Summary

Summary (Comprehensive Guide to Short Stories, Critical Edition)

Omelas is a utopian city where the people lead lives that are happy, in the best sense of the word. On the day on which the narrator is focusing, the city’s people are celebrating the summer festival. The children ride willing horses in races and race about the fields in their bare feet. The day is bright and clear, music of all kinds fills the air, bells ring, and the air itself is sweet.

The narrator is conscious of the fact that the idea of happiness, and in particular the happiness of an entire city, may be a suspect concept to others. Happiness implies a kind of innocence and foolishness and lacks the complexities that are most often attributed to pain and evil impulses. However, the narrator insists that the people of Omelas lead complex lives.

The people may lack certain things that others have, but they do not feel that lack as a deprivation. These people have come to an understanding of what is necessary, what is destructive, and what is both or neither. Those things that are necessary, they have. Those luxuries that are neither necessary nor destructive, they also have. Omelas is a joyful city inhabited by mature, intelligent, passionate adults. Their lives are not wretched, nor are they puritanical.

This picture of Omelas is not the whole story. There is something that makes the city special in another way. The city has a guarantee of happiness; it has struck a bargain, although how and with whom it is not clear. The bargain is this: In a room under the city is a stunted, frightened, half-starved child, and everyone over adolescence in Omelas knows that the child is there. The child is locked in a closet and shown off to those who wish to see it. It is fed half a bowl of cornmeal mush a day and is left to sit, naked, in dirt and its own excrement. The child barely talks, except for a bit of whining gibberish and a plea, heard less and less often, to be let out. No one is allowed to speak even a kind word to the child, and no one stays with it long.

If the child were rescued from its cell-like closet, the whole of the city of Omelas would falter. The city’s great happiness, its splendors and health, its architecture, music, and science, all are dependent on the misery of this one child. The Omelas people know that if the child were released, then the possible happiness of the degraded child—and it is only possible, not probable—would be set against the sure failure of the happiness of the many. Thus, the people have been taught compassion and the terrible reality of justice, and on this they base their lives.

Inexplicably, there are some young people, and sometimes even an adult, who, shortly after viewing the child, leave Omelas through its gates and head into the mountains. They do not return.
Overview

The story opens as the celebration of the Festival of Summer is getting under way in the city of Omelas. There is an air of genuine excitement about the festival, with its flag-ornamented boats, noisy running children, prancing horses, and "great joyous clanging of the bells." The narrator, who never identifies himself or herself, steps back from describing the scene to comment: "Given a description such as this one tends to make certain assumptions. . . . Omelas sounds in my words like a city in a fairy tale, long ago and far away, once upon a time." However, the narrator hastens to add, the people of Omelas "were not barbarians. I do not know the rules and laws of their society, but I suspect that they were singularly few." The people of Omelas are happy, and the narrator explains his or her belief that "we" (presumably enlightened, contemporary westerners) have a "bad habit, encouraged by pedants and sophisticates, of considering happiness as something rather stupid."

As the narrator continues to describe the people and the city, he or she stops using the past-tense verbs of a traditional narration and switches to the conditional: "I think that there would be no cars or helicopters in and above the streets." The people's happiness is not determined by the external accoutrements of life in Omelas, but rather, the absence of those accoutrements in Omelas "follows from the fact that the people of Omelas are happy people." This happiness is "based on a just discrimination of what is necessary, what is neither necessary nor destructive, and what is destructive." They "could perfectly well" have some of the luxuries belonging to the middle category, but as the narrator tells the reader, other than the fact that they are happy, what they have or don't have "doesn't matter. As you like it." The narrator has an idea about what life is like there, but the reader is more than welcome to add details of his or her own. For example, if the description given thus far of Omelas strikes the reader as "goody-goody," the reader is welcome to add an orgy. If there are orgies, though, any resulting offspring will be treated well; in another distinction that makes Omelas seem Utopian, "one thing I know there is none of in Omelas is guilt."

Now the horse race is about to begin, and with it the festival itself officially opens. In case the reader is still skeptical about the nature of Omelas, the narrator will describe "one more thing." At this point the story makes a dramatic shift, turning to what is literally and figuratively beneath the surface of the happy city, the troubling situation at the core of its existence.

In a dirty, dusty, dank locked room sits a "feeble-minded" child in fear of its surroundings, never directly approached by the townspeople except when they "kick the child to make it stand up. . . [or] peer in at it with frightened, disgusted eyes." As with the details of the city itself, the narrator also leaves some of the details of the child's existence up to the reader: the room is "in a basement under one of the beautiful public buildings of Omelas, or perhaps in the cellar of one of its more spacious private homes. . . . [The child] could be a boy or a girl." But from here, although the reader is given alternatives and choices as to the child's living conditions, the horror of the description proceeds with clarity and certainty. The adults of Omelas "all know it is there. . . . Some of them have come to see it, others are content merely to know it is there." All the adults understand that everything that is good and wonderful about their city depends "wholly on this child's abominable misery." People, usually children, who come to see the child for the first time "are always shocked and sickened at the sight." They may ponder the peril of this child "for weeks or years," ultimately realizing that there is nothing they can do. If the child were 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.
Furthermore, says the narrator, the people realize that even if the child were to be released and treated kindly now, it has been degraded for so long already that rescue would come too late; it is unlikely that it would "get much good of its freedom." The tears of the young people "at the bitter injustice dry when they begin to perceive the terrible justice of reality, and to accept it. . . . Theirs is no vapid, irresponsible happiness. They know that they, like the child, are not free. They know compassion."

The narrator concludes the story by asking the reader whether somehow the presence of this suffering, upon which all the happiness of Omelas is based, makes the happiness more credible. And then, he or she adds, "there is one more thing to tell, and this is quite incredible." Occasionally one of the adolescents who goes to see the child for the first time, or even one of the older adults who has been pondering the child's situation silently for years, turns away from the town and simply leaves, each one alone, walking "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."
**Summary**

"The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" opens as the celebration of the Festival of Summer is getting underway in the city of Omelas. There is an air of genuine excitement about the festival, with its flag-adorned boats, noisy running children, prancing horses, and "great joyous clanging of the bells."

The narrator, who never identifies him or herself, steps back from describing the scene to comment that, "Given a description such as this one tends to make certain assumptions.... Omelas sounds in my words like a city in a fairy tale, long ago and far away, once upon a time."

However, the narrator hastens to add, the people of Omelas "were not barbarians. I do not know the rules and laws of their society, but I suspect they were singularly few." The people of Omelas are happy, and the narrator explains his or her belief that "we" (presumably enlightened, contemporary westerners) have a "bad habit, encouraged by pedants and sophisticated, of considering happiness as something rather stupid."

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Now the horse race is about to begin, and with it the Festival itself officially opens. In case the reader is still skeptical about the nature of Omelas, the narrator will describe "one more thing." At this point the story makes a dramatic shift, turning to what is literally and figuratively beneath the surface of the happy city, the troubling situation at the core of its existence.

In a dirty, dusty, dank, locked room sits a "feeble-minded" child in fear of its surroundings, never directly approached by the townspeople except when they "kick the child to make it stand up ... [or] peer in at it with frightened, disgusted eyes." As with the details of the city itself, the narrator leaves some of the details of the child's existence up to the reader, too: the room is "in a basement under one of the beautiful public buildings of Omelas, or perhaps in the cellar of one of its spacious private homes.... [The child] could be a boy or a girl." But from here, although the reader is given alternatives and choices as to the conditions of the child's existence, the horror of the description proceeds with clarity and certainty.

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The narrator winds up the story by asking the reader if somehow the presence of this suffering, which all the happiness of Omelas is based on, makes the happiness more credible. And then, he or she adds, "There is one more thing to tell, and this is quite incredible." Occasionally one of the adolescents who goes to see the child for the first time, or even one of the older adults who has been pondering the child's situation silently for years, turns away from the town and simply leaves, each one alone, walking "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."
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Themes

Themes and Meanings (Comprehensive Guide to Short Stories, Critical Edition)

Ursula K. Le Guin has given this story a parenthetical subtitle, “Variations on a Theme by William James,” referring to the philosopher and psychologist who wrote that “some people could not accept even universal prosperity and happiness if it depended on the deliberate subjugation of an idiot child to abuse it could barely understand.” Le Guin’s story also has ties to Fyodor Dostoevski’s Bratya Karamazovy (1879-1880; The Brothers Karamazov, 1912), in which Ivan, the realistic brother, asks Alyosha, the religious brother, about God’s goodness in a world in which children suffer. Ivan asks Alyosha if he would be willing to be the creator of a world in which every being was happy, if that happiness were based on the suffering of a five-year-old girl. Alyosha is forced to concede that he would not.

