

# The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF URSULA K. LE GUIN

Ursula Kroeber was born on October 21, 1929, the daughter of writer Theodora Kracaw and anthropologist Alfred Kroeber. With three older brothers and access to her father's extensive library, Le Guin developed an early interest in speculative fiction, writing her first science fiction story at age nine. She channeled her literary interests into her studies, graduating Phi Beta Kappa from Radcliffe in 1951 and then earning a master's degree from Columbia in 1952 (she studied French and Italian literature). She won a Fulbright to continue studying Renaissance literature in Paris, but on the voyage across the Atlantic, she met historian Charles Le Guin and fell in love. Le Guin abandoned her literature studies to marry Charles and move to Portland, Oregon, where she would find time to write while raising three children. Le Guin found national acclaim with her 1970 novel [The Left Hand of Darkness](#), set on a genderless planet called Gethen. That year, she won the Hugo and Nebula awards for her novel, a feat she would repeat a year later with her anarcho-feminist book, *The Dispossessed*. Though Le Guin came to be known for her science fiction and fantasy, particularly her *Earthsea* series, she wrote prolifically in a number of genres. By the time she died, Le Guin had penned 12 books of poetry, 7 books of essays, 5 volumes of translation, and 13 children's books, in addition to her 20 novels. In April 2000, the Library of Congress named Le Guin a "Living Legend" for her immense contribution to literature.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The city of Omelas is never given a specific location in time or space, but seems to occur in an imaginary universe outside the realm of human history. Even so, the story was written during a moment of political change in the United States. Le Guin wrote and published "Omelas" in the early 1970s, on the heels of the Civil Rights Movement and in the later years of the Vietnam War. As the bright-eyed radicalism and optimism of the '60s counterculture movement faded (along with its hopes for political revolution), many Americans found themselves searching for answers to some of the questions that Le Guin poses to her readers in "Omelas," such as whether a fair and just society is possible, and whether the dream of a truly happy society (e.g., the American dream) must always depend on the oppression and scapegoating of others.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Writers of New Wave Science Fiction were known to use the worlds they invented to explore complex psychological,

political, and philosophical issues. Accordingly, they drew inspiration from the work of philosophers and theorists just as often as from other storytellers. "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas" is partially inspired by an essay called "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life" by William James, in which he explores the moral conundrum that every "good" for one man represents an "ill" for another. Le Guin is likewise directly concerned, in "Omelas," with the interrelated nature of happiness and suffering. Shirley Jackson's famous short story, "The Lottery," takes place in a fictional community that once a year selects a person at random to stone to death, thereby assuring (they believe) good fortune in the year ahead. Like the citizens of Omelas, the characters in "The Lottery" find themselves unable to imagine a society which does not depend on the violent and institutionalized scapegoating of a single individual.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas"
- **When Written:** 1973
- **Where Written:** Portland, OR
- **When Published:** 1973
- **Literary Period:** New Wave Science Fiction
- **Genre:** Speculative fiction
- **Setting:** Omelas, a fictional utopian city
- **Climax:** The reader discovers that the happiness of Omelas is dependent on the perpetual suffering of a single child.
- **Antagonist:** Suffering and injustice
- **Point of View:** LeGuin defies literary convention by using a combination of first person limited (the narrator speaking to their audience) and third person omniscient (the narrator describing Omelas).

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Inspiration Strikes.** "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" is the result of Le Guin reading a sign for "Salem, OR" backwards. She liked the sound of "melas" and decided to add an O to the beginning.

**Coincidental Contemporaries.** Le Guin and Philip K. Dick (famed sci-fi writer, author of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*) graduated in the same class at the same high school. Though their work would later influence one another, the two never met at their California high school.



## PLOT SUMMARY

The city of Omelas is celebrating the Festival of Summer. Bells ring, children play, and adults dance. The atmosphere is full of cheer. The Narrator pauses from describing the scene to clear any possible misconceptions they suspect the audience might have about Omelas—most importantly, that the citizens of Omelas are not simple-minded just because they are joyful. The narrator points out that humans have the “bad habit” of considering suffering to be more complicated and interesting than contentment, but that this is just a harmful myth our society perpetuates.

The narrator laments the difficulty of describing Omelas and acknowledges that it’s difficult for the audience to imagine an advanced society in which everyone is happy. The narrator suggests that the audience fill in the details for themselves—whatever they need to make Omelas believable to them personally, so long as the citizens experience contentment without guilt.

Back at the Festival of Summer, children ready their horses for the race. The crowd gathers around the racecourse as the competing children organize at the starting line, gently tending to their horses. A trumpet blasts. The narrator tells the audience that the Festival of Summer has now truly begun. Still, the narrator is uncertain if the audience believes in Omelas. In a final attempt to convince their audience, the narrator reveals an important detail about Omelas. While the city of Omelas revels, one child is locked in a windowless room. The child’s living conditions are appalling: it lives in its own excrement, frightened, malnourished, abused, and neglected. Occasionally people come to see the child, but they never interact with it, despite its desperate pleas for freedom.

The narrator explains that every citizen of Omelas knows of the child’s existence. In fact, everything good in Omelas depends on this child’s continual suffering, such that setting the child free or even saying so much as a kind word to it would destroy the entire city’s happiness. Most citizens learn of the child between the ages of eight and twelve. Although the knowledge initially disgusts most of them, almost all come to terms with the child’s tortured existence as a necessary evil, and eventually manage to live guiltless lives despite the child’s suffering. After all, the knowledge of the suffering child is what allows the people of Omelas to appreciate everything good in their city.

Now that they have shared this information, the narrator suggests, perhaps Omelas feels more realistic—though there is one more incredible aspect of the city worth noting. Sometimes, citizens fail to come to terms with the child’s suffering, and decide to leave Omelas instead. Silent and alone, they walk into the darkness beyond the city and never come back. The narrator does not know where the ones who walk away go. Their destination may be even more un-imaginable to

the audience than the city of Omelas. Nevertheless, the ones who walk away seem to know where they are going.



