

The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas Study Guide

**The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas by Ursula K.
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Plot Summary

One child is chosen from the population to serve as a sacrifice that will allow the rest of the city to live in peace and plenty. The child is placed in a small, windowless room without any amenities and is completely cut off from the rest of society except for the short visits from those who come to view the child.

When they learn of the child's existence, the people of Omelas battle with the knowledge of The child, who suffers for them, and the guilt they feel as a result of their knowledge. However, most of them eventually overcome their guilt. They live fully, celebrate life, and work to achieve beauty and greatness in an effort to justify the sacrifice of The child. They are no longer capable of true happiness after they learn about The child, but they are capable of contentment.

There are some people who leave the city. Some leave when they first learn of the child's existence and some leave after a long battle with their guilt. But they all leave on solitary journeys as they make their way through the city and the surrounding fields and out into the unknown. These people disappear and never return. Their fate and their paths are unknown.



Paragraphs 1-2

Summary

The story begins with a description of the Festival of Summer in the city of Omelas. Omelas is a city by the sea and the bright blue skies, sparkling waters, and colorful boats create a beautiful picture. The entire population of Omelas joins together in various processions through the city. Boys and girls in the Green Fields exercise their horses in preparation for the festival race. Bells clang and people sing and dance so that the city becomes a place of music and celebration.

In the second paragraph, the narrator says that the people of Omelas are not simple. Their lives are complicated. They do not live in an idyllic fairytale of perfect happiness as suggested by the description. The city is peaceful and without the unnecessary aspects of modern life that make life so loud and hectic. The people of Omelas have exactly what they need. No more and no less. The narrator soon reveals that words are inadequate to describe the paradox of the complex perfection of Omelas; the reader is bid to attempt to create their own mental image of the city and its people. There is one thing that Omelas does not have, however, and that is guilt. Instead, the people celebrate their own contentment and the triumph of life. Those who know of The child take nothing for granted in their lives.

Analysis

The descriptions in this first paragraph create a vision of a beautiful, perfect city filled with happy people. However, the joy described in this first paragraph is immediately undermined and questioned in the second paragraph. The child, who serves as a sacrifice for the happiness of the rest of Omelas, is not mentioned until paragraph five. However, the descriptions of the city before this chapter must be seen in light of the later descriptions of the child. The descriptions of the children exercising their horses are both similar and opposite to the descriptions of the child and they create a sense of juxtaposition between the children of Omelas and the lone child who suffers in the little room. Like the child, the children with the horses are naked and dirty. However, the children with the horses are obviously healthy and happy. They joyfully play and prepare their horses for the display of the race. They are wealthy enough to have horses that are happy, healthy, and well fed. The children are naked and dirty now, but there is assurance that they will return home to be cared for, cleaned, and clothed.

In the second paragraph, the narrator addresses the common misconception that real happiness and joy are the product of simple minds or that people who are truly happy have to be relatively stupid. In this belief, life isn't simple or perfect, so perfect happiness can only be achieved by living in ignorance. The narrator disagrees with this view of happiness and suggests that it can be a complex emotion that overcomes the knowledge of evil and survives the horrors of pain. The narrator blames "pedants and



sophisticates” for the belief that happiness is a simple-minded affair and for the idea that meaning, reality, and truth are to be found in the complexities of pain and evil. The narrator even goes so far to say that pain is boring and evil is banal.

However, this vision of the world also fails to encompass the complexities of the future revelations of the narrative. If pain and evil become boring and banal, then they lose their power and importance. If pain is simply boring, then there is no need to fight against the pain of others. And if evil is banal, then it no longer possesses the magnitude of true evil. The narrator makes a point about the absence of guilt in Omelas, which is only possible because pain has become boring and evil is considered banal. The narrator speaks as a citizen of Omelas, so it makes sense that he would adopt this view of things. It can only be assumed that the narrator is an individual who has chosen to remain in the city. The only way for the narrator to avoid guilt is to take this view of happiness, pain, and evil.

