

## The Paradox of Selfishness

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The accounts of utopian societies in the short stories “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas,” by Ursula K. Le Guin, and “The Lottery,” by Shirley Jackson have shocking twists as the reader learns that there is a high price to pay for their apparent happiness. These societies seem perfect on the surface; however, as we understand more about its citizens and their traditions, we learn that utopia is exactly what its definition suggests: impossible. The sacrifice made by these communities in order to keep their society perfectly happy turns out to be fruitless. Their ideas of how society should function are doomed to fail, because people are inherently prone to selfishness and often engage in evil. This, paradoxically, condemns them to unhappiness.

In “The Lottery,” the town’s people held an annual lottery in which all of the citizens participated. The twist is that its winner would ultimately be stoned to death. Old Man Warner believed this tradition guaranteed good crops for the year and, therefore, food and longevity for the rest of the town’s people. The majority of the people, however, did not know the purpose of this tradition and simply conformed to it. There were no attempts to change the situation, and the town’s people eagerly participated in it – even if in the process they were hurting their friends and family. In “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas,” the happiness of the people in town is never abundant even though they live in a society that thrives. The people act happy; however, they are aware that this happiness is dependent on the abuse and neglect of a small child locked in a basement. Their success was due to the degradation of that child, and everyone approximately eight and older were aware of this. The ones who did not agree with the tradition

left town, however, the majority of the people were able to rationalize and accept that, in order for them to thrive, someone had to pay the price.

The high price the child in Omelas and the lottery winner in the village paid reflected on the rest of the population. Because everyone was encouraged to sacrifice one another for their own well being, the utopia began to fall apart as the horrible things they did to one another ultimately destroyed their relationships. From a very early age, the children were taught traditions that validated the evil in human nature; they were not encouraged to question their meaning. Indoctrinating children guaranteed the traditions' continuity. As Jackson explains it, "someone gave little Davy Hutchinson a few pebbles" (844). The perversity is in the fact that these pebbles would then be used to stone Tessie Hutchinson, Davy's mother. Little Davy did not know then what this meant. Nevertheless, this gesture says that the people around Davy were perverse since they guaranteed that the small child had a hand in his own mother's death. Similarly, the children in Omelas were part of the evil in society as they were aware that all the good they had in life was thanks to the abused child in the basement. As LeGuin says, "this is usually explained to children when they are between eight and twelve" (1510). Again, the children were taught that selfishness and evil are acceptable in their society. In this lies the problem with tradition- it desensitizes people and validates any evil that they wish to commit. If, at one point a tradition is made to justify the evils of human nature, it can also easily work the other way around: a tradition can validate the evil and make it go unquestioned, corrupting the very essence of people who might otherwise act upon their good impulses.

When people are aware of the evil that they do, the normal response is either to change the course of their actions or to live with a heavy conscience. In "The Lottery," even among the children, there seems to be some quiet discomfort in social interactions. The children

do not act as if they are truly happy when they are together. There seems to be a barrier that keeps them from being carefree like children normally are. As Jackson explained, “they tended to get together quietly for a while before they broke into boisterous play” (837). As the children begin to understand what their tradition means, it does not seem that their friendship is genuine.

Considering the people know that their happiness is dependent on someone’s misery, their happiness can no longer be. Jackson captures this hidden sense of guilt when Mr. Adams reaches for his piece of paper from the black box: “he stood a little apart from his family, not looking down at his hand” (841). Although he did not know what the paper said, he still felt some kind of guilt and shame for being part of that atrocious tradition. He could not be with his own family as he took part in the pointless custom. Mr. Adams knew he might have picked the paper with his own family member’s name and he felt guilty. However, he was still willing to go through with it because the chances were higher that it was someone else’s family. He knew he was selfish, and that destroyed his relationship with his family. The village held the lottery as if it simply had to be, as if it were a part of whom they were. The people knew that every time the lottery happened, they individually had a small chance of winning. They were selfish and, in the end, did not care that others were dying. The irony is that the one reason there was no true happiness in the village was because their relationships had been destroyed by their utter selfishness.