## CHARACTERS

**The Narrator** – The Narrator is the unnamed speaker who dictates the story, speaking directly to the reader. The narrator seems to be inventing Omelas as they write. Although never stated explicitly, the narrator does not try to hide the fact that they are describing a place that exists only in their imagination and the imaginations of their readers. Thus, the narrator does not know all the details of the fictitious city, only the one absolute: that the city is perfect in every way imaginable, save for the fact that its perfection and the happiness of its citizens depend on the suffering of one child. This condition is what makes the otherwise unrealistic, utopian city of Omelas realistic, according to the narrator. The narrator serves as a bridge between the world of Omelas and the world of the audience, first guiding the reader into the city, then guiding the reader to compare Omelas to their own moral universe.

**The Child** – The Child is the awful, shameful secret of Omelas—the secret that everyone knows. Citizens are only able to experience their happiness because this child suffers. Further, every citizen must confront the truth of the child’s miserable existence, as learning about the child is a type of coming-of-age ritual in Omelas. The reader never learns the child’s personal information, in part because it barely has any; Omelas has denied it the opportunity to develop personhood. The narrator exclusively uses the pronoun “it” when describing the child, reinforcing the child’s status as an object rather than a subject in its own right. The child is malnourished and un-socialized. Its body is underdeveloped and covered in festering sores. Even though the child is locked in perpetual suffering, it still protests its situation, pleading with its jailors: “Please let me out. I will be good!” Even though it has been objectified through torturous neglect for years, the child still remembers sunlight and its mother’s voice—thus, it remembers what it was like to be treated like a human being well enough to understand that its current state is inhuman. It experienced happiness enough to understand that it is now suffering. Like all people in “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas,” The Child is highly symbolic, serving not only as the scapegoat for the society of Omelas, but as a symbol for scapegoats more generally. (A scapegoat is an individual who suffers in place of many—for example, the one criminal who takes the fall for robbing a bank to save the rest of his criminal team from jail, even though they robbed the bank together.) The symbolic scapegoating of this one child, in “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas,” begs the question of whether a society can be called “just” or “perfect” if it is founded on even one instance of cruelty and injustice. Le Guin does not give her readers any clear answers to this question—she only poses it to her reader by depicting the child

as a scapegoat in the extreme.

**The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas** – The narrator never reveals specific information about the individual characters of the people who decide to walk away from Omelas—only that they are all ages and genders. What unites them is their decision to reject the terms of their society. By choosing to reject this city and its structure (which requires a child’s perpetual torture), they must reject all the benefits of Omelas by leaving the city, permanently. They must walk away in silence, alone, into **the darkness that lies beyond Omelas**. Le Guin never reveals any views about the ones who walk away—whether they are “better” or more morally upstanding than the other citizens of Omelas—nor does she reveal what, exactly, lies beyond Omelas. The narrator notes that such a place is difficult (if not impossible) to imagine. And yet, the ones who walk away seem to leave Omelas with a sense of purpose. They seem to know where they are going. Thus, the ones who walk away symbolize those who reject the idea that the oppression of others is the necessary precondition of their own happiness, and in doing so turn their backs on the very project of organized society—at least in any of the forms it has taken in human history to date.



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don’t have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



### INDIVIDUAL VS SOCIETY

The utopian city of Omelas relies on a social contract according to which each person must accept that their city’s happiness depends on the suffering of one child. Those who cannot come to terms with the child’s suffering leave the city alone on foot, their destination a mystery. The story therefore presents a classic utilitarian problem: is it morally justifiable to inflict suffering on one person in the service of others’ happiness? In weighing this dilemma, each citizen decides their fate. If they are able to come to terms with the suffering of another individual in the name of the common good, they remain a part of Omelas. If, however, they are overcome by feelings of guilt for the child’s suffering, their only choice is to reject the society of Omelas altogether by walking away from the city and seeking out their individual fate. LeGuin doesn’t take a clear moral position on which decision is right. Rather, she creates an allegorical world that invites readers to consider the sacrifices that they as individuals make (or do not make) for the good of their own society—and to ask themselves whether the terms of the social contract are acceptable.

In the first part of the story—before the existence of the suffering child is known—the narrator takes great pains to establish just how happy life in Omelas is. The city of Omelas, for example, has no advertising, monarchy, slavery, nuclear weapons, war, guilt, or habit-forming drugs. Furthermore, the people of Omelas feel joy, but not at any enemy’s expense. “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,” the narrator writes; “this is what swells the hearts of the people of Omelas.” Through these descriptions of happiness, LeGuin establishes the stakes of the moral quandary that will follow by allowing the reader to imagine a life for which they would give almost anything.

When the narrator reveals that the happiness of life in Omelas depends on the suffering of one child, however, the previously uncomplicated appearance of the perfect society fades away. The narrator describes how each of the city’s children must eventually learn about and grapple with the existence of the suffering child, just as the reader is presently doing. Children learning of the suffering child become anguished and outraged, since its existence flies in the face of the perfect society they have known. Yet, because the “terms” of life in Omelas are that nobody can help the child without destroying the city’s happiness, the children are powerless to act on their moral intuitions, and they have only two options for handling their distress: repress the knowledge of their own complicity in the child’s suffering, or leave.