Vocabulary

clamor, soar, decorous, dodge, lithe, archaic, splendid, barbarians, dulcet, noble, bland, pedants, sophisticates, banal, naive, wretched, discrimination, exuberance, ecstasy, puritanical, languor, arcana, magnanimous, splendor



Paragraphs 3-4

Summary

The narrator goes on to describe an idyllic scene in the Green Fields in the third paragraph. There is food, laughter, and flowers as the youths prepare for the horse race. A child of nine or ten sits to the side of things and plays a sweet tune on a flute. People pause and smile as they listen to his music. The child never pauses and never notices the people around him as he is so focused on the melody of his own music.

When the flute player finally ends his song in the fourth paragraph, a trumpet sounds to bid the horse riders to prepare for the race. The trumpet excites the horses who prance, rear, and neigh in response. The riders soberly restrain their horses and get in line. This is the opening of the Festival of Summer.

Analysis

This scene in paragraph 3 again suggests a comparison to the later descriptions of the environment of the child. This young child playing the flute is the same age as the child, who sits in the windowless closet at the foundations of the city. This child, having had the leisure time to learn and play the flute as well as his obvious enjoyment of his music, is in direct opposition to the deprivation of the child in the broom closet. The child has no form of entertainment to distract him from the grimy terrors of his reality. The perfection of the day of the festival and the happiness of the people serves to strengthen the impact of the horrific circumstances of the child.

The cessation of the flute player's song in the fourth paragraph signals the opening of the Festival of Summer. The simple beauty of the flute's song ends to usher in the pomp and festivity that seem to function as a kind of denial of guilt. Instead of laughing and frolicking, the riders now soberly restrain their horses with whispered words. They call their horses "beauty" and "hope." The people standing along the path of the race are described as "a field of grass and flowers in the wind." This highlights the fact that they, unlike the child, live in a world of beauty and they have hope. Those at the race are old enough to know about the existence of the child and so they face this day of festivity with a sober determination to enjoy life and deny their guilt.

Vocabulary

marvelous, amiable, benign, entangled, cease, wholly, rapt, imperious, melancholy, piercing, rear, slender, neigh



Paragraphs 5-6

Summary

In the fifth paragraph, the narrator moves from the description of the festival to the scene of the child's existence. The narrator describes a room with a locked door, no windows, bugs, dirt, and filth. The only thing the child has to look at are a couple of dirty mops and a rusty bucket. These things frighten the child. The child looks like a six-year-old, but is in reality about ten. The child is feeble-minded and malnourished. The door only opens when small amounts of food and water are brought to the child or when people come to view the child. Sometimes someone kicks the child to make it stand for a viewing. The people, who come to see the child, react with varying degrees of fear and disgust and never say anything. The child remembers a time before it was in the little room and begs to be let out, but there is no response.

The reader learns in paragraph 6 that all the adults of Omelas know about the existence of the child and some of them have even come to see the child. Some understand the purpose of the child's misery and some do not. But they all understand that everything good about their city and their lives is completely dependent on the "abominable misery" of this one child. Whether they understand it or not, they all accept it.

Analysis

The explicit descriptions of the circumstances of the child in the fifth paragraph serve to strengthen the horror for the reader. The description of the child follows, in direct juxtaposition, the descriptions of the beautiful city above its head and the frivolities of the city's festival. The most horrifying moment of the description comes when the narrator relates the fact that the child has not always lived in the room and that it can remember its life before. The child is naked and dirty like the children with the horses, but this child has no hope of being clothed or escaping from its own filth. Unlike the child with the flute, this child has nothing to distract it from the horrors of its existence other than the tortuous memories of its life before. This child has no hope and the longer it stays in the room, the farther it will be removed from hope and the remembrance of a world removed from its prison. The pronoun "it" is always used to refer to the child, the narrator even says, "It could be a boy or a girl." The use of the pronoun "it" is simply a further dehumanization of the child. Not only is the identity of the child slowly dissolved in the prison, the child is also clearly less than human to the citizens of Omelas who are aware of its presence.

