“The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas”

Ethics and Community in Ursula K. Le Guin
Le Guin’s Life (1929- )

- Ursula K. Le Guin was born on October 21, 1929 in Berkeley, CA.
- Le Guin graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Radcliffe College in 1951 with a B.A. in French and Italian literature. She went on to earn a Master’s in French and Italian lit from Columbia, and received a Fulbright grant to conduct doctoral work in France from 1953-54.
- Between 1951 and 1961, Le Guin wrote five novels, but all of them were rejected by publishers who thought they were inaccessible. After she returned to her earlier interest in science fiction, her work began to be published regularly. She has won four Nebula and two Hugo Awards.
Le Guin’s story “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” is subtitled (Variations on a theme by William James). This is a reference to James’s 1891 essay “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life.”

James states, “The main purpose of this paper is to show that there is no such thing possible as an ethical philosophy dogmatically made up in advance. We all help to determine the content of ethical philosophy so far as we contribute to the [human] race’s moral life” (141).

What does James mean by this? Does he seem to view ethics as fixed and unchanging or fluid and evolving?
Jamesian Moral Principles in “Omelas”

- “If the hypothesis were offered us of a world in which [famous] utopias should all be outdone, and millions kept permanently happy on the simple condition that a certain lost soul on the far-off edge of things should lead a life of lonely torture, what except a [specific] and independent sort of emotion can it be which would make us immediately feel, even though an impulse arose within us to clutch at the happiness so offered, how hideous a thing would be its enjoyment when deliberately accepted as the fruit of such a bargain?” (144)

- How does Le Guin’s story treat James’s moral hypothesis?

- Le Guin has said of James’s remarks above, “The dilemma of the American conscience can hardly be better stated.” How might this statement affect our reading of her story about Omelas?
Moral Justification?

Le Guin writes that the citizens of Omelas justify keeping the child locked up since “It is too degraded and imbecile to know any real joy. It has been afraid too long ever to be free of fear. Its habits are too uncouth for it to respond to humane treatment. [...] Their tears at the bitter injustice dry when they begin to perceive the terrible justice of reality, and to accept it” (384).

Diagram of the prisoners and cave from Plato’s allegory in *The Republic*

- Might we compare the Omelasians’ justification for keeping the child locked up to Plato’s Allegory of the Cave? How so? Do you think this justification is sufficient for the treatment the child endures?
Reading “Omelas” as Metaphor

- Jerre Collins has argued that Le Guin’s story is about “society’s use of a scapegoat...to keep the rest of society happy” (525).
- He continues, “the dilemma of the American conscience seems twofold: we cannot renounce the exploitation of others that makes possible our high standard of living, nor can we renounce the scapegoat-motif that justifies our comfortable life” (525).
- Do you agree with Collins’s assessment of American society? Why or why not?

Brooks writes, “many of us live in societies whose prosperity depends on some faraway child in the basement. When we buy a cellphone or a piece of cheap clothing, there is some exploited worker — a child in the basement. We tolerate exploitation, telling each other that their misery is necessary for overall affluence, though maybe it’s not. [...] In many different venues, the suffering of the few is justified by those trying to deliver the greatest good for the greatest number.”

Do you think, like the people of Omelas, that the benefit of the many justifies the misery or exploitation of the few? Why?
References