Most children eventually justify continuing their perfect lives in Omelas as though nothing were wrong. They re-calibrate their moral compass, recognizing that suffering is the most basic precondition of the world they live in even if they do not experience this suffering themselves, and thus, to be a part of society requires them to participate in the scapegoating. As awful as the child’s suffering may be, it seems better (at least to the citizens of Omelas) for one person to suffer than for everyone in Omelas to give up their perfect lives. Thus, most people choose to prioritize society over the individual. However, if a person decides that the quality of life for each individual matters more than collective happiness—in other words, if a person decides that the child’s suffering is indefensible, even though it allows the rest of Omelas to experience happiness— they have no choice but exile. These people leave the city on foot, in silence, and never come back. While choosing the good of society over the good of the individual results in a life of boundless happiness, the consequences of rejecting the society that depends on the suffering of one individual remain mysterious. The narrator writes of those who walk away, “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.” In this way, LeGuin declines to moralize—she doesn’t

say whether those who make this choice are satisfied or remorseful, or whether they are rewarded or condemned. Perhaps this is because most readers, just like most citizens of Omelas, make choices that compromise the happiness of individuals for the sake of the greater good, and thus the choice to prioritize the wellbeing of one individual over the wellbeing of the whole will always remain a mystery.



## COMING OF AGE AND COMING INTO SOCIETY

The city of Omelas practices a coming of age ritual in which every child, at some point between the ages of eight and twelve, must learn that the happiness of their city depends on the suffering of one abused and neglected **child**. The town's children have the choice to accept the suffering of this child and continue living their happy lives, or to walk, alone, out of the city forever. This moral choice marks the moment when a child truly grows up: they now understand that their society is not unconditionally good and that their happiness is not without cost. What they do with this knowledge—either staying in Omelas, or leaving forever—will define who they are and what their lives will become.

In Omelas, childhood is beautiful and innocent. Children live perfect lives and, not knowing yet of the suffering that makes these lives possible, their goodness is not yet compromised. The Festival of Summer takes place in a lush meadow called “the Green Fields” where children run around naked. Their nakedness emphasizes their innocence. The children tend the horses with care, demonstrating how they have been taught to interact with other living beings. They speak softly and encouragingly to their horses, calling them “my beauty” and “my hope.” In contrast, the suffering child is denied a childhood. It does not get a gender, nourishment, or social contact. The narrator tells us it looks six but is actually ten—the child's development is physically and emotionally arrested due to its suffering, and it will never be able to come of age.

When the children learn of the suffering child's existence, their initial reaction is anguish and outrage—after all, they have been taught to be good and morally pure. However, after they have some time to think about the dilemma, most begin to contort their morals in order to justify their lives. The narrator describes these justifications in detail. For one, most people don't go to see the child, and LeGuin suggests that simply knowing of its existence is less painful than witnessing its suffering. Therefore, the child becomes an intellectual problem to the citizens of Omelas, rather than a physical indignity to which a person has an emotional response. Furthermore, as time passes, the citizens of Omelas “realize that even if the child could be released, it would not get much good out of its freedom.” Since the child's development is so arrested, most people rationalize keeping it locked up as the more reasonable choice, since the damp cellar is the only world the child has ever

known and the only world it is likely to be able to process. Finally, most people in Omelas reason that, because they are incapable of changing the terms of their society, *they* are not immoral in continuing to neglect the child—the *world* is immoral for giving them this awful choice.

As LeGuin presents these moral justifications as a normal part of coming of age, she shows growing up to be, in part, a process of corruption. Most people, as they realize the complexity of the world, learn to re-calibrate their moral responses so that they can live peacefully and comfortably within an unjust society. LeGuin doesn't judge this choice—her tone is neutral as she depicts the townspeople's rationalizations, and she even suggests that this response is normal and sane. However, the narrator presents another option: children may keep their innocence and purity (and adults may regain it) by rejecting the terms of Omelas and leaving the town. This is a choice whose outcome is unknown and whose cost (the person loses their entire blissful life) is tremendous—in this way, LeGuin shows this choice to be somewhat irrational, but also morally pure. As the narrator never depicts the lives of those who have left Omelas, it's not clear what kinds of adult lives they will lead in light of their choice. This omission suggests that all readers, by growing up and making compromises large and small, are still, metaphorically, in Omelas.



## IMAGINATION AND ALLEGORY

The narrator invites the reader to imagine Omelas as they wish. The narrator does not care if the reader knows Omelas is not real, so long as the city feels real to them personally. LeGuin highlights the imaginative act of storytelling by emphasizing both the narrator and reader's fabrication of Omelas. As the reader pictures Omelas more and more clearly, they become more and more complicit in the world they have built. By the time **the suffering child** is revealed, the reader is so deeply involved in Omelas that they are forced to consider what decision they would make. By the time the story ends, the reader has grappled enough with this decision to recognize how familiar it is to their own world. Omelas starts as an imaginary land, but eventually becomes so real to the reader that they recognize Omelas as an allegory—not a fairy tale place, but a city full of people who face the same moral questions they do. LeGuin shows her audience just how valuable imagination is by revealing how it can illuminate the reader's own life in a completely new way.

The narrator emphasizes their presence as storyteller, inviting the audience to imagine Omelas with them. As they invest more in imagining the city, the reader becomes complicit in building the world of Omelas. When the allegory becomes apparent at the end of the story, the audience sees how their imaginative capacities reflect their own reality. For example, LeGuin writes, “Omelas sounds in my words like a city in a fairy tale, long ago and far away, once upon a time. Perhaps it would be best if you

imagined it as your own fancy bids, assuming it will rise to the occasion, for certainly I cannot suit you all.” The narrator admits that they alone cannot convince the audience of this make-believe city—the reader must work in tandem to color Omelas for themselves. The narrator checks in with their audience throughout the story: “Do you believe? Do you accept the festival, the city, the joy? No?” The narrator does not take an authoritative stance on Omelas’s reality—they ask the audience to authorize the reality of Omelas for themselves.

When the narrator finally mentions the ones who walk away from Omelas, they posit that, “The place they go towards is a place even less imaginable to most of us than the city of happiness.” By the end of the story, the audience has realized the allegorical nature of Omelas, and thus, the ways in which their imagination is limited by their own reality. Storytelling, then, is not just fanciful imagination, but a reflection of the reader’s world that allows them to see this world in a different light.