These issues are related to the concept of theodicy, which attempts to answer the question of the problem of evil that is summed up by three statements: God is good, God is omnipotent and omniscient, and there is evil. The existence of evil is usually accepted as a given. If God is good, but not omnipotent, he wants to stop evil but cannot. If God is omnipotent, but not good, he could stop evil but would not. In the Judeo-Christian system, however, God is understood to be both good and omnipotent, so some other answer for the existence of evil is necessary.

The concept of human free will has often been used to explain the evil in the world. Theologians use the story of the expulsion from Eden as an example of how human free will, uncoerced choice, may cause evil to occur. The people of Omelas knowingly allow the child to suffer so that they may be happy. Someone in Omelas gave the child up to its incarceration; it remembers its mother. Someone in Omelas may have the child in the cellar of his or her lovely home. Someone is responsible for its poor food. Someone kicks at it to make it stand when it is to be shown to a new group of children. The great majority of Omelas citizens are able to accept their lives at the expense of this helpless other and have rationalized that it could not really be made happy anyway. Even the ones who walk away make no attempt to take the child away with them. They choose to leave it to its suffering, fear, and pleading.
Themes

"The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" is the story of a Utopian society whose survival depends on the existence of a child who is locked in a small room and mistreated. Although all of the citizens of Omelas are aware of the child's situation, most of them accept that their happiness is dependent on the child's "abominable misery." Sometimes, however, a few people, after visiting the child and seeing the deplorable conditions under which it lives, leave Omelas forever.

Morals and Morality

One of the major themes in "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" is morality. Le Guin once wrote in a preface to the story that it is a critique of American moral life. She also explained the story's subtitle, "Variations on a Theme by William James," noting that she was inspired to write the story by something James, an American psychologist and philosopher, stated in his "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life": "[If people could be] kept permanently happy on the one simple condition that a certain lost soul on the far-off edge of things should lead a life of lonely torment, ... how hideous a thing would be [the enjoyment of this happiness] when deliberately accepted as the fruit of such a bargain." Although James believed people would not accept such a bargain, Le Guin presents in "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" a society that does just that so that she can explore the reasons why people avoid or renounce moral responsibility. In fact, the few people who do choose to leave Omelas after seeing the child are hardly noticed, and their act of protest is not understood by the people or the narrator.

As a political allegory, a story in which characters represent things or ideas to convey a political message, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" also addresses the morality underlying political systems. The child has been said to represent the underclass in capitalistic Western societies, particularly the United States, as well as the underdeveloped countries of the Third World. In both cases, poor, underprivileged people are often exploited and overlooked by the wealthy and prosperous. Therefore, Le Guin explores the moral accountability of a society where the happiness of the majority rests on the misery of a powerless minority.

Finally, Le Guin examines the moral responsibility of writers and readers by composing a story in which the narrator tries to entice the reader into taking part in the creation of Omelas. Because the reader is told to imagine Omelas "as your fancy bids," the reader is lulled into accepting Omelas and the horrible premise on which it is founded. Therefore, the reader, like the citizens of Omelas, can either accept the society or reject it out of moral indignation.

Victims and Victimization

Closely related to the theme of morality is the theme of victimization, which is the act of oppressing, harming, or killing an individual or group. In this story, the victim, the child, is a scapegoat—it is sacrificed, the narrator states, so the other citizens of Omelas can live in happiness and peace. However, the narrator gives no good, rational explanation of how this situation came about, who set the terms, or how it is enforced, stating only that "if the child were brought up into the sunlight out of the vile place, if it were cleaned 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." Critics have said this lack of a rational explanation adds to the moral conflict of the story because readers are unable to fully understand why a scapegoat is necessary for Omelas to continue to exist.

Guilt and Innocence

Le Guin also addresses guilt and innocence in "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas." Although the narrator states that there is no guilt in Omelas, the reactions of the citizens to the child's condition seem to suggest otherwise. For example, the narrator says that many people, after going to view the child, are
"shocked and sickened at the sight. They feel disgust. 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." The few people who choose to leave Omelas because they cannot accept the situation on which the society rests also, presumably, feel guilt. But the narrator is unable to fathom such a reaction and merely states, "I cannot describe it at all."

**Happiness**

Because "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" is an example of Utopian literature, a type of fiction that depicts seemingly perfect societies, it also examines the meaning and consequences of happiness. Toward the beginning of the story, the narrator tries to explain why people are unable to accept happiness: "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.... 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." Since there is some truth to such statements, Le Guin causes the reader to wonder if people do, in fact, reject happiness as something "rather stupid" because they are too critical and pessimistic to believe true happiness can exist. This only further entices the reader to accept Omelas and, in turn, the possibility of Utopian societies despite the negative consequences.
The Child
The child, whose existence is revealed toward the end of the story, is abused and mistreated so the other citizens of Omelas can live in prosperity and happiness. Locked in a small room or closet with no windows, the child is dirty, naked, and malnourished. It receives only half a bowl of corn meal and grease a day and often sits in its own excrement. The narrator states that the child "could be 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." All of the citizens of Omelas know of the child's existence, but they also "know that it has to be there. [They] all understand that their happiness.... [depends] wholly on this child's abominable misery." The child, therefore, is the scapegoat of the story; it is sacrificed for the good of the others in the community.

The Citizens of Omelas
The citizens of Omelas are described as happy, non-violent, and intelligent. Everyone is considered equal in Omelas; there are no slaves or rulers. In Omelas, children run about naked, playing; "merry women carry their babies"; and "tall young men wear.... flowers in their shining hair." The narrator also stresses that although the citizens are happy, they are not simple or naive; "they were mature, intelligent, passionate adults whose lives were not wretched." All of the citizens know about the child, who is mistreated and locked in a small room, but most accept that their happiness depends on the child's "abominable misery." The ones who are not able to bear the reality of the child's situation leave Omelas forever.
Themes and Characters

As mentioned earlier, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" is the story of a Utopian society whose survival depends on the "abominable misery" of a child who is locked in a small room and mistreated. Although all of the citizens of Omelas are aware of the child's situation, most of them accept that their happiness is dependent on the child's deprivation. Some people, however, after visiting the child and seeing the deplorable conditions under which it lives, leave Omelas forever.

One of the major themes in the story is morality. Le Guin once wrote in a preface to the story that it is a critique of American moral life. She also explained the story's subtitle, "Variations on a Theme by William James," noting that she was inspired to write the story by something James stated in "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life": "[If people could be] kept permanently happy on the one simple condition that a certain lost soul on the far-off edge of things should lead a life of lonely torment... how hideous a thing would be [the enjoyment of this happiness] when deliberately accepted as the fruit of such a bargain." Although James believed that people would not accept such a bargain, in this story Le Guin presents a society that does just that. This device allows her to explore the reasons why people avoid or renounce moral responsibility. In fact, the few people who do choose to leave Omelas after seeing the child are hardly noticed, and their act of protest is not understood.

As a political allegory—a story in which characters represent things or ideas to convey a political message—"The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" also addresses the morality underlying political systems. The child has been said to represent the underclass in capitalistic Western societies, particularly the United States, as well as the underdeveloped countries of the Third World. In both cases, poor, underprivileged people are often exploited and overlooked by the wealthy and prosperous. Le Guin explores the moral accountability of a society where the happiness of the majority rests on the misery of a powerless minority.

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Closely related to the theme of morality is the theme of victimization, which is the act of oppressing, harming, or killing an individual or group. In this story the victim, the child, is a scapegoat—it is sacrificed, the narrator states, so that the other citizens of Omelas can live in happiness and peace. The narrator gives no good, rational explanation, however, for how this situation came about; who sets the terms? How are they enforced? The narrator states only that

if the child were brought up into the sunlight out of the vile place, if it were 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.

