process; and naturally the story gets shaped by the different interpretations of the readers, along with the characters and the writer. Le Guin, by including the reader into the narration, signifies the importance of perspectives and point of views in "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas". Therefore, in this paper I argue that Omelas as a physical place, actually creates utopic and dystopic spaces for the child and the citizens of Omelas separately.

The first scene of the story portrays a clear representation of the euphoric state that the citizens of Omelas are living in. They are celebrating the Festival of Summer in their perfectly constructed society and surroundings. Le Guin clearly indicates that "But there was no king. They did not use swords, or keep slaves. They were not barbarians." (Le Guin, 1973); Omelas is a definitive portrayal of a utopia according to the traditional sense until the point the readers get to witness Omelas as a place that bears the duality inside. In his article titled "Le Guin's Omelas: Issues of Genre" Senior claims: "Certainly, a city of shared prosperity where such celebrations occur without the pall of poverty, racism, religious dogma, or draconian governmental stricture - such a place must be a utopia for those who live there." (Senior, 2004) Naturally, for the people of Omelas, this place creates a pleasant space which can also be identified as 'locus amoenus' in which they all feel safe and protected; however, the shift of the narration and the perspective changes with the ambiguous remarks of the narrator. After describing Omelas and the people, the narrator suddenly includes the readers to the narration by enabling them to have the power to construct Omelas according to their own desires in their minds. Le Guin, through the narrator, gives freedom to the readers to experiment with the elements of this utopian society and actually welcomes the readers into the textual space which

was created by the narrator. Once we, as the readers, not only exist but also start to shape and construct the different elements of Omelas, also begin to be included in the story that will be also shown by a different perspective. In this turning point of the narration, in where narrator asks: “Do you believe? Do you accept the festival, the city, the joy? No? Then let me describe one more thing.” (Le Guin, 1973) the readers now start to see the concealed and hidden side of this utopia. In order to make the citizens have such an idyllic space for themselves in Omelas, a child must be sacrificed and be deprived of that ‘locus amoenus’.

Carolyn Merchant in her *Earthcare: Women and the Environment* identifies ideology as a “story told by people in power. Once we identify ideology as a story-powerful and compelling, but still only a story-we realize that by rewriting the story, we can challenge the structures of power. We recognize that all stories can and should be challenged.” (Merchant, 1996) With the shift of the scene at this point, the readers are enabled to see the other side of this utopia, which actually can be identified as a dystopia from this perspective. If the readers had any chance to hear the story from this lonely child who is being locked in one of the basements of this glorious city-Omelas, the understanding about the space would be quite different too, naturally no one would read this story as a utopian work. The child, who is ‘destined to suffer’, perceives the same place-the city of Omelas- as a locus horridus instead of locus amoenus. Narrator at this point, as a significant element of the narration, enables everyone to see how one’s utopia actually symbolizes someone else’s dystopia. As Adams claims: "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" appears to simply problematize the concept of Utopia by foregrounding the scapegoat which we, the readers, require to be the foundation stone of culture.” (Adams, 1991) Therefore, after seeing the duality of this representation, the readers start to have even larger significance to the text mostly because they become naturally responsible for their help in creation of this ‘utopia’ at the first place. Adams summarises this process of participation of the readers in a brutal act of constructing a utopia by first making sure that this utopia is built on someone else’s dystopia with these words: “In "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" Le Guin invites the reader to co-create a Utopian city and take responsibility for it, then also creates, at the insistence of her imagined reader, a graphically scapegoated victim-a brutally imprisoned idiot child-whose misery is the condition upon which the entire happiness of the Utopia is founded.” (Adams, 1991) Different perceptions of this city of Omelas are also presented in the characters that reflect each other in a similar sense. The flute-playing child and the suffering-child all perceive the world in a way that is presented to them, according to their surroundings and their relationship with this setting. As Khanna states: “In "Omelas" readers

are meant to see the suffering child behind the fluteplayer's sensitive eyes, a recapitulation of the mythos of wounded artist and, implicitly in this story, a recapitulation of binary oppositions within the dominant Utopian narrative. (Khanna, 1991) This narrative, in this sense, clearly indicates the dual ways of the establishment of the understanding of this place as a utopia or a dystopia.

After comprehending the significance of this suffering child for the establishment of the utopia, the readers also gain an understanding about the hidden agreement between the citizens of Omelas. Everyone who lives in this constructed utopia, actually protect their status quo by accepting the necessity of dystopia for the utilitarian utopia. The story actually ends with the introduction of a new place, outside of the Omelas where even the narrator “cannot describe it at all. It is possible that it does not exist.” (Le Guin, 1973) In this context, the ones who walk away from Omelas, the ones who cannot change the dynamics of the society, form a special space only they can comprehend. Varsam in her article claims that: “The ones who walk away most obviously are refusing a utilitarian ethic since by remaining they would be complicit in the suffering of a child.” (Varsam, 2006) Therefore, by leaving the Omelas after understanding the transformative effect of the spaces this city creates, the journey towards unknown actually starts. The ones who leave Omelas travels into a place in which they can form their own individual spaces, not being affected by the feeling of guilt that naturally comes with the feeling of joy in Omelas. We, as the readers, also act as the people who has decided to leave the suffering child, the Omelas and the narration behind. After participating in the construction of Omelas as a utopia, and facing with the dystopia beneath; readers are now expected to leave the city of Omelas, the textual space which was founded on suffering, desperation and injustice. And as Adams states: “An alternative to violent cultural foundation through scapegoating, Le Guin suggests, is unimaginable-literally outside the capacity of her images.” (Adams, 1991) Le Guin, clearly indicates that the place is even more hard to describe to the readers than the city of Omelas, mostly because how it is open to any possibility of presenting a hopeful utopia or even a terrible dystopia to the people who walk away from Omelas.

In conclusion, Le Guin, in “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas”, enables the readers to function freely in the world-building process and transforms the way the readers comprehend the city of Omelas. Throughout the story, along with the reader, this so-called utopia also gets shaped by the narrator. This narrator functions as a power that makes all of the readers perceive the real dynamics of this joyous society and the sufferings as the foundations of Omelas. The ending of the story invokes the state of wonder and awe about the unimaginable

place that is presented outside of Omelas for the readers, while also reminding the ones that are left in Omelas, including the suffering child and the citizens who has to live on with the guilt.

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