The Flaws of Utopia

Narrative Ethics in Ursula K. Le Guin's Utopian Fictions

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Abstract

Utopian fiction envisions worlds or societies in which the various social, political, and economic issues of the real world have been solved, leaving an ideal realm of justice and tranquility. The modern sub-genre of Utopian fiction is rooted in the unfulfilled needs and wants of specific groups of people in their unique historical contexts, and they use their imagination to envision something that is fundamentally better. This thesis endeavors to utilize the field of narrative ethics to first explore various aspects of the utopian idea as they are presented in the fictions of the American novelist Ursula K. Le Guin, and then using these aspects to ask whether the ethics of utopia are essentially flawed. In order to gain these perspectives, the thesis will include readings and analyses of Le Guin's short story "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" and her novel *The Dispossessed*, asking specific questions to each text, before applying my conclusions to question the utopian idea itself, asking whether trying to make things better for everyone always makes it worse for someone else.

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Abbreviations:

The Dispossessed – *Td*

The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas – "Omelas"

The Wind's Twelve Quarters – *Twtq*

Living to Tell About it – *Lttai*

Experiencing Fiction - *Ef*

1   Introduction

"The greatest instrument of moral good is the imagination." (Percy Bysshe Shelley)

Utopian fiction has existed since antiquity and our ability to use our imagination to envision new and better worlds have shaped both ancient and modern society. Imagination is the tool of invention, the founder of culture, and it is the builder of character, as well as the destroyer, the iconoclast, and the instrument of evil. It could be argued that imagination is the reason why our species became what we have become, both good and bad. Utopia and dystopia go hand in hand, but when an individual uses her imagination, chances are that it is a utopia she is imagining and longing for. We use the word "utopia" in everyday discourse to mean a perfect place in which to live and belong. They are often beautiful, with happy people and children filled to the brim by solidarity and feelings of freedom. Some are societies of plenty, the utopian mechanism comfort, and others are societies of fellowship where only everyone's participation in the community's ideology ensures paradise. Common in both, and all others, is an underlying ambiguity, felt only, perhaps, in the mind of the reader as she goes on a journey to these cities, observing the people, customs, and politics of these so-called utopias.

Ursula K. Le Guin's authorship is a myriad of imagined worlds, several of which includes utopian elements or societies. Her most important utopian society, the Odonians of Anarres, is a struggling community that instead of living in the promised lands of heaven, find their ideals in solidarity and in working for a common goal, an untypical presentation of utopia, something that makes it, I will argue, that much more interesting. Utopian fiction asks highly ethical questions about life, community, oppression and the human condition. It is a sub-genre that lends itself very well to being read ethically. Albeit never straight forward, Le Guin's utopian stories always implicitly ask the reader to reflect on the society in question and to ask whether or not it is in fact utopian, an underlying ambiguity that questions our potential to create a world to the betterment of everyone, a world where people live in harmony with nature and others. This thesis will explore this ambiguousness, which I believe points towards anti-utopian conclusions: trying to make things better for everyone only makes it worse for someone.

This master's thesis will study two of Ursula K. Le Guin's utopian fictions, the short story "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" and the novel *The Dispossessed*, subtitled "An Ambiguous Utopia," to question the ethics of the utopian idea. Le Guin's narratives have been read in a myriad of ways, but an ethical reading seems to be missing. The author puts quite a lot of emphasis on moral value in her writing, and I thus believe this oversight should be redeemed. William Faulkner said in his Nobel banquet speech that the only thing worth writing about is the human heart in conflict with itself, and it is in my opinion the only thing worth reading about as well (Faulkner). The human condition is always what interests us, be it in history or in literature, because human ambition changes a lot less than that which surrounds us. Sure, politics and technology have changed, and one might put in a dragon or an unknown world in a story, but we can still relate to the basic drives of the people we are reading about, and that is what make them interesting. Ethical theory studies these basic drives and other human tendencies, the whole range of humanity's powers, strengths, capacities and habits of behavior to see how they affect a narrative, its readers, and the characters and their choices. This is something I will return to in this introduction's section on theory.

To discuss the ethical implications of Le Guin's utopian fictions more thoroughly, I have split the problem statement into three parts. The first and most telling question asks: *does* The Dispossessed *succeed in its presentation of a utopian project*? This study intends to use narrative ethics to comment on the interplay between ethics and aesthetics in the text, to show that it is the ethical value-system of this utopian society that is flawed or ambiguous. Utilizing James Phelan's "rhetorical theory of narrative" to point to ethical elements, meaning which human tendencies are effected to make the society "utopian," and asking whether those tendencies are praiseworthy. If they are not, then the society is not in fact a utopian society and in accordance with anti-utopian thought I will argue that there is a conflict between the utopian idea and freedom for the individual. To find evidence for this, I ask *Why must the child suffer*? Ideology can feel pretty close to torture for some, and the suffering child in the basement in "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" shows that though Omelas is truly a utopia for most, it is not so for the child or for those who walk away. Can it then be a utopia? Utopian thought asks for betterment for everyone, but "Omelas" shows that making things better for "everyone," makes it worse for "someone." Le Guin's narrative is a "behind-the-scenes"-look at the utopian idea, and a close reading will show what narrative and philosophical mechanisms make her societies "utopian." This makes it possible to point to the

same mechanisms in *The Dispossessed* in a more extended reading, where I will expect to be able to discuss the results in the context of the utopian idea and anti-utopian thought, asking whether *trying to make something better for everyone only makes it worse for someone.*

Le Guin believed with Shelley that the imagination is the instrument of moral good, saying "if you cannot or will not imagine the results of your actions, there's no way you can act morally or responsibly" (Jaggi). She took this thought further and imagined the implications of the actions of many, writing utopian narratives based on the ideologies of contemporary society in order to question these ideals. Le Guin was a perceptive writer who hid deeply ethical perspectives in between her lines, using sophisticated narrative techniques to weave stories that engage with our sensibilities. Narrative ethics analyze these techniques to see how her storytelling presents ethical issues, and it is possible that these may give unique insights into what the ultimate "positive" result of an ideology could be. It is my hope that reading utopian fiction ethically may shine some new light on the sub-genre, seeing that the subject of utopia, and by association dystopia, is a highly ethical one, as the societies are free or bound by the value-system of their communities. It seems to me that this relationship, between the idea and ethics, has been overlooked and I believe that there are important lessons to be learned in doing such a reading.

1.1   Ursula K. Le Guin: American novelist and "giant of storytelling"

When Le Guin sadly passed away in January 2018, authors, academics and readers from all over the world wrote eulogies, literary homages, and other pieces celebrating the life of this highly influential writer. An author's author, Neil Gaiman said of her influence: "Her essays on writing changed me as a young writer, made me see the craft more seriously and made me try always to remember the joy in it" (Gaiman). It is especially this joy that the tributaries come back to, a joy in one's own work, and whether it was sf or fantasy, children's novels, poetry, literary criticism, or novels on the craft of writing, the joy of imagination palpably flowed through her words.

Le Guin's long, unpredictable and distinctive career left a legacy that is worthy of a place in the literary canon, with novels such as *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969)*, The Dispossessed* (1974)*,* and the *Earthsea*-cycle (1968-2014) being already considered classics of American literature, bringing imagination into realist literature (Phillips). She was the type

of author who raised people's consciousness, writing about topics that were seldom written about. Through her writing people learned, as did I, about controversial and difficult subjects in ways that opened minds. In *The Left Hand of Darkness*, she explored questions of feminism and gender through her ambisexual inhabitants of Gethen, while in *Always Coming Home* (1985), the fictional anthropological account of the people of Kesh, is a rich depiction of indigenous peoples that feels more real than most anthropological accounts. She wrote about environmentalism in *The Word for World is Forest* (1972) and in *The Dispossessed* her exploration of political structures has a relevance that has made me write a thesis about it almost 50 years after its first publication. The list could have gone on and on, every story with as skillfully drawn characters as any other more realistic narrative, always touching on profound philosophical and emotional truths.

Ursula Kroeber was daughter to distinguished anthropologist Alfred (A. L.) and writer Theodora Kroeber, both of whom exercised a high degree of influence on her work (*EB*). Especially her father's anthropological work informed her highly detailed description of alien societies, as well as the many protagonists who work as cultural observers to other worlds and societies in her fiction. David Mitchell, writer of *Cloud Atlas* (2004), said that "Le Guin could dream up a non-existent world and make it feel more real than the 'real' here and now around me, this Worchestershire I'm growing up in. Sometimes I think my writing life is the theory, practice and emulation of that same trick" (Phillips). She received a number of accolades, including Hugos, Nebulas, Locus Awards, and she was named a Living Legend by the U.S. Library of Congress in 2000, as well as winning the National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters in 2014. Ursula K. Le Guin influenced a generation of writers and in author George RR Martin's words, "[Ursula K. Le Guin] was one of the giants" (Martin).