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Le Guin also addresses guilt and innocence in "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas." Although the narrator states that there is no guilt in Omelas, the reactions of the citizens to the child's condition seem to suggest otherwise. For example, the narrator says that many people, after going to view the child, are
"shocked and sickened at the sight. They feel disgust. . . . 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." The few people who choose to leave Omelas because they cannot accept the situation on which the society rests also, presumably, feel guilt. But the narrator is unable to fathom such a reaction and merely states, "I cannot describe it at all."

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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. . . . 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.

Since there is some truth to such statements, Le Guin causes the reader to wonder whether people do in fact reject happiness as something "rather stupid" because they are too critical and pessimistic to believe true happiness can exist. This only further entices the reader to accept Omelas and, in turn, the possibility of Utopian societies despite the negative consequences.

The story does not focus on specific characters. Even the existence of the child at the center of the story is not revealed until the end. Locked in a small room or closet with no windows, the child is dirty, naked, and malnourished. It receives only half a bowl of corn meal and grease a day and often sits in its own excrement. The narrator states that the child "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." All of the citizens of Omelas know of the child's existence, but they also "know that it has to be there. . . . [They] all understand that their happiness . . . [depends] wholly on this child's abominable misery." In contrast, the citizens of Omelas are described as happy, nonviolent, and intelligent. Everyone is considered equal in Omelas; there are no slaves or rulers. Other children run about naked, playing, "merry women carry their babies," and "tall young men wear flowers in their shining hair." The narrator also stresses that although the citizens are happy, they are not simple or naive: "they were mature, intelligent, passionate adults whose lives were not wretched."
Critical Essays

Critical Overview

Although "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" won a Hugo Award for best short story in 1974, it has not received much scholarly attention. The critics who have commented on the story have focused on its complex themes, including scapegoatism, morality, the duality of human nature, and political ideology. For example, Jerre Collins wrote in Studies in Short Fiction that "The Ones who Walk Away from Omelas" is "a critique of American moral life," while Shoshana Knapp observed in The Journal of Narrative Technique that Le Guin's subject is "the proper morality of art itself." Reviewers have also commented on how Le Guin's narrative technique and symbolism advance the themes of the story. The narrator of the story, for example, tries to convince the reader that Omelas does exist by inviting the reader to take part in its creation: "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." Knapp has noted that because the story's readers "are drafted to be partners in creation, they work together [with the narrator] to construct the hideous moral universe of Omelas."

Critical reaction to Le Guin's career as a whole has been positive. She is a highly respected author of fantasy fiction and has been praised for expanding the scope of the genre by combining conventional elements of science fiction with more traditional literary techniques. Le Guin has also been lauded for working in a wide variety of genres and for incorporating social analysis, reality, and moral conscience into her works.

Le Guin's novel The Left Hand of Darkness (1969), for which she received Hugo and Nebula Awards, is generally regarded as among her best works. This book centers on an androgynous alien culture and examines such themes as sexual identity, incest, xenophobia, and fidelity and betrayal. Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia (1974), another highly regarded novel, also won Hugo and Nebula Awards and earned praise for its complex characterizations and well-integrated social and political ideas. Le Guin's Earthsea cycle, which is comprised of four novels, is considered a major achievement in fantasy literature, comparable in stature to such popular works as J.R.R. Tolkien's Lord of the Rings. In addition to her novels, Le Guin has written numerous short stories, many of which are collected in The Wind's Twelve Quarters (1975), Orsinian Tales (1976), and The Compass Rose (1982). Orsinian Tales has been acclaimed for the manner in which it weaves elements of European history, specifically references to events in Central Europe prior to the outbreak of World War II, into fantastic narrative. Le Guin has also been praised for her works of children's fiction, including The Adventures of Cobbler's Rune (1982) and Catwings (1988).

Although Le Guin has experimented with numerous genres, and her works are quite diverse, critics have noted that there are thematic and stylistic similarities running throughout her fiction. Theodore Sturgeon wrote in the Los Angeles Times that "there are some notes in her orchestration that come out repeatedly and with power. A cautionary fear of the development of democracy into dictatorship. Celebrations of courage, endurance, risk. Language, not only loved and shaped, but investigated in all its aspects; call that, perhaps, communication. But above all, in almost un-earthly terms, Ursula Le Guin examines, attacks, unbuttons and takes down and exposes our notions of reality."
Essays and Criticism

Summary and Allegorical Significance in "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas"

Ursula Le Guin's "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas" was first published in 1973 in _New Dimensions_ 3 and has been published in many anthologies since. When it appeared for the second time in 1975 as part of her short story collection _The Wind's Twelve Quarters_, Le Guin added a two-page preface in which she addresses her subtitle, "Variations on a Theme by William James," and its connection to the story's theme. Le Guin writes in this preface: "The central idea of this psycho myth, the scapegoat, turns up in Dostoevsky's _Brothers Karamozov_, and several people have asked me, rather suspiciously, why I gave the credit to William James." She goes on to say that not having re-read Dostoevsky since she was twenty-five, she had "simply forgotten he used the idea. But when [she] met it in James's 'The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life,' it was with a shock of recognition." Le Guin's preface is friendly and informative in nature: for example, she tells the reader that the name "Omelas" came from her reading the road sign for Salem, Oregon backwards, something she commonly did, reading the word "stop," for example, as "pots." The reference to James and Dostoevsky seems, too, to be merely a helpful, explanatory note from the author, but here the nature of Le Guin's comments cannot be taken for granted. Critic Shoshana Knapp reminds us of D.H. Lawrence's suggestion to "trust the tale instead of the teller": Simply because the author says something does not mean the reader needs to believe it, and perhaps the people who asked Le Guin about Dostoevsky "suspiciously" were right to be suspicious, regardless of her casual dismissal. It matters whether or not one trusts Le Guin's comments about her inspiration for this story.

Since both Dostoevsky and James have written pieces which include some kind of scapegoat which could be a model for the locked-up child of Omelas, looking at these pieces in light of Le Guin's story can be instructive. The passage she cites from James says that if millions of people could be "kept permanently happy on the one simple condition that a certain lost soul on the far-off edge of things should lead a life of lonely torment, ... how hideous a thing would be [the enjoyment of this happiness] when deliberately accepted as the fruit of such a bargain." James holds the optimistic position that people would not accept this bargain, that a "specifical and independent sort of emotion" would arise which would "immediately make us feel" its hideous nature, "even though an impulse arose within us to clutch at the happiness so offered." In James's view, people would immediately spurn such happiness. The premise of "Omelas" is that the opposite would hold true: in Omelas, walking away is not the norm but happens rarely and is considered, as Knapp points out, "incredible." Le Guin's story, then, seems to refute the Jamesian assumption of an innate human decency; in Omelas, the mean and the vulgar are accepted as a necessary part of existence.

Certainly Le Guin's story is aiming for some kind of political interpretation, though exactly what that should be is less clear. Le Guin deals with similar themes in some of her other works, including _The Dispossessed, The Tombs of Atuan_, and _Rocannon's World_. Her story "The Day Before the Revolution," which immediately follows "Omelas" in _The Wind's Twelve Quarters_, is about one of those who walked away, Odo, the female founder of the planet in _The Dispossessed_. Regarding James's encapsulation of the scapegoat, Le Guin writes that "the dilemma of the American conscience can hardly be better stated." As critic Jerre Collins puts it, "the dilemma of the American conscience seems to be twofold: we cannot renounce the exploitation of others that makes possible our high standard of living, nor can we renounce the scapegoat-motif that justifies our comfortable life, [but 'Omelas' challenges] us to renounce both."

