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Lit. By the Numbers

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Literary Analysis

“The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” by Ursula K Leguin is a story about a utopian society. The story begins with the author describing a festival that is going on in the fictional city of Omelas. Leguin reveals that the people of Omelas are all happy, peaceful, and intelligent. The society is in some ways more advanced to real life societies in that they can live peacefully without requiring rules, or government. The one issue that lies beneath the happy city is that a child is enclosed in a dark room. This child is neglected, malnourished, and lives in fear. Nobody in Omelas is allowed to be kind, help, or free the child. If the child were to be freed, everything that makes Omelas a great place would be destroyed. The child must suffer immensely, for the people of Omelas to stay happy and peaceful. Throughout the story, Leguin uses several different literary devices including imagery, repetition, and metaphor. She uses these literary devices to show how the townspeople get to live perfect lives at the expense of the child suffering. The story is a metaphor for privilege in that the people of Omelas represent parties that have privilege, and the child represents the groups who are in turn negatively affected. Leguin also uses metaphor of the child to show how the groups negatively affected by privilege are often dehumanized.

“The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” is rich with imagery throughout the story to describe the beauty of the city, as well as how awful the place is that the child is trapped in. The story starts by using imagery about the festival of summer arriving at Omelas. The first two paragraphs discuss how there are bells, music playing, and people dancing. Leguin uses this imagery to create a peaceful scene of townspeople celebrating summer. It creates a scene that is almost heavenly of people coming together so peacefully that it’s unrealistic. It goes to the point where the author even describes the weather as what she deems as perfect “The air of the

morning was so clear that the snow still crowning the eighteen peaks burned with white-gold fire across the miles of sunlit air, under the dark blue of the sky.” Leguin was attempting to create a utopia here that the reader would feel is too perfect. It’s a place where all the townspeople live in perfect prosperity, and nothing bad ever happens.

Leguin further makes the utopia sound too perfect in a more sarcastic tone later and describes herself adding things whilst writing the story. “But what else should there be? At first, I thought that there were no drugs, but that is puritanical” and “I think there ought to be beer.” Here she breaks the fourth wall and is talking to the reader about ways that she can make Omelas as perfect as possible. Leguin also uses repetition of the word joy and joyous throughout when she is focusing on description of the town. Through imagery, tone, and repetition Leguin was attempting to give the audience a description of a place that’s too good to be true to the point that it’s almost laughable. She’s attempting to build the city up to be this place that is perfect in every way imaginable. A place where everyone is happy, a place where the weather is always perfect, and a place where there are no societal rules because everyone is so peaceful. Eventually the author shows that the perfection of the town comes at a cost.

She then shifts the story to talk about the child. The child lives in a cellar under “one of the most beautiful buildings of Omelas.” Leguin uses imagery again, but this time to describe how terrible the cellar that the child is trapped in. She describes it as a dim lit room, only light seeping from cracks in the floorboards, with a dirt floor that is lightly damp. The room is dark, empty, and has a few mops with mopheads described as smelling awful that the child is afraid of. Here the author takes a significant shift from using bright and pleasant imagery, to using dark and creepy imagery. The authors use of this imagery shift was to go from describing the best place she could imagine, to the worst place that she could imagine.

When the author starts to describe the child, she uses repetition of the word “it” to refer to the child. “It is afraid of mops. It finds them horrible. It shuts its eyes, but it knows the mops are still there” and then in the next paragraph uses repetition of the word “their” for the people of Omelas “their happiness, the beauty of their city, the tenderness of their friendships, the health of

their children.....and the kindly weathers of their skies, depend wholly on this child's abominable misery." The author used repetition here to group the people of Omelas, and single out as well as dehumanize the child. The conditions the child is kept in does make the townspeople sad and or angry, but they still find it more important to live in a perfect utopia than setting the child free. The author ends the story by explaining that there are some people who leave Omelas because they feel like they can't be a part of the system in place.

The underlying theme of the story is privilege, the people of Omelas are a metaphor for people with privilege, and the child is a metaphor for groups of people who are oppressed such as African Americans, immigrants, minority groups, etc. Privilege is defined as a group of people having an unearned advantage, leaving other groups of people at an unearned disadvantage. The people of Omelas happiness is based off the suffering of an innocent child, therefor their happiness as well as the child's suffering are both unearned.

Peggy McIntosh, writer of the article "White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women's Studies" refers to privilege as an "invisible knapsack." She explains that the invisible knapsack is an invisible bag of items that put the privileged at an unearned advantage. The article first discusses how privilege is never taught and that those who are privileged are often oblivious that they have an advantage over others. People are conditioned to not recognize their own privilege. Peggy McIntosh is a white woman and talks about the ways in which she remained oblivious to her own white privilege due to societal reasons.

She discusses how in school she was never taught in depth about slavery, or to see slaveholders as damaged people, and how white people are conditioned to think of themselves as normative and ideal. In the article she makes a list of things that are in her "invisible knapsack." McIntosh talks about all the ways that she can think of in which her white skin put her at an advantage. Some of these examples include not having to worry about her skin color as an effect on financial reliability, that if a police officer pulls her over that it's not because she is being

singled out over her race, and that if she were to need legal or medical help that her race wouldn't act as a disadvantage.

This is relevant to the metaphor in "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas" because the child is in a room underground. Nobody wants to see it, and nobody wants to acknowledge that it is down there in order to keep their town thriving. The towns people attempt to stay oblivious to the child and pretend that it doesn't exist, bearing striking similarity to McIntosh's idea of the invisible knapsack.

The story can also relate to real life society, with how people dehumanize others to stay prosperous. This has happened throughout American history and is currently happening right now. Immigrants today are dehumanized and kept in awful conditions when trying to cross the border. While this is disturbing to many American people, many argue that if America were to allow open borders it would in turn have a negative effect on the economy. While this is currently happening long after Leguin wrote the story, economic prosperity at the expense of dehumanization of others has happened multiple times before. With slavery, African Americans were completely dehumanized and kept in awful conditions; but again, it took a long time for it to come to an end in part because it gave the United States a booming economy. Throughout history where Native American land has been destroyed to build towns or dig for oil. Leguin's main purpose of writing "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" was to point out how people in real life society often live in prosperity at the expense of dehumanizing others, and how those people choose to remain oblivious in their comfort.

McIntosh, Peggy. "White and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondence Through Work in Women's Studies.", 1988, pp. 1-9. *collegeart*, <https://www.collegeart.org/pdf/diversity/white-privilege-and-male-privilege.pdf>. Accessed 10 December 2019.

Twine was a good choice to integrate the project in that I was able to use it to show how I intended to connect each of my ideas to each other, and how they are relevant. It especially helped with the area of the paper where I talk about how Leguin uses repetition with the word “it” and how I connect it with dehumanization of actual people in society such as minority groups. In the paper after talking about repetition I attempted to touch on dehumanization, but I was unable to make a smooth transition, so I left it out until later. With twine I was able to make it clearer as to why I talk about repetition. I was also able to add a piece in twine to the project about dehumanizing language and how it can relate to the child. I also liked twine because of how I was able to connect the different literary devices so that it was interactive reading, but that I was still able to make it so that metaphor was the last one to click on in order to go on with the project. I liked this because I intended for metaphor to be the most important literary device in the paper in that it introduces the “so what” part of my paper. Overall it gave me the ability to highlight the more important parts of the project without pointing it out and helped transition through each idea as the way I intended for the paper to do.