1.2   A brief outline of sf

Science fiction has been accepted as a name and a genre that is difficult to define and has been the subject of numerous debates. Le Guin herself preferred the terms "American Novelist" or a writer of speculative fiction rather than "science-fiction author," believing that her narratives should be defined not by their unrealistic aspects but rather by their themes and their depiction of the human condition (Phillips). When asked in an interview with John Wray

from the *New York Times* and the *Paris Review*, how she felt about the term "science fiction," this exchange followed along with a good-natured contemptuous snort:

> Where I can get prickly, Wray, is if I'm just called a sci-fi writer. […] I'm not. I'm a novelist and a poet. Don't shove me into your pigeonhole, where I don't fit, because I'm all over. My tentacles are coming out of the pigeonhole in all directions. (Wray)

This thesis will generally use the term "sf," preferred by many critics and writers, standing most generally for "speculative fiction," but it can also encompass science fiction, space fiction, science fantasy etc. (Bambini 13). As for myself, the sf and fantasy-genres have always been gateways into worlds dissimilar to my own, places where my imagination can run free and explore a plethora of ideas, identities and perspectives. This point is beautifully underlined by Le Guin herself in an exchange during her interview with Wray. Talking about the writing of his own sf novel, Le Guin answers him:

> *"Entertaining* them is all well and good, Wray, but does it make them think? We don't know what we're looking for when we pick up a book, no matter how clear-cut the genre," she said. "We think we do, but we don't. Don't ever give people the thing they expect just because they expect it. Our job is to surprise them, to shake them — to turn their expectations on their heads. And do you know why, Wray?"
> Why, I managed to mumble.
> "Because that's when the MRI of their brain lights up, and they begin to *see.*" (Wray)

I do not intend to take up a firm stance in the discussion of definition. Rather, I have chosen a definition that is commonly used, and works well in connection with the sub-genre and the narratives I will be discussing throughout this thesis. I believe the definition given by M. Keith Booker and Anne-Marie Thomas in *The Science Fiction Handbook* is adequate. Leaning on definitions by James Gunn and Darko Suvin, Booker and Thomas define sf as "fiction set in an imagined world that is different from our own in ways that are rationally explicable (often because of scientific advances) and that tend to produce cognitive estrangement in the reader" (4). "Cognitive estrangement" is a term used by Suvin in his book *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* to mean "a literature that places readers in a world different from our own in ways that stimulate thought about the nature of those differences, causing us to view our own world from a fresh perspective" (Booker and Thomas 75). Complimenting Booker and Thomas' definition, which is seen from the audiences' standpoint, Gwyneth Jones' definition identifies the aim of sf-narratives as controlled laboratory experiments for exploration of specific ideas (Roberts 10). In combination, the two definitions state that authors write sf narratives as controlled laboratory experiments in order to explore specific ideas, engaging readers in worlds unlike their own to stimulate thoughts

about the nature of those ideas and differences.

1.3   Utopian fiction

Having shown a brief outline of sf, the next section of the introduction will present the sub-genre of utopian fiction, including its definition, and its relationship with ideology, as well as its history. In the following I will also briefly discuss the sub-genre's relationship with dystopian fiction, as these two are closely related, and, as I intend to show in this thesis, inextricably linked with each other.

Fundamentally, utopian fiction envisions worlds or societies that work better than the flesh-and-blood author's own. This means that all fiction projecting a world, society, or situation that is subjectively better than in the real world has a utopian component. More specifically, utopian thought attempts to envision a society in which the various social, political, and economic issues of the real world have been solved, leaving an ideal realm of justice and tranquility (Booker and Thomas, 75). According to Tom Moylan, "utopian writing is rooted in the unfulfilled needs and wants of specific classes, groups and individuals in their unique historical contexts" (1). These classes, groups, or individuals use their imagination to produce realities that are fundamentally better than the ones they are living in, and often opposed to the culture maintained by the dominant ideology of their historical and geographical backgrounds. Also important is the difference between a literary utopia, which is the genre itself, and the utopian impulse. The latter is the attempt to achieve an ideal by transforming existing social conditions. Always contained in the utopian impulse is a critique of existing conditions and a vision for a new society.

At this point it is important to define what I here mean by ideology and idealism. Idealism is fairly straight forward, it is the "aspiration after or pursuit of an ideal" (*OED* "Idealism"). An ideal is something "conceived or regarded as perfect or supremely excellent in its kind" (*OED* "Ideal"). Ideology, on the other hand, is subject to debate and there exists many definitions of the term. I have chosen to use Louis Althusser's definition, as discussed by Moylan, since it designates ideology as relating to the individual and the system, rather than as something which reinforces, maintains or legitimates power. Of course, ideology is and has often been used by a governing or religious system to shape individuals into objects fulfilling the needs of the overall structure. However, ideology as I see it is any formally set of

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shared practices creating a belief-system that is not necessarily about truth, but about the argumentative statements that shape an individual. In addition, the difference includes the, arguably modern, possibility of a person choosing her own ideology, not just having it chosen for her by the ruling class. Moylan eloquently defines ideology as "a more general set of practices that shape the self-understanding of individuals. It is a representational system of values, opinions, knowledge, and images which articulates the individual's lived relationship to the transpersonal realities of the social structure as experienced by a particular social class" (17-18). This means that ideologies are systems that provide individuals with a total picture of society within which they can live and perform the demands of their social class while also covering up contradictions or issues in the same system.

With this definition in mind, I want to turn briefly to the relationship between ideology and utopia. Karl Mannheim states that there is an opposition between ideology and Utopia. He defines "*ideology* as the complex of ideas directing activity toward the maintenance of the status quo and *utopia* as the complex of ideas directing activity toward changing the status quo" (Moylan 18). I disagree with Mannheim for two reasons. First, because this simplifies both concepts into binary oppositions that pull on opposite sides of the status quo. And second, because if utopian thought is the use of the imagination to envision worlds that are better than the real one and the utopian impulse is the attempt of achieving an ideal, as I previously noted, then utopia and ideology do not necessarily mean "directing activity." Rather, utopia is the complex of ideas of how a perfect society *looks*, and ideology is the complex of ideas of how a perfect society *works*, meaning the underlying set of practices that keep the people happy and the society working, the belief-system that the society is to be built upon. "We must see the utopian impulse as operating *within* the ideological, both helping it along and pulling against it. This is the point of [Frederic] Jameson's statement that 'the effectively ideological is also, at the same time, necessarily Utopian'" (Moylan 19). They both have the ability to direct change, but as I see it, the main thing about the utopian impulse is to point to what change can look like, not to have a handbook for how this change should be realized. In the context of the literary utopia: "if one conceives of utopia not as an ultimate accomplishment towards which the whole text has been leading, but rather as being suggested by the accumulative process of action/reaction within a dynamic system of power relations tending to overcome historical obstacles, the personification of utopia itself would become inseparable from a representation of power with its contradictions and the interweaving of its various levels," as Nadia Khouri puts it (49). That is not to say that these stories do not

describe the required transition from present to utopia, describing this change is a large part of *The Dispossessed* for instance, but as it is not an obligatory component, it should not be part of the definition.

Having discussed these central definitions, I will now give a brief outline of the basic elements of utopian fiction. In 1516, Thomas More published *Utopia*, from which the sub-genre has taken its name, laying the foundations for the Western tradition of utopian fiction. By introducing the narrative technique of contrasting a utopia with the real world as a means of critiquing contemporary society, More essentially created a generic model for future writers of utopian fiction (Booker and Thomas 75). Utopian fiction has ancient roots and some of the most well-known religious texts are visions of utopia, for instance Christianity's Garden of Eden, or the Western Paradise, Sukhāvatī, of east Asian Buddhism. Like these religious paradises, More located his utopia in a different place than where it was written, creating the effect of cognitive estrangement necessary for stimulating thought about the differences of the fictional and the real world, whether that place is a far-away planet or some isolated island on Earth. The name itself is a pun, combining the word "eutopia," meaning a good place, and "outopia," meaning no place, perhaps hinting at my idea that no place can be good enough to be called an actual utopia (Bouet 13).

