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A Journey Towards Utopian Science Fiction

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The Utopia in Omelas, a Yin-Yang analysis

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ABSTRACT: “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” by Ursula K. Le Guin delves into the complexities of the human condition and nature, exploring through them the concept of utopia. Resorting to the Yin-Yang theory, Le Guin proposes the interdependence between utopian and dystopian traits, exploring the cycle they form and the transformation they allow. Omelas stands, in this article, as the perfect example of this interdependence, as it presents a seemingly utopian setting marked by inherently dystopian traits, i.e., the child and the abuse to which it is the victim. The paradoxical nature of Omelas prompts contemplation regarding the true meaning of utopia and the means through which it can be achieved (or not). By analyzing the departure of those who refuse to perpetuate Omelas’ social contract through the Yin-Yang lens, this article clarifies where the utopia truly resides in Omelas. In light of this, one finds that the true utopia in Omelas can be found in three places: the ones who choose to leave, as the

RESUMO: “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” de Ursula K. Le Guin detalha as complexidades da condição e natureza humana, explorando-as através do conceito de utopia. No seu entendimento da teoria de Yin-Yang, Le Guin propõe a interdependência entre traços utópico e distópicos, explorando o ciclo que formam e as transformações que permitem. Omelas serve, neste artigo, como o exemplo primo desta interdependência, apresentando um cenário aparentemente utópico, marcado por traços inerentemente distópicos, i.e., a criança e o abuso de que é vítima. A natureza paradoxal de Omelas incita contemplação relativamente ao verdadeiro significado de utopia e os meios pelos quais pode, ou não, ser alcançado. Analisando, através da lente Yin-Yang, a partida daqueles que recusam perpetuar o contrato social de Omelas, este artigo oferece clareza relativamente ao verdadeiro lugar da utopia em Omelas. Neste sentido, é possível encontrar a verdadeira utopia em Omelas em três partes distintas:



embodiment of utopia; the journey on which they embark; and, finally, the out-of-reach destination they are heading towards, and which will keep moving them. In this story, Le Guin parts with the tradition of utopian writing, advocating for a dynamic state rather than a static one.

KEYWORDS: utopia, dystopia, Yin-Yang, Omelas, paradox, tradition

aqueles que escolhem partir, como a personificação da utopia; a jornada em que embarcam; e, por último, o destino, sempre fora de alcance, para onde se movem e que os move eternamente. Neste conto, Le Guin afasta-se da tradição utópica, estabelecendo e defendendo um estado dinâmico, em vez de um estático.

PALAVRAS CHAVE: utopia, distopia, Yin-Yang, Omelas, paradoxo, tradição



Ursula K. Le Guin's "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" stands as an exploration of the human condition, morality, and the pursuit of utopia. In this idyllic city where the narrative unfolds, an unbelievably perfected state of society is presented, one that is reigned by happiness, abundance, and communal harmony. The narration begins with the clamor of bells indicating the start of the Summer Festival and a cheery tone is attributed to the city and its people, painting a picture of unparalleled bliss.

However, behind this utopian façade lies the city's fatal flaw, a truth so unsettling and profoundly discordant that it completely dismantles the reader's initial sense of comfort. At the core of all the festivities and joy that characterize Omelas resides a desperate, feeble-minded, solitary child, locked away in a dark room. On this mistreated child lies the weight of Omelas' high spirits.

Le Guin manages to intricately depict the complexities of the human condition and ethical responsibility while also calling into question the nature of utopia. Through the lens of her perception of the Yin-Yang theory, Ursula K. Le Guin proposes an intricate balance of opposing forces. Much like in the ancient Chinese symbol, whose merging halves represent "complete interdependence and continual intermutability", Le Guin expresses her belief that utopia and dystopia are not merely contrasting concepts, but rather deeply connected and intertwined entities, that the creation of all utopian and dystopian settings rely on their relation to each other as well as the balance achieved between them (Le Guin 2017, 97). They are two sides of the same coin, constantly influencing each other, evolving together in a dynamic state of existence. In Omelas, this balance is found amidst its contradictions. As the Yin-Yang symbol suggests, the good and the bad become juxtaposed, starting - in fact - to blur into each other. This means that the perfection, to which the reader is exposed at the beginning of the story, is not sustainable without some form of sacrifice; i.e., the abused child. Following this logic, one can establish that the same goes for a dystopian setting, with an ever-present sense of hope, resilience and resistance, which can lead to the birth of light amidst the dark.

