

”the lottery” vs ”the
ones who walk away
from omelas” essay
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The Lottery by Shirley Jackson and *The Ones who Walk Away from Omelas* by Ursula K. Le Guin both contain similar concepts – that the sacrifice of one for the benefit of the many is justified. Normally, this concept is referred to as the theory of the scapegoat which is practiced, although not very apparent, in society. Although both stories revolve around the scapegoat, the manner in which the societies in the stories hide the practice is different.

Scapegoating is the practice of putting the blame on one person who becomes ostracized in the community. It is even believed that scapegoating is necessary to allow the community to function well and to become a unified entity. Therefore, scapegoating has a psycho-social function in society.

There are numerous beliefs as to the causes of scapegoating and its effect on the individual and on the society as a whole. The stories of *The Lottery* and *The Ones Who Walk Away from the Omelas* present a sample of the function of the scapegoat.

In *The Lottery*, the story begins with the whole community congregating in their town hall for an important event. The important event turns out to be a lottery which is done every year on exactly the same day. Initially, the reader gets the impression that it is a happy occasion for the village. Much detail is placed on the props and the major players of the lottery. In the end, the lottery turns out to be a raffle as to who will be sacrificed next so that the village can reap a good harvest for that year. The manner of sacrifice is by stoning whoever “won” the lottery. It is indicated in the story that other villages have stopped the practice but somehow the unnamed village of the Lottery believes that it is necessary although it is also apparent that the

younger member of the community are beginning to look down on the practice. However, it is very obvious that they are having a hard time letting go of an age old tradition.

According to Robert Boyd (1991), scapegoating is " a reaction to distress or an attempt to locate or identify the source of the distress." Although not clearly stated, *The Lottery* is set in an agricultural community. " Men began to gather...speaking of planting and rain, tractors and taxes" (Jackson 3) indicate that farming was the main source of income in the community and being such the farmers' biggest concern will be their harvest. Anything that goes wrong with that harvest is a source of distress for the community. The act of scapegoating in *The Lottery* is to find the possible source of a poor harvest. They believe that a person causes a poor harvest and the lottery magical and succinctly chooses this one person.

Saul Scheidlingr (1991) claims that the scapegoating is the magical belief that the guilt, pain and evil can be transferred to another being - whether animal, object or person - which will be destroyed along with the negative feelings. This is the core of *The Lottery*'s stoning. Mrs. Hutchinson, came late for the lottery. As a matter of fact she totally forgot about it and in the end she voiced out her disapproval of practicing the lottery. The whole community felt the same way about the lottery and this can be seen in the story with the comments of Old Man Warner and the reactions, in the form of loud sighing and little protestations, of the community every time a name was called out.

However, they also believe that stopping the tradition of the lottery would be disadvantageous to all of them since this is their assurance of a good harvest. Therefore, when Mrs. Hutchinson expressed her beliefs in her actions and words, she became the automatic scapegoat. The community's feelings were transferred to her and by her stoning her they believe that the negative feelings will die with her resulting in a good harvest for the community.

Scapegoating allows the community to continue and function properly. As Roy Mackenzie (1990) stated " a group consensus forms that if a particular member were no longer in a group everyone else will get along satisfactorily." This is exactly the after effect of *The Lottery* .

This is also the reason why the Omelas live so happily.

Ursula K. Le Guin portrayed a Utopian world in her short story *The Ones Who Walk Away from the Omelas* . In Omelas, everyone is happy. Unlike *The Lottery* where there is interaction and action in the story, *The Ones who Walk Away from the Omelas* is a descriptive coming from a third person who has personal knowledge of Omelas. " They were not naive and happy children—though their children were, in fact, happy. They were mature, intelligent, passionate adults whose lives were not wretched. O miracle! but I wish I could describe it better." (Ursula 3) is the best description that the speaker could make about the people of Omelas, and yet, with her last statement it is evident that their happiness goes beyond that words are not enough to express them.

After establishing what a wonderful place Omelas is, Le Guin describes a filthy room in one of the houses in Omelas. Locked inside it is a boy who has lived within the dark room is a boy who has never seen the outside world nor has talked to anybody in his life. He just lives there alone, crying and begging to be let out. "It is feeble-minded. Perhaps it was born defective, or perhaps it has become imbecile through fear, malnutrition, and neglect." (8) The whole community knows the existence of the boy and some view him without speaking to him and others are content knowing he is there. "They all understand that their 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, depend wholly on this child's abominable misery." (9) This one line in story epitomizes the whole concept of the scapegoat.

According to J. Zinner (1989), "For many individuals, interpersonal conflict is better than inner anxiety because the source of the pain is externalized. This is the basis of scapegoating, in which bad projections within group members are located within an individual who is then ostracized from the community."

It would seem that when Le Guin wrote her short story of Omelas, she had the theory of scapegoating in mind. The boy who was considered defective was representative of all the ugliness that can be found in every single person in Omelas. By choosing this boy and knowing that he exists, the insecurity of the people with their own defects and their ugliness is externalized on the boy. The misery of the community is also externalized on the boy. As MacKenzie and Sheidlinger stated earlier, the communal agreement to lock up the boy and their transference of their own misery on <https://assignbuster.com/the-lottery-vs-the-ones-who-walk-away-from-omelas-essay-sample/>

the boy makes the community function better, happier and in a unified manner.

He is the sacrifice, the same way that Mrs. Hutchinson is the sacrifice in *The Lottery*. Knowing that one suffers for the sake of the whole community, make everybody content. Also, the boy serves as a point of comparison. The boy is the worst case scenario. Everything is better than the life of the boy who lives in solitude, who is defective and who is miserable. This idea makes the community feel that their lives are so much better than the boys and they are relieved that it is the boy who suffers and not they.

Le Guin indicated that most of the people of Omelas accept this situation, however, there are those who do not and thus " walk away from the Omelas."

In both stories, scapegoating is used to make the community a better place to live in. In both stories, scapegoating, although serves the community, is looked down upon by some of the community members, and yet they do nothing about it. Since the act of scapegoating is not good, but functional, the community in *The Lottery* hides this deplorable act by calling it tradition. The community in the Omelas, literally hide the boy. Some how, the difference lies on the fact that both communities believe that they are trapped in the practice of it and their only solution is to move to another village or walk away from the Omelas.

In conclusion, society as it is always has a scapegoat. As mentioned, sometimes it is not very apparent that there is a scapegoat since nobody really wants to be mean. However, there is always a scapegoat and Shirley
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Jackson and Ursula K. Le Guin were able to portray this in their stories. They even were able to demonstrate how it is justified. Reading the two stories opens the eyes of the readers, harshly even, to drive the point that society has a tendency to enjoy life at the expense of another.

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