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# Utopia and Fantasy in Le Guin and Tolkien

Shay Chandler

*Catherine Barragy Mackin Memorial Prize Winner*

Within the genre of fiction, specifically that of speculative fiction, a war is raging. This war is fought over the distinctions, properties, and merit of two subgenres: utopian science fiction and fantasy. In regards to the debate, Robert T. Tally, Jr. reputes “the idea that fantasy and utopia are incompatible or opposed, a notion that permeates the discussions of these ostensibly related discourses” (42). Tally offers a middle ground, or a truce between the two sides, by analyzing J.R.R. Tolkien’s fantasy works and showing how they embody “the utopian function and potential of fantasy” (42). By taking Tally’s assessments a step forward, Tolkien’s fantasy can be compared to a classic utopian writer, such as Ursula K. Le Guin and her short story “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas,” to draw comparisons and allow understanding of the way in which both writers create utopias, or dystopias, and sustain such societies through the role of the “innocent” characters; Frodo in Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* and the child that is locked away in Le Guin’s short story. Both characters share a similar journey as individuals that are in charge of keeping their worlds safe from destruction: Both the child in Omelas and Frodo Baggins have a burden placed upon them, experience physical and mental effects from their burden, and finally have an ending that does not leave room for any alternative rescues from their fate.

In order to understand how both writers use and sustain their utopias, it is important to examine the individual utopias created by Le Guin and Tolkien. Le Guin’s imaginative city of Omelas is quite different from the pastoral lands of Tolkien’s Shire, and yet there are some similarities between the two. Le Guin’s narrator, while describing Omelas to the reader, points to their peaceful nature: “I do not know the rules and laws of their society, but I suspect that they were singularly few. As they did without monarchy and slavery, so they also got on without the stock exchange...” (214). Tolkien, similarly, addresses the history of Hobbits, the citizens of the Shire, in the preface to *The Lord of the Rings*. He discusses many aspects of their lives, including their history, saying, “At no time had Hobbits of any kind been warlike, and they had never fought among themselves. In olden days they had, of course, been often obliged to fight to maintain themselves in a hard world; but in Bilbo’s time that was very ancient history” (5). He also mentions that the Shire “had hardly any ‘government’” and that the Hobbits were “generous and not greedy, but contended and moderate” (9). It is interesting to note that Le Guin describes Omelas as “a city in a fairy tale, long ago and far away, once upon a time,” which in many ways is what the Shire, as a part of a fantastical world, represents (214).

To call both the Shire and Omelas pure utopias would be to over simplify the worlds created by Le Guin and Tolkien. In his article regarding the Shire, David M. Waito points out that there are many problems facing the Shire from the very beginning of Tolkien's story: "Significant power struggles and issues lurk beneath the Shire's surface, inhibiting its healthy growth and mirroring many of the same power struggles and issues of the Ring Quest" (155). This fault will help set up Frodo's exodus from the Shire. As Lee Cullen Khanna notes, Omelas, on the other hand, fails to "depict or suggest racial, cultural, or linguistic diversity" which is also a problem faced by many of Tolkien's homogenous societies (49). Both Middle-earth and Omelas are societies that offer both light and darkness. According to Khanna, "The young fluteplayer... is juxtaposed with the suffering child of the same age. Utopian accomplishment is suggested in the city's glorious public buildings, even as the dark basement houses the secret sufferer" (48). While the Shire houses the secret of the Ring and the encroaching problems in Middle-earth, Omelas also hides a secret. The mere fact that people choose to walk away from Omelas suggests its imperfections as a utopia. However, both societies are depicted with idyllic qualities that earn them the distinction of utopian due to the fact that they have remained relatively peaceful. This peace, unfortunately, comes at a price for both societies.

Both stories represent a utopia that is able to exist at the expense of innocence or characters one would not expect to carry the weight of an entire town. In Le Guin's story, the innocent character is a small child described as being "feeble-minded", perhaps having been "born defective" (216). Le Guin's closeted child represents a true example of innocence, due to the fact that the small child has no ability to help itself from its miserable existence and has done nothing to deserve such a life. Tolkien's innocent character is not, initially, as haunting as Le Guin's, for when Frodo is first introduced to the Ring he is seen as a young and lively hobbit, "in his *tweens*, as the hobbits called the irresponsible twenties between childhood and coming of age at thirty-three" (Tolkien 22). He is, however, still young for a hobbit and innocent in his view of the world beyond the Shire.