In that sense, the definition of utopia becomes less clear, expanding towards an amalgamation of contradictions and fundamental truths, ultimately measured by the reader's moral compass. By becoming aware "of the limitations of the utopian tradition", and therefore "reject[ing] utopia as blueprint while preserving it as a dream", Le Guin's story becomes a "critical utopia", as defined by Tom Moylan, so that it is made up of a

subversive facet, a “sense of critique” (Moylan 2014, 10). Summarizing Moylan’s definition, the critical utopia is not only critical in the sense of being essential in establishing a process of change, but it also presents a critique of the author’s surroundings. This means that, unlike a blueprint utopia, which introduces the reader to an exemplary society, where the perfect socioeconomic structure has been achieved, “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” provides and articulates “the process of social change (...) focus[ing] on the continuing presence of difference and imperfection within utopian society itself” (*ibidem*) rather than simply presenting the reader with a static image of the blueprint society, as is the case in More’s *Utopia*, and thus becoming a dynamic pool of constant change, perpetuated by the Yin-Yang structures set in place.

There are two opposing sides in Omelas: a utopian one, made up by the city’s jubilant atmosphere; and a dystopian one, comprised of the child’s mistreatment, and even further, of the people’s acceptance and participation in the child’s oppression. There is however, a hidden third side, consisting of those who, when confronted with their reality, revolt and leave behind the utopian façade in search for a true utopia, where happiness and well-being are not corrupted and do not come at such a cost, a place that possibly “does not exist” yet (Le Guin 2015, 259). Their search for utopia might not have a final destination, it might simply serve as an engine to keep them moving further and away from Omelas. In this sense, “utopia is something we set in your horizon: we know that we will never reach it (...) but we need it to proceed, as it forces us to walk”, continuously slipping away as the deserters draw nearer, urging them on their journey (Fernando Birri *in* Vieira 2016, 2). The hope that moves them is synonymous with the wish for utopia. By acknowledging Omelas’ flaws and by taking on this journey, the deserters become themselves living embodiments of utopia. Their bodies, in this context, function as heterotopias – spaces that exist outside the norms of conventional society, becoming subversive and challenging of the cultural structures of Omelas. These bodies are, therefore, spaces of resistance, platforms of change and activism. As heterotopias, these bodies disrupt the established norms of Omelas, questioning its utopian façade and calling to question the ethical and moral implications of staying and abiding by social norms. Their physical presence outside the city’s confines is a symbol for their rejection of the oppressive systems that sustain the city’s peace. Therefore, they offer an alternative narrative and perspective, embodying resilience, courage and the transformative power of dissent. By

assuming their place as heterotopias, the deserters become the vessel of change, challenging the established norms of utopia and dystopia as we know them, synonymous to good and bad respectively, and becoming a symbol for a new, different approach (Mead 1995, 13).

THE YANG UTOPIA

At first glance, one would assume that utopia is in the city itself, painted as a safe haven and utopian sanctuary, where prosperity knows no bounds and the citizens flourish endlessly. The festivities serve to trick the reader further into assimilating Omelas as a vibrant city, filled with glee, buzzing with excitement, full of life, with descriptions of a happy people delighting in the celebrations and children running in and out of homes. The people, their customs, and their way of life are all teeming with happiness, freedom, sophistication, and wealth. Everything the narrator presents to the reader helps create a well-rounded, paradisiacal atmosphere, free from any suffering.