Utopian fiction is often motivated by social upheaval and change. Generally, the sub-genre has been advanced in times of faith in human potential to advocate change, such as in the Enlightenment, or by faith in the potential of science and technology, like in the 19th century. By the same logic, the sub-genre becomes more muted in times of struggle, as it did the first half of the 20th century (Booker and Thomas 76-79). The sub-genre has often been criticized for being more interested in constructing societies than in narrative quality, but this changed drastically when, following golden age of sf in the late 1930s and early '40s, the critical utopias of the 1960s and '70s presented sophisticated literary works featuring more refined utopian projects (Booker and Thomas 79). Authors such as Le Guin brought utopian sf from the underground and into the mainstream, becoming a voice in the movement of opposition and change, while providing imaginative and alternative thoughts to discussions of contemporary issues (Moylan 30). While earlier narratives were satirical critiques or constructed perfect societies where all problems were solved, the critical utopias grew out of the social and political concerns of the moment. André Gorz describes the goal of the oppositional movement that inspired the critical utopias as a goal of freedom based

upon activities unrelated to any economic goal which are an end in themselves: communication, giving, creating and aesthetic enjoyment, the production and reproduction of life, tenderness, the realization of physical sensuous, and intellectual capacities, the creation of non-commodity use-values (shared goods and/or services) that could not be produces as commodities because of their unprofitability. (Moylan 11)

Along with this goal, they also went further thematically by exploring themes of feminism, gender, environmentalism, socialism, anarchism, and technological advancement (Booker and Thomas 80). In general, these critical utopian narratives explore the unrealized potential of human community, while at the same time being aware of the limitations of the utopian traditions, focusing on the continuing presence of difference and limitations within utopian societies themselves, attempting to create a utopia that is not filled with simple, happy, naked people, but with ordinary people like you and me (Moylan 11).

Social, political and technological upheavals have seen the waxing and waning of the utopian sub-genre and have in general followed the movement of sf. Today, the abundance of information and technological advancement has given opportunity of technological projections that are generally more believable than the utopian visions of the 1930s, including more sophisticated political and social ideas that suggest new possibilities for utopian thinking in the 21st century. However, we are now at a stage where environmental concerns and a political scene that could have been the plot of a dystopian novel have disillusioned the populace as to utopian thought. That does not mean that the utopian dream is not present in modern society, in fact, it is totally necessary if we are to find solutions to contemporary threats to our species, because if we cannot imagine something better, if we cannot use utopia to interrogate and challenge the status quo, then how will we survive?

1.4   Dystopia and anti-utopia

Fundamentally, dystopian fiction imagines a society that is worse than the existing one. Utopia is an imaginary society where the social, political and economic problems of the real world have been solved, but dystopia is one where the dream of the ideal society has become a nightmare (Booker and Thomas 65). Dystopia is a place where evil, or negative social or political developments, have the upper hand. This type of fiction seizes some aspect of contemporary society and asks, "what would happen if this goes on?" It is then taken to the

extreme, painting a narrative picture of a society where this particular aspect has continued and worsened, creating a model designed to warn against its possible consequences (Claeys).

Interestingly, dystopian narratives often take the form of a central character fighting or attacking a system that describes itself as utopian, such as in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1931), and the line between the two is often a fine one. B. F. Skinner's 1948 novel *Walden Two* illustrates this point as the novel's ideal society, centered on respect for science and scientific principles of efficiency, is one of psychological determinism, and, though in many ways utopian, has also been described by some readers as reducing humans to unthinking automatons (Booker and Thomas 78). This similarity between the two concepts, and the fact that two readers or the author and the reader may view a society so differently, can be made even more opaque if one reflects on the fact that the leaders of a dystopian society might view it as utopian. Others will argue that the common utopian motif of altering human nature, for instance by gender surgeries or making characters in a narrative androgynous or hermaphrodites, is dystopian itself, as it introduces a factor of force and pressure into the utopia.

Anti-utopia, as one might think, is not the same as the literary dystopia. Rather, a literary anti-utopia functions as a criticism of attempts to implement various concepts of utopias. The idea of the anti-utopia is that by trying to make something better, it always ends up making things worse, which means that if dystopia is the opposite of utopia, then an anti-utopia conveys the idea of utopia as problematic in itself. It is an idea that attempts to present the fallacies of utopia and demonstrate its problematic sides (Claeys 107). My argument is that Le Guin in writing her ambiguous utopias is commenting on this exact idea, though not necessarily explicitly. Bout states that containment, differentiation, and exclusion are the very barriers to utopia, while I would add the individualism that characterizes modern society (16). By this I mean that my utopia is not necessarily the same as your utopia, and that historically, for me to reach my utopia I must subjugate someone else, making the same society a dystopia for you. Utopia for the few, dystopia for the many. I will expand upon this idea after the reading of Le Guin's two texts, hoping to point to characteristic flaws in the utopian ideal in literature.

1.5 Theory

At the beginning of the Introduction I quoted Faulkner about the human heart in conflict with itself. The meaning I take from the quote is that literature is, and should, concern itself with the discussion of ethical questions and with how the choices participants in a narrative make relates to them. The utopian and dystopian sub-genres are no exceptions to this, presenting questions as dramatizations of what can happen if an ideal or an ideology becomes reality, and by doing so lead readers to expand their perspectives and abilities to reflect ethically. For this reason, using ethical theory to read Ursula K. Le Guin's utopian texts may reveal the mechanisms of her societies, possibly leading into larger discussions of the utopian idea itself. However, ethical theory can be limited as it does not necessarily consider which narrative techniques reveal the ethical and aesthetical dimensions within a story. The consequence can be that important nuances are overlooked in an analysis. Consequently, I have chosen to rely on the field of narrative ethics to contextualize the ethical theory, specifically using Phelan's theoretical framework to explore the interplay between the ethics and aesthetics within the given narrative. The relationship between the two will allow me to present how the ethical identifies the risks and flaws of the utopian idea, providing the arguments necessary for discussing the main points of my problem statement. In the following paragraphs I will spend some time establishing important definitions and nuances in Phelan's theory and in the field of narrative ethics and ethical theory.

1.5.1 The rhetorical theory of narrative

In *Experiencing Fiction,* James Phelan describes his understanding of narrative as a rhetorical act, "somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose(s) that something happened" (*Ef* 3). He also states that the rhetorical situation is doubled in a fictional narrative, saying that "the narrator tells her story to her narratee for her purposes, while the [implied] author communicates to her audience for her own purposes both that story and the narrator's telling of it" (Phelan *Ef* 3-4). In contrast to non-fiction, redefining narrative as a rhetorical act is important because all literary fiction is written for a purpose, be it merely to earn money, or in the case of George Orwell's dystopian classic *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) to point at what may happen to contemporary society if dangerous ideologies were to develop unchecked. These purposes are important to keep in mind in an analysis, especially in

a narrative ethics analysis such as this, for the reason that they will reveal the ethical value-systems of the different players within a text.

The rhetorical theory of narrative builds on the understanding that narrative is a rhetorical act, an act of communication, and Phelan elaborates upon his theory further by stating what he calls key elements of narrative experience. The first of these elements is narrative judgment, which are assessments the readers make about the characters and the tellers (both narrators and authors) of a narrative. The second key element is narrative progression, which is readers' experience of form, by which he means "the particular fashioning of the elements, techniques, and structure of a narrative in the service of a set of readerly [the activities of an audience] engagements that lead to particular final effects on the implied [the perfect reader from an authorial standpoint] audience" (Phelan *Ef* 3). This experience is a result of the movement of the narrative from beginning to middle to end, including the effect these movements have on the reader. These key elements are according to Phelan responsible for the various components of narrative experience, especially the ethics and aesthetics, along with the interrelation between them.

The term "implied author" will be used frequently and interchangeably with the word "author" in discussing different types of authors in a narrative. The concept of the implied author is a version of the real-life author, with only the relevant abilities, values, opinions, and other properties that play a role in the construction of a text, a concept which fits well in the practical applications of Phelan's rhetorical theory of narrative (*Ef* 3). I will be using Phelan's term "flesh-and-blood author" or the author's name to separate the two types of authors. One of the most important things that implied authors do is to provide ethical guidance to their audiences. Using the concept of an implied author, who knows that the narrative is an artificial construct but takes responsibility for the morals and values the text implies, lets both the reader and the critic hold someone responsible for the ethical implications in a given text. This is in contrast to the flesh-and-blood author, who does not necessarily take responsibility for the ethics implied in the text, because for her the writing of a story is merely "one concentrated moment selected from the infinite complexities of 'real' life," and might be merely a technique for making a story better (Booth 80).