Laurie Langbauer discusses the role of the innocent and children in utopian fiction, especially the way in which Le Guin and other similar authors, such as Dickens and Dostoevsky, use children to draw on specific ideas: "Their texts turn to children because those figures are so effective as rhetorical devices: the shock of their depictions can make rhetoric seem almost material, palpable, anything but rhetoric" (103-104). Langbauer's interpretation shows that by using the child, and by showing the effects of the community on the child, the story begins to become more realistic and more substantial to the reader, drawing them in and forcing them to compare the life led by the child to their own, mature one. Both Le Guin and Tolkien use their rhetoric to do this by portraying their innocent character in a society that becomes dependent upon them.

While Frodo has had the Ring given to him for safe keeping from the very first chapter of *The Lord of the Rings*, it is not until he reaches Rivendell that he really accepts his fate as the Ring bearer. Everyone at the Council of Elrond is made aware of the evil nature of the Ring, and yet none but Frodo, a small hobbit,

is fit to take the Ring to Mordor and destroy it in the fiery pits of Mount Doom. Elrond comments on this after Frodo takes the task of destroying the ring upon himself:

“‘If I understand alright all that I have heard,’ he said, ‘I think that this task is appointed for you, Frodo; and that if you do not find a way, no one will. This is the hour of the Shire-folk, when they arise from their quiet fields to shake the towers and counsels of the Great. Who of all the Wise could have foreseen it? Or, if they are wise, why should they expect to know it, until the hour has struck?’” (264)

Not only does this begin the tale of the reluctant hero, but it also introduces the idea of the unexpected hero. At the Council there are many powerful elves, men, and dwarves, and even the most powerful of them all, Gandalf the Grey, and yet it is Frodo who must complete the task that will save their world.

Le Guin’s child is the only one who can keep the city running peacefully, just like Frodo must be the one to destroy the ring to reach peace in Middle-earth and sustain the peace in the Shire. In regards to the child of Omelas, Le Guin’s narrator mentions that the entire city is aware of the child’s existence, and while many do not know exactly why it has to be there, the citizens of Omelas know that in order to have happiness, health, and abundance in their lives the child must remain there (217). While many of the peaceful attitudes are similar between the two societies, one of the biggest differences is how the society responds to the two individuals tasked with maintaining the peace. Laurie Langbauer discusses the dark nature of Omelas when she addresses the idea that Le Guin’s “story takes up the challenge of just what it might mean for an entire people knowingly to accept their society’s happiness in exchange for the unjustified blood of one child’s torture” (99). On the other hand, the only people aware of Frodo’s existence and his quest are those who appointed him and supported him along the way. When he, and the other hobbits, arrive at the Shire after the destruction of the Ring, not only do they discover that their hometown has changed for the worse, but that no one is aware of the reason behind their absence in the Shire (Waito 172).

Despite the difference in the scope of the characters’ roles recognized by their societies, Frodo and the child follow a similar journey as characters. Both the child locked away in Omelas and Frodo Baggins experience negative physical effects as a result of their burden. The child is described as being “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 mess of festered sores, as it sits in its own excrement continually” (Le Guin 216). As Langbauer points out, the description of the wretched child shows the earnestness of the society’s dependency on his/her existence (99). This is a very disturbing image for readers and by introducing this description, especially because it belongs to a child, Le Guin creates a very dark mood in her previously light hearted story. Frodo’s story begins to darken when he is stabbed by a Ringwraith on Weathertop: “...he felt a pain like a dart of poisoned ice pierce his left shoulder” (Tolkien 191). This is the first time he is truly impacted by the evilness of the ring’s influence for if he had not had the ring in his possession, the Witch King would not have attacked him

and even after the wound is healed in Rivendell it still effects Frodo throughout the rest of his life.

