The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas

Ursula K. Le Guin Biography

Born in October 1929 in Berkeley, California, daughter of two well known Berkley academics, author Theodora Kroeber and anthropologist Alfred L. Kroeber, who was called the founder of modern anthropology. In 1953 she married historian Charles A. Le Guin. They have three children. She lives in Oregon.

Earned her B.A. at Radcliffe College, 1951 (Phi Beta Kappa); Columbia University M.A. 1952. Columbia University Fellow 1952. Fulbright Fellow 1953. She also studied in France as a part of her Ph.D. work. After marriage she did not finish her Ph.D. but moved with Charles to Georgia where he finished his Ph.D.

She has been awarded numerous honorary degrees and literary honors and awards. A full list can be found at: http://www.ursulakleguin.com/Bio.html. “The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas” won the Hugo Award. She also earned the Hugo and Nebula Awards for The Dispossessed (1974), these are science fiction’s top honors.

She has been a prolific writer publishing 20 novels, many short stories, six volumes of poetry, four volumes of translation, 13 children’s books, four collections of essays, screenplays and sound recordings. Le Guin has also worked as a lecturer or writer in residence at many institutions including Tulane University, Stanford University and Beloit College. She has written in numerous genres including fantasy, young adult literature, science fiction, and essay.

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Le Guin’s tale is a parable about the scapegoat. Le Guin herself has called it a “psychomyth.” For Le Guin a psychomyth is a story dealing with themes or ideas in a universal way. The story is the vehicle for exploring a bigger theme; in this case the suffering of one for the good of many.
Major Themes with Discussion Questions:

1) **Community Ideals:** The following quote by William James is said to have inspired Le Guin to write “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas“:

   One could not accept a happiness shared with millions if the condition of that happiness were the suffering of one lonely soul.\(^1\)

Do you think the story bears out the claim? Why do you think Le Guin says that the ones who walk away “seem to know where they are going?” What should we think about those who leave? How much courage and moral clarity do you think they have?

Take five minutes to write what you think of James’ quote. Is it possible to live based on this ideal in our society? What do we do to fulfill this ideal? What do we do that is contrary to it?

Do you think that Le Guin’s story gives people enough credit? Does it reflect the reality of life on earth in our time? Give examples to back up your response.

   a. “Yes” examples: slavery, holocaust, capitalism, socialism (Mao famously said you cannot make an omelet without breaking a few eggs).
   b. “No” examples: slavery, holocaust, capitalism, socialism.........you get the idea here...

Where are the heroes in Le Guin’s story? Where are those who stand up against institutions and oppression? They are not here.

2) **Utilitarianism:** Utilitarianism would rationalize the situation of the child with a logical (but cold) cost-benefit analysis. The narrator tells us that “the terrible justice of reality” is that the child has been so damaged by the environment that freedom would be relatively meaningless. Do you think that Mill’s utilitarianism would support this “reality”? Is it acceptable to have one suffer for the good of many?

Do you think Le Guin is a utilitarian? Le Guin is trying to tell us that we must take responsibility for even the weakest in our society. That we must help those who are helpless. Do you agree? You can’t agree with both Mill and Le Guin.

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3) **Religious Interpretation:** Do you see any religious symbolism in this story? Is the child a martyr? Some have compared him to a martyr, even Jesus. The single child suffering for the benefit of the whole. In that case, who are the residents? Who are the ones who walk away? Are there issues with this interpretation?

Le Guin points out that there is no guilt in Omelas. They accept that the child is “suffering for their sins” and they are now free of guilt. Could this be true? Is it the same as Jesus suffering for our sins? The ones who walk away do not accept the martyr. Are they free of guilt? Do you think they free themselves of the guilt by walking away?

4) **Alienation:** Think about Marx’s “Alienation of Labor” excerpt. Compare it to “The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas.” Who do the residents represent? Who does the child represent? Who do you think the ones who walk away represent?

Source: [http://www.laborarts.org/collections/item.cfm?itemid=428](http://www.laborarts.org/collections/item.cfm?itemid=428)

Take a look at overhead 1. This is a depiction of the capitalist system by the Industrial Workers of the World union in 1911. How does this poster illustrate the hierarchical system of capitalism? Is it possible to see it as a representation of the hierarchy of Omelas?
IF you believe that capitalism exploits workers, which workers do you think it exploits? Do we need to have martyrs (like the child) in order to live well? Think back on your common book Where am I wearing. How can you relate the workers that Timmerman describes to this story? What makes you associate the workers with the child?

5) **Imagery/Symbolism:** Le Guin uses words to evoke certain emotions in the story. The first half of the story is filled with “light images.” Can you give examples? Summer, joy, happiness, brilliance, etc. These words represent awakening/birth. The second half of the story is filled with dark images. Can you find examples? Darkness, night, sorrow, fear, weep. These represent somberness. An emotion that can be evoked by death, night. Can the story be viewed symbolically as day and night or death and resurrection?

If you agree with this, how does Le Guin see the ones who walk away? Toward the end she says, “they leave Omelas, they walk away into the darkness and they do not come back.” Does she deem them just as guilty as those who stayed?

**Vocabulary from reading:**
- Decorous
- Dulcet
- Utopians
- Pedants
- Sophisticates
- Banality
- Puritanical
- Drooz
- Languor
- Arcane
- Provisioners
- Vapid
- Poignancy
Vocabulary for the discussion:

Psychomyth

Utilitarianism

Socialism

Capitalism

Resources:

http://www.ursulakleguin.com/

http://jeffersonflanders.wordpress.com/2006/07/26/summer-reading-ursula-k-le-guin

http://www.nndb.com/people/719/000023650/

http://www.bookoflife.org/history/concepts/omelas.htm