As the reader imagines Omelas more and more deeply, they unwittingly become citizens of the city who must ultimately make their own decision about how to handle the suffering child. While Omelas begins as an imaginary place, by the time the story ends, the reader is forced to reckon with how Omelas compares to their own world. When checking in with her audience midway through the story, LeGuin writes: “Do you believe? Do you accept the festival, the city, the joy? No? Then let me describe one more thing.” The narrator then introduces the suffering child—suggesting that the suffering child’s existence is what makes Omelas believable to the audience. Without explicitly asking the reader to allegorize Omelas, LeGuin invites the reader to examine their own notion of reality—for example, what it says about the reader’s world if suffering is the necessary element to make the city of happiness believable. After describing the decision that each citizen must make about the child’s fate, the narrator is careful to enforce the terms of the decision: “The terms are strict and absolute; there may not even be a kind word spoken to the child.” While this statement is, ostensibly, for the children of Omelas first learning of the suffering child, it is, more importantly, directed at the audience. There is no way to wriggle out of this decision, no way to change the terms. The reader’s creative freedom in imagining Omelas comes to a close with this awful decision—at which point the reader is so deeply invested in their imagined Omelas that they face this decision with the same terror as the city’s children. By forcing readers to see a moral choice in the clearest, most binary way possible, LeGuin draws attention to the fact that the unfairness of a choice does not erase its ethical implications.

Even though the citizens of Omelas are faced with a gruesome choice, the narrator tells us that, “Their tears at the bitter injustice dry when they begin to perceive the terrible justice of reality, and to accept it.” By showing readers this unfair moral

choice and an entire city’s acceptance of the choice’s reality, LeGuin invites the reader to examine the gruesome moral decisions they must make in their own life—even though these decisions have become utterly normal to the reader.



## HAPPINESS AND SUFFERING

“The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” posits that there can be no happiness without suffering. Even in her imagined city of perfect happiness,

LeGuin insists that one child must suffer extreme neglect and torture so the other citizens may experience joy.

The fundamental condition of life in Omelas is that, in order for society to be happy, **the child** must suffer without reprieve. The price of happiness, in other words, is suffering, and without one the other cannot exist. Therefore, the story suggests not only that suffering enables joy, but also that suffering and joy are always intermingled, and that achieving happiness requires an intimate understanding of grief.

However, happiness does not exist *solely* due to the child’s suffering; the narrator also suggests other, secondary conditions for the town’s happiness. They state, “Happiness is based on a just discrimination of what is necessary, what is neither necessary nor destructive, and what is destructive.” For this reason, the townspeople are discerning about what aspects of life they embrace and reject. The town is bountiful in necessities, and it has non-necessities that make life more pleasant without making it too complex: subway trains, for instance, or air conditioning. They do *not* have technologies that are wholly unnecessary, though, like “cars or helicopters in and above the streets.” Such things, LeGuin suggests, are *too* pleasurable—much like addictive drugs—and they therefore would invite emotions destructive to happiness, upsetting the careful balance the town must strike to preserve its joy.

To LeGuin, then, happiness is a complex and precarious emotion, an idea that she believes challenges entrenched ideas about happiness. “The trouble is that we have a bad habit,” she writes, “encouraged by pedants and sophisticates, of considering happiness as something rather stupid. Only pain is intellectual, only evil interesting. This is the treason of the artist: a refusal to admit the banality of evil and the terrible boredom of pain.” In other words, to LeGuin, happiness is perhaps *more* complex than suffering, and it’s more worthy of sustained investigation. Though people desire to be happy, they tend to know more about suffering, which does not, in isolation, help build happy lives.

Since suffering and happiness are interwoven, LeGuin suggests that understanding suffering is an essential part of becoming happy. Of the people of Omelas, the narrator states, “Yet it is their tears and anger, the trying of their generosity and the acceptance of their helplessness, which are perhaps the true source of the splendor of their lives. Theirs is no vapid,

irresponsible happiness. They know that they, like the child, are not free...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." In other words, not only do the citizens of Omelas understand that everything good in their lives is made possible by one child's suffering—they also understand that their ability to recognize and cultivate joy is made possible by their proximity to and complicity in suffering.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



## THE DARKNESS

The darkness beyond Omelas symbolizes humanity's unrealized political possibilities. Even in Omelas, the city of happiness, society cannot function without part of the population suffering (even if that "part" is just one person). In Omelas, this is taken to the extreme: one child must suffer for the rest of the city's citizens. In imagining a society such as Omelas, Le Guin suggests that humanity has yet to create a truly just society in which no person or group of people must serve as a scapegoat—the unlucky object of others' ugliest desires and impulses. Thus, Le Guin reminds the readers that, even in their wildest imaginations, they cannot conceive of a society that is not founded on unjust suffering. It is likewise impossible for the narrator to describe the destination of the ones who walk away from Omelas as anything other than "darkness." Thus, the darkness beyond Omelas symbolizes the impossibility of imagining any alternative to a society in which the happiness of some is predicated on the suffering of others.



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Orion edition of *The Wind's Twelve Quarters: Stories* published in 2015.

### The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas Quotes

☹️ Joyous! How is one to tell about joy? How to describe the citizens of Omelas? They were not simple folk, you see, though they were happy. But we do not say the words of cheer much any more. All smiles have become archaic.

**Related Characters:** The Narrator (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 256

### Explanation and Analysis

While the previous paragraph described the Festival of Summer in Omelas from an omniscient third-person perspective, here the narrator breaks from this all-knowing perspective to speak directly to the audience about the challenges of storytelling. The narrator writes in the manner of someone conveying the story of Omelas to a specific audience and uses the collective "we," thereby identifying themselves as a part of this audience. Both narrator and reader thus experience Omelas from a shared perspective: that of modern, human society.

