

City of Omelas: Modern Relevance

All of us have struggled in one way or another, some being harder to deal with comparatively, or some being easier—though of course, no less valid. They can be sharp bursts of pain or the dull ache of a forgotten wound and some fester like a long neglected infection. Nevertheless, pain is difficult, but a part of life.

But in the obsession with the understanding of pain and suffering, we often neglect the value of happiness. Happiness is also not easy, it's as easy as pain, which is to say not at all. Or perhaps, it is the easiest thing in the world, also much like pain which is easy to inflict. Thus, there is also the inherent struggle that presents itself on a journey to happiness, much like the journey of healing, or the trainwreck that is the unexpected but perhaps inevitable journey to pain. It is said there can be no happiness without struggle and the book 'The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas' by Ursula K. Le Guin touches on this delicate matter.

It can be read as a political allegory and is about a town called Omelas where every resident is happy, it is the happiest place in the world and devoid of anything that would create torment. A sort of fairytale-like quality is given to the city where there is "a clamor of bells" and "swallows soaring". The narrator does not know the details of the city, only that everyone is happy and invites the readers to imagine the details of it themselves, so long as they like it.

Still unbelievable? the narrator would ask. Because it is. The story is not as simple as the plain existence of the utopian society of Omelas, but in fact, the narrator goes on to describe a boy, who is treated in the most miserable way possible. The child is malnourished, filthy and captive in a windowless, dirty basement. Everyone's happiness is dependent on the suffering of that boy, no one is allowed to feed it, be kind to it, or speak to it, or otherwise it would shatter the happiness of the whole city. In the book, as I have done so, they refer to the child as an 'it', further highlighting the derogatory treatment as they're not even given human pronouns. All of the residents know the child is there and once they get past their initial disgust, they deem it a necessary evil for their happiness. The citizens live free of guilt deliberately, and this is where their happiness is derived from.

In the story, Le Guin states 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". In this, humans neglect the power of happiness and the sacrifices that have led to unadulterated joy. It breeds the myth of the power of 'suffering artists' and that only those who struggle are worth something, that people who are plainly happy have not worked hard or 'made bad decisions' and do not deserve what others get on the basis of that they have just not suffered enough, when really it is because they have been disadvantaged or oppressed by society.

The story also brings up the discussion of other people suffering for a person's happiness—does the benefit of many outweigh the struggle of a few? The answer should be an absolute and firm "No", or, well, I hope it is. But I also hope it is not. If the answer is no, your morality seems fair, the happiness of your own and many others does not seem worth

the misery of a few, in the case of the book, the boy. But in this case, we are also contradicting ourselves, as we all have made choices that conflict with this 'no' and may have even flaunted it proudly. Even if in our hearts, the answer is a resounding no, we are often detached from such situations that make us give a negative answer. The child in the room is representative of the underprivileged in society, those people whose lives consist of sweat, stress and labour. The happiness of those in high society is dependent on those suffering without privilege and without the labour and pains of these people, the ones with privilege would not maintain their status in society.

"Each alone, they go west or north, towards the mountains. They go on. 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. But they seem to know where they are going, the ones who walk away from Omelas."

And yet, there are also these people who walk away from Omelas, those who reject this part of society and leave the city, they refuse to accept that this sort of select suffering is okay and refuse to reject their guilt. They choose to walk away from the most thorough joy and ensure their removal from an almost certain happiness. Though, as it states in the book, they seem to know where they are going, perhaps a society that is more just, a society where their happiness does not come from guilt and is pure, a more valuable happiness.

Thus, this allows us to examine our own privilege and be grateful for our own happiness, our pain is valuable but the happiness we have is valuable too. Happiness does not have to exist with misery, happiness *can* be small things and doesn't have to have any preluding sadness, it just is. We should understand the treatment of the unprivileged in society and not ignore it, but rather, acknowledge it and not exploit their disadvantaged position. Instead we should help them the best we can. The steps we take in an attempt to aid, no matter how small, are steps nonetheless, and that's where humanity and a guilt-free happiness lies.

– Mahrukh Riaz