

A Platonic Analysis of Ursula Le Guin's "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas"

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Ursula Le Guin's short story "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" tells of the people of Omelas, who experience great prosperity and pleasure, but whose happiness is built upon the suffering of a child locked in a basement. Le Guin explains how the majority of Omelans come to accept the situation but ends the story by describing Omelans who do not accept the child's suffering and instead walk away into the unknown. Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" explores the topic of education through the metaphor of prisoners in a cave. The allegory starts with prisoners who are held in a cave and are unable to see anything except for the shadows of puppets cast onto a wall by a fire behind them. One prisoner is led out of the cave. On his way out he sees the puppets whose shadows had been projected on to the wall and the fire that created the shadows. Once out of the cave he sees elements of nature and finally, the sun. The process is painful for him. The symbols in Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" represent parts of the educational process. In "Plato's Republic: A Reader's Guide," Luke Purshouse asserts that the cave in Plato's allegory is ignorance, the outside is where education begins and seeing the sun represents the highest level of understanding (93, 98). "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" conveys several Platonic themes through symbolism. The theme that most people live in a state of delusion is conveyed through the symbol of the city of Omelas, the theme that exposure to reality is painful is conveyed by the symbol of the child in the basement, and the theme that only a minority of people are capable of full self-realization is conveyed through the symbol of the journey out of Omelas.

The city of Omelas is symbolic of Plato's Cave, as it is a place in which people are detached from elements of reality. The residents of Omelas are fulfilled and joyful, but underlying their unbounded happiness is a great evil, the imprisonment of a child in a basement.

The story begins with the description of a city that is exceptional in its magnificence and in the happiness of its residents. Omelas has “moss grown gardens... avenues of trees... great parks and public buildings” (Le Guin 140). The emphasis on the green spaces and the description of the buildings as “public buildings” (Le Guin 140) creates an impression of a city where the residents are in harmony with each other and with nature. The pleasant atmosphere is further developed through descriptions of the people of Omelas that emphasize their “cheer... [and] joy” (Le Guin 140). However, the narrator’s revelation that there is a child “locked in a “room [of] about three paces long and two wide” (Le Guin 145) underneath the city shatters this perfect image. The revelation exposes Omelas as a place of illusion, where the happiness is not as all-encompassing as it is portrayed at first. The city of Omelas is therefore much like Plato’s cave. While the “sunlit air” of Omelas (Le Guin 140) may seem incongruent with Plato’s dark “cavelike dwelling” (Plato, para 1), a deeper analysis of Plato and Le Guin’s symbolic use of light actually reveals similarities between the two settings. In the “Allegory of the Cave” the fire in the cave is a source of light, but it is used to create the illusions that the prisoners believe to be reality. The shadows that the prisoners believe to be real objects “are projected on the wall opposite by the glow of the fire” (Plato, para 4). Thus, the light in the cave is actually a source of illusion and not a source of enlightenment. Dale Hall, in “Interpreting Plato’s Cave as an Allegory of the Human Condition,” suggests that life in the cave is a “perversion of nature” where “illusions of success and failure and change” (84) appear to be significant due to the lack of exposure to reality. Like the prisoners in the Cave, the residents of Omelas are living in deception and are blinded by Omelas’ apparent brightness and beauty. Thus, the city of Omelas conveys the theme that most people live in a state of delusion.

Similarly, the child in the basement is symbolic of reality outside the cave. In Plato's "Allegory of the Cave," seeing the outside is a moment of realization for the prisoner-philosopher, while that awakening is triggered for Omelans by seeing the child in the basement. Seeing the child in the basement is disturbing for Omelans. Le Guin narrates that Omelans feel "frightened and disgusted" (Le Guin 143) when they learn about the child's suffering. Le Guin narrates that the child in the basement is "explained to [Omelans] when they are between eight and twelve," but "no matter how well the matter has been explained to them, these young spectators are always shocked and sickened at the sight [of the child]" (Le Guin 143). The emphasis on the negative emotional reactions of Omelans to the child shows that the learning process is painful for Omelans. Sean McAleer states in "Plato's Republic: An Introduction" that the educational process is "painful and confusing for the prisoner" in Plato's allegory (212). The prisoner-philosopher experiences "pain, rage [and] blindness (Plato, Para 11) when he sees the outside (MacAleer 214). The overwhelming discomfort experienced when seeing the child thus conveys the theme that exposure to reality after living in a world of illusion can be shocking and painful, which is also a major theme in the "Allegory of the Cave".

Additionally, the act of walking away from Omelas symbolizes the solitariness of the prisoner-philosopher's journey of enlightenment in the "Allegory of the Cave". The journeys taken by both the walkers in "The Ones who Walk Away from Omelas" and the prisoner-philosopher in the "Allegory of the Cave" are individual endeavours. Although multiple Omelans decide to leave their city, "each [person walks] alone" (Le Guin 145) out of Omelas. The isolation of the walkers is emphasized through the repetition of the word "alone," which appears three times in the final paragraph of the story (Le Guin 144-145). The personal nature of the journey parallels that of the prisoner-philosopher, who is alienated from his previous

companions by exiting the cave. Plato narrates that the prisoner-philosopher “would prefer to endure everything rather than be that kind of human being” (para 19), meaning that the prisoner-philosopher would prefer to endure unknown hardships rather than be with the people who have remained in the cave. This alienation results in solitude for the prisoner-philosopher. The isolation of both the Omelans who leave their city and the prisoner-philosopher conveys the theme that enlightenment is something that can only be achieved by a minority of people. In “Plato’s Republic: An Introduction”, Sean Sayers argues that “Plato’s allegory presents a bleak and pessimistic picture of the situation of the majority” and that the “Allegory of the Cave” suggests that “most of us, for most of our lives, live in ignorance and illusion” (127). Gerasimos Santas also highlights the exceptionalism of the prisoner-philosopher in “Understanding Plato’s Republic”. Santas contends that in Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave” only a minority of people achieve enlightenment and suggests that the loneliness of the prisoner-philosopher indicates that Plato was an “intellectual... [and] ethical elitist” (146). The unique nature of the journey of enlightenment is also apparent in “The Ones That Walk Away from Omelas,” when the walkers’ journey is described as being “quite incredible” (Le Guin 144). The emphasis on how the journey is “incredible” highlights both the lonely individualism of the walkers and their rarity. Thus, in revealing the isolation of those who leave Omelas, Le Guin demonstrates the unusualness of defying the comfort of ignorance and thereby suggests that few people ever leave their state of ignorance.

In conclusion, Le Guin modifies the symbols from the “Allegory of the Cave” to convey the themes that most people live in a state of delusion, that exposure to reality can be shocking and painful, and that only a small minority of people are capable of full self-realization. The city of Omelas symbolizes the cave and conveys the theme that most people are detached from

reality. The child in the basement represents the world outside the cave and conveys the theme that exposure to reality can be shocking and painful. The walkers symbolize the solitude of the prisoner-philosopher on his journey to enlightenment and convey the theme that not all people are capable of enlightenment. By reproducing and inverting Plato's symbols, Le Guin creates space for her readers to consider the nature of philosophical and personal enlightenment. The symbols in the story raise questions about education and personal responsibility but leave them to be answered by the reader.

Works Cited

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