

A Reading of “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas”
by Gord Sellar

One of Ursula K. Le Guin’s most famous short stories, “The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas” is notoriously tricky to interpret. Countless readers have assumed that the characters alluded to in the title—those who choose to walk away from Omelas are simply “walking away” from social injustice instead of deciding to fight against it. The fundamental mistake in this interpretation is that a reader fails to understand what Omelas really *is* in the story. After all, Le Guin makes it very clear that Omelas is neither a fictional utopia nor a fictional dystopia.

Omelas of course shares traits with both utopia and dystopia. On the utopian side, Le Guin makes it clear that for most residents of the city, Omelas is a wonderful place to live. People are, she repeatedly insists, “happy,” describing them as follows:

They were not naive and happy children--though their children were, in fact, happy. They were mature, intelligent, passionate adults whose lives were not wretched. O miracle! Meanwhile, for the one individual who cannot enjoy the pleasures of Omelas, life is outright dystopian:

The child used to scream for help at night, and cry a good deal, but now it only makes a kind of whining, "eh-haa, eh-haa," and it speaks less and less often. It is so thin there are no calves to its legs; its belly protrudes; it lives on a half-bowl of corn meal 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.

So, is Omelas then a matter of perspective? Is it utopian for its happy residents, and dystopian for the child in the basement room whose suffering buys that happiness?

Carefully reading reveals a problem with this interpretation. Traditionally, a “utopia” or a “dystopia” is presented in overwhelming detail, in order to establish a sense of “realism.” In other words, usually when a writer describes a utopia, they provide a lot of description that makes the details of the place clear and solid. (For example, the opening of Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* is filled with details about the pleasures of life within the utopia of World State.) Similarly, in a dystopia, the details of the world are usually described in a way that makes the reader feel as if it is an almost-real place, imaginary but wholly possible. In George Orwell’s *Nineteen-Eighty-Four*, the reader is bombarded with details, facts, and even the specialized new language of the dystopia. In both cases, we can see “literary realism” at work: the author describes the world the way an author might do in a mainstream novel, as if the people and places in it were real, in order to create a sense of what it feels like to be in that other world.

This clearly is not Le Guin’s approach in “The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas,” however. She repeatedly emphasizes that Omelas *isn’t* real, sometimes inviting the reader to modify details (“If so, please add an orgy. If an orgy would help, don’t hesitate.”) and referring to her own imaginative process in creating Omelas (“I thought at first there were no drugs, but that is puritanical.”). This approach to describing Omelas cannot be accidental: Le Guin has, in many of her other works, described unreal places as real in the “realist” way of mainstream novels, and is in fact very talented at writing in this way. If Omelas doesn’t feel quiet real to us, this is not by accident but instead because Le Guin doesn’t want it to feel that way to the reader.

If this is the case, we have to ask ourselves why. I believe that one passage in particular is relevant when we try to answer the question of why:

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.

What are “pedants” and “sophisticates”? In abstract terms, pedants are lecturers—whether they are teachers or not, they lecture others. Sophisticates, on the other hand, are people who are “sophisticated”. This can mean many things, including the ability to talk in a an impressively complex and educated way. Although the adjective “sophisticated” is not used in such a negative sense today, the word “sophisticate” is still somewhat negative, and it contains within it the root “sophist.” The sophists were philosophers in ancient Greece who have been remembered in a negative way, and when someone is called a “sophist” in modern English, they are usually being associated with clever but flawed or illogical arguments. If we put together “pedants” and “sophisticates” we end up not with educators, but with false teachers, false lecturers, people who argue illogical things are true.

This should immediately make us pause and reconsider the narrator of the story. The narrator who describes Omelas to us seems very eager to convince us that they are telling the truth—even to the point of inviting us to make up whatever we want if it helps us believe in Omelas. At the same time, the things that this narrator insists about Omelas are paradoxical and make no sense: for example, the narrator insists not only that everyone in Omelas knows about the suffering child, but that among those who stay, people feel “no guilt,” and they are “truly happy.” For anyone who has a normal human conscience, this makes no sense, but the narrator continues to insist on the perfectness of Omelas even as the reader begins to doubt.

This, I believe, is a paradox that Le Guin includes in the story on purpose. She wants us to have to think about the narrator of the story, to distrust them, and to ultimately understand that the narrator of the story is themselves a “pedant” and a “sophisticate” peddling bad logic and nonsense. Like the trolley problem, the “dilemma” that is supposedly presented in “The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas” is not meant to be taken seriously: it is a trick question, and those of us who understand this are intended to “walk away from Omelas” dubious of the story and its narrator.

In other words, “The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas” is not actually a puzzle story about whether it is better to live in a utopia where one person must suffer. It is instead a trick question, and the correct answer is to recognize that it is a trick question and reject the premise of the story completely. Le Guin is not presenting “walking away from Omelas” as a metaphor for failing to act against social injustice: the idea of rescuing the child is never even mentioned in the story, after all. Instead, Le Guin is presenting “walking away” as a metaphor for recognizing and rejecting the kind of logic that pedants and sophisticates in our world use every day to justify all kinds of suffering, injustice, and inequality in our world.

Le Guin is warning us that we have to recognize the way that supposedly “clever” philosophical problems like the trolley problem are in fact actually *stupid* philosophical problems. Beware such philosophical thought experiments, Le Guin warns us: they are useless for making good moral decisions in the world, but they are very useful for manipulating us into bad thinking, when used against us by the real “pedants and sophisticates” of our own world.