Another major principle of the rhetorical theory of narrative is the relationship for interpretive purposes between the author or implied author, the text, and the reader. This approach assumes "that texts are designed by authors in order to affect readers in particular ways; that those designs are conveyed through the words, techniques, structures, forms, and

dialogic relations of texts as well as the genres and conventions readers use to understand them; and that reader responses are a function of and, thus, a guide to how designs are created through textual and intertextual phenomena" (Phelan *Ef* 4). Or, in other words, the author creates a narrative consisting of textual phenomena for a hypothetical audience, which the individual reader then seeks to become a part of (Phelan *Lttai* 19). This principle assumes an interconnectedness between the three, a feedback loop or a recursive relationship, which means that a critic can begin an analysis from any of the points on what Phelan calls a "rhetorical triangle." The analysis must nevertheless consider how they each influence each other (Phelan *Ef* 5). This approach seeks not only to find interpretive support, but also to test that support by considering other ways which the text could have been constructed. These three elements, the narrative judgment, narrative progression, and the recursive relationship, offers a comprehensive for examining the ethical perspectives and other motivations behind a given narrative, and they are the principles on which I will base the readings of the texts.

Having mentioned the most important elements of the theory that will be used here, a few terms should be more thoroughly examined before moving onto the analysis of Le Guin's narratives. First of all, the key element of "narrative progression," which is a result of the movement of narrative from beginning to end is more easily understood within the context of a reading of a particular text. I will therefore explain this concept thoroughly in my reading of "Omelas" in the next chapter. "Narrative judgment," on the other hand, requires a thorough examination before continuing, as I will be using the concept throughout the thesis.

Narratives encourage two main activities, observing and judging. "The authorial audience [the hypothetical readers for whom the author writes] perceives the characters as external to themselves and as distinct from their implied authors, and the authorial audience passes interpretive and ethical judgments on them, their situations, and their choices" (Phelan *Ef* 7). Readers observe whatever happens as they read a narrative, they then judge these observations from the vantage point of their own ethical value-systems, interpretive skills, ideologies, and other preferences. The point where narrative form, narrative ethics, and narrative aesthetics intersect constitutes a narrative judgment, including the experiences of the characters and the experiences of the readers that encourage reactions to that narrative. According to Phelan, readers make three main types of narrative judgments: "interpretive judgments about the nature of actions or other elements of the narrative," exemplified by Winston and Julia's love affair in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, which is valid because we disagree with the policies of Big Brother; "ethical judgments about the moral value of characters and

actions," Winston and Julia's love affair is ethically positive because all humans need love; and "aesthetic judgments about the artistic quality of the narrative and its parts," using love thematically to set Winston's path towards the climax of the story is a brilliant act of storytelling (Phelan *Ef* 9). A single action may also evoke multiple kinds of judgments.

Phelan also explains that individual narratives establish their own ethical standards in order to guide readers to make specific ethical judgments. Someone applying his rhetorical theory should therefore not attempt to utilize ethical criticism using a pre-existing ethical system, instead the theorist should seek to reconstruct the ethical principles upon which the narrative is built (Phelan *Ef* 10). This is an important point, as it implies that even though a rhetorical theorist will always bring her own values with them into a text, the theorist will need to remain open to having her values challenged by a text. The author, intentionally or not, leads the characters of a narrative into situations or into doing actions that actualize ethical questions which the characters are forced to consider to a larger or smaller degree. These considerations are based on the individual narrative's own ethical standard, which means that they will potentially guide the reader towards an ethical judgment that clashes with her own ethical value-system, something I will elaborate upon momentarily.

The last part of Phelan's rhetorical theory of narrative that I will be considering in this thesis, regards his 'ethical dimensions'. The dimensions are "the ethics of the told" defined as the character-to-character relations of the narrative, the two-fold "ethics of the telling" defined as "the narrator's relation to the characters, the task of narrating, and to the audience" and the implied author's relation to the same things, and "the ethics of rhetorical purpose," which is defined as the ethical dimension of the overall narrative act (*Experiencing Fiction,* 11). Using the last dimension involves a two-step process: reconstruction and evaluation. "[Rhetorical ethics] attempts to identify the relevant underlying ethical principles, to apply them to specific behavior of the characters and techniques of the telling, and ultimately, to determine the ethics of the overall narrative purpose. Then having done that reconstruction, the rhetorical ethics moves to evaluation" (*Experiencing Fiction,* 13). As seen from this list, all communicative situations in a fictional narrative have an ethical dimension, and these considerations provide a way of discussing these dimensions systematically that links up very well with the rest of Phelan's approach. Next, I will give an overview of the theory as it relates specifically to the ethics of a text.

1.5.2   Ethics

I have already mentioned the concept of ethics many times throughout this Introduction. I have, however, so far not made any attempt to define it. I will opt for following Wayne C. Booth's definition of ethics in literary theory, meaning that ethics or an ethical effect is seen as any strengthening or weakening of a "virtue," where virtues are defined in their older sense of referring not just to our praiseworthy tendencies, but rather "the whole range of human 'powers,' 'strengths,' 'capacities,' or 'habits of behavior'" (Gregory 46). Reading narratives using Phelan's rhetorical approach with Booth's definition in mind, one easily circumvents the idea that ethical theory must be moralizing. Instead of saying whether this quality is good or bad, it merely states that this is a human quality and that something is challenging it. It also makes working with ethics the most fun, in my opinion, seeing that those qualities of character (as in the personality traits of a person or literary character) that are not necessarily praiseworthy, are often those most interesting to read about.

Historically, ethical theory has not had the highest standing in academia. Before what has come to be known as "the ethical turn" of criticism, there was a preconception that an ethical reading would always be moralizing, that the critic brought her own values into the text and judged it accordingly (Altes 25). This preconception was for a long time the largest obstacle for ethical theory and for doing ethical readings. Another problematic issue was the thought that a person interested in ethical criticism believes that every moral should be taken for granted by the reader (Booth 95). The aim of ethical criticism should not be to tell the reader that "this is right," "this is wrong," "this is immoral," or some other version of the same song. Nor is it about thought control, censorship of literature or managing people's conduct. Rather, ethical criticism should help readers of literature "see, understand and appreciate the powerful ways in which fictions invite them into specific ways of feeling, thinking and judging" (Gregory 50). The responsibility of a reader or a critic is not to take every moral for granted, but to enter into a serious dialogue about how the flesh-and-blood author's, implied author's or character's values join or conflict with his or her own.

If we were to take every moral in a story for granted, how then could a reader possibly take any pleasure in reading a narrative with an arguably evil character? What makes Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment* (1866) fascinating, is exactly this dialogue. The story makes the implicit ethical dialogue between an implied author and a reader explicit, building a story around whether or not an action is moral or immoral, making

the reader reflect upon the psychology of murder together with the main character as he descends into madness. If we were to take a moral for granted, could we not then end our reading after the first few chapters, saying that murder is okay if a person can be considered "great," the very same theory that the protagonist acts upon as he commits the murder? *Crime and Punishment* personifies Faulkner's heart in conflict with itself, asking us as readers not to take Raskolnikov's values for granted, but rather join in on a journey into a haunted mind. Haunted not because of his actions, but because of how his morals react in a dialogue with those actions.

In the same way as we should not take a narrative's morals for granted, a person interested in the hermeneutics of ethical criticism should not distrust all morals either, rather, we must remember our own situatedness, upbringing and values. Only when we are honest about our own ethics is it possible for us to criticize, judge and especially write and reflect on those of other people, characters, authors, implied authors and narrators. No reading is value neutral. We read on the back of our own values, because we understand the world through the lens of our own upbringing and culture. Our morals and values are ingrained parts of our identities, and therefore it is important that we as readers, and especially critics, always reflect upon the potential shortcomings of our understanding in meeting with different values than our own, and with ideological convictions opposite to ours. Having reflected on our own ethics makes it possible to use Phelan's approach accordingly, so that we know to remain open when they are challenged. This reflection also helps if in a reading one meets a character or an implied author who presents the same ethics as oneself, so that we do not overlook them, or simply accept that the ethics of the character must be good, simply because it is the same as our own. I read a text from my standpoint as a fairly well-educated white male from the countryside of Norway, and if I am not careful it might be easy for me to overlook the plight of someone from a different culture, or a woman, or someone less educated, all of whom might be living with experiences that I have never had to deal with. So, even though the ethical values I embrace do not necessarily match those of a literary work, I still need to see the ethics through my own lens while all the time being open to having them challenged.