This listing of the city's utopian traits elicits the narrator to question the credibility of such a place. Could a place like Omelas, "a city in a fairy tale, long ago and far away, once upon a time", where only good things happen, actually exist (Le Guin 2015, 254)? That is when the narrator presents the reader with one more piece of information: the child. The child, referred throughout the story as "it", is nearly ten years old (although the continued mistreatment has affected its growth) and lies naked in a damp room hidden from the town's scenic landscape, behind a locked door, surrounded by its own excrement. The child has long ago lost all sense of time, is constantly scared, malnourished, neglected, and constantly terrified. It is said that the child used to cry for help, promising to be good, having known a better life before it took this tumultuous turn, but as time goes on and it realizes no one is coming to help, the child has begun to speak less and less, resorting to a low whining.

As the children of Omelas grow up, their parents will tell them about this child, how the immeasurable "happiness, the beauty of their city, the tenderness of their friendships, the health of their children, the wisdom of their scholars, the skill of their makers, even the abundance of their harvest and the kindly weathers of their skies" are

the product of the damage inflicted on the child (Le Guin 2015, 257). Upon being made aware of Omelas' social contract, the children will usually go on to visit the hurting child. This experience will incite a plethora of feelings. Despite all the explanations, when they still do not understand why things are the way they are, they are told that to rescue the child, or to show it even the smallest kindness, would jeopardize the town's well-being and prosperity. A few of them revisit the child again as adults with their questions still unanswered. The whole population knows the child is there, save for the small children who will eventually be made aware of it, and they all participate, more than simply accept, in this agreement, for, even if they are not actively hurting the child, taking their frustrations out by beating it, they will never help it for fear of disrupting the town's harmony. The dehumanization of the child is never-ending and aids in its continuous mistreatment. As the citizens of Omelas do not perceive the child as an actual human child, barely even as a living being, it becomes increasingly easier to justify the abuse inflicted on it. The child is a necessary sacrifice to be made and the citizens further justify their detachment to the child's situation, claiming the child "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 untouched for it to respond to humane treatment" (Le Guin 2015, 258). This is a tactic often used in dystopias, literary or otherwise, seeing as through the dehumanization of people, especially children, one can transmit a stronger sense of dissonance and, consequently, dystopia. For example, in *The Hunger Games*, a dystopian novel written by Suzanne Collins, Katniss refuses to let Rue's body symbolize yet another loss to the Capitol's oppressive regime, weaving flowers around her lifeless body and bluntly ignoring what is expected of her as a participant. Katniss's display of affection, made up of the flowers she gathers, the lullaby she sings and the sign of resistance she lifts towards the camera, is highly subversive, and, while making Rue a symbol of resistance and resilience, Katniss is also acknowledging and transmitting to the viewers her innocence as a child, contradicting the nature of the games and reminding the spectators that humanity cannot be extinguished.

In her Ph.D thesis (yet to be published), Joana Caetano defines Le Guin's utopianism as a "utopian paradox", implying the "reversed-mirror image of the other", two halves that are eternally in a cycle of merger and transformation. The utopian paradox lives off this "permanent tension between utopia and dystopia, their conflicting

interdependence, each with a seed of the other inside their belly” (Caetano 2023, 23). The utopian paradox contained within this story resides in the town’s acceptance and participation in the continued mistreatment of the child. The entirety of the town sees the child’s situation as a necessary sacrifice to be made in order to maintain the city’s balance and union, placing the collective well-being over that of the individual. The utopian paradox is made up of two antagonistic forces, whose co-existence is made impossible by the overarching consequences that they imply. The suffering of the child is rationalized as everyone becomes complicit in perpetuating this continued, failed search for utopia. Confronting the reader with contradicting facets of the same reality, Le Guin is daring the reader to indulge in her “thought experiment”¹, criticizing or praising the actions she describes, consequently fine-tuning the reader’s moral compass. Moreover, this paradox can be extended beyond the confines of the narrative, serving as a symbol for the ethical queries of which our society’s history is comprised. From the exploitation of marginalized communities to the perpetuation of systemic injustices, the story of Omelas resonates with the timeless struggle of consolidating collective prosperity with individual dignity. Here, the child in Omelas symbolizes the hidden suffering and sacrifices often required from our society in order to achieve harmony and success. It might serve to mirror the exploitation of labor, where the comfort of some is the consequence of the hard, underpaid work of others, who mostly live in deplorable conditions. In this sense, racial discrimination, the gender gap and socioeconomic disparities can be reflected in Omelas’ moral conundrum. The moral ambiguity to which the reader is exposed upon reading the story is the main tool Le Guin uses to form this “thought experiment”. Being forced to make connections between reality and the story, the reader is encouraged to put things into perspective and reflect about living ethically, in a world where the line between utopia and dystopia is as blurred as it is in Omelas’.

