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The Tao Masters Who Walk Away From Omelas

Abstract

Le Guin primarily intended to portray Taoist enlightenment in “*The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas*” rather than a moral contemplation or lesson. She first describes Omelas as the pinnacle of human flourishing from a Taoist perspective, then how the residents of Omelas have achieved moral maturity through coming to terms with the necessity of evil, and finally she describes the even greater transcendence of those who have achieved detachment from the goods of Omelas, the Tao Masters. This interpretation is supported by parallels with the *Tao Te Ching*.

Additional Keywords

Le Guin, Ursula K. “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas”; Le Guin, Ursula K.—Taoist influence; Bodhisattvas; Good and evil in fantasy; Taoism

THE TAO MASTERS WHO WALK AWAY FROM OMELAS

SABINA SCHRYNEMAKERS

URSULA K. LE GUIN HAS SAID ALL HER WRITING has been “deeply influenced” by the *Tao Te Ching* (“The Feminine”). This influence is striking in *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas* (hereafter, *Omelas*). As a mirror for our own relationship to injustice and evil, *Omelas* powerfully provokes reflection and is commonly interpreted as presenting a moral thought experiment. It is often read as an argument against utilitarianism or as some other moral lesson. I offer an alternative reading: Le Guin primarily intended to portray Taoist enlightenment in *Omelas* rather than a moral contemplation or lesson. The ones who walk away are Tao Masters.

Omelas portrays the Taoist idea that understanding the interconnectedness of good and evil can lead to an enlightenment and higher consciousness that is greater than even the greatest earthly human happiness. This is connection to the Tao, a reality deeper than good and evil. Le Guin first describes *Omelas* as the pinnacle of human flourishing, then how the residents of *Omelas* have achieved moral maturity through coming to terms with the necessity of evil, and finally, she describes the even greater transcendence of those who have achieved detachment from the goods of *Omelas*, the Tao Masters.

OMELAS REPRESENTS TAOIST HUMAN FLOURISHING

The joys and pleasures of *Omelas* represent the pinnacle of human fulfillment, from a Taoist perspective. The residents’ moral ideal is the Taoist saint who, without guilt, does not sacrifice or suppress their natural inclination to self-fulfillment along the many dimensions of human experience in order to satisfy an altruistic moral ideal. This is why the city is full of artistic expression and enjoyments, as well as devoted care for children and family.¹ In an interview discussing her translation of the *Tao Te Ching*, Le Guin says that “Lao Tzu says we should be like Nature. We should not be humane either, in the sense that we should not sacrifice ourselves for others” (“The Feminine”). This does not mean the residents or Taoist saints do not prevent suffering and work to improve the happiness of others; indeed, they do so as a natural part of their own happiness. They are described as compassionate and caring and the naturalness of their full human goodness is symbolized by their open nakedness, intimacy with their steeds, harmonious flow of movement and music, and their having few laws.

¹ In fact, Le Guin interrupts her narrative to scold the absence of joyful descriptions of happiness in our own society (278). She favors the Taoist ideal.

OMELAS RESIDENTS REACH MORAL MATURITY BY PERCEIVING THE NECESSITY OF EVIL

Nevertheless, evil has a necessary role in humanity reaching its greatest potential, and this is symbolized by an abused child. Le Guin says it is because of the child that they are compassionate and “so gentle with children” and can achieve human fulfillment in all the ways Omelas exemplifies (283). The residents of Omelas cannot prevent the suffering of the child without preventing human flourishing. As the narrator says, freeing the child would “let guilt within the walls [of Omelas] indeed” (282) implying doing so would be objectively wrong. We may wonder how the joys of Omelas could justify the horrific injustice of the child’s treatment, but to question the morality of the residents is to misconstrue what the child and Omelas represent. Le Guin describes *Omelas* as a “psychomyth” taking place “outside any history, outside of time [...] without spatial or temporal limits at all” (Foreword viii). Within the metaphor of this myth expressing timeless truths, the child represents the Taoist idea of the necessary role of evil in human development.² This timeless or eternal relation between good and evil (yin and yang) at the human level of reality is symbolized by the fact that the same abused child is visited as a child by others when they were children and later as adults. Removing the evil of the abused child is not a possibility, and so the issue of the morality of Omelas residents, as well as those who leave Omelas, not doing so is not in the logical space of the story.