1.6   Summary and structure

In this introductory chapter I have articulated my problem statement and how I will structure this study in order to answer it. I have also given brief overviews of Ursula K. Le Guin's authorship, sf, utopia, dystopia and anti-utopia, and I have defined and discussed ethics in connection with literature and literary criticism. Going forward, Chapter One will be a close reading of Le Guin's "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas", using Phelan's theory to analyze the short story. This chapter will thoroughly show how the theory works when applied to a text, while the main focus will be on the narrative techniques the author uses and how the aesthetics present ethical issues in the text. I believe that many of the utopian elements established in "Omelas" can be seen generally in how Le Guin builds her utopias, which means that I can use my analysis from the first chapter to present the basics of the society in *The Dispossessed* in the second. If my assumption is correct, then I can spend the majority of Chapter Two discussing the ethics and aesthetics of the characters, the implied author, and the societies as they are presented in the narrative along with how they relate to the ethics of the utopian idea. Phelan's theory will be integral to revealing ethical perspectives in this chapter as well, but as I spend plenty of time presenting the theory in the two preceding chapters it will merely inform the background of the reading, instead of being utilized as explicitly as it was in Chapter One. Though the whole thesis will deal with parts of the problem statement, the majority of the discussion relating to it will happen in Chapter Two. To finish the thesis, I will round up the discussion in a concluding chapter where I will to sum up the results of my analysis as they relate to the problem statement. This will provide answers to the whether the idea of utopia is flawed in itself, and if that is the case, what the problematic sides of the concept may be. In the end, the concluding chapter will lead into a discussion of the anti-utopian idea and whether ethical flaws in the utopian idea mean that trying to make something better for everyone always makes it worse for someone else.

2   "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas"

The short story "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" was published in 1973 and won the author the prestigious 1974 Hugo Award for Best Short Story (Sustana). In this chapter I intend to read the short story to show how one can use James Phelan's rhetorical theory of narrative generally, and the notions of narrative progression and judgment specifically, to read Ursula K. Le Guin's utopian fictions as describing intentionally flawed or ambiguous utopian societies. This is hinted at by the implied author in the titles both of *The Dispossessed* and "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" ("Omelas"), and I will make use of this in discussing both narratives. Snaking through the close reading will be a discussion stemming from the question in my problem statement of why the child must suffer. This evocative question reveals the ethical value-system of the society and how it is exposed in the narrative, as well as the repercussion it can have on the flesh-and-blood reader. This analysis will in turn be used as a "blueprint" to how Le Guin's utopian fictions are written, specifically how the narrative guides the authorial audience towards certain ethical and aesthetical judgments about utopian societies and their ideologies. I will then put this notion to work when I analyze her most famous utopian novel *The Dispossessed* in the next chapter. Furthermore, I expect that the two readings will make it possible to discuss inherent flaws in the idea of utopia in itself, as noted in the problem statement of this thesis.

Christopher Menadue describes Le Guin's short story succinctly when he says that "Her short story 'The Ones Who Walk Away from the Omelas,' written in 1973, is a devastating, slow-burn exposition of the implications of the taking the utilitarian route in our exploitative relationships with other people" (Menadue). I will utilize Phelan's rhetorical theory of narrative to expose exactly what those implications are, and how they relate to the ethics of utopia. I will provide the definitions of Phelan's theory where necessary, especially when I use his narrative progressions to point to instances in the text that carry importance for the ethics, aesthetics, and form that will qualify the narrative judgments of the analysis. Phelan's narrative progressions consist of twelve aspects that provide a way to track textual and readerly dynamics in a narrative (*Ef* 21). These aspects are divided into four aspects each for the beginning, middle and end, with two encompassing textual dynamics and two readerly dynamics. I will begin with the "exposition" of the narrative beginning.

2. 1   Narrative Progression: Beginning

The textual dynamic "exposition" means everything, including the front matter, that provides information about the narrative, the characters, the setting, and the events of the narrative (Phelan *Ef* 17). "Omelas" was published in the anthology *New Dimensions* in 1973 and is part of a short story collection called *The Wind's Twelve Quarters* (1975), collecting Ursula K. Le Guin's most important short stories from her first decade as a published author. "Omelas" is the penultimate story in the collection, and other than the text itself it includes the title, as well as a short foreword by the author. The title, "The Ones Who Walk Away from the Omelas" makes the reader ask certain questions about the story: what is Omelas? Who are the ones who walk away from it, and why do they walk away? These are important questions that the authorial audience has to reflect on throughout the seven-page short story.

In her foreword, Le Guin quotes William James' *The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life* as she discusses the central idea of the story, the boy as a scapegoat for the utopia:

> Or, if the hypothesis were offered us of a world in which Messrs. Fourier's and Bellamy's and Morris' utopias should be outdone, and millions kept permanently happy on the one simple condition that a certain lost soul on the far-off edge of things should lead a life of lonely torment, what except a specific and independent sort of emotion can it be which would make us immediately feel, even though an impulse arose within us to clutch at the happiness so offered, how hideous a thing would be its enjoyment when deliberately accepted as the fruit of such a bargain? (Le Guin *Twtq* 251)

James asks here about the moral implications of utilitarianism, which Le Guin sets in action as a thought-experiment of a utopia balancing on the fate of a tortured boy, a classic example of utopian fiction as explorations of current ideas of philosophy (Mamola). Utilitarianism is, of course, the philosophical theory that states that the best action is the one that produces well-being for the greatest number of people (*OED* "Utilitarianism"). The end justifies the means. And though Le Guin did not read James and sit down to write the story of that "lost soul," she still ended up with a narrative that explores this idea, just as she later ends up doing in *The Dispossessed* in relation to the ideas of anarchy and communism. In Le Guin's *Rocannon's World* (1966), quoted by Shoshana Knapp, an exchange between two characters, Rocannon and Mogien shows that Le Guin agrees with James' anti-utilitarian position: "'One man's fate is not important.' 'If it is not, what is?'." In short, they agree that what produces well-being for the greatest number of people should not be used as a moral criterion (76). Her short story becomes the "laboratory experiment" I mentioned in the Introduction, envisioning

how a society built on such a premise would look, using narrative itself as a site for an "insoluble dilemma of mortal exchange" (Langbauer).

Le Guin also draws parallels to the American conscience in her foreword, insinuating that "Omelas" can also be read politically about a society's use of a scapegoat to keep rest happy, for instance affluent countries' obsession with material growth based on cheap labor in undeveloped countries. As we will see in this analysis, the dilemma of the reader becomes that the scapegoat-motif is horrible and one easily side with those who walk away that the title refers to, nevertheless, the comforts of one's life are not as easily renounced. "Omelas" is a story that absorbs the reader into the interconnectedness between real life and fiction, it also comments on the ambiguousness between one's ethics and the difficulty of responding to predicaments with no clear conduct (Langbauer). In these predicaments one's own ethical value-system must act as the final judge. However, as the analysis will show, doing so becomes more difficult when the short story analogy evokes a response that is more radical than what is practicable in real life.

Providing at once the answer to the question concerning the title, the narrator describes in the first paragraph the beautiful and prosperous city of Omelas, "bright-towered by the sea" (Le Guin *Twtq* 251). This whole paragraph and those that follow provide exposition to the society of Omelas and go straight into presenting the setting of the narrative. As in many utopias, the physical appeal of the city and its people receive emphasis. Colors, smiles and happy sounds are reported everywhere by the narrator. The main characters of the story are introduced, the narrative non-focalization making the whole society into its protagonists, or antagonists, depending on one's own conclusion at the end of the narrative. These people are gearing up for the grand Festival of Summer, showing themselves as a diverse group with one thing in common: they are all happy and guilt free. It is immediately clear to most readers that the implied author sets up an aesthetic standard that is almost a caricature of other utopian fictions. We are led to believe that beauty equals moral good, something the flesh-and-blood reader knows from her own world is not necessarily true.

These first paragraphs inform the "initiation"-dynamic of the beginning, which is the "initial rhetorical transactions among implied author and narrator, on the one hand, and flesh-and-blood and authorial audience, on the other" (Phelan *Ef* 18). Knapp says about the narrator that we are "lectured, seduced, and importuned by a narrator who wants to make us hear, feel, see, and, above all, believe" (77). The implied author uses a narrator who is clearly a believer in the Omelasi society, spending a large portion of the tale describing the intellectual,

technological, and cultural sophistication of her people. The narrator is not a resident in Omelas, however, as the descriptions are suggestive, not factual, not always sure of its details, but she is always sure of their cultivation and the fact that they are all guilt free. The details are not too important it seems, what is important to her is that the reader also believes in them, and she thus breaks the fourth wall at intervals to comment on her own descriptions acknowledging how far fetched their happiness must seem.

