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The Ones Who Walked Away From Omelas

One may have difficulties trying to find the underlying meaning of “The ones who walked away from Omelas”, written by Ursula Le Guin. Many come together and can agree that mostly walking away and turning pages in the story of our life is difficult. As well as seeing a society live in ignorance of certain situations. However, there is always more than meets the eye. Just like societies and people change, so does literature and its different genres and theories.

“The ones who walked away from Omelas” may certainly touch base on many movements, however there are also many “looking glasses” that one may read this story under. Personally, I decided to view this story under the influence of two theories and try to find its place within one literary movement, being this last part, the most difficult. This essay will be divided in three parts, each to one subject: psychoanalytic theory, sociological theory and finally where it belongs or not and why.

In this short story, Le Guin mentions a society that is ideally utopic, enjoying then a summer festival with all of the pleasures that one can imagine in life: food, drinks, pleasure and pure joy. Of course, these citizens consider their life to be perfect and completely unquestioned, however there is some underlying darkness that is the main cause of their happiness. In this case, the darkness is the malnourishment, abuse and torture of a child. We can say there is a cause and

effect in this story, cause, being the darkness and effect the happiness of the townspeople.

However, the main focus here could be the overall mentality of society. This is where one can tackle many non-moral actions that they take, "One of them may come in and kick the child to make it stand up" (LeGuin 5). They live with a constant sense of superiority due to the way they treat the child throughout the whole story. In a way, I sense they behave in the most narcissistic way possible, in the most narcissistic personality disorder way possible. NPD is by definition "a mental condition in which people have an inflated sense of their own importance, a deep need for excessive attention and admiration, troubled relationships, and a lack of empathy for others. But behind this mask of extreme confidence lies a fragile self-esteem that's vulnerable to the slightest criticism." (MAYOCLINIC). In Omelas, those who are young and see the child have two different roads, one that lets guilt consume them, leading them to walk away from the town, or two, where they live in ignorance, disgust, masked as superiority, in fear of losing their utopia.

Bringing back the idea of NPD, these behaviors are shown throughout the whole story. They have an inflated sense of their own importance, since they always seem themselves better than the child. There isn't a clear attention and admiration need, but there is a big lack of empathy for others. They do not care for the child that is sitting in his own feces, or that is always hungry. There are many ways to tackle these characters, especially when we are trying to break down their psyche. One can simply read the story and assume there is nothing wrong, or assume that everything is wrong.

As previously mentioned, narcissism may be a key point within society, since they all ignore the existence of the child in the basement. However, the concept of ignorance should also be brought into the light. Ignorance, by definition is "lack of knowledge, education or

awareness” (Merriam-Webster). In this case, those who stay, know about the child, but choose to not educate themselves about the situation. Furthermore, those who have chosen to not see the child simply accept the fact that it is being neglected for their own good, and move on with their life. As mentioned in the text “These people go out into the street, and walk down the street alone. They keep walking, and walk straight out of the city of Omelas, through the beautiful gates”(LeGuin 7). One can say that this part of society, those who walk away have chosen to not ignore the child, in some way. They accept its’ existence and try to move on, however, wouldn’t leaving also be an act of ignorance?

According to Hume’s idea of causality, “we say that A causes B when the two always occur together, that is, are constantly conjoined. Whenever we find A, we also find B, and we have a certainty that this conjunction will continue to happen” (Lorkowski). Applying this concept to the text, we can say that citizens of Omelas cannot be happy unless the child is locked up. They are conjoined into one simple concept: happiness. When we see Omelas, we also see the child. As it mentions in the text, if the child is free and cared for, the crude sense of reality would dawn upon the citizens, causing unhappiness. In a way, one cannot happen without the other.

In the story Ursula herself seems to try and analyze their characters. There are many moments where it is pointed out that these characters are not truly happy. Somehow one can say they are giving us this false sense of happiness. “If you can't lick 'em, join 'em. If it hurts, repeat it.” (Le Guin 2). Here, one can point out how the mention of herd mentality comes into play. Herd mentality is the “tendency for people's behaviour or beliefs to conform to those of the group to which they belong” (Oxford). There is a certain commercial on television, where they

promote antidepressant pills. In this add, the protagonist sees everyone smiling, but she cannot, so she holds a mask to her face, as if that way she was smiling, when deep down she is not.