For Knapp, there is more to the story than the particular political interpretation Le Guin urges the reader toward, a position which rests on emphasizing the influence of Dostoevsky in addition to James. Knapp sees "Omelas" as being closer to Dostoevsky than to James, because James, in the passage Le Guin cites, discusses an abstract "lost soul" of no particular age, while Dostoevsky gives the reader, in the portrayal of the child Ivan Karamozov, a "painfully concrete picture ... of isolation, malnutrition, mental torment, and filth," strikingly similar to the child we find in Omelas.
Dostoevsky's Ivan Karamozov walks away from his life condemning the creator (in this case, God); Omelas, writes Knapp, "itself can be seen as a Similar act of dissent, a refusal to write stories that are rotten at the core," to be as guilty as the God in question in The Brothers Karamozov. "In the world of Le Guin's fiction, creation, like all acts of freedom and wizardry, entails moral responsibility." Knapp sees Le Guin's subject, then, as not only the moral accountability of a society for which the happiness of the majority rests on the abject misery of a powerless few, but that "her actual subject is the proper morality of art itself."

The Jamesian version of the scapegoat myth is an abstract political idea of oppression, while in Dostoevsky's version, the person who is the scapegoat rails against God, the creator of his situation. In "Omelas," Le Guin sets up the narrator, the reader, and Le Guin herself as creators of the child's situation.

Here there is a further point to be made about trustworthiness. The fact that Le Guin says in her preface to trust her regarding Dostoevsky and James, when the reader may have reason not to, can be viewed as analogous to the narrator saying to trust him or her about the people of Omelas and the legitimacy of their response to their dilemma. According to the narrator, the people of Omelas "would like to do something for the child. But there is nothing they can do... Even if the child could be released, it would not get much good of its freedom." Knapp and Collins, however, both criticize the reasons the narrator gives against freeing the child as faulty rationalizations. According to Knapp, the justification "offered by the narrator—that the child makes the inhabitants aware of the 'terrible justice of reality'—is a patent sophistry. To choose between torturing a child and destroying one's society (which includes other children) is a diabolical choice, not a human one." Collins agrees that "the rationalization rings hollow because the narrator has told us earlier that the child had not always been imprisoned in the dark room and 'can remember sunlight and its mother's voice,' and also that it wants out, even pleads to be released. However imbecile it may be, it knows (remembers) an alternative to its present suffering and wants that alternative. The bad faith of the Omelasians' rationalization is implied."

Not only are the residents of Omelas, those who stay, complicit in the child's misery, but the narrator attempts to draw the reader in and make the reader complicit on some level as well. Although the story opens with a well-detailed description of Omelas and its summer festival by a narrator who relates this description with authority, by the third paragraph the narrator goes so far as to say "Perhaps it would be best if you imagined [Omelas] as your own fancy bids, assuming it will rise to the occasion, for certainly I cannot suit you all.... They could perfectly well have central heating... and all kinds of marvelous devices not yet invented here.... Or they could have none of that: it doesn't matter. As you like it." If the reader accepts this premise, that the details of Omelas are at his or her discretion, then the reader is implicated in the creation of Omelas and thus implicated in the horrible situation on which the society rests.

According to Collins, such "negotiations entice the reader to commit himself or herself to the project of constructing a Utopia, a happy world that is intelligible." As the narrator points out, "we have a bad habit ... of considering happiness as something rather stupid"; it is not intelligible to us that a place could simply be happy, so we need a sense of something darker underneath. Because the narrator carries out the process of constructing Omelas with the reader for the good aspects of Omelas as well as for the bad, the reader is lulled into complacency and into accepting the reasonableness of such a world and his/her own role in creating it. As Knapp points out, "sometimes the narrator implies that this society has objective reality, that it is possible to have definite knowledge about it, even if this knowledge is not fully accessible to the narrator or to us," and sometimes not, through doling out to us pieces of information which are "factual" or "optional," a grammar which "traps us more subtly" in the creation of Omelas, as even the verbs change from past tense to present to conditional.

Collins classifies "Omelas" as an example of what she calls "narrative theodicy," a story which, like the necessities of painful labor and of dying in Genesis as "consequences of Adam and Eve's eating the forbidden fruit ... justifies or makes sense of a painful aspect of the status quo." Collins explains that theodicy originally
was a way to explain evil and meaningless in the world as somehow being a justified part of God's plan. In "Omelas," the narrator explains that the child suffers so that the rest of the population can live happily, but no logical explanation is given as to why this should be so—and thus, Collins writes, Le Guin is able to make her reader question "a similar failure of Western capitalist theodicy": there is no good reason, despite the "historical, economic, political, racial-genetic-physical, geographical and religious elements" that Western readers may use to explain the "radical inequalities" of "our world," as to why certain groups must suffer so that others can have a high standard of living. No justification can be made for capitalism's "[exploitation of] the peoples of the third world, or one's indigenous unprivileged groups (blacks, women, the poor generally)."

Le Guin's ending, in which some individuals leave Omelas for a place "even less imaginable to most of us," points out finally that the dilemma of the scapegoat for the American people has in no way been resolved. The ones who walk away are not thanked for their decency or concern or commitment to social justice, nor does their absence even seem to be noticed. "Omelas" achieves its power through drawing in the reader and then implicating him or her in the highly questionable morality of the Utopia (s)he has participated in describing and thus in creating. Collins thinks that this story has never affected readers to the extent that they would change society because it is too threatening to their world view, that, ironically, the message is too powerful for people to hear.

What is this place, beyond the city of happiness that the narrator can hardly conceive of, much less describe? It would seem to be a place that values morality beyond happiness. We cynical modern Westerners can hardly conceive of a place unburdened by guilt, and it is still harder for us to conceive of a place where people freely renounce happiness which is based on a moral wrong.

Source: Judy Sobeloff, for Short Stories for Students, Gale Research, 1997.
Judy Sobeloff is a writer and educator who has won several awards for her fiction.

Parallels between Omelas and America
In her introduction to "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" in The Wind's Twelve Quarters, Le Guin writes that her story was inspired by William James formulation of ideals as "the probable cause of experience." Le Guin states that her story was written as a fictive allegory of the scapegoat as the "dilemma of the American conscience." Yet, she never literally states this dilemma. As a fiction writer she illustrates, but never states, the problem. Were she an essayist, she might have written the story as a straightforward question and offered an argument like a newspaper editorialist or a philosophy teacher. She might have asked: If the land you lived in was in every way you could possibly imagine perfect, if it was your own unique, custom-made Utopia and everyone was ecstatically happy because one small child was horribly unhappy and mistreated child, would you give away all of this happiness and leave this land, because you objected? Would you walk away from Omelas?

After setting the question, Le Guin the editorial writer may have related this general question to the unique, particular predicament of American society. As a white woman writing in the contemporary United States, Le Guin may have been painfully aware of the racial discrimination surrounding her. She might have written that, while many white people were living extremely well, rates of African-American poverty, imprisonment and illiteracy were egregiously higher than that of white Americans. Because racist political, legal and educational systems have historically discriminated against African Americans throughout American history, Le Guin might have argued, African Americans have been hindered by more than metal shackles. While America has been a Utopian land of plenty for many rich whites, it has been a world of pain for many African Americans who have been murdered, lynched and discriminated against or excluded from middle-class America.

Or, when Le Guin wrote that her story evoked "the dilemma of the American conscience," she might have been thinking particularly of the corporate capitalist class discrimination that allows rich corporate executives to earn hundreds of times more money than most of their employees, an American economic system in which
the wealthiest one percent of the population own an extremely disproportionate share of the total wealth of the country, which has often approximated over thirty percent. She might have compared this class to the least wealthy half of the population, which typically shares less than a quarter of the Americans' total wealth, attends poorer schools, dies years earlier than the average upper-class American, has higher rates of infant mortality and imprisonment and is more likely to die as a result of serious illness because of inferior health care.

In spite of Le Guin's admittedly instructive and unabashedly moralistic intentions, she could not simply type such a direct question and such blatant connections as I have sketched out, nor would she desire to do so. Since most readers of fiction resent being force-fed morality or didactically educated in the manner Le Guin proposes, such a didactic argument would not be effective, nor would it carry the emotional or affective force that her fictionalized argument contains. After all, Le Guin is not a teacher or philosopher like William James, whose writing inspired the story. She is a science fiction writer. Because Le Guin incurs an obligation to tell a fantastic, enjoyable story, she cannot allow her instructional intentions to overwhelm this primary responsibility. Her story must educate through this form. She must create a compelling story that will grip her audience, not a didactic treatise that would put many to sleep.