Le Guin’s description of how the residents of Omelas come to terms with the abuse of the child that makes Omelas possible may initially seem a description of the residents’ own rationalizations for enjoying their lives at the expense of the child. However, the narrator says earlier there is no guilt in Omelas. Reading this passage from the narrator’s perspective, those in Omelas have not suppressed guilt to gain the good feeling of happiness. Instead, they are able to be fully happy because they have with full awareness and moral clarity accepted the necessity of the child’s abuse. Le Guin writes, “Their tears at the bitter injustice dry when they begin to perceive the terrible justice of reality, and to accept it. [...] Theirs is no vapid, irresponsible happiness” (283). In other words, they experience genuine moral outrage and wish the child could be spared but transcend this by focusing on the understanding that this injustice and suffering is necessary. In this way, “They know that they, like the child, are not free” (283). They are not free to remove evil’s role in the perfection of

² As Le Guin says in an interview, “utopia may always be based on atrocity—since all privileged lives are based on injustice, that would seem to indicate a possible rule” (“A Conversation” 172). And, as Junot Diaz wrote, “What interests her the most, it seems in my opinion, is the hard art of human wisdom, how desperate we all are for it and yet how it can only ever be learned by confronting suffering and loss and responsibility” (qtd. in Freeman).

humanity and their own fulfillment; removing evil removes good as well. This passing through moral outrage to achieve moral maturity, clarity, and responsibility reflects the role of evil in human development and shows the residents of Omelas are genuinely, not merely apparently, morally good. As Le Guin describes, their moral outrage is “perhaps the true source of splendor of their lives” (283).

THE ONES WHO WALK AWAY FROM OMELAS ARE TAO MASTERS

But there is an even higher level of spiritual growth and transcendence than this ideal enjoyment of life with full moral clarity.³ Some walk away from Omelas. As the central lesson, this is the story’s title. This is what is even more “incredible” about the nature of reality and spirituality than the possibility of Omelas. This higher level, the Tao, is indescribable and beyond the order of interlocked good and evil, and so it is beyond Omelas. It is “towards the mountains” which indicates a higher state or level of being.

Verbal parallels between Le Guin’s description of those who walk away, and the *Tao Te Ching*’s description of enlightenment support this reading. Those who walk away from Omelas “walk ahead into the darkness.” The *Tao Te Ching* says the Tao “is called darkness.” They leave Omelas by walking “through the beautiful gates.” The *Tao Te Ching* calls the Tao “the gateway to all understanding.” The narrator “cannot describe it [where they go] at all.” The *Tao Te Ching* calls the Tao the “unnamable” and ungraspable.⁴

Those who walk away do so alone, as enlightenment is experienced individually.⁵ By leaving they are no longer aiming for the happiness of Omelas, just as the *Tao Te Ching* describes enlightened Masters as “detached from all things,” not aiming for, or attached to, anything in life (Chapter 7). They are not rejecting Omelas in moral outrage: upon contemplation of the child, the role of evil in the order of Omelas, they do not “weep or rage.” Instead, some fall silent

³ Le Guin repeatedly emphasizes that Omelas contains the greatest goods of human life to show that those who walk away from Omelas achieve a consciousness that is greater than even the greatest and most mature enjoyments of life. She says, “The place they go towards is a place even less imaginable to most of us than the city of happiness” (284). Another reason Le Guin emphasizes repeatedly that the happiness in Omelas is true joy, not an imitation or mere appearance of happiness, and why she vividly depicts the evil of the child’s mistreatment, may have been to illustrate how the higher level of reality, the Tao, beyond good and evil, does not diminish the importance or reality of the lower level.