Not only does the narrator identify themselves as a storyteller who shares a similar experience to their audience, the narrator also invites the audience to consider how this experience has shaped the audience as listeners. It is difficult "to tell about joy," the narrator writes, because "we do not say the words of cheer much any more," thus reminding readers that the narrator's ability to communicate with them is limited by their shared experience.

"All smiles have become archaic," the narrator states, drawing a conclusion about human society from their musings on the difficulty of describing Omelas. This is the first point where the narrator hints at the allegorical nature of the story. Not only is the narrator a human who is struggling to communicate successfully to other humans, but this struggle proves to reflect certain truths about the narrator and reader's shared human experience.

☹️ 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. This is the treason of the artist: a refusal to admit the banality of evil and the terrible boredom of pain.

**Related Characters:** The Narrator (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 257



### Explanation and Analysis

The narrator continues to explain the difficulty of communicating with their audience—specifically, the

difficulty of conveying a happy society to an audience that has been conditioned to consider “happiness as something rather stupid.” This section initially feels like a tangent, as the narrator strays from their description of Omelas to criticize a specific attitude present in human culture. However, the passage is crucial in reorienting the audience to consider the complexity of happiness. The narrator calls the artist’s “refusal to admit the banality of evil” a “treason”. Therefore, any reader who automatically writes off Omelas as boring because it is the city of happiness is committing an offense. The audience must think more carefully about their preconceived notions about happiness—namely, that it is the boring opposite of pain. In this way, the narrator paves the way for the story’s main moral argument—that happiness and suffering are, in the human imagination, inextricably linked.

●● I think that there would be no cars or helicopters in and above the streets; this follows from the fact that the people of Omelas are happy people. Happiness is based on a just discrimination of what is necessary, what is neither necessary nor destructive, and what is destructive.

**Related Characters:** The Narrator (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 257

### Explanation and Analysis

The narrator reveals that happiness in Omelas exists according to “a just discrimination of what is necessary, what is neither necessary nor destructive, and what is destructive.” In other words, happiness involves having the necessities while resisting the temptation of destructive objects and behaviors—perhaps because being responsible for destruction causes guilt, and guilt is corrosive of happiness.

The principle behind this tripartite distinction underpins everything about life in Omelas. When the narrator says, “I think,” they reveal their uncertainty about the city’s specifics and, consequently, they reveal the city’s imaginary status. By eschewing any pretense to the reality of the city, the narrator suggests that the specifics of the city might not matter at all, so long as the reader feels invested enough in the idea of Omelas to absorb the moral lesson it represents.

●● Let tambourines be struck above the copulations, and the glory of desire be proclaimed upon the gongs, and (a not unimportant point) let the offspring of these delightful rituals be beloved and looked after by all. One thing I know there is none of in Omelas is guilt.

**Related Characters:** The Narrator (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 258

### Explanation and Analysis

Having laid down the rules of what’s allowed in Omelas, the narrator gives more and more examples of how this rule plays out. Even though nothing destructive is allowed, the narrator insists that Omelas is fun—it even has orgies! The narrator describes sex in Omelas, or, what sex would look like in a society with nothing destructive.

Sex in Omelas is celebrated, warranting music and ringing of “the gongs.” Further, every child is “beloved and looked after by all.” Sex is not destructive, in part because it does not produce children who have no one to care for them because society will care for them.

Additionally, sex is shame-free. The narrator is certain that there is no guilt in Omelas. There are no societal standards to berate citizens for being themselves. In other words, Omelas is very different from human society, which is the reader’s only point of comparison. The narrator hints at the allegorical nature of Omelas in the stark differences between Omelas’s society and the audience’s society.

●● 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.

**Related Characters:** The Narrator (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 258

### Explanation and Analysis

After exploring what society in Omelas looks like (i.e., exploring what society would look like if nothing was destructive), the narrator describes what society in Omelas

feels like. As a point of comparison, the narrator gives a well-known example of collective, societal happiness: a “magnanimous triumph” in war. However, as everything in Omelas is non-destructive, the narrator clarifies that the city’s joy is not felt “against some outer enemy but in communion” with one another. For the citizens of Omelas, then, it is enough just to celebrate their society existing “in communion.” Happiness in Omelas is not hedonistic. It is not defined by brief moments of pleasure, but rather, its members feel a sustained and deeply positive sense of “contentment.”

☞ The people at the door never say anything, but the child, who has not always lived in the tool room, and can remember sunlight and its mother’s voice, sometimes speaks. “I will be good,” it says. “Please let me out. I will be good!” They never answer.

**Related Characters:** The Narrator (speaker), The Child

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 260

### Explanation and Analysis

Now that the narrator has fully established what a truly happy society looks and feels like, they reveal the awful secret of Omelas: the child locked in the basement who suffers for the rest of the city’s happiness. While the entire description of the child’s living situation is awful, this passage highlights what is so truly awful about it (in turn, pointing to Le Guin’s conception of happiness). Even though the child is mentally underdeveloped from years of neglect, it understands the cruelty of its suffering because it remembers moments of happiness—for example, sunlight and its mother’s voice.

The child promises to “be good” if it is released, indicating that the child thinks it has been locked away as punishment for bad behavior. However, the child is not being punished for its behavior—rather, it is being punished because the arbitrary terms of Omelas call for a child to suffer. This passage highlights just how unfair and cruel this child’s situation is. It is denied a place in the loving society of Omelas that looks after all of its children, and worse, there is no good reason for this denial; it’s just the way it must be.

☞ They all know that it has to be there [...] 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 [...] depend wholly on this child’s abominable misery.

**Related Characters:** The Narrator (speaker), The Child

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 260

### Explanation and Analysis

The narrator reveals that everyone in Omelas knows about the wholly unjust situation that demands a child’s suffering for the rest of the city’s happiness, even if they don’t understand why this is the case. Just as the child’s memory of happiness allows it to understand its current suffering, the citizens’ knowledge of the child’s suffering allows them to understand their current happiness.