Paragraph 6 reinforces the fact that the citizens of Omelas are aware that even as they frolic, eat, sing, make music, race horses, and dance, there is a child below them living in solitude, deprivation, and its own filth. They do not all fully understand the reason for this situation, but they all accept it. They accept it because they are unwilling to sacrifice their own contentment and peaceful lives for the sake of a single child. Some of them



have seen the child, but here they are singing, laughing, and dancing. Perhaps some of them believe that in their enjoyment of life they are paying tribute to the child's sacrifice. Perhaps some don't care.

Vocabulary

spacious, seep, defective, imbecile, malnutrition, fumble, vague, hasty, abundance, kindly, abominable, misery



Paragraphs 7-9

Summary

In paragraph 7, the narrator explains that between the ages of eight and twelve, the citizens of Omelas are told of the existence of the child. Those who come to see the child are generally young, but occasionally adults come to see the child for the first time or even for a second time. The young citizens who come to see the child are always disgusted and outraged by its circumstances. They would like to do something to save the child, but they know that doing something would result in the destruction of Omelas and its people.

In the eighth paragraph, the narrator describes how the young people return to their lives to brood over the horrific circumstances of the child and the paradox of the foundation of their civilization. However, the memories gradually fade in light of their daily lives, and they are able to convince themselves that rescue would not benefit the child in any great way. It has been in the small room for so long that it would be unable to appreciate its freedom or successfully reenter the world. The child may not even like being taken from the little room to which it has grown accustomed. And yet the knowledge of the child's existence changes them and makes them more sober-minded. They realize the price of their peace and prosperity. The narrator writes, "It is the existence of the child, and their knowledge of its existence, that makes possible the nobility of their architecture, the poignancy of their music, the profundity of their science."

Throughout the story the narrator refers to the disbelief of the reader. The reader is told on several occasions to imagine what they will in order to make the world of Omelas more believable. It is very necessary to the narrator that Omelas and the city's treatment of the child are real to the reader. In essence, this facet of human cruelty is what makes the story realistic. At the beginning of the final paragraph the narrator asks, "Now do you believe in them? Are they not more credible? But there is one more thing to tell, and this is quite incredible." The cruelty of the citizens of Omelas is the believable part of the story. The incredible part of the story, from the narrator's point of view, is that some people reject this form of cruelty and abandon their "idyllic" home. One day these people simply walk silently down the street alone and disappear. They walk through the beautiful gates of the city, across the farmlands, and in the darkness of night through the villages. They walk into the darkness and do not return. Their destination is totally unknown to all but the people themselves.

Analysis

The narrator is careful to mention in paragraph 7 that the first emotion the young citizens experience when they see the child is disgust. They have previously believed themselves to be impervious to this emotion, but they are shocked into disgust when they view the child. Perhaps it is shame at their own shallow callousness that moves



them to want to do something to rescue the child. Whatever emotion motivates their desire to help the child, it fades with the remembrance of the cost of doing so to themselves and their city. They must mentally distance themselves from the situation of the child and view its rescue in the light of a “small improvement” in order to get on with their lives.

The narrator uses the term “paradox” to describe the exchange of Omelas in the first sentence of this eighth paragraph. This term suggests that the citizens almost immediately begin to distance themselves from the knowledge of the child. Rather than seeing a child in deprivation and misery, a child in need of rescue and aid, they see the situation as a paradox. They recall the prosperity and contentment of their city and call the exchange of their happiness for the child’s life “a paradox.” It is not a simple problem with a simple solution, they say. The citizens of Omelas excuse their inaction with the idea that rescue would not benefit the child and it might even resent it. They comfort themselves with the thought that the pain of the child and their knowledge of it make their lives richer. This knowledge causes them to appreciate life more and it lends greater meaning and depth to everything they create. Yet they never stop to consider the possibility that perhaps the rescue of the child would not result in the destruction of their city and the collapse of their lives.