The dilemma that she works through in her story becomes: how to tell a moralistic story to a contemporary fiction audience? Thus, when Le Guin first asks, "How is one to tell about joy?" she is asking, how is one to tell about an ideal? How can one fictionalize an ideal without it sounding false? How can one entertain and educate at the same time?

Le Guin's question, "How is one to tell?" is itself part of her larger answer. By asking the reader such a direct question, she immediately destabilizes the traditional relationship between narrator and reader. Of course, Le Guin's narrative is actually no less structured or solid than a typical short story. Every author neglects some details, but unlike the typical short story narrator, Le Guin's narrator admits the incompletion of the picture, she confesses that she is not sure about the specifics of the religion of this land, the exact effects of "drooz," and so on. Admiring the difficulty and contrived nature of storytelling, the narrator reveals the wizard behind the curtain. Asked, "How is one to tell?" the reader must immediately consider Le Guin's act of writing: the artifice of the fiction. The story presents, not a fully developed fantastic world, but a work-in-progress. From here, the reader's experience becomes a dual experience, following both the plot progression and the story construction. In fact, the plot in this primarily descriptive story becomes the development of whether or not Le Guin's fiction is believable. The conspicuous narrator becomes the main character.

The reader does not follow anyone's specific experience in Omelas, unlike most stories. Instead, in this story the reader consciously follows the narrator's attempt to create a believable world with Utopian characteristics. The story can be read as a story about storytelling, a story about the act of Creating an alternate, plausible reality. The task and difficulty of writing "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" becomes central to "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" itself, and in the context of Le Guin's attempt to translate William James theoretical formulation of the scapegoat into fiction, her approach has several definite advantages that are particularly effective here.

The question, "How does one tell?" acts first as a disclaimer. It admits that the story sounds unbelievable. Such a humble statement ingratiates the narrator to the reader by asking the reader for help. In opposition to the imperious manner of the typical moralist, Le Guin appears genuine and sympathetic.

Second, the question "How does one tell?" or "How is one to tell?" expands the reader's sense of possibility. Contrary to the typical assumption that a story must proceed according to a single narrative, Le Guin allows and actually requires each reader to envision his or her own narrative, and his or her own personal Utopia.
This is the final and most important advantage to her technique: her questions are not purely rhetorical. When the narrator asks the reader to envision the world as he or she wishes to, it forces the reader to consciously create the story with the narrator. Since the idea of such awesome responsibility is rarely admitted (though it is always the way stories are created), Le Guin softens her request by writing, in relation to technology, "Or they could have none of that: it doesn't matter. As you like it." She eases the readers sense of responsibility while exploiting it and implicating the reader more thoroughly into the act of writing. She proceeds to add her own suggestions, but claims that they are by no means definitive; they are not the only options. She scatters the story with "ifs": "If so, please add an orgy. If an orgy would help, don't hesitate." Her humorous suggestions continue, from a super-drug with the silly name "drooze" to the wild parade and "Festival of Summer." The cumulative effect is that the reader becomes playfully involved in creating this alternate reality thinking that "it doesn't really matter," when it does in a very particular manner.

That the reader consciously collaborates with Le Guin to create this story becomes crucially important. In the context of Le Guin's explicitly instructive intention, the shift in narration actually enhances the sense of urgency and moral responsibility she seeks to stress. Omelas develops as a word created not just by Le Guin, but by Le Guin and the reader. The story offers a space within which each reader may create his or her own Omelas, his or her own Utopia. The reader knowingly becomes an accomplice in the writing of this story and as a responsible creator, must accept the results: The reader has made her bed, now she must decide whether she will sleep in it or not.

Once the reader has imagined her Utopian Omelas, Le Guin begins to tighten her narrative. The narrator describes the parade and "The Festival of Summer" and then asks, "Do you believe me? Do you accept the festival, the city, the joy? No? Then let me describe one more thing." With this "let me," the narrator slowly begins to take control of the story. At first, the narrative remains flexible. The child may live "In the basement... or perhaps in the cellar." Here, the choice is much more limited than the fanciful daydreaming of the preceding chapters. She continues to describe the child, 'It could be a boy or a girl... Perhaps it was born defective, or perhaps it has become imbecile through fear. "Once again, the choice offered to the reader is strictly limited, and with this final "perhaps," Le Guin ceases to offer options. The story proceeds according to her exact descriptions, from the precise sound of the child's whining to the feelings and thoughts of the child's visitors.

Only in the final paragraph does Le Guin's narrator release the story once again. She writes that some people "leave Omelas" and that "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." Crucially, she places the onus of final responsibility back on the reader. Having seen the repulsive underbelly of Omelas, the reader must imagine what this other place must look like. The reader must create her own image for the story's conclusion, another place that does not exploit or oppress anyone. Moreover, the reader's choice becomes imminently important. It is no longer a choice between fantastical worlds, as indicated by the narrator's enigmatic comment, "It is possible that it does not exist." If it were merely a choice between fairy tale lands, this comment would not make sense. Of course, Omelas does not exist, one might argue. There are wild parades, the odd "Festival of Summer" and "drooze!" Why should it matter that an alternate world might not exist?

It matters because Le Guin, by forcing readers to conjure their own Omelas, has forced them to consciously relate the story to their own personal experience. By forcing the reader to create Omelas with her, to co-author our story, she forces us to understand that, while we do not live in ideal worlds, we live with ideals every day of our lives, and that even by not walking away, we support the ideals and the society we live in. That Le Guin cannot imagine a world not based on oppression forces one to face the the oppression of one's own society. Le Guin's "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" is ultimately inspiring because it forces us to examine our own ideals, and to consider both the consequences of those ideals and the means by which we might need to realize them.
Leaving Omelas: Questions of Faith and Understanding

Ursula Le Guin's short story "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas," subtitled "Variations on a Theme by William James," is a critique of American moral life. At least that is what Ms. Le Guin tells us in the introduction she added when the story was collected in *The Wind's Twelve Quarters* (1975). First she quotes the passage from James's "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life" to which the subtitle refers:

[I]f the hypothesis were offered us of a world in which Messrs Fourier's and Bellamy's and Morris's Utopias should all be outdone, and millions kept permanently happy on the one simple condition that a certain lost soul on the far-off edge of things should lead a life of lonely torment, what except a specifical and independent sort of emotion can it be which would make us immediately feel, even though an impulse arose within us to clutch at the happiness so offered, how hideous a thing would be its enjoyment when deliberately accepted as the fruit of such a bargain.

Le Guin then indicates that her story is to be read politically by adding, "The dilemma of the American conscience can hardly be better stated."

Her story is about a society's use of a scapegoat, a *pharmakos*, to keep the rest of the society happy; and the dilemma of the American conscience seems to be twofold: we cannot renounce the exploitation of others that makes possible our high standard of living, nor can we renounce the scapegoat-motif that justifies our comfortable life. By challenging us to renounce both, "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas" takes up what Hans Robert Jauss calls the "socially formative." But this story and other stories like it have not so far achieved any notable emancipation; they have not transformed the American conscience. Why not? I propose to take this story as seriously as we are meant to take it, examine how it works as a challenge to our conscience, and then suggest two factors that limit the radicality of that challenge.

As the text begins, the narrator is describing the bustle of preparations for the Festival of Summer in the city of Omelas, whose people are perfectly happy. She makes explicit the reader's complicity in the world-building activity of the story: "Perhaps it would be best if you imagined it as your own fancy bids, ... for I certainly cannot suit you all." She proceeds to supply examples, and repeatedly asks the reader to change the examples or supply others, as indices of Utopian technology, Utopian sex, and Utopian drugs (among which the narrator playfully includes beer). Her negotiations entice the reader to commit himself or herself to the project of constructing a Utopia, a happy world that is intelligible, that forms an intelligible whole.

After more description of the beginning of the Festival of Summer, the narrator pauses to ask, "Do you believe? Do you accept the festival, the city, the joy? No? Then let me describe one more thing," and we know that we are now approaching the key that should make the whole intelligible.