Once again, Le Guin depicts the interrelated nature of happiness and suffering, and the necessity of understanding one to understand the other. Citizens understand that the price of their happiness, beauty, friendships, health, and wisdom, is the “abominable misery” of one individual. This knowledge is what binds Omelas society together.

☞ “Those are the terms. 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.”

**Related Characters:** The Narrator (speaker), The Child

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 261

### Explanation and Analysis

The reader first learns of the complex social order that revolves around the child’s existence by proxy of the Omelas children discovering the suffering child for the first time. Their instinctual desire (which is likely shared by readers) is to fix the situation, to find some way to change the child’s misery without damaging the rest of society’s happiness. In this passage, the narrator reiterates the rules of Omelas to pre-empt any thoughts of changing the child’s situation without destroying the happiness of Omelas: it is impossible. For no reason in particular, these are “the terms”





of Omelas and they are impossible to change. Thus, the children of Omelas must accept that this is their choice: to let the child continue to suffer, or “to throw away the happiness of thousands for the chance of the happiness of one”.

In imagining Omelas, the reader is led deeper and deeper into the city of happiness. By the time the children of Omelas face this awful decision, the reader is right there with them, forced to make this decision with no right answer.

☹️ Their tears at the bitter injustice dry when they begin to perceive the terrible justice of reality, and to accept it.

**Related Characters:** The Narrator (speaker), The Child

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 261

### Explanation and Analysis

Most of Omelas’s children react to the suffering child in the same way: first with disgust and anger, then with “tears” over the unjust situation that demands that they turn a blind eye to the child’s suffering. With time, the children learn to justify their inaction towards the child. There is no use for them to dwell in sadness over their inability to help the child, and narrator suggests that the real tragedy is not their personal inaction but the “terrible justice of reality” that forces them to make such a dreadful choice.


In Omelas, this is how children come of age: by accepting the cruel nature of reality and their powerlessness to change that reality. Society’s collective neglect of the child is therefore not portrayed as a personal moral failure on each

citizen’s behalf, but as a simply tragic fact of life: every person’s happiness depends on the suffering of someone else.

☹️ They leave Omelas, they walk ahead into the darkness, and they do not come back. 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.

**Related Characters:** The Narrator (speaker), The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 262

### Explanation and Analysis

Even though the citizens of Omelas are powerless to change the terms of the city (that one child must suffer to enable everyone else’s happiness), they do have the power to reject these terms entirely. But in rejecting the child’s suffering, one must reject the benefits associated with that suffering, too: being a part of Omelas society. To make this decision, one must leave the city of Omelas, alone, and never come back.

The narrator does not know where these people go, as it is “even less imaginable to most of us than the city of happiness.” In this way, the narrator suggests that humans have yet to conceive of a wholly just society in which no individual must unfairly suffer for the group at large (or vice versa). The narrator does not even know if this is possible.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## THE ONES WHO WALK AWAY FROM OMELAS

It is the Festival of Summer in the city of Omelas by the sea. Everyone in the city is celebrating and dancing as they parade northward through the streets toward “the great water-meadow called the Green Fields,” where naked children sit astride horses, preparing for a race. Everyone is going to watch the horse race. Banners flutter in the wind, marking the course that the race will take. As bells clang joyously, the entire city is filled with music and merriment.

The narrator pauses to contemplate the difficulty of describing a city of happiness to an audience conditioned to think of happiness as dull and “simple.” The narrator calls out this assumption as false, insisting that strife is a monotonous subject, and further, is only recognizable in contrast to happiness. Not only is it false to equate happiness with stupidity, it is dangerous. Artists have perpetuated this myth, so much so that society has largely forgotten how to describe happiness and smiles have become “archaic.”

The narrator clarifies the nature of the city’s happiness. The citizens of Omelas are happy, but not naïve or unintelligent. Their definition of happiness follows from a tripartite distinction: they understand the difference between what is necessary; what is unnecessary but not destructive; and what is destructive. The narrator invites the reader to imagine Omelas as they wish, so long as nothing about the city falls into the category of “destructive”. Thus, Omelas may have “central heating, subway trains, washing machines, [...] a cure for the common cold. Or they could have none of that; it doesn't matter.” The narrator reveals the city’s imaginary status as they describe Omelas in more and more theoretical terms. The exact details of Omelas do not matter, so long as the reader is able to imagine a city that conforms to the narrator’s loose description.

*This opening scene portrays a seemingly perfect society in which everyone is happy. It sets up the theme of society versus the individual by depicting the joyous society of Omelas. The scene also introduces the theme of Coming of Age by focusing on the children of Omelas and their idyllic, innocent childhood. This opening description of Omelas is crucial in establishing the stakes of the story. The audience must first see this society as perfect in order to later understand the full cost of such apparent perfection.*



*This is the first point where the narrator “breaks the fourth wall” by speaking directly to the reader and begins to establish the story as an allegory by suggesting Omelas is an imaginary city that is therefore difficult to describe. Part of this difficulty, the narrator explains, has to do with the audience’s preconceived notions about happiness and suffering—another important theme in the story. In criticizing modern society’s romanticized view of suffering as interesting and happiness as uninteresting, the narrator prods the reader to open their mind to happiness as a complex emotion that exists in constant relation to suffering.*



*The narrator continues to emphasize the theme of happiness and suffering by describing in greater detail the principles on which Omelas’s happiness is founded, and introducing the concepts of necessity and destructiveness as important variables in calculating that happiness. Here, the narrator explicitly directs the reader to use their imagination to fill in the details of Omelas for themselves, and in doing so reveals that Omelas is not an actual place so much as an idea. In this way, the narrator further reinforces the idea that the story is to be read as an allegory in which the society of Omelas is a stand-in for the ideal society. Notably, many aspects and inventions of modern society are absent from the narrator’s summation of what is allowed in the city according to their tripartite distinction, and this is presumably because these things fall into the “destructive” category. These differences invite the audience to compare Omelas to their own society and examine which parts of it may be destructive.*



Still, the narrator worries that Omelas may strike the reader as too perfect, too strictly adherent to rules to be an ideal society. The narrator insists that these guidelines for happiness still allow for a certain amount of hedonism, and encourages the reader again to imagine the city however they like: “if an orgy would help” the city seem more utopic, “don’t hesitate.” The narrator imagines that in Omelas there is religion but no clergy, sex and nudity are celebrated publicly, and “the offspring of these delightful rituals” of desire are “beloved and looked after by all.”

