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How does happiness relate to suffering? In “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas,” there exists a genuinely happy and joyous town. However, it comes with a hidden cost: the suffering of one child, which guarantees the happiness of the citizens and the existence of their everyday lives. Guin raises the question, “Is it worth it? Do one individual’s pain and misery outweigh the happiness of a community?” Those who say yes, walk away; those who say no, stay and actively choose to maintain this social contract; though they are no longer “simple,” as Guin puts it, they are happy. Still, as far as current society is concerned, how can you have true, genuine happiness if it’s not naive or childlike?

“Ignorance is bliss” is a common idiom in the English vernacular; the phrase can invoke images of the relationship between children and almost anything else, such as children and money, children and politics, and children and the complex ties connecting family. True happiness, at least in the eyes of the modern, Western world, cannot be felt once one becomes privy to the hidden darkneses of society. To be naive is to be happy; to be an adult is to grow cynical and lose the childlike joy. In contrast, in Guin’s fictional town of Omelas, the citizens are neither simple nor naive. Instead, they are “mature, intelligent, passionate,” as well as incredibly happy, all while knowing the cost of keeping the status quo (278). How can this be?

“Happiness,” Guin explains, “is based on a just discrimination of what is necessary” (278). There, it is not an emotion based in a utopia, nor is it based in a material-laden world with endless technology at their disposal; instead, true happiness belongs in a society that learns to accept the facts at hand. Every person learns of the suffering child; after struggling to understand

why the social contract must be kept, most accept the circumstances of their lives. Henceforth, everyday, “the victory they celebrate is that of life” (280). Essentially, they celebrate the lives they are able to live. Is true happiness, not childlike happiness, a combination of knowing and accepting whatever darkness exists alongside their society? In addition, does striving for change only bring heartache and disappointment? As the few walk away, the child remains suffering; the town remains happy and peaceful; the deserters walk towards a great unknown. They may discover an even more tragic town, without the happiness that flourishes in Omelas. Is it in their best interest to stay, or does their moral conscience matter more than their happiness? In Omelas, it depends on the individual.

In “Those Who Walk Away From Omelas,” Guin asks the central question, “Is the happiness of a society worth the suffering of an individual?” However, hidden between the lines is an equally captivating question: “is ignorance truly bliss?” The short story provides an interesting perspective contrary to Western popular opinion; happiness can be found in being content where one is placed, so long as one fully embraces the bittersweetness of life. Ignorance does not provide true bliss; it is simple, naive, and even vapid--“Omelas” suggests that knowing reality can inspire others to work harder to find joy in their lives (to make the pre-existing conditions “worth it”). While progress may not come quickly to an accepting, stagnant town like Omelas, Guin suggests that, for some, maybe the best they can do is accept and joyfully live the life they were given.

Le Guin, Ursula. “Those Who Walk Away From Omelas.” *The Wind’s Twelve Quarters*. Harper and Row. 1975. 274-284. Print.