Personally, my insight of what the author is trying to show us is how one simply conforms with society decisions. One may find problematic violence, racism and other controversial topics, but never act according to their own principles. This in a way can be what the add is also signaling, she seems to smile but she simply follows. In society, people want to be different, but at the end of the day, for the vast majority it stays in want. They don't seek to find these qualities that make them special. This is what herd mentality is all about.

In regards of the false sense of happiness, there are many key moments in the text where one can see how Ursula Le Guin seems to point out how fake these people are, "we can no longer describe a happy man, nor make any celebration of joy" (LeGuin 2). It almost functions as a criticism of our current society, at least from my point of view.

Society as a whole has come to either be a total disgrace or something worth praising, and from the point of view of Ursula Le Guin, it seems to have become some sort of emotionless cult. The best way to portray this similarity within the text and actual society could be "They were not naive and happy children--though their children were, in fact, happy"(LeGuin 2). Here, she clearly points out that they weren't happy, however the innocence of childhood kept the younger generations happy. We can say the same for our current society. Children all seem happy, but the more you grow, the more knowledge sinks into our minds. It can bring anyone to the understanding that if you do not fit the social norms, you shouldn't be a part of it. Due to this, people simply follow. We can see this in many areas of our society, fashion, hair styles, music and more. Can this be what Ursula is hinting?

Omelas seems to give us a strong sense of being a utopian society. Utopia by definition is “a place of ideal perfection especially in laws, government, and social conditions” just by giving us the details of the summer festival (Merriam-Webster). Everyone seems to be in peace, enjoying themselves as the festivals begin. If we were to compare this definition and this society to Plato’s Republic, we can see many similarities. For example, Plato’s idea is that a perfect society shouldn’t have politics, just like Omelas, he also wanted citizens to behave rather than act, “so, in a sense, we have had Presidents and Congressmen who don’t seem outstanding in any way; and this is the utopia that the founders hoped for - harmony without heroics” (Dealy 3). From Plato’s point of view, Omelas is perfect. However I feel like Ursula Le Guin wants to show us the opposite, since there is no right way to actually analyze and understand the citizens of Omelas.

As it doesn’t exactly fit into the “perfect society paradigms” in my opinion, it doesn’t exactly fit in Postmodernism. However, my opinion stand divided. Postmodernism was made to continue experimenting with writing,, wanting to provide more questions than answers, hoping the reader questions who they are. In this case, we are meant to question society as a whole, instead of ourselves. It is portrayed through a dark sense of enlightenment, and what I mean by this is that, we see the horrors of society, after the good is brought to light. One can also say that Postmodernism brings the weird into light. The strange ways one can portray grave social issues and broad concepts can be mesmerizing. For example, if we were to talk about death, one can point out how we are animals that have no sense of reality and through adventures we come to learn about ourselves, life and death. In the case of “The Ones Who Walked Away From Omelas”, the weird is brought in by having a child being neglected, causing the happiness of

others. Also, there is deep meaning behind the text, such as the criticism of society as a whole and how no one acts up to what is being done. However, one never knows what culture will bring us or how the future will change. We take what we know now and place a mask over it, for the reader to understand, but we never know what will happen in a few years. For some reason, Omelas seems to be a society taken from the future, where a sacrifice of one is worth many. In a way, it is almost ironic how this occurs. There is no background of how the child got there or why. We question our own morality and societal values, as if we were forced to act upon the child being harmed. One can be equally disturbed or pleased with this piece of literature.

Finally, “The Ones Who Walked Away From Omelas” could be a perfect example of social criticism of postmodernist times, intertwined with philosophical points of view like causality that still are relevant to our times, and gets our gears turning. It makes us think about current society and its’ flaws, even of possible solutions. If you were to live in this utopia, would you walk away from Omelas?

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