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Utopian Thought and Literature

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The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas

“Joyous! How is one to tell about joy? How describe the citizens of Omelas?”
(Page 274) A place of joy and happiness is the perfect place to be. Why would anyone be willing to walk away? Of course, a perfect place can never exist; there must always be a negative impulse, a problem, a sickness within a humanly perfect place.

The perfection contained within such a place has a sickening feeling. The beginning contains constant references to the extreme happiness of the people.

In the streets between houses with red roofs and painted walls, between old moss-grown gardens and under avenues of trees, past great parks and public buildings, processions moved...In other streets the music beat faster, a shimmering of gong and tambourine, and the people went dancing, the precession was a dance. They were no simple folk, you see, though they were happy. But we do not say the words of cheer much any more.

(Page 273-274)

Thus begins the sick feeling. A place like this is perfect beyond description; joyful, but lacking cheer; perhaps we can begin to understand why some would be willing to walk away. A lack of cheer, though, is not enough to really want to walk away from such joyful bliss. Omelas is a beautiful land, “far off to the north and west the mountains stood up half-encircling Omelas on her bay. The air of morning was so clear that the snow still crowning the Eighteen Peaks burned with-gold fire across the miles of sunlit

air, under the dark blue of the sky,” (Page 274) and a sweetness everywhere, so how could someone possibly be willing to leave?

It is like eating M&M's; after going through a handful or two, the chocolate is tasty, but slowly a sick feeling begins in your stomach that tells you there has been too much of the chocolaty goodness. You want to keep eating, but you know that the sick feeling will grow. The city has the same feeling. So much goodness, but there is that uneasy feeling that you are about to get sick. Omelas is presented as being too good, but do you really want to stop taking it in?

The looming feeling continues to grow as the author begins to demonstrate how one might disbelieve the existence of such a place. “Do you believe? Do you accept the festival, the city, the joy? No? Then let me describe on more thing.” (Page 277) Suddenly the pangs of sugar overload hit, and we know we have gone one handful too many into the bag of goodness. The problem with the sweet, joyful goodness is on the horizon coming up to haunt our joyful indulgence -- a wave of nausea as our world of happiness begins to spin out of control.

Our world implodes as the undermining of the beauty of Omelas is shown to the world. “In a basement under[...]Omelas, or perhaps in [a] cellar[...]there is a room. It has one locked door, and no window. [A] mere broom closet or disused toolroom. In the room a child is sitting.” (Page 277-278) A child in an underground closet is not a problem; perhaps he enjoys playing down there. We quickly see that he is not like other children.

“It is naked. Its buttocks and thighs are a mass of festered sores, as it sits in its own excrement continually. It is feeble-minded.” (Page 278) A society of such pure and unbridled joy and happiness keeps a child in pure misery for no discernable reason. The realization of the negative undercurrent and the sickness turns our stomach and we feel like retching. If only we had known that something so good had hid such a hideous secret, then we would have stopped living here and left sooner.

It appears, however, as if the populace of Omelas does not care and are simply apathetic to the child's condition.

They all know it is there, all the people of Omelas. Some of them have come to see it, others are content merely to know it is there. They all know that it has to be there. They would like to do something for the child. But there is nothing they can do.

(Page 278)

The author states, "One thing I know there is none of in Omelas is guilt." (Page 276) No guilt! A place of beauty and happiness is locking a child in a basement. What more could there be to cause widespread guilt?

What right do these people have to enforce the maltreatment of this one entity?

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. 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.

(Page 279)

Is this not the point of life, to allow each the chance of happiness? Yes, it is. "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." (The Declaration of Independence of the Thirteen United States of America) No man, woman, or child has the right to force any other into a life they do not choose for themselves.

The people of Omelas know what they are doing is deplorable. "Often the young people go home in tears, or in a tearless rage, when they have seen the child and faced

this terrible paradox. They may brood over it for weeks or years.” (Page 279) As the people are shown the child, they know it is ultimately wrong. Why would they feel so much emotion unless the situation was utterly appalling?

In such a place where living in joy and happiness is the normal aspect of life, how can you possibly rationalize placing one person in horrible conditions? Realizing that the happiness stems from the absolute degradation of a child, walking away is the only humane decision. Remaining in Omelas is deplorable, as it removes this child’s every chance at a remotely happy, or even a mildly tolerable, life.