Again the narrator insists both on giving particular details and on signaling that the details are mere indices and may be varied, so long as the alternate index has the same signification, carries the same meaning:

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. 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.
The child's situation and its misery are described at some length. The passage closes with a physical description of the child, a description familiar to us from the photo-journalism of war, displacement, and famine:

It is so thin there are no calves to its legs; its belly protrudes; it lives on a half-bowl of cornmeal 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.

The narrator stresses that all the people of Omelas know about the child, and they all know that there is a connection between the child's unhappiness and their prosperity:

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.

At first the latter items on this list may seem to be excessive and facetious. However, extravagant causality is frequently found in a particular kind of narrative meant to explain or justify the current state of things. For example, the third chapter of Genesis presents the necessity of painful labor (in both senses) and the necessity of dying as consequences of Adam and Eve's eating the forbidden fruit. Let us call this kind of narrative, which justifies or makes sense of a painful aspect of the status quo, a narrative theodicy.

"Theodicy" originally designated a theoretical attempt to explain the problem of evil, to "justify the ways of God to man." It takes its place within the larger human project of the creation of an ordered world of experience, a world in which everything "fits" or has its place—what Benjy bellowed for at the end of The Sound and the Fury. Peter Berger calls such an ordered world of experience a "nomos," a rule-governed universe. Anything that disorders our world—such as death, sickness, and evil, but also economic and social privations that lead to sickness, suffering, and early death—can cause anomic, a loss of nomos. Anomie is the chaos into which we fall when our world falls apart. It is a threatening sense of meaninglessness and disorder. We can escape anomie only by placing the disorder within a larger pattern of order. This is precisely what theodicies do.

A theodicy need not be religious. Berger notes that "A theodicy may ... be established by projecting compensation for the anomic phenomena into a future understood in this-worldly terms," and he gives as an example the recurrent millenarianism of the Biblical or Jewish-Christian-Muslim tradition. But the same kind of projection can be seen in secular form. For example, several of Chekhov's plays include a character who speaks, like Vershinin in Three Sisters, in secular millenarian terms:

In two or three hundred years, or maybe in a thousand years—it doesn't matter how long exactly—life will be different. It will be happy. Of course, we shan't be able to enjoy that future life, but all the same, what we're living for now is to create it, we work and ... yes, we suffer in order to create it. That's the goal of our life, and you might say that's the only happiness we shall ever achieve.

Here we see that the suffering of the present, even the perceived lack of meaningfulness of the present, is justified, made meaningful, understood in terms of a humanly satisfying future.

A theodicy can be theoretically articulated (in the type of discourse Barthes calls intellectual), but it can also find expression or be created in the other forms of discourse, including narrative. Perhaps the most powerful, most effective form of theodicy is a narrative: the life of Christ, for instance, or of Socrates, or Marxist apocalyptic history. A good narrative can "make sense" quite compellingly, in a way hard for other forms of
discourse to match. And when a culture's narrative theodicy begins to lose its explanatory power, the result can be great anomic. It is not surprising, then, that a culture will resist a story that challenges its theodicy.

Let us return to "Omelas." Immediately after describing the suffering child, the narrator adds:

If the child were brought up into the sunlight out of that vile place, if it were 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 ... The terms are strict and absolute; there may not even be a kind word spoken to the child.

The connection between the child's suffering and the people's happiness is stressed, yet while the narrator says that the connection can be understood, she advances no details, however hypothetically, as indices of the rationality or intelligibility of the connection. If the child's suffering makes sense, that sense is not demonstrated. But if a theodicy fails to make sense of such a radical inequality of power and privilege, it is a "bad" theodicy; and accepting it implies either stupidity or bad faith. Of course, not accepting it leaves one open to anomic.

If the child's suffering is not made rational, the Omelasians' acquiescence is rationalized. After describing the child, the narrator explains how those who come to visit the child, mostly young people, come to terms with what they see:

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.

This rationalization has a familiar ring to it. Similar justifications of the status quo sometimes appear in discussions of "first world" relations with the third world or discussions of relations between the prosperous classes and the unprivileged groups of, say, America. In the story, the rationalization rings hollow because the narrator has told us earlier that the child had not always been imprisoned in the dark room and "can remember sunlight and its mother's voice," and also that it wants out, even pleads to be released. However imbecile it may be, it knows (remembers) an alternative to its present suffering and wants that alternative. The bad faith of the Omelasians' rationalization is implied.

The next step in our analysis of how Le Guin's story challenges the American conscience depends on the distinction between story and text. It is often noted that one of the peculiarities of narrative is that different texts can "tell the same story." For example, many see the three synoptic gospels telling the same Christ-story (when compared to the Gospel of John). Moreover, the Christ-story itself can be read as a sequence of functions so that other texts with different events and characters can be said to be telling the Christ-story too (or part of it). We may call this the level of the ur-story. On a higher level of abstraction, the Christ-story and, say, the Oedipus story can be said to be alternate embodiments of the hero-story (see Lord Raglan, The Hero). We may call this the level of the ur-ur-story.... And so on, as we stutter into infinite regress, onto ever higher levels of abstraction. Note that on each level we may speak meaningfully of variations: variant texts of the same story, variant stories of the same ur-story, and so on.
One way of specifying the relationship among levels is to see the ur-story not as an abstraction from similar stories but as a code or "master plot" by means of which the reader can construct, as he or she reads, innumerable stories in the image of their master. For example, Frederick Jameson, who calls the ur-story the "master code or Ur-narrative," aspires in The Political Unconscious to show how all narratives can be seen to be telling (at least a part of) the Marxist Ur-narrative. "Interpretation," he tells us, "is here construed as an essentially allegorical act, which consists in rewriting a given text in terms of a particular interpretive master code."

But rewriting may be reversible; a flaw in the story may reveal or unveil a flaw in the ur-story. Le Guin's story, by conspicuously failing to enable the reader "to perceive the terrible justice of reality," suggests a similar failure of Western capitalist theodicy. The people of Omelas are able to rationalize to their satisfaction a situation that enables them to continue to enjoy happiness and prosperity. But we are told only one segment of the rationalization, and the weakest segment at that (namely, that the child would be more wretched out of the closet of suffering than in it), the one most strongly suggesting the Omelians' bad faith. A full rationalization, as we know from "our" world, would include historical, economic, political, racial-genetic-physical, geographical, and religious elements so that such radical inequalities would indeed "make sense." It is because Le Guin's story has by this point become rather obviously an allegory of Western hegemony that the narrator can proceed to say, with a little more bite to her words, "Now do you believe in them [the people of Omelas]? Are they not more credible?" Indeed they are; they look a lot like us.

The story's more radical calling of the reader into question is yet to come, however, in the text's long last paragraph, which the narrator introduces with a monitory "But there is one more thing to tell, and this is quite incredible." Sometimes a boy or girl, man or woman is not persuaded by the Omelian theodicy nor by the prospect of the good life. For them, neither good faith nor bad faith suffices. Sooner or later, they walk out of the city. And when evening comes, instead of returning they walk on. In a final challenge to our moral imagination, Le Guin has her narrator say:

"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."

At the very end, then, the story points toward the real Utopia, a negative space defined by its difference from Omelas.

Le Guin's authorial comment about "the dilemma of the American conscience," with which we began, ratifies, as it were, the political-economic reading I have outlined here.

The curious fact is that the dilemma, both for the American conscience and for the West's in general, has for a long time remained, and continues to remain, a dilemma. The theodicy of Western capitalism is not working well, but neither has it failed altogether. Its continued imperfect success may be attributed partly to bad faith, partly to the extreme difficulty of imagining a genuine alternative and how to get there, but also partly, I suggest, to a third reason.