The narrator juxtaposes the terms “credible” and “incredible” to introduce the actions of those who leave the city. The words suggest that the actions of those who forget about the child or ignore their knowledge of the child are understandable and expected, while those who leave are performing some unbelievable and astonishing action. They are unable to accept the price for their happiness. They are unwilling to retain their own peace and prosperity in exchange for the slow, tortuous death of one child. Therefore, they leave their homeland for a destination known only to them. Their actions are unfathomable to all but them. The fact that the travelers go on a solitary journey into the darkness of night highlights the mystery of their actions. These two different reactions to knowledge of the child, reluctant acceptance and departure, are the only ones mentioned in the story. Yet it should not be overlooked that no one, whether he or she stays or goes, takes any action to rescue the child.

While those who stay in Omelas determinedly embrace life in order to validate the suffering of the child, those who leave the city abandon all attempts to justify the child’s suffering. Perhaps, just as the child is deprived of light, these people walk into the darkness. They embrace their feelings of empathy and merge their destiny, in a small way, with that of the child. Perhaps they are able to combine the simplicity and naiveté of happiness with the complexity of pain. Perhaps they realize that a real utopia is a place without careless, naive happy people or callously delusional, enlightened individuals. Utopia is a place where people know the reality of the world and their own character. It is a place where people see pain and suffering as well as beauty and joy and celebrate life by making it better.

Vocabulary

capable, spectator, superior, impotence, vile, prosperity, paradox, brood, vague, degraded, imbecile, uncouth, humane, wretched, perceive, splendor, vapid, poignancy, profundity, sniveling, credible, incredible, imaginable

Characters

Citizens of Omelas

People who live in Omelas and choose to ignore the child.

The Child

Living in a little room, separated from everything and everyone, this child is selected to suffer the misery that all the citizens would suffer. It is because of the child that many walk away from the city.



Objects/Places

Omelas

The supposedly utopian city based on the premise that the entire population lives in peace and prosperity but only on the condition that one child from the city lives with torture and neglect.

The Child

The child is the sacrifice of the people of Omelas in exchange for the near-perfection of their own lives. One child of the city is forced to live shut away from the rest of society in tortuous conditions with no real human interaction and inadequate food. The child is treated as more of an object than a human being is.

Away

Some citizens leave Omelas and go away after discovering the reality of their world. The narrator says that no one knows where these people go, only that they disappear. They are always alone when they leave and they simply walk through the town and the fields and out into the unknown.



Themes

Ethical Dilemma

The people of Omelas face an ethical dilemma when they learn about the existence of the child. They must choose between living with the knowledge of the child's torture or leaving their home in order to forget. They must choose between the welfare of a city and the welfare of a lone child. The reader should notice that the people of Omelas always make one of two choices: either they live with the knowledge of the child or they leave the city altogether. No one ever attempts to release the child from its plight or to interact with the child in any way.

This situation speaks to a larger theme; that of the common man's reaction to any immoral or unjust situation that a person might learn about in their life. All members of a society know that there are homeless, starving, suffering people living amongst them, yet most of them either ignore the problem or accept it as a reality of life. Few people would be willing to sacrifice or risk their own happiness and stability to help alleviate the suffering of those nameless, faceless others.

The Scapegoat

A scapegoat is someone who receives punishment in the place of someone else. Often a scapegoat is singled out for unwarranted punishment, negative treatment, or blame. Generally, scapegoats do not volunteer for the position of martyr. In Le Guin's narrative, the scapegoat for the city of Omelas is the child. This single child receives abuse, torture, and neglect so that the people of Omelas can live in peace and prosperity. LeGuin is encouraging the reader to consider what forms of the scapegoat exist in contemporary society.