“I thought at first there were not drugs” in Omelas, the narrator writes, “but that is puritanical.” Thus, the narrator supposes, there is an ecstasy-inducing drug named *drooz* in Omelas, and it is not even habit-forming. However, few people would need *drooz*, the narrator suspects, because the city feels “a boundless and generous contentment” all the time anyway. The city celebrates victory and courage, but has no soldiers—“the victory they celebrate is that of life.” There is no guilt in Omelas.

The narrator returns to the Festival of Summer. The parades of people have mostly reached the fields where the children’s horse race is held. The scene is impossibly idyllic. There is good food, and the children’s faces are “amiably sticky”. An old woman passes out flowers. A boy plays the flute as children ready their horses at the starting line, speaking to them gently and affectionately: “Quiet, quiet, there my beauty, my hope.” The crowd flanking the racecourse looks like a field. The narrator announces to the reader that “the Festival of Summer has begun,” then pauses to ask the reader directly whether they believe in this scene: “Do you accept the festival, the city, the joy?” If not, the narrator will reveal one more detail about Omelas.

*Again, the narrator makes a direct appeal to the reader’s imagination, imploring readers to leave aside their preconceived notions about happiness as they strain to imagine the city of Omelas. The narrator expands on the distinction they drew earlier between the destructive and the necessary, and clarifies that the perimeters of “non-destructive and necessary” still allow for fun and pleasure in Omelas. As the narrator asks the reader to imagine Omelas in greater and greater detail, they also invite the reader to become increasingly invested in the society. Again, the noticeable differences between Omelas and modern society invite the audience to allegorize the city.*



*The themes of Happiness and Suffering and Imagination and Allegory continue to entangle when the narrator considers the presence of drugs and war in Omelas. The narrator invites the reader to imagine how drugs and victory might exist in a way that doesn’t depend on destruction. The narrator strains to imagine pleasure without destruction in considering drugs and victory’s existence in Omelas, nodding to one of the story’s moral lessons: that happiness always exists in relation to suffering. Again, while the narrator does not explicitly ask the reader to compare their own society to Omelas, the calculated differences between Omelas and the reader’s society encourage the reader to allegorize the city of Omelas.*



*After exploring happiness in Omelas at length, the narrator returns to the picturesque scene of the Festival of Summer. The theme of the individual versus society resurfaces as the narrator focuses on the city’s society moving as one organic being. Again, the narrator pays special attention to the children of Omelas, describing their joy and emotional attentiveness to their horses, and generally portraying childhood in Omelas as idealistic. This is significant because it lays the groundwork for what the narrator will later reveal about these children’s coming of age. The narrator again breaks the fourth wall as they ask readers whether they believe in the scene. Thus, the reader’s imagination is tested once again. In supposing that the reader does not believe the scene, the narrator gestures toward the story’s explicitly allegorical—rather than realistic—presentation. The narrator seems to suggest that, if a reader cannot believe in a fully happy society, this must reflect something about the reader’s beliefs about human society in general.*



In a **dark**, windowless room in a basement beneath one of the city's public buildings lives a malnourished child. The room is tiny, about the size of a broom closet. The child shares the room with a couple of "clotted, foul-smelling" mops and a rusty bucket. The narrator suggests that the child's gender is irrelevant, and refers to the child using the pronoun "it". The child is severely underdeveloped both physically and mentally; "it has become imbecile through fear, malnutrition, and neglect." The child is terrified of the mops and shuts its eyes in fear, but nothing will ever change. "The door is always locked; and nobody ever comes," except, on occasion, a person (or a few), to refill the child's water jug and food bowl. The people who come to the door do not speak to the child, only "peer in at it with frightened, disgusted eyes."

The child has not always lived in the locked room. In fact, it remembers "sunlight and its mother's voice." Though no one speaks to the child, the child begs the people who visit it for release, promising to "be good." The narrator reveals that the child used to scream and cry constantly, but after years of neglect, it now only whimpers pathetically, and hardly ever speaks. It is naked, gaunt, and covered in festering sores from sitting "in its own excrement continually." Its stomach is bloated from starvation, for "it lives on a half-bowl of corn meal and grease a day."

This child's existence is not a secret. Everyone in Omelas knows about it, whether they have seen the child personally or simply know of its existence. Every citizen knows that everything good in their lives ("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") exists because of this child's suffering. Some citizens understand why this is, while others do not, but all understand that the perfection of Omelas depends on the child's abject misery.

*The narrator moves from the bird's eye view of thriving Omelas society to a close-up on an individual child whose dark, miserable, and lonely experience contrasts dramatically the Festival of Summer unfolding aboveground. Whereas until now the narrator has focused on depicting the great happiness of Omelas as a whole, they now turn their focus to the other half of the equation: a suffering individual. The child experiences suffering in all aspects of its life: mental, emotional, and physical. Its existence could not be more different from the idyllic childhood of the other Omelas youths. The narrator focuses on the child's stunted growth to highlight how the child is denied its own coming of age or even a sense of selfhood.*



*The story returns to the relationship between happiness and suffering when the narrator mentions the child's memory of its mother and sunlight. Because the child has experienced these moments of happiness, it has a frame of reference in which to contextualize its current state of misery. The child desperately wants to be released, and begs its visitors for help. Where the cries and noise from the Festival of Summer indicated joy and a sense of community, the child's cries and noises indicate abject misery and loneliness. While the children of Omelas are naked because they are free of shame, the child is naked because it lacks proper care. While the children of Omelas eat treats at the Festival of Summer, the child is limited to corn meal and grease.*