Le Guin's text can be read in terms of another ur-story besides that of Western capitalism: the religious story of the "suffering servant," the one who suffers to ensure the happiness of the many. A version of this story has been canonized in Christian redemption theology. In this reading, when Le Guin's text fails to explain, to make sense of the child's suffering, that failure suggests that the various reasons advanced in the religious stow also fail finally to make sense.
My point is that the possibility of reading Le Guin's story alternately as a religious allegory and as a políctico-economic allegory reveals a narrative-structural similarity in the two ur-stories, and furthermore suggests that some of the difficulty in throwing off Western rationalizations of exploitation is accounted for by a hidden link between redemption-theology and complacency about exploitation. The same ur-story (or ur-ur-story) is involved: exploiting the peoples of the third world, or one's indigenous unprivileged groups (blacks, women, the poor generally) is homologous to being redeemed by the "suffering servant." Rejection of capitalist exploitation-theodicy undermined the redemption-theodicy since they are structurally so similar, and threatens great anomic. To walk into the darkness, unable to imagine where one might be going, is very much like walking off the edge of the world. Or rather, in the archetypal imagery of our culture, leaving bright Omelas and walking into the darkness is like going from life into death.

This brings us to one last complication. The Bible, our culture's source of the suffering-servant theodicy, entwines this theodicy with another one, which we may call a "resurrection" theodicy. This theodicy appears already in the Old Testament and is foregrounded in the New. For example, Jesus suffers and dies, only to rise again to a transformed, glorious life in the presence of the Father. A frequently cited "natural" exemplar of this theodicy is the caterpillar that seems to die but instead is transformed into a butterfly.

It is this second theodicy to which Le Guin's story appeals and from which it derives much of its power. If leaving Omelas is like going from life into death, that death (according to the faith of those who leave) leads to a new, transformed life in a place beyond the mountains, a life so different from the present life that it is unimaginable.

But Le Guin's appeal to the resurrection theodicy weakens her attack on the suffering-servant theodicy, since in the Judeo-Christian tradition it is the resurrection theodicy that justifies recourse to the pharmakos: it is all right for one person to suffer for the benefit of another, because even the sufferer will end up benefiting—his or her final, transformed state will be vastly better than his or her first state.

Our original question was: Why hasn't Le Guin's story (and others like it) transformed the American conscience? Now we have an answer. On the one hand, the secular, economic version of the suffering-servant theodicy gains power from the religious version, still strong in our culture. Because the economic and religious theodicies are quite similar, a threat to one can easily be seen as a threat to the other. Readers may resist Le Guin's story in order to protect themselves from an increase in anomie. On the other hand, the theodicy of resurrection or of renewed, transformed life, cannot function for us as the alternative it might otherwise be, because in our religious culture it is precisely resurrection that gives the suffering-servant theodicy its final justification. So when Le Guin makes sense of a Utopian gesture (leaving Omelas) in the imagery of renewed life beyond death, she indirectly buttresses the very scapegoat theodicy she hopes to undermine.

Analysis

Style and Technique (Comprehensive Guide to Short Stories, Critical Edition)

“The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” won the Hugo Award for best short story in 1974. Although the Hugo is an award for science fiction, this story may more accurately be called a fantasy: Science fiction discusses the improbable; fantasy examines the impossible. First published in New Dimensions 3, the story has been widely anthologized since then, notably in Le Guin’s own The Wind’s Twelve Quarters (1975). Le Guin’s work often has sociological or anthropological elements; this can easily be seen in her novels, including The Left Hand of Darkness (1969) and The Dispossessed (1974).

Reliability is a problem for Le Guin’s narrator in this story. At times the narrator does not know the truth and therefore guesses what could be, presenting these guesses as often essential detail. The narrator says “I think” and “I think there ought to be,” rather than telling the reader what is. Asking if the reader believes what he says about the festival, the city, and the joy, or if the ones who walk away are not more credible, implies that the reader should have doubts. Can the narrator be trusted by a reader who is being asked to approve the details of the story? Such questions raise doubts in the reader’s mind about what the narrator is conveying. Only the description of the child itself lacks asides.

The narrator of “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” cannot tell a straightforward tale. The story about the summer festival is diverted into a short treatise on happiness, what happiness truly is and how the Omelas citizens have achieved it. This discussion encompasses not only those at the festival, but also those who choose to leave the city. What is happiness? What should one be willing to sacrifice for happiness?

All of the narrator’s questions invite the reader to place himself or herself in the position of the people of Omelas. Do you need this to make you happy? Then you may have it. Once the reader begins to enjoy the city and begins to see its happiness as a good thing, then the reader, like the adolescents in the story, must be shown that on which the happiness depends. Readers must face the question of what they would be willing to sacrifice for happiness, for “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.”
Setting

"The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" is an allegorical tale about a Utopian society in which Omelas' happiness is made possible by the sacrifice of one child for the sake of the group. In an allegory many symbols and images are used in an attempt to illustrate universal truths about life. Readers looking for clues as to where the city of Omelas is located should note that Le Guin devised the town's name by reading a roadside sign backward. Thus, "Omelas" is a kind of anagram of Salem, Oregon, a fact that the author has stated is not particularly relevant. Some critics have noted the similarity of the story's ideas with the themes of the Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky, who wrote *Crime and Punishment*, another work concerned with morality. But Le Guin has stated that only in retrospect did the similarities between his work and hers occur to her; it was not a major influence in the writing of the story.

The story is subtitled "Variations on a Theme by William James." William James was an early-twentieth-century psychologist and philosopher and the brother of the renowned novelist Henry James. Le Guin was intrigued by James's theory of pragmatism, which states that a person's thoughts should guide his or her actions and that truth is the consequence of a person's belief. Taking this theory to its moral conclusion, she fashioned the land of Omelas. "Omelas" was composed in a time of enormous political, social, and cultural upheaval in the United States—the late 1960s and early 1970s—and it is probable that the events of this period influenced Le Guin's writing of the story.
"The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" is the story of Omelas, a city where everyone seems to be happy and to live in peace and harmony. Toward the end of the story, however, the narrator reveals that the happiness of Omelas is dependent on the existence of a child who is locked in a small, windowless room and who is abused and mistreated. Although most of the citizens accept the situation, a small number of people leave Omelas forever after seeing the deplorable conditions in which the child lives.

Structure
The story is divided into two fairly distinct sections. In the first section, the narrator attempts to describe Omelas even though he/she notes more than once that the description is inadequate and does not capture the joy and happiness of Omelas. In the second section, the narrator reveals the existence of the child and matter-of-factly describes the awful conditions in which it is forced to live.

Narrative
"The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" is told from the point of view of a first-person narrator. The narrator is not an active participant in the story and does not have any special insight into the characters' perceptions. Since the narrator invites the reader to take part in the description of Omelas, he/she is not an objective or reliable observer. For example, toward the beginning of the story, the narrator states: "I wish I could describe [Omelas] 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." Since readers are asked to develop their own perceptions of Omelas, they are implicated in the creation of Omelas as well as in the horrible situation on which the society rests.

Le Guin manipulates the narrative, and therefore the reader, by shifting tenses throughout the story. In the first paragraph, the narrator describes the festival in the past tense. As the narrator begins to describe Omelas in more detail, he/she moves to the conditional tense, a verb tense which is subject to or dependent on a condition. In this case, the reality of Omelas is dependent on the involvement of the reader. Finally, after the third paragraph, the narrative shifts to the present tense. Consequently, as Shoshanna Knapp writes in The Journal of Narrative Technique, the reader becomes "stuck in the story, to be set free only when a few of the people of Omelas stride out of the land and the story, headed for a country that the narrator cannot describe and that, consequently, may not 'exist.'" The narrator's use of the pronoun "it" to describe the child also adds to the manipulation of the reader because it makes the child seem less than human. Therefore, it is easier for readers to justify the mistreatment and abuse of the child.

Allegory
"The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" is considered an allegory, or a tale in which characters representing things or abstract ideas are used to convey a message or teach a lesson. This story has been called both a political allegory and a religious allegory. The child, who is sacrificed for the good of the community, has been said to represent the underclass in capitalistic Western societies as well as the underdeveloped countries of the Third World. In capitalistic societies, particularly the United States, the wealth and privilege of the upper-class is often dependent on the exploitation or denial of the lower-classes. Additionally, some believe the continued prosperity of industrialized Western nations is due in part to the abuse and manipulation of Third World countries. "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" has also been characterized as a religious allegory, with some critics suggesting that the child is a Christ-like figure, or one who is sacrificed so that others may live.