Ginna Wilkerson examines the role of the ring in respect to Frodo's health and believes that the influence of its power is responsible for isolating Frodo and harming him on a psychological level (83). While Wilkerson's idea of psychological distance can be seen literally in "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas," where the child is kept "in a basement under one of the beautiful public buildings of Omelas, or perhaps in the cellar of one of its spacious private homes..." (216), Frodo's distance is created by the presence of the ring. Wilkerson goes on to label Frodo as a victim "of Sauron's power, the strangle hold of the Ring, and the obligation the Council of Elrond placed on his shoulders" and says "He is fighting not only the external war with the darkness that threatens Middle-earth, but a private battle to maintain his sanity and strength of will long enough to accomplish his mission" (88). By the time Frodo and Sam reach Mordor and Sam is asking Frodo if he remembers the better parts of their journey, Frodo is at the end of his capabilities to continue and is showing the effects of psychological isolation:

"No, I am afraid not, Sam," said Frodo. "At least, I know that such things happened, but I cannot see them. No taste of food, no feel of water, no sound of wind, no memory of tree or grass or flower, no image of moon or star are left to me. I am naked in the dark, Sam, and there is no veil between me and the wheel of fire. I begin to see it even with my waking eyes, and all else fades." (Tolkien 916).

Frodo is losing himself to the will of the ring and the evil of Sauron, especially now that he is closer to the end of his, and the ring's, journey. He has lost the ability to remember many of the aspects of life that have kept him tethered to Middle-earth and his "humanity," resulting from the power the ring holds over him.

Frodo's struggles are comparable to the child in Omelas who is undoubtedly a victim of Omelas' society, even if many people in the society view the child as a necessary victim. Because of the child's isolation it has developed unreasonable fears of the mops in the closet and has lost all recollection of time. There is no way this child will ever become a functioning member of society again, which the narrator notes by addressing the ways in which the young people cope with the concept of the child: "...As time goes on they begin to realize that even if the child could be released, it would not get much good of its freedom... It is too degraded and imbecile to know any real joy. It has been afraid too long ever to be free of fear" (Le Guin 217).

Because of the psychological and physical impacts of the burdens placed upon Frodo and the child, these innocent characters are unable to return to normal life. The journey, or lack of journey, they are forced to embark upon changes them forever. For the child in Omelas, this means that he/she will never be freed from imprisonment. Le Guin addresses this issue by having her characters realize that if the child were to be removed, their beautiful city would not be able to function. She makes the child offer his/her happiness as a sacrifice for the greater good: "To exchange all the goodness and grace of every life in Omelas for that

single, small improvement: to throw away the happiness of thousands for their change of the happiness of one: that would be to let guilt within the walls indeed” (217). Because the child is isolated and burdened with the responsibility of unhappiness, the rest of Omelas is able to live as a utopia.

Frodo’s acceptance of his fate, while more personal than the quietly doomed existence of the child, is very similar in the way in which his role as an innocent character is forced to react to the concept of utopia. He has completed his mission and saved the world and this victory has transformed him, setting him irrevocably apart from the rest of society. Wilkinson describes his end as a retreat from his previous life:

“In the final chapters of *Lord of the Rings*, Frodo finds it impossible to integrate himself back into his former life in the Shire. The daily business of living is indeed too much for him: an intrusion with which he cannot cope. With the Ring – and the evil power it represents – permanently removed from Frodo’s life, perhaps Frodo will indeed find a healthy capacity to “limit intrusion” by retreating to Valinor.” (90)

This idea is represented in Frodo’s own words to Sam at the end of *The Return of the King* when he says “...I have been too deeply hurt, Sam. I tried to save the Shire, and it has been saved, but not for me. It must often be so, Sam, when things are in danger: someone has to give them up, lose them, so that others may keep them” (1006). Just as the child in Omelas had to give up freedom in exchange for the happiness of others, Frodo had to give up his life in the Shire in order to save his friends and the rest of Middle-earth.

When Tally says that he believes “that the utopia-versus-fantasy arguments are misplaced,” the innocent characters in Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* and Le Guin’s “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” come to mind (44). By looking at the child in Omelas and Frodo Baggins, and how they both are burdened by society, affected physically and mentally by the burden, and in the end must live with the burden’s impact on their lives, it is easy to see that both utopia fiction and fantasy fiction draw from similar elements. In fact, without these similar, yet distinct, characters, neither one of these works would be nearly as important as they are today in the genre of speculative fiction.

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