In Omelas, the situation is not much different. Their perfect society is hurt by a lack of joy that haunts all of its citizens. As Le Guin puts it, “we do not say the words of cheer much anymore. All smiles have become archaic” (1508). The people in town believe that the reason for all success in their community is the child’s suffering. They largely accept it because their selfishness does not allow them to risk their community’s well being. Poignantly, their knowledge of the child’s situation guarantees that there is no true spontaneous

happiness anymore. The few that understand that the sacrifice is in vain sometimes leave: “they leave Omelas, they walk ahead into the darkness, and they do not come back” (1511).

Nevertheless, the majority stays. What is most upsetting about their situation is that, even though their social interactions and friendships became awkward and contrived, the people still largely chose to keep on living under the same rules as before. This exemplifies that most people are selfish beings and know that their lifestyle would suffer if there were any change in the rules. A society that is inhumane can never be truly happy.

People often rationalize and blame tradition to justify their own wrongdoings. It becomes clear that in the village that Jackson writes about, the villagers only use the tradition as an excuse, considering they no longer remember it. As Jackson explains, “although the villagers had forgotten the ritual and lost the original black box, they still remembered to use stones” (843). Jackson captured then the true evil in people, who often use tradition as a means to act out on their worst impulses. The villagers did not really follow the tradition, but they certainly remembered to use stones and became enthusiastic about stoning their so-called friends. Mrs. Delacroix, who seemed friendly to Tessie Hutchinson in the beginning, showed no compassion and “selected a stone so large she had to pick it up with both hands” (Jackson 843) to help killing Tessie. All friendships in the village were condemned to be superficial.

The people of Omelas seemed to dwell more on the evil that they caused more than the villagers in Jackson’s story did. Nonetheless, with time, they come to justify that the child should stay where it is because to them “even if the child could be released, it would not get much good of its freedom” (1511). Again, this is human nature trying to justify its misconduct so that the people do not feel the guilt or the need to change. The community of Omelas takes longer to understand this, and some of them get truly upset. In the end, the ones who really do not agree

with what is being done, leave. The majority is not willing to risk its present living conditions and believe that the exchange is fair. As LeGuin explains, “to throw away the happiness of thousands for the chance of happiness of one: that would be to let guilt within the walls indeed” (1511). The people rationalize in utilitarian terms, meaning that the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people is a fair principle to live by, and therefore, they reject any notion of guilt.

Sadly, what both stories tell us is that people are inherently selfish and sometimes find joy in others' suffering. Tessie Hutchinson, in her moment of despair knowing she could die, attempted to have her own daughter be in her place instead. When she said “there's Don and Eva” (Jackson 842), she wanted the two to draw papers for the family as well, and have her chances of being the winner slimmed. Tessie was selfish in attempting to preserve her own life over her family's. Tessie's children, Nancy and Bill Jr., act just as their mother upon realizing they were not chosen. In perhaps the most disturbing passage in the story, they “both beamed and laughed” (Jackson 843), even though they knew their mother would die. Although they were children, there was already some evil in them as they laughed at others' suffering. There were no real friendships and families in the village or in Omelas, as everyone was only concerned with their own well being. Because of the lack of true meaningful relationships in these communities, happiness is not possible.

When people become this selfish, the concept of guilt ceases to exist. As Le Guin puts it, “one thing I know there is none of in Omelas is guilt” (1509). The people, acting on their own self-interest and selfishness, believed that if they were to feel guilty and help the child, “all the prosperity and beauty and delight of Omelas would wither and be destroyed” (Le Guin 1511). The paradox is that, upon sacrificing that child, everyone in the community ended up truly living with some kind of heavy conscience and no one is as happy as outsiders might believe they

are.

Finally, the traditions in both societies are nothing but a disguise that allows people to be selfish. As their activities become more perverse towards one another, and their selfishness escalates, they justify their actions by dismissing any notion of guilt rationalizing to themselves that, as long as the majority is doing well, they have a fair trade. The problem is that their actions turn them away from their friends and family. They might believe they are doing what is best for the community, but they do not care for one another individually and their strongest instinct is self-preservation. Ultimately, their families and friends cease to matter and these relationships become meaningless to them. Human beings without meaningful relationships cannot be happy. If the people are not happy, then they do not live in a utopian society. Their utopia falls apart and gives way to a tragedy of humanity. The sacrifices in the lottery in the village and of the child in Omelas are pointless. Everyone loses.

### Works Cited

- Jackson, Shirley. "The Lottery." Ed. John Schilb and John Clifford. *Making Literature Matter: An Anthology for Readers and Writers*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2009. 837-44. Print.
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