Utopia
The story is also an example of Utopian literature, a form of fiction which describes an imaginary, ideal world
where laws, government, and social conditions are perfect. Utopian literature also frequently addresses the impossibility of Utopian societies and examines the negative social, political, and psychological consequences of Utopian worlds. In "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas," Le Guin shows that the idealized happiness of Omelas does not come without a price; in order for the society to exist, one child must be terribly abused. By presenting such a dilemma, Le Guin forces the reader to consider which is more important, morality or happiness.
The story is divided into two fairly distinct sections. In the first section the narrator attempts to describe Omelas even though he or she notes more than once that the description is inadequate and does not capture the joy and happiness of Omelas. In the second section the narrator reveals the existence of the child and matter-of-factly describes the awful conditions in which it is forced to live.

A narrator who is not an active participant in the story and does not have any special insight into the characters' perceptions narrates "Omelas" in the third person. Since the narrator invites the reader to take part in the description of Omelas, he or she is not an objective or reliable observer. For example, toward the beginning of the story the narrator states: "I wish I could describe [Omelas] 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." Since readers are asked to develop their own perceptions of Omelas, they are implicated in the creation of Omelas as well as in the horrible situation on which the society rests.

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Social Sensitivity

America's involvement in the Vietnam War, particularly from 1964 to 1973, caused much domestic unrest during those decades. Many young people protested against the war, and these demonstrations reached their peak in 1969, when 250,000 people marched in Washington, D.C. A year later, on May 4, 1970, National Guardsmen killed four students at Kent State University in Ohio during a war protest. The mid to late 1960s also saw the rise of the "counter-culture" in the United States. A movement that developed largely as a reaction against the war, the counterculture was made up of young people who called themselves "hippies" or "flower children." Believing that it was possible to build a society based on love, happiness, peace, and freedom, the counterculture rejected materialism and traditional middle-class values. They also protested America's involvement in Vietnam, emphasized spirituality, particularly Asian mysticism, called for a sexual revolution, and advocated the use of psychedelic drugs to expand one's consciousness. A popular slogan of the counterculture was "Make love, not war." It was in 1965 that the American poet Allen Ginsberg introduced the term "flower power" at an antiwar protest in Berkeley, California. This term was used to describe a strategy of friendly cooperation in confronting what the flower children considered the injustices of the day. That same year Timothy Leary, a Harvard professor, published The Psychedelic Reader, in which he wrote that he had experimented with drugs and advised readers to "turn on, tune in, and drop out." In 1966 the International Society for the Krishna Consciousness, founded in India in 1958, was brought to the United States and Canada. The Hare Krishnas rejected materialism and lived communally. In 1968 there were confrontations between the counter culture and the political establishment at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago.

Members of the counterculture held a "Festival of Life," during which they protested the war, attended rock concerts, smoked marijuana, had public sex, held beach "nude-ins," and burned their draft cards. Rock 'n' roll was an integral part of the counterculture movement, and in 1967 the first large rock gathering was held in Monterey, California. In 1969 the Woodstock Music and Art Fair, an event attended by 300,000 people, was held on a dairy farm in upstate New York.

During the 1960s Lyndon Johnson, who became president when John F. Kennedy was assassinated in 1963, attempted to build a "Great Society" by passing numerous laws to advance civil rights, help the poor, and protect the environment. In 1965 the Appalachian Regional Development Act, which provided aid to that economically depressed area, was passed, as was the Housing and Urban Development Act, which established a cabinet-level department to coordinate federal housing programs. The Medicare Act provided health care to the elderly, and the Higher Education Act provided scholarships for more than 140,000 needy students. Other legislation passed during Johnson's administration liberalized immigrant laws, provided support for the arts, tackled issues of truth in packaging, and addressed water and air quality.

This period in U.S. history is also known for the civil rights movement. In March 1965, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. led a march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, demanding federal protection of blacks' voting rights; the new Voting Rights Act was signed later that year. It abolished literacy tests and other voter restrictions and authorized federal intervention against voter discrimination. Also in 1965, Thurgood Marshall became the first African American to be appointed to the U.S. Supreme Court. A couple of years later, in 1968, Dr. King was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee.

The feminist movement was also influential during the late 1960s and early 1970s. In the mid-1960s the birth control pill was introduced in the United States, and in 1973 the Supreme Court ruled in Roe vs. Wade that a state cannot prevent a woman from having an abortion during the first three months of pregnancy. The National Organization for Women (NOW) was founded in 1966. Headed by Betty Friedan, who in 1963 published the book The Feminine Mystique, the organization's membership included many prominent women's rights advocates. NOW devoted most of its early efforts to alleviating discrimination against women
in economic, educational, and social arenas. Numerous other women's organizations followed: the National Women's Law Center was founded in 1972 to protect women's rights, and the Women's Campaign Fund was founded in 1973 to help fund the political campaigns of women candidates.

Richard Nixon was reelected as president in 1972. Shortly afterward, however, it was revealed that members of Nixon's Committee to Re-Elect the President had broken into the Democratic National Committee headquarters at the Watergate Hotel in June of that year. Nixon's attempt to cover up the scandal led to his resignation from office in August 1974; he became the only U.S. president to resign from office to escape impeachment. The Watergate affair, as well as the Vietnam War, led to an increasing disillusionment with and skepticism about American government and politics.

The period from 1965 to 1975 also saw a great deal of scientific and technological development, particularly in the area of space exploration. In 1965 the world's first commercial communications satellite was launched; later that year Edward White became the first American to walk in space. An unmanned American space probe landed on the moon in 1967, and in 1968 the first manned spacecraft orbited the moon. Neil Armstrong became the first person to step foot on the moon during the Apollo 11 mission of 1969.
Compare and Contrast

1973: Many young people involved in the counterculture movement band together to form communes where they attempt to live together without the detriments of modern society. Many settle in California and the Pacific Northwest.

1993: In Waco, Texas, many members of a religious commune known as the Branch Davidians die during a violent standoff with U.S. federal agents.

1973: The infant mortality rate in the United States is 56 per 1,000 live births, among the highest of all industrialized nations.

1994: The infant mortality rate in the United States is 31 per 1,000 births, among the highest of all Western industrialized nations and more than twice the rate of Japan.

1973: Following the Supreme Court's decision on Roe v. Wade, which upholds a woman's right to privacy, abortion is legalized in the United States.

1992: There were 1,359,000 abortions in the United States; a ratio of 23 for every 1,000 live births.
Topics for Discussion

1. Research William James's philosophy of pragmatism, which inspired Le Guin to write "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas." Do you think that she agrees with his ideas of happiness in society? Why or why not?

2. A *kibbutz* is a communal farm in Israel. Investigate the style of living and the beliefs of the people who live in a kibbutz. How does this compare with the way the people of Omelas live?

3. Give some examples from present-day society in which the well-being of a few must be sacrificed for the good of everyone.
Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Compare and contrast the counter-culture movement of the early 1960s and 1970s to modern religious movements and cults. What are the differences, and what are the similarities?
Topics for Further Study

Research William James's philosophy of pragmatism, which inspired Le Guin to write "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas." Do you think that she agrees with his ideas of happiness in society? Why or why not?

A kibbutz is a communal farm in Israel. Investigate the style of living and the beliefs of the people who live in a kibbutz. How does this compare with the way the people of Omelas live?

Give some examples from present-day society in which the well-being of a few must be sacrificed for the good of the whole.
Related Titles / Adaptations

*The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), another novel by Ursula K. Le Guin in the science fiction and fantasy genre, tells the story of a race of androgynous beings. *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury, published in novel form in 1953, tells the story of a modern society that has banned books and, as a result, its unreflective citizens live in a tightly controlled world that they believe has been created for their own good. Another title of possible interest to readers is *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), a collection of stories in which the British writer Angela Carter reinterprets classic fairy tales through modern sensibilities.
What Do I Read Next?


*Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury, published in novel form in 1953. A modern society has banned books and as a result, its unreflective citizens live in a tightly controlled world which they believe has been created for their own good.

*The Bloody Chamber* (1979) by British writer Angela Carter, a collection of stories that reinterpret classic fairy tales with modern sensibilities.
For Further Reference


Bibliography and Further Reading

Sources


Further Reading


Bibliography (Comprehensive Guide to Short Stories, Critical Edition)


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