

Approaches to
injustice: comparing
"a party down at the
square" and "the
ones who..."



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In the short stories "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" and "A Party Down at the Square," authors Ursula LeGuin and Ralph Ellison depict desensitized scenes in which communities show an extreme lack of empathy to human beings receiving unjustified abuse. Such bleak characterization is paired with a lack of acknowledgment of the matter by doing nothing to stop such injustices. With this, both authors critique society's role in the "Bystander Effect" and in the human rights abuses that pervade the lives of many people today.

The theme of conscientious objection is present in both stories. In "A Party Down at the Square", this theme is demonstrated through the boys' response to the lynching of an African American man. Although not delighted by the scene like the objectors around him the boy says, "I had enough. I didn't want to see anymore. I wanted to run somewhere and puke," (Ellison, 209) but yet, disturbingly he stays. This is similar to the line, "They all know it is there, all the people of Omelas. Some of them have come to see it, others are content merely to know it is there"(Le Guin, 200), found in "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas". Both lines describe a consciousness of the abuse that both the man and child are enduring yet nothing is being done to help them, save them, or stop it from being done to others. This is a direct example of what John M. Darley and Bibb Latané coined as the Bystander Effect or the psychological phenomenon in which individuals placed within or around large crowds are less likely they to the aid of others. Ellison creates a gruesome scene to the reader as the boy notes how one "could smell his skin burning," or "Every time I eat barbeque I'll remember that never forget it. Every time I eat barbecue I'll remember that

nigger."(Ellison, 209). These lines have such a dramatic effect on his reader because they are able to see how it has no effect on the narrator. Using sensory imagery such as the smell of burning skin or the sight of a man as barbecue is cringe-worthy and provokes an extremely unsettling tone into the story. This is also done with the line " It is so thin there are no calves to its legs; its belly protrudes; it lives on a half-bowl of corn meal and grease a day. It is naked. Its buttocks and thighs are a mass of festered sores, as it sits in its own excrement continually."(Le Guin, 200). As the reader can imagine the taste of corn meal and grease paired with the smell of continuous and aged bodily excrements that are in direct correlation to the unhealthy diet of corn meal and grease, LeGuin too has created an uncomfortable and noisome atmosphere. With both scenes, the reader feels to be somewhere else and they are not actually in the situation. Yet both the narrator and the townspeople in both stories stay and endure the sights, smells, and unsettlement and do nothing to put an end to it. Ellison and LeGuin present people who regardless of the injustices, are willing to make themselves uncomfortable and distressed thus demonstrating the Bystander Effect and it's deeply rooted effects on humankind.

These effects are shown through the characters lack of guilt for their conscientious objections and their desensitization to the violence of the scenes. LeGuin presents the idea that some within the city find themselves able to cope with the idea that their luxurious lives are built upon the back of an innocent person's pain. When the narrator mentions " One thing I know there is none of in Omelas is guilt."(LeGuin, 199), the reader can reasonably conclude it's because they feel they have nothing to feel guilty about. It

becomes deliberately clear that their lack of guilt is a calculation. Their happiness comes from their willingness to sacrifice one human being for the benefit of the rest. They know of the violent and cruel conditions of the child locked in the room yet through the existence of the child and their knowledge of its existence," that makes possible the nobility of their architecture the poignancy of their music, the profundity of their science." . (LeGuin, 199) The narrator speaks of when being young you learn of the child and at that age, they want to help and do something about it, but with age, we find that most are taught to accept the situation and relatively accept knowing about the child's situation. In short, they learn to reject guilt. The boy from " A Party Down in the Square" is taught the same as his uncle tells him " You get used to it in time".(Ellison, 210) Ellison constructs the boy's internal dialogue in such a way to present to the reader how the boy understands the physical agony the African American man is facing. The line " It was some night all right. It was some party too. I was right there, see. I was right there watching it all. It was my first party and my last. God, but that nigger was tough,"(Ellison, 210) depicts the lack of humanity in the boy. His lack of guilt is shown as he describes the horrid scene as a party and something he will decide to not attend. Ellison specifically uses the word party to emphasize how belittled these murders were and by the boy describing the event of a usually innocent African American man being tortured and murdered as a party is symbolism for a lack of guilt. The same is in " The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas," as a " Festival"(LeGuin, 198) is occurring at the beginning of the story. One could consider a Festival being the act of ignoring a child being tortured in a small room because it occurs at the same time. Both stories have abominable events taking place yet the

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author purposely use the words party and festival to emphasize what is really dark, violent, and sinister as fun, happy, and guilt free.