These aspects ultimately prevent the reader from viewing the city of Omelas as utopian, being comprised of aspects on opposing sides of a spectrum. In her perspective of the Yin-Yang theory, Le Guin sets a term of comparison between the ancient Chinese symbol and the process of utopian creation, claiming that dystopian and utopian traits are not so easily separated, having to rely on each other to create balance. She establishes that both halves constitute “great and equal powers; neither can exist alone, and each is always in the process of becoming the other” (Le Guin 2017, 97).

As stated in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, the Yin-Yang is a harmonious depiction of light and dark, one half always contains traces of the other, leaving ample room and opportunity for growth and change. When applied to utopian writing, balancing dystopian and utopianism, allowing traces of one to bleed into the other, it enables a cyclical change. Both parts are essential in keeping the balance, too much of one might overtake the other, dimming the chances for transformation, resulting in a state of stasis. That they are in the process of becoming the other is clearly established in “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas”, either a utopian setting that leads to the rise of a dystopian one, or the other way around. In any case, Le Guin claims that the inability to find this balance, can lead to “a non dynamic statis that allows no change”, leading to the creation of “pure dystopias”, much like Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, where the Yang has completely overtaken the Yin (Le Guin 2017, 97).

TOWARDS THE YIN UTOPIA

Whereas, in Le Guin’s perspective of the ancient symbol, Yang stands for control, Yin stands for hope and subversion, which respectively stand for dystopia and utopia. However, she also explains how in each of them resides a seed of the other, allowing change and transformation, keeping the works dynamic. This “seed of transformation” and the ability to grow into each other makes utopian/dystopian fiction cyclical, for, as soon as this seed takes over and becomes the bigger part, a new seed is planted, spurting new change (Le Guin 2017, 97). The Yin-Yang relation established in Omelas takes the town’s dystopian nature as Yang, encompassing both the child’s situation and the town’s effort in perpetuating the utopian façade through the overwhelming need for control, and opposes it to Yin, those who choose to leave Omelas who are fundamentally the embodiment of utopia. In them is represented the black “seed of transformation” contained within Yang’s white, dystopian half. In the same way that Yin and Yang are interdependent, so are acceptance and revolt in Omelas, seeing as they are divergent forces that merge on the same front. In utopian and dystopian literature, one often finds the same objects, symbols, places or actions, which are then constructed and worked to fit within the utopian or dystopian scene that is being painted.

In this sense, Yin represents the wilderness beyond Omelas, freedom, hope and utopia, while Yang represents the inside of the city's borders, oppression, control and dystopia. Le Guin establishes that "through psychological and political control" there is no opportunity for change, no "seed of transformation", which will inevitably lead to stasis (Le Guin 2017, 97). This being the case, the deserters who leave their hometown behind, embark on a journey towards "the dark mysterious wilderness surrounding a bright, safe place, the Bad Places", Omelas (*ibidem*). Much like what happens in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, where one side has been completely overtaken by the other, establishing, in terms of Yin-Yang, a remarkably static monochromatic circle. The true balance in Omelas is found in those who leave, representing the dynamic nature of utopia. As such, the eternal quest for equilibrium on which they embark is defined by the duality from which it is born. In this framework, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" can be categorized as a Yin dystopia, i.e., a dystopian set of circumstances that is actively being contradicted by forces of utopian nature.