*After contrasting the child's loneliness and suffering with the happy society of Omelas, the narrator reveals that everyone in Omelas knows about this awful contrast and still, no one does anything to help the child. Happiness versus Suffering and the Individual versus Society are not just implicit themes in this text—rather, the extreme contrast between the suffering of the individual and the happiness of society is the very foundation of Omelas. While all societies have some imbalance between the happiness of some and the suffering of others, the extreme and seemingly arbitrary law of Omelas (that one child must suffer for everyone else's happiness) throws such imbalances into sharp relief.*



Learning about the child's existence is a sort of coming-of-age ritual in Omelas—an experience each child has, usually between the ages of eight and twelve. Despite the justifications they are given, each child reacts in disgust and anger. Their first instinct is to help the child out of its miserable situation, though they are able to override this instinct by reminding themselves that helping the child will ruin everyone else's happiness, causing "all the prosperity and beauty and delight of Omelas" to "wither and be destroyed." There is no way around this predicament. The narrator states that "the terms are strict and absolute," though they never state why this is the case. Thus, to live in Omelas is to accept this child's misery as a condition of one's happiness.

Despite the initial trauma of learning about the child, most citizens come to justify their inaction. For some it takes weeks, for others, years, but eventually almost everyone comes to accept the predicament. The narrator runs through their reasoning: even if the child were released, it would not be able to experience much joy due to its underdevelopment. "It has been afraid too long to ever be free of fear," they reason, and they are not cruel for neglecting the child, since they are helpless to change its circumstances. The children's "tears at the bitter injustice dry when they begin to perceive the terrible justice of reality, and to accept it."

The people of Omelas do not forget about the child's misery. Rather, their understanding of the child's misery allows them to more deeply understand and appreciate their own happiness. The narrator assures the audience that "Theirs is no vapid, irresponsible happiness." They understand that they are indebted to the child for its suffering. As much as the child is a slave to its misery, the people of Omelas are enslaved to the child's situation—all are powerless to change the terms of their existence. None are truly free.

*The narrator explains that learning of this awful imbalance—that the citizens of Omelas only experience happiness because of one child's awful suffering—is how one comes of age in Omelas. Because the children of Omelas experience perfect and idealistic childhoods, their first reaction to the suffering child is outrage that it is subjected to such an unfair rule, and disgust for the child's condition (as well as the fact that every adult in Omelas, the people who have raised them to be good and moral, are complicit in this child's suffering). The narrator creates an important thematic opposition between happiness and suffering, and between the individual and society, by emphasizing the strict nature of Omelas's rules: all happiness for the whole society must rely on the complete misery of an individual child.*



*Although the idealistic children initially react with compassion (as they have been raised to be moral), each child ultimately finds their own way of justifying their inaction and neglect of the suffering child. This is the true coming of age ritual of Omelas: learning how to justify one's immoral actions, given the amoral nature of reality. As the children come of age in Omelas, they come into their place in a society that depends on its members' ability to turn a blind eye to injustice. Thus, the children are bound to the rest of Omelas society by their knowledge of the suffering child and their collective neglect. Growing up in Omelas requires children to understand the true and tragic price of their society's happiness.*



*The narrator clarifies that, while the people of Omelas justify neglecting a suffering child, they do not take this decision lightly. The knowledge of the suffering child forces the citizens of Omelas to recognize the interrelated nature of happiness and suffering. Even though they realize that they are indebted to the child, they refuse to help it. In this passage, the narrator explains that, at least in Omelas, happiness cannot exist without suffering, and that accepting this reality is how one grows up and truly joins society. Even though the citizens of Omelas are the ones who benefit from the extreme dictum that the child must suffer for the whole of society's happiness, they know that they are locked into this structure as much as the child is locked in its broom closet.*



The narrator pauses to ask the audience if they believe in Omelas now, after learning about the child. The narrator suggests that this cruel situation makes Omelas “more credible.” Yet, there is another detail about Omelas that is “quite incredible.”

Though most citizens of Omelas come to accept the awful predicament of the child’s misery, some do not. Sometimes citizens decide to reject the terms of life in Omelas—something they can only do by leaving the city, alone, in total silence. These citizens walk into the **darkness** beyond Omelas and never come back. The narrator does not know where they go, for it is impossible to imagine—the place might not even exist. Still, the ones who walk away from Omelas do so with a sense of purpose, seeming “to know where they are going.”

*The narrator suggests that Omelas’s terrible secret is what makes it “more credible” to the reader, implying that the reader finds a city with a cruel, unjust secret to be more realistic than a city of perfect happiness. This invites the reader to examine their expectations for happiness in their own society, and encourages the reader to allegorize Omelas. The narrator suggests that what one can and cannot imagine is always deeply reflective of one’s own reality. If it is impossible for the reader to imagine a truly happy society, this impasse must reflect on the reader’s own societal experiences.*



*While the theme of the individual versus society has previously come out in the contrast between the individual child’s suffering and the collective happiness of Omelas society, Le Guin ends the story by introducing individualism in a new way: through the difficult decision made by “the ones who walk away.” Though citizens are unable to change the structure that requires the child to suffer for the city’s happiness, citizens can choose to disengage with Omelas society altogether by leaving Omelas. Leaving Omelas is an ultimate act of individualism, as it requires one to reject the comfort of society in a stand for one’s own sense of morality. The narrator does not say whether walking away is right or wrong, but once more asks the audience to reflect on the limits of their own ability to imagine an alternative to a city like Omelas. That it is impossible for the reader and narrator to imagine what lies beyond Omelas implies that it is impossible for humans to imagine a society without unjust suffering. Still, certain individuals will strike out on their own to live by their morals, on their own terms.*





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