⁴ All of these quotes from the *Tao Te Ching* are from the first chapter, and the corresponding quotes from *Omelas* are all in the last paragraph, an interesting correlation. Also, the narrator says of their destination, “It is possible that it does not exist.” This may be an expression of the narrator’s own doubts about Taoism, not having the insight of a Tao master herself, or an expression of the *Tao Te Ching* description of the Tao as beyond being and non-being.

⁵ The *Tao Te Ching* says “The Master keeps her mind always at one with the Tao” (chapter 21).

before leaving,⁶ just as the *Tao Te Ching* describes Tao Masters as silent and non-reactive (Chapter 20). They achieve understanding. Their enlightenment beyond verbal description is conveyed in that they “know where they are going” though the narrator cannot describe it.

The inclusion of all these elements is difficult to cohesively explain if walking away signified moral protest. Yet this is a common interpretation. For example, in her recent *Mythlore* Note, “Ursula’s Bookshelf,” Kris Swank speculates the child must be abused as part of an agreement or bargain that those who walk away cannot accept. She concurs with N.K. Jemisin’s critique of Omelas in “The Ones Who Stay and Fight,” namely that Le Guin suggests the only way to create a better society is to walk away from it rather than fix it. Similarly, after speculating that the abuse of the child in Omelas carries only the necessity of societal norms, Paul Firenze argues in “They, Like the Child, Are Not Free” that it is morally better to stay in Omelas to work toward a future without the abuse of the child than to walk away and leave Omelas to its evil. However, interpreting the abuse of the child as an evil it is possible to remove cannot be reconciled with Le Guin’s reverence for those who walk away. Indeed, in agreement with Swank, Jemisin, and Firenze, it seems merely ignoble to walk away from an evil that can be fixed. So, it is more plausible that the kind of evil the child represents cannot be removed.

Though our hearts soar when we read of those who walk away, this feeling should not be mistaken for Le Guin’s intent and inspiration. We think those who leave believe, as we may, that the suffering of the child is not worth the joys of Omelas and leave either because they can no longer be happy knowing about the child or because they willingly sacrifice their happiness in protest. This feeling draws us to consider how different values ought to be traded or thought incommensurable and what our moral obligations are with respect to them. These are interesting debates. However, the walking away is a metaphor within a myth. Walking away from Omelas into the darkness represents achieving detachment from desire and moving toward ineffable enlightenment and transcendence. Our judgment that those who walk away nobly reject Omelas for its dependence on evil, or that instead they should have stayed to work toward a future Omelas that does not require it, is of a choice that is not made, nor even possible, in the Taoist psychomymth of Le Guin’s imagination. The ones who walk away are Tao Masters; they, like Le Guin, are silent on these questions.

⁶ “At times one of the adolescent girls or boys who go to see the child does not go home to weep or rage, does not, in fact, go home at all. Sometimes also a man or woman much older falls silent for a day or two, and then leaves home” (283).

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A QUEER ATHEIST FEMINIST AUTIST RESPONDS TO DONALD WILLIAMS'S "KEYSTONE OR CORNERSTONE? A REJOINER TO VERLYN FLIEGER ON THE ALLEGED 'CONFLICTING SIDES' OF TOLKIEN'S SINGULAR SELF"

ROBIN A. REID

I ATTENDED DONALD WILLIAMS'S PRESENTATION at MythCon 51, "A Virtual Halfling' MythCon," in which he responded to Verlyn Flieger's essay "The Arch and the Keystone," and which has subsequently been published in *Mythlore* #139. Since I did not have an opportunity to respond to his presentation in the Q&A, I want to continue the conversation here in the pages of *Mythlore*.

I read Flieger's essay as soon as it appeared in 2019 and wrote an enthusiastic recommendation in my Dreamwidth journal explaining why I liked the essay so much and how I was going to use it in the last graduate Tolkien class I would teach before my retirement (Ithiliana). My expanded response here