Between the city's contradicting traits, stands the most significant group of citizens, the true focus of this "thought experiment" who, moved by their conscience, moral clarity, revolt and hope, opt to leave Omelas, leaving behind their seemingly utopian society and lives, embarking on a journey in search for a true utopia, one that does not rely on the oppression of an individual to thrive. It is in their act of defiance that the utopia lives, rejecting the incontestable truth that all others around them seem to accept unquestioningly. Through their actions, utopia stops being a finalized state of society, filled with descriptions of unending social dynamics, which one or more explorers happened to stumble upon, providing a detailed description of the State's affairs. Through those who leave Omelas, utopia becomes an on-going quest, fueled by the hope for something better.

In the midst of this set of contradictions, the child itself is not the embodiment of Yang, rather the engine on which the town's obsessive need for control runs. Meanwhile, the ones who walk away are the embodiment of Yin, whose engine is hope and the acknowledgement of injustice. As such, could the city of Omelas be a representation of a Yin state and could its people represent Yang's control and the acceptance of the sacrifice of an individual for the greater good? Can a place be truly utopian and harmonious if it emerges from such dystopian behaviors? But do not all utopias contain traces of Yang's

controlling dystopian side? Where do we draw the line, and how does one achieve the balance provided by the Yin-Yang?

The departure from Omelas represents more than a mere physical departure, encompassing a spiritual and ethical awakening, a disruption in Omelas' state of affairs, which define the city's collective consciousness. The ones who walk away, refusing to be complacent in the perpetuation of the utopian façade, are able to see beyond the collective well-being of the town and revolt against its social contract, challenging the status quo. Their departure is a declaration of individual agency and an affirmation of their values as individuals, rather than as a part of a corrupt collective. Their desertion is not without sacrifices, as they leave behind the town's comfort and safety that the mistreatment of the child provides, venturing into the unknown and renouncing the outcome of the abuse, more than just the abuse itself.

The paradoxical nature of Omelas raises questions about the essence of utopia, namely some mentioned above, because, while the city of Omelas gathers the criteria necessary to be seen as utopian, its foundation and engine reveal an underlying dystopian reality. The journey of those who walk away offers possibility for a new kind of utopia, one that is not grounded in the sacrifice of an individual for the greater good, but rather that centers itself on inherently utopian traits, such as justice, human integrity and dignity.

Considering this, there are three new fragments of utopia that arise, focusing respectively on the embodiment of utopia, the journey in search for something better as utopia and the utopia set on the horizon, always just out of reach, for which the person or community strive, and they each represent a different part in relation to "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas". On the one hand, these rebels are the embodiment of utopia, for in them resides the "seed of transformation" that Le Guin tells us is necessary in order to establish balance and harmony when it comes to creating a utopia. However, upon deciding to leave, the journey on which they embark, in search for a true utopia, set in motion by their conviction that it is possible to lead a different way of life, represents continuous and cyclical growth, especially seeing as these deserters have no destination. Subsequently, the wish for utopia is what keeps them moving along on their journey, with the true utopia remaining unattainable on the horizon, forcing them – those who are seeking utopia - to keep on evolving. The three aspects of utopia are all present in "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas", enhancing the grandeur and importance of the ones



who give their name to the text. All three allow the pursuit of balance and harmony, rejecting Omelas' utopian façade.

CONCLUSION

Traditionally, utopian writing provided detailed descriptions of non-existent communities located just off the map, which seek to present the reader with a set of prosperous, fairer and more advanced conditions and regulations, which goal is to bring to light certain societal flaws, causing in the reader a sense of alarm for the state of their surrounding society, and therefore constructing blueprints for the best society imaginable. Thomas More relied on the leeway that an uncharted world provided him, which is why his *Utopia* had the impact that it did, shaking up controversy among his contemporaries. After the world was charted, some utopian writers took to the skies and intertwined utopian thinking and science-fiction, others leaned further into fiction, concocting purposefully absurd societies, others looked at death as a necessary step in achieving utopia (i.e. alotopia), but, as utopia remained just out of reach, their purpose remained the same – to ask questions. Therefore, I would argue that, up until this point (meaning the second half of the 20th century), utopia had always been the final destination.