> O miracle! I wish I could describe it better. I wish I could convince you. Omelas sounds in my words like a city in a fairy tale, long ago and far away, once upon a time. Perhaps it would be best if you imagined it as your own fancy bids, assuming it will rise to the occasion, for certainly I cannot suit you all. (Le Guin *Twtq* 254)

By inviting the authorial audience to participate, the implied author involves them as participants in the telling of the story, implicating them as well as participants in the eventual subjugation of the boy in the cellar.

That the narrator attempts to make the audience accomplices, is important for several reasons. One is as a comment on the flesh-and-blood author's idea that how a utopia looks is different for each individual, an idea that I will discuss later in this thesis. For now, let me just say that individuality is the killer of utopias, and the fact that Ursula K. Le Guin wrote this story as an imaginative "write-your-own-setting"-story comments on an important flaw in the idea of utopia, namely that what paradise looks like is different for everyone. Another reason is that the story the narrator is telling is not one about the people of Omelas, but about the "incredible" people who walk away. By the end of the narrative, the narrator exposes herself as the teller of a story not about the aesthetics of the perfect utopia, but one about the positive implications for a society where happiness is predicated on the torment of one instead of many. The critical problem becomes that she does not understand the moral responsibility she has as the teller and in context to the narrative as a "write-your-own-setting"-story, also the creator of such a society, or perhaps she does understand and wants the authorial audience to share in the inhuman choice of creating such a society (Knapp 79). At this point, the reader does not know of the implications of accepting the unusual invitation to co-imagine or create the utopia either; they simply have a choice of accepting or not accepting the proposition. The observant reader will be skeptical at least, as this move makes explicit the narrator's role as creator of the society and there is still uncertainty of her intentions. The last reason is for the implied author to make the authorial audience assume the ethically superior stance, before reflecting on their own participation in subjugating the real-world "child" by way of their life within an arguably utilitarian ideology, capitalism. It is this last sentiment that permeates

through the critical utopias of the period, their ability to illustrate problematic sides within contemporary utopias, and it is also the reason why these narratives are less dated than many other utopian visions in literary history.

The authorial audience does not know the evil in the story yet, and the narrator's telling, or creation, of Omelas continues in the same expository tone until the arrival of the second textual dynamic of the beginning, the "launch." Phelan explains that a narrative progress through sequences of loaded events where characters or the situations they find themselves in undergo some kind of change. This change happens when unstable situations within, between, or among the characters are introduced and resolved during the story, and these instabilities and/or tensions mark the progression from beginning to middle to end (*Ef* 7). Instabilities and tensions might be local or global, local meaning those that do not signal the completeness of the progression, while global instabilities or tensions are the ones that do. The global instabilities and/or tensions must be resolved for a narrative to attain completeness (*Ef* 16). Usually the first global instability or tension that marks the "launch," which is the boundary between the beginning and middle, happens fairly early in a narrative. However, because "beginning" is a technical term which encompasses more than just the opening first pages, it means that in some narratives the launch happens late in the story. In "Omelas," the global instability does not happen until the middle of page 4 of the seven-page short story, after the narrator has described the city, the people, and what is about to take place at the beginning of the festival.

Having described, and having had the reader imagine, the utopia of "Omelas," the launch comes in the form of a question; "Do you believe? Do you accept the festival, the city, the joy? No? Then let me describe one more thing" (Le Guin *Twtq* 254). The launch destabilizes the seemingly delightful society in one swift move, pulling the proverbial curtain aside as the narrator goes on to depict in terrifying detail James' "certain lost soul," the suffering child that the Omelasi utopia balances on. At the launch, the second readerly dynamic, the "entrance," is also complete, which is that the authorial audience has now made a number of interpretive, ethical, and aesthetical judgments that influence their hypothesis about the "configuration," meaning the direction and purpose of the whole narrative (Phelan *Ef* 19). In "Omelas," the reader has made judgments on the aesthetic validity of the city, and of the ethics of its people and the narrator. Particularly noticeable is the stated fact that the people are guilt free, which makes the audience infer that there must be some reason for this lack as this is a quite sociopathic trait and ethically disheveling, especially considering the

interpretive judgment the reader makes seeing that the narrator finds it really important that they believe in her creation. The hypothesis becomes that there must be something rotten in the city of Omelas.

2.2   Narrative Progression: Middle

Middles and ends also have four aspects, two of each concerning textual and readerly dynamics. The first textual dynamic is, again, exposition, which includes information relating to the narrative, such as chapter titles, setting, characters and events (Phelan *Ef* 9). As "Omelas" is a short story, there are no chapter titles, but the setting moves from the green beautiful scenery of the city and the Festival of Summer, to a dark, dirty, and tiny basement space. In this room a terrified little boy sits, forever in the dark, lonely and tortured. The boy has not done anything wrong but is still being sacrificed for the happiness of the city. The contrast of setting from the city to the basement is as extreme as the cellar room is horrifying, and while the beginning took a considerable amount of time to launch, the middle loses no time in developing the global tension of the narrative.

The voyage, the second textual dynamic, which is the development of the global instabilities and/or tensions of narrative, sees the idyllic Omelas being contrasted to an inhuman choice between utopia and torment for one individual (Phelan *Ef* 19). The length and vividness of the description are presented by the narrator as something perfectly logical. Whether describing the room it is living in, "it has one locked door, and no window," the child's intellectual capacity, "it is feeble minded," or its sense of time, "the child has no understanding of time or interval – sometimes the door rattles terribly and opens, and a person, or several people, are there," it is all done with a calculated emotional distance (Le Guin *Twtq* 256-257). But no matter how logical the narrator believes such a treatment for the good of all, the reader's heart breaks in its depiction and its pleading, "'I will be good' it says. 'Please let me out. I will be good!' They never answer. The child used to scream for help at night, and cry a good deal, but now it only makes a kind of whining" (*Twtq* 257). People's ethical value-systems are as diverse as people are, but the image of the suffering child is a particularly strong and uniting one, making the readers share in an innate feeling of repulsion towards the narrator's depiction (Wyman 230). The narrative progresses in the narrative middle from the problematization of the idyllic utopia of Omelas, reaching its utilitarian

conclusion, "if the child were brought up into the sunlight out of that vile place, if it were cleaned and fed and comforted, that would be a good thing, indeed; but if it were done, in that day and hour all prosperity and beauty and delight of Omelas would wither and be destroyed. Those are the terms" (Le Guin *Twtq* 258).

As the reader is presented with the child in the basement, the ongoing exchanges between author, narrator and audience continue in what Phelan calls the "interaction," the first readerly dynamic of the narrative middle (Phelan *Ef* 20). If the descriptions of the society were evocative, then the descriptions of the child are factual to an extreme degree. Interestingly, like the authorial audience joined in the construction of the joy of "Omelas," they are not asked to participate in the description of the child as the narrator knows every single detail of its state, down to its fear of the two mops in the corner of the room. The use of the dehumanizing pronoun "it" adds to the emotional distance kept by the narrator who accepts the bargain, utopia for a boy, fair trade. The authorial audience, however, is moved to feel for the child, and to immediately reject the bargain the implied author presents is the obvious thing to do, no matter how much the aesthetics of Omelas, as the Le Guin's foreword claims, "arose a feeling within us to clutch at the happiness so offered" (Knapp 76). The narrator presents a version of utopia that is weighed against the torment of a suffering child, but the rationalization that the suffering makes the citizens of Omelas aware of what Knapp calls the "terrible justice of reality," is almost as much of a caricature of ideology as the city is of a utopia (Knapp 79). However, in creating the analogy the implied author presents an important point in the meeting of the idealistic and the practical, ideology leaves someone suffering in some way or other, and accepting this suffering to keep one's own happiness is ethically problematic.

The second readerly dynamic which deals with the evolving responses of the authorial audience to the overall development of the narrative is called the intermediate configuration (Phelan *Ef* 20). The question becomes why a child's suffering should lead to anyone's happiness? That society's scapegoat is a child, is particularly disturbing, because the shock of the depictions of its life strikes so close to most people's ethical value-system. It is the same reason as why humanitarian movements use starving children in their advertisements, the protection of children and other helpless and innocent individuals evokes the guardian within us, as well as altruistic guilt, moving the reader to try to help (Bennett 66). But guilt is of course something that the Omelasi lack, at least those who stay in their city. The tormented, incarcerated child serves both as the "certain lost soul" of James' quote, as well as the trope of

innocence in meeting with a cold and unfair world. Langbauer emphasizes the problematic issues involved in using the trope of the suffering child, stating that "We display children as symbols in order to imagine that we can somehow give back our ticket because part of us, we hope, remains like a child not fully embarked on human life and all its horrors" (104). The narrative symbol of the child becomes that of the innocence within all of us, as readers look for a way to escape Omelas, having seen the terrible truth of the society and wanting to retain their innocence.