Happiness

The people of Omelas have everything they need and just about everything they could ever want. Their city is a place of peace and prosperity. Nevertheless, they are not happy. The children of Omelas are happy because they are naive; they are happy because they do not know of the existence of the single child that serves as a sacrifice. The narrator says that those who know of the child's existence live in contentment--the highest form of joy they can hope to reach. They live fully and work towards achievement so that the child's sacrifice will not be in vain. Le Guin is suggesting that no one can truly be happy once they have the knowledge that others are suffering and that, by not acting or by ignoring the situation, they are contributing to that suffering.



Style

Point of View

The story is narrated from a third-person omniscient point of view. The narrator is aware of the thoughts and feelings of all of the people in the story and occasionally addresses the thoughts and feelings of the reader. The narrator addresses the audience in a form of metafiction (fiction referencing its own fictionality) so that the reader never forgets that the place, story, and people are all imaginary. This use of metafiction helps the reader to realize that the story is a parable.

Setting

The story is set in the utopian village of Omelas. In the early descriptions of the story, Omelas seems like a place of perfection: the buildings are beautiful, the topography is idyllic, and the people are content. However, as the narrative progresses it becomes clear that Omelas is not perfect and that there are some very sad, disturbing things happening within this society.

Language and Meaning

Le Guin's narrative style is eloquent but simple. Le Guin's descriptions in reference to the city help to capture the beauty and grace of the city and the people. Later, her simple language and ability to create clear pictures helps to enhance the horrific circumstances of the child. Her in-depth descriptions are easy to visualize so that the reader can develop a very clear mental picture of Omelas from the beginning. Le Guin's ability to create this clear visualization helps to develop the strong impact of the story as the visual of the city changes drastically over the course of the narrative.

Structure

The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas is a short story written without chapters. Instead, the narrative is divided into paragraphs. Through the use of these separate and distinct paragraphs, the narrator creates a slowly developing, subtly changing vision of the city of Omelas. The vision begins with apparent perfection and slowly declines into a vision of horror and cruelty.



Quotes

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 is interesting. This is the treason of the artist: a refusal to admit the banality of evil and the terrible boredom of pain. (Paragraph 2)

But to praise despair is to condemn delight, to embrace violence is to loose hold of everything else. (Paragraph 2)

Happiness is based on a just discrimination of what is necessary, what is neither necessary nor destructive, and what is destructive. (Paragraph 2)

A boundless and generous contentment, a magnanimous triumph felt not against some outer enemy but in communion with the finest and fairest in the souls of all men everywhere and the splendor of the world's summer: this is what swells the hearts of the people of Omelas, and the victory they celebrate is that of life. (Paragraph 2)

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. (Paragraph 5)

Some of the 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. (Paragraph 6)

No matter how well the matter has been explained to them, these young spectators are always shocked and sickened at the sight. They feel disgust, which they had thought themselves superior to. They feel anger, outrage, and impotence, despite all the explanations. They would like to do something for the child. But there is nothing they can do. (Paragraph 7)

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. (Paragraph 7)

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. 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. (Paragraph 8)

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. (Paragraph 9)



Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

What is a utopia? What is a dystopia? Does the city of Omelas fulfill the definition of either one? How would you describe the city?

Topic 2

Why do the people walk away from Omelas? Where do you think they are going? What type of person do you think walks away from the city? Why do you think they always walk away alone and into darkness?

Topic 3

What does the narrator seem to think of Omelas? Do you think the narrator agrees or disagrees with the circumstances that support the city? Do you think the narrator agrees that the exchange is fair and that the achievements of the city justify the price that is paid?

Topic 4

What do you think of the narrator's idea that pain and evil are banal and boring? That happiness or joyousness are far more important? Do you think there is such a thing as "Joy built upon successful slaughter"? If there is such a thing, how is it different from the contentment of the people of Omelas?

Topic 5

If the people of Omelas are never really happy after they discover the existence of the child, why do they stay? Why do most of them simply accept the fact of the child's existence? Do you believe that they try to make beautiful things and celebrate their lives in order to justify the torture of the child and make it count for something?

Topic 6

Are the achievements of Omelas valid when they are based on such a premise? Can they create true beauty and reach great developments or achievements when they do so in exchange for the life of a child?