While Le Guin's perspective of the Yin-Yang theory seems to have a place among texts like More's which, while highly utopian contain some dystopian traits (perhaps a true testament to the passage of time) allowing for a cyclical change and criticism within the text, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" does not, for it completely breaks away from the tradition of utopian blueprints. Utopia is never attained in "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas", unlike other works in the Canon, such as More's *Utopia* and Gilman's *Herland*, which both constitute blueprint utopias, effectively separating it from the tradition of utopian writing. Because in Le Guin's story utopia is never realized and, contrastingly, it is something the citizens are aiming to achieve, Le Guin establishes a new mode of utopian creation.

In this new mode of utopianism, Le Guin begins by forgoing conventional utopian structures, emphasizing the exploration of nuanced, complex societies, rather than the arrival at perfected ones. She does this by proposing "thought experiments" and creating

settings in which the reader is forced to draw judgements and arrive at hard-to-reach conclusions. Using these tools, Le Guin manages to separate the concepts of utopia and dystopia from that of society, placing the emphasis on the unknown path and improbable destination, and those who choose to take it. Much like traditional utopianism, Le Guin's vision also intends to be thought-provoking and to instill a sense of unrest in the reader. However, by taking a different approach, she allows the reader's imagination to work with her in imagining what that utopian society might look like, how it might be organized politically and socially, and how it might be achieved.

In conclusion, Ursula K. Le Guin's "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" serves as a powerful exploration of the complexities of utopia, touching on morality and the human condition, deconstructing and redefining the concept of utopia. Through the Yin-Yang theory and the journey of those who walk away, the reader is faced with profound questions regarding the nature of happiness, the price of prosperity and stability, as well as the ethical implications of considering the collective well-being over that of the individual. Omelas' contradicting nature challenges the reader to call into question the traditional notions of utopia and utopian writing, exposing the paradoxical compromises set in place to establish this idealized state of society. While the city of Omelas, with its Summer Festival and happy people, is painted as a utopian setting, its foundation is based on the known sacrifice of a person, to which all citizens are privy, and which works to perpetuate the never-ending harmony that marks Omelas so strongly. Being faced with the city's obscure secret and uncomfortable reality, the ones who walk away offer a new kind of utopia, grounded in hope for justice, responsibility, accountability and true prosperity. Unlike traditional utopia, which often relies on peer-to-peer control and observation to maintain a stable and well-rounded environment, in "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas", the utopia is a celebration of individual autonomy, celebrating diversity and the inherent worth of every human being, no matter the bounds to which they are subjected. Embracing this new paradigm of utopian writing, where the people and their journey, fueled by utopia, are the utopia, the concept of utopia becomes untidy, falling out the box it had been put in with the original description of *Utopia*.

In her perspective of the Yin-Yang theory, Le Guin establishes a sense of balance that is necessary when entering the process of utopian creation. By relating Yin and Yang to utopian and dystopian traits, Le Guin creates an unshakable connection between them,

claiming that it can't be broken if a piece of utopian literature is to be dynamic, to allow for growth and change, because, seeing as the two sides are always present within the other, they are always in the process of transforming into their opposite, creating a cyclical change. This harmonious relation between them is present in Omelas, where the utopian and dystopian traits are interdependent and where there is vast room for cyclical transformation.

The citizens who choose to leave Omelas are a new representation of utopia, as is their journey and what guides them, allowing them to keep moving forward. The new paradigm that they establish represents a break from the utopian tradition, where the utopia is no longer an already established society, but rather the goal for which the deserters strive.

END NOTES

¹Literary device used to explore complex ideas or philosophical concepts through hypothetical scenarios or imaginative narratives. It serves to test the boundaries of reality and challenge conventional assumptions, while probing the reader's principles, allowing them to envision new possibilities. As Ursula K. Le Guin states in her introduction to *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), "In a story so conceived, the moral complexity proper to the modern novel need not be sacrificed, nor is there any built-in dead end; thought and intuition can move freely within bounds set only by the terms of the experiment, which may be very large indeed" (2019, 14).

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