Authors Ursula LeGuin and Ralph Ellison both use detailed imagery, language, and setting to emphasized the dehumanizing abuse happening within each story, specifically Ellison, who excessively uses the word “nigger” in his story to stress the lack of humanity given to the tortured African American man. This is also done by his use of her when the narrator explains the crashing of a nearby airplane. The plane is personified as a female, “ Then I saw her. Through the clouds and fog, I could see a red and green light on her wings” (Ellison, 208). The narrator describes the crashing plane in a mystical and glorified way much unlike the burning of an actual human being, which is instead described as a “ lifeless barbecued hog” (Ellison, 209). As Ellison specifically gives life to non-living things, LeGuin specifically took life away from a living thing. The description of the child from Omelas is one of dread and almost disgust. The lines, “ It is feeble-minded. Perhaps it was born defective or perhaps it has become imbecile through fear, malnutrition, and neglect. It picks its nose and occasionally fumbles vaguely with its toes or genitals, as it sits haunched in the corner farthest from the bucket and the two mops. It is afraid of the mops. It finds them horrible. It shuts its eyes, but it knows the mops are still standing there, and the door is locked, and nobody will come.”,(LeGuin, 200) describes a child who is unworthy of a gender or a name. Rather LeGuin depicts a community who is willing to completely dehumanize a child and consider the child as a “ thing” that receives unlimited misery for their joy.

The loss of humanity within both stories is found in both the abused subjects and within the communities and narrators themselves. In "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" it is made very clear that everyone in Omelas, the narrator included, knows about the suffering child. Most have even come to see it for themselves. As Le Guin writes, "They all know that it has to be there." (LeGuin, 200) she makes the point that the community itself lost their humanity as they dehumanize the child locked in the room. The community fully understands, "the beauty of their city, the tenderness of their friendships, the health of their children, the wisdom of their scholars...the kindly weathers of their skies depend wholly on this child's abominable misery". (LeGuin, 200) Ellison displays the same through the fallen airplane scene. During the town's "party" a plane manages to crash extremely close to the square. This was used only as a momentary distraction from the spectacle brought by the burning man. There is something inhuman in the crowd's enjoyment of this spectacle. A woman was electrocuted, and nobody mourned her, but rather everybody wanted to get back to the equally inhumane act of burning a man alive. After this crash occurs the crowd rushes back to the original "party" and this is when Ellison makes his most significant comment about humanity. Just as both communities dehumanize a person, they dehumanize themselves for being able to commit such heinous atrocities. LeGuin and Ellison make powerful statements about internal evils that can be found in people. By choosing innocent people to suffer in both stories the authors display society as barbaric and callous people, both qualities that can be used to describe a monster.

Although their stories were published thirty years apart, both authors seemed to create a critiquing tone by means of societal norms found in America. With powerful messages found behind both stories, the reader is able to see how through setting and point of view there is an appraisal of the ostracization and abuse of selective people. Both authors extend this critique by displaying communities that find no guilt from this abuse and dehumanization. This was a common pattern in American history being that child abuse laws and awareness wasn't significant until the 1960s and the uprising of racism found in the 1990s. Each story speaks out against these injustices and through details and close reading LeGuin and Ellison tell the stories of those who face these issues every day.

Work Cited

LeGuin, Ursula. "The Ones Who Walk away from Omelas." *The Best Short Stories Ever Written Course Packet*. Compiled and Edited by Jessica Manry. Rapid Copy Publishing, 2017.

Ellison, Ralph. "A Party Down in the Square." *The Best Short Stories Ever Written Course Packet*. Compiled and Edited by Jessica Manry. Rapid Copy Publishing, 2017.