2.3 Narrative Progression: End

"Now do you believe in them? Are they not more credible? But there is one more thing to tell, and this is quite incredible" (Le Guin *Twtq* 259). Thus begins the end of "Omelas," the "exposition/closure"-dynamic of the progression again being marked by comments and questions by the narrator to the authorial audience. This dynamic begins as "information about the narrative, characters, or action includes a signal that the narrative is coming to an end, regardless of the state of the instabilities or the tensions" (Phelan *Ef* 20). The setting moves back from the basement to the city, and the narrator focalizes on some unnamed, non-explicit character that cannot shake the thought of the little boy from their head, deciding that they would rather leave Omelas than know that their happiness rests on the unhappiness of a little boy, alone and terrified. The reader finally knows who the people who walk away are, and why they are doing it, they are walking away from the diabolical, inhuman choice between torturing a child and destroying their society, which also includes other children (Knapp 79).

The ones that walk away from Omelas mark the "farewell," the first readerly dynamic of the end, meaning the "concluding exchanges among implied author, narrator and audiences" (Phelan *Ef* 21). Throughout the narrative, the reader has been lured into a creative collaboration by the narrator, perfectly modeling a relative utopia in each reader's mind, "The lushness of the language and the rhetorical power of the telling augment the seduction of this collaborative relationship between narrator and reader" (Wyman 229). At the end of the story the implied author shows how the right choice is not necessarily the easiest, as those who leave head alone into the unknown, not knowing what they are walking towards, just what they are walking away from. There might not exist a better place than Omelas, but the

happiness, or guilt, that the ones who walk away will experience, will be results of their own efforts and not of the suffering of a child in a basement (Bennett 67). If "Omelas" is viewed as an anti-utopia, then those who walk away have the opportunity to create something that could be considered an anti-anti-utopia, a utopia defined by its very difference from Omelas (Wyman 230). However, as Langbauer argues, one does not necessarily circumvent the moral dilemma by walking away, the child still suffers and the Omelasi ideology prevails (Langbauer 102). The implied author has ensnared the authorial audience into becoming citizens of the utopia, then taking them into the basement to look at the child, guiding them towards the choice of walking away (Mamola). By doing this, the author evokes the moral value of the reader, both to stand as judge on the trail of Omelas, implying that the least difficult thing to do, staying in Omelas, is not the most ethical. It is also done to evoke ethical reflections on the American conscience, absorbing them into the interconnectedness between real life and fiction, and into the thought-experiment that she will continue with *The Dispossessed*, a society on a harsh and difficult planet founded by one of the ones who walked away from Omelas (Le Guin *Twtq* 260).

The last paragraph marks the "arrival," the last textual dynamic of Phelan's rhetorical theory of narrative, "the resolution, in whole or in part, of the global instabilities and tensions" (*Ef* 21). The narrator's choice of words in her last direct comment to the audience is quite interesting. She uses the words "credible" for the people of Omelas, and then states that the people who decide to leave the city are "incredible," marking her narrative as one not about the suffering child but about the, in her eyes, unbelievable people who chose to leave utopia. The narrator's choice of words here is revealing in that we understand why she throughout the narrative has wanted to believe in the city, not because it is too utopian in her eyes, but rather so that we will believe her when she tells us about the choice she does not understand, walking away from Omelas. The narrator shows her true colors as an ideological fanatic, justifying the suffering within the system. If the flesh-and-blood author had chosen a different narrative technique, then her point would not have been so apt. This positive judgment about the aesthetics of the story does not, however, have any positive consequence for our ethical judgment about the narrator and the society of Omelas. Rather, it reinforces the ethical judgment that we make, whether or not it is to agree with its utilitarian basis, or to let ourselves be guided by the implied author in relating to the ones who walk away, instead of the ones who stay.

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The conclusion of the reader's evolving responses to the whole narrative is the last readerly dynamic, what Phelan calls the "completion" (Phelan *Ef* 21). In the next few paragraphs I will detail the ethical and aesthetical judgments that can be made from the narrative as a whole, as well as discuss what the ethics of the telling and of rhetorical purpose says about the narrative. The progression of the tension-complication-resolution of the narrative began with the joyous well-being of the people living in Omelas. At that point the authorial audience judged the aesthetics of the city as too good to be true, knowing that nothing is perfect, especially those things, people, and places that make themselves out to be so. That judgment led the observant reader to make the ethical judgment that the Omelas society must somehow be more complicated, either because of something the people do or because of convictions within their ideology or ethical value-system. The implied author revealed her underlying ethical principles through the narrator's comments to the authorial audience, asking whether or not they believe what is being told, and then showing the basement and its inhabitant, exposing the fact that the city of Omelas was violating the basic moral value of the freedom of the individual, as well as guiding the audience towards questioning the underlying philosophy of the utopia.

The implied author's recruitment of the authorial audience into describing the society before she complicates it by revealing a truly horrifying situation, sums up the ethical dimension of the overall narrative, what Phelan calls the ethics of rhetorical purpose (*Ef* 11). Hidden underneath this reflection, as the most observant readers will notice is an assessment of real-world circumstances. It is a critique of the jeans that we use which have been produced by underpaid laborers in dark and dank factories, or of miners getting sick from mining the metals in our technology. And when the reader has been sufficiently guided towards looking for someone who walks away, which they most likely would be even without knowing the title, she ends the story with a single efficient paragraph, telling us about the ones that walk away from Omelas, leaving the authorial audience, and perhaps the reader, with a chance to reflect on their own ethical standards. As the authorial audience observe the revelation of the ethical standards in "Omelas," they are also guided to evaluate those standards and make an ethical judgment on whether ten thousand people's, or any other number's, happiness is worth the torment of the child, or whether the principle of individual freedom is more important. It is a choice between utilitarianism or personal morality, between staying in Omelas or walking away.

2.4   Conclusion

If one does not consider utilitarianism the ultimate ideal of society, then this reading of "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" has shown that the consequence of utilitarian ideology is loss of individual freedom and rejection. The rejection of the individual is an inherent flaw in the idea of this utopia, and through this analysis and discussion I have shown that Phelan's rhetorical theory of narrative is a good tool with which to unearth such flaws. This reading has been a start at showing that the idea of utopia is ethically flawed, and the continued reading of Le Guin's utopian thought-experiment will add more weight to this hypothesis. By beginning my analysis from the textual point of the recursive loop, I have shown that the ethical value-system the narrator operates within, as well as the ethical and aesthetical judgments the implied author guides the authorial audience towards making, including reflections on real-life circumstances in Le Guin's continued thought-experiment on the utopian idea. In the next chapter I will go on to present another narratological analysis, this time of Le Guin's acclaimed novel, *The Dispossessed*.

3 *The Dispossessed*

When Ursula K. Le Guin wrote *The Dispossessed*, published in 1974, it was at a time of strong nations fighting cold wars, entrenched in their own ideologies. Where "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" was an account of the consequences of taking the utilitarian route in creating a "perfect" society, this story is a reader-friendly explanation of comparative ideologies, "a masterful portrayal of the difficulties of presenting a complex concept to an unwelcome world, something that is still pertinent in an age of climate-change denial, anti-vaccination lobbying and fake news" (Menadue). The novel is a central work of the resurgence in utopian sf in the 1970s, led in large part by women writers, and called the "richest reinvention of the genre" by Frederic Jameson (Booker and Thomas 229). This chapter will again make use of the rhetorical theory of narrative, as well as the close reading of "Omelas," to point to how and which narrative techniques the author uses to present the ethical value-system in her utopian story. As mentioned in the Introduction, James Phelan's theory will take a step back and while still informing the analysis, it will do so less explicitly. Entwined in the close reading will be a continuation of the discussion concerning the utopian idea, and whether the novel succeeds in its presentation of its utopian project, enabling me to round up the thoughts collected throughout the thesis into a discussion of anti-utopian thought as it relates to utopia and ideology. The main focus of this chapter will lie in the underlying principles of the two worlds of *The Dispossessed*, which means that the close reading will not spend time on parts of the narrative and setting I deem less important to the problem statement.

3.1 Narrative elements

The most interesting aspect of the beginning's exposition is the two titles, *The Dispossessed* and the subtitle "An Ambiguous Utopia." The main title reflects the socialist-anarchistic economic model of the utopian society of Annares, where no one owns anything, and whatever they need, which is not much, can be gotten at a depository. Another factor is the break from traditional utopian fiction, where material wealth and universal prosperity have made possible, often through technology such as robots, a society where social, political and economic issues of the real world have been solved, a utopia. Through the title and

Anarresti's poverty, the implied author argues that wealth is a source of corruption and spiritual decay, and in order to compete more successfully for material gain one inevitably compromises one's own values (Booker and Thomas 231). "Ambiguous," meaning doubtful or questionable, modifies the title, pointing to the questionable status of Anarres as a utopia, and even utopia as a concept (*OED* "Ambiguous"). My further analysis of the novel will show examples and discuss reasons why Le Guin chose this subtitle, and why the implied author modifies the utopian community in this way.

3.1.2   Shevek

In the beginning's exposition we are introduced to the novel's protagonist, "Shevek," who is the only character I will discuss in detail in this analysis. He is the ethical foundation from which the narrative's ethical standards are established, remembering that according to Phelan, a narrative formulates its own ethical standards in order to guide readers to make specific ethical judgments (*Ef* 10). Shevek is also the focalization point for the third person limited narrator who describes what happens and what this character feels, which means that my analysis here, in contrast to "Omelas," will consider the narrator only as an extension of the implied author. The novel is structured in alternating chapters where the first and every odd chapter tell the story of Shevek visiting "Urras," the twin and enemy planet of his home planet "Anarres," while the even chapters are the story of his life as he grows up into the man who decides to become the first person to leave Anarres in one and a half century. This narrative technique informs the ethics of the telling because as we join Shevek, the sf staple of the stranger in the strange land, we are also invited to explore the ethical value-system that he was raised in, while he at the same time is forced to consider the moral value of his own ideology. The ethics of the telling, in this case the implied author's relation to the task of narrating, sets up easily identifiable contrasts revealing the specific differences in ideology between the two, as well as contrasting them to the flesh-and-blood author's contemporary society with its cold war and the proxy wars that ravaged it (Booker and Thomas 230).

The second chapter of this novel depicts Shevek's childhood as he grows into becoming the best physicist of his generation. He is born into a socialist-anarchistic system based on the principles of Laia Aseio Odo, a philosopher and political activist whose revolution sparked the initial break with Urras, leading to an exodus of one million people to

their new home planet. At the Odonian core lies the principles of solidarity, community, and humility, a society in which work is valued over family bonds, which means that though "regular" families exist, most are encouraged to let their offspring be raised in communal domiciles by the society rather than their parents. Shevek is one such, left by an ambitious mother and a hard-working father to be brought up in the principles of Odo, and in these early chapters the reader gets to observe the indoctrination into the system first hand. Whether this can be considered brainwashing is something I will come back to a later paragraph. From an early age, Shevek shows himself as a "nuchnib," an outsider, whose scientific genius fits badly with a society that insists on equal opportunity for all (Le Guin *Td* 151). Through Shevek we are shown that people are unique, with various abilities which yielding different results, making inequality unavoidable.

The Anarres chapters of the novel show us that what Shevek seeks are two things, long-term intimacy and intellectual freedom to finish his General Temporal Theory which will facilitate interstellar communication, both of which are undervalued in the Anarresti mindset (Lindow 175). In many ways one can say that in his search for paternal intimacy, Shevek adopts the Odo as a surrogate mother, becoming not just indoctrinated into the principles his society lives by, but also internalizing her patience and self-sacrifice, trying almost religiously to live according to the values she taught him (Lindow 181). Striving to live up to the norms of service and sacrifice, Shevek neglects his scientific work as he continually worries that he should be doing work that is more immediately essential to his society. His talents are put to work, however, leading him to the university of Abennay, the central hub of Anarres. He was hoping to find peers there, but quickly finds that he lacks intellectual sparring partners, and his mentor reveals himself to be a profiteer from the work of others. Feeling that these conditions are limiting his work, leads Shevek to initiate communication with the Ieu Eun University of A-Io, the largest and most prosperous nation of Urras.

The two planets have lived in close to total isolation from each other since the Odonian revolution, the only known communication being a ship transporting supplies to Anarres and taking minerals back to Urras eight times a year, so when Shevek learns that there are also letters being exchanged, the idea alarms him.

> Did such people actually exchange ideas with free people in a nonaggressive voluntary manner? Could they really admit equality and participate in intellectual solidarity, or were they merely trying to dominate, to assert their power, to possess? The idea of actually exchanging letters with a propertarian alarmed him. (Le Guin *Td* 109)

His thoughts expose the manipulation of the children of Anarres, showing the result of myths and propaganda taught about the other planet during the isolated years since the revolution. "All the material on Urras available to students is the same. Disgusting, immoral, excremental" (Le Guin *Td* 43). The people of Anarres sees Urras as an oppressive consumer-capitalist dystopia. Reversed, the capitalist America of 1974, and by extension the modern western-world parallel that is Urras, sees Anarres as a dirt-poor institution of criminals, closer to savages than respectable people. Both parties present themselves and their ideology as utopian, using the other as a dystopian villain to strike fear into the people, making their own philosophy unquestionable. The children of Anarres are not taught to challenge the system, to free themselves and demand change, but merely to repeat the words of Odo without doubting and without developing their own ideas and decision making (Bouet 51).

3.1.3   Walls and mobiles

Walls, one of the two central metaphors of the novel, is at play when Shevek is forced to question the system he was raised in as he realizes that the community's idealism is stagnating. The people of Anarres have forgotten one of Odo's main principles, perpetual revolution, which I will discuss when I present the rest of her principles in relating to the utopian idea. Walls are ambiguous by definition, referring back to the novel's subtitle. "Like all walls, it was ambiguous, two-faced. What was inside it and what was outside it depended upon which side you were on" (Le Guin *Td* 1). They can both protect and imprison and Shevek understands that his society has become two faced. Sandra J. Lindlow say that the two include "a bright one that reflects positive communal values and a dark one that fosters petty and self-serving impulses, thereby allowing politically savvy bullies to manipulate the system for their own ends" (6). The wall metaphor is introduced in the very first chapter of the description of a physical wall outside Abbenay, intended to serve as protection for the post-revolutionary society of Anarres from the "propertarian" and "egotizing" Urrasti.

> There was a wall. It did not look important. It was built of uncut rocks roughly mortared. An adult could look right over it, and even a child could climb it. Where it crossed the roadway, instead of having a gate it degenerated into mere geometry, a line, an idea of boundary. But the idea was real. It was important. For seven generations there had been nothing in the world more important than that wall. (Le Guin *Td* 1)

Walls are often used ideologically to create a "façade of security and protection, thus instating a physical, psychological line or border defining one's identity and creating constrictions, repression and subjugation" (Bouet 9). Time and toil have changed the perception of this wall, however, with it becoming limitation and separation rather than protection (Moylan 93).

The Anarresti value freedom over security, but Annares has nevertheless become a place of status quo, the ideals of the community becoming stationary, ingrown, a typical problem for utopian projects. No system is perfect, and Tom Moylan sees the primary social problem of the Odonians as "the danger of centralization of power in an elite group and the reduction of the ideals of the revolution into a dogmatic ideology that itself inhibits further emancipatory activity" (100). Le Guin has created a society whose principles can be read as a reversal of the principles of classic dystopian societies such at Oceania in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four.* Instead of a society where the main responsibility of the individual is to accept and obey authority, the Anarresti's is to reject it, to value freedom over security (Booker and Thomas 231). I will discuss this metaphor in greater detail later.

The second central metaphor of the novel is that of the mobile. Created by Shevek's partner, Takver, mobiles are "complex concentric shapes made of wire, which moved and changed slowly and inwardly when suspended from the ceiling" (Le Guin *Td* 183). Where the metaphor of walls represents obstacles and ambiguousness, the barriers Shevek must cross in order to achieve his goals, mobiles embody balance and perpetual motion, the ideal state of him and his society (Lindow 174). Though not as obvious as the wall, the metaphor of mobiles occurs throughout the novel, in the two worlds which revolve around each other, in the principle of perpetual revolution, in Shevek's relationship with Takver, in the concept he is trying to prove in temporal physics, and ultimately as "a dynamic world of a number of parts that become one through creative conception" (Lindow 183). As I will discuss later in this chapter, Shevek's ultimate goal is to unbuild walls in order to facilitate the dynamic world, the utopia, that Odo envisioned.

3.1.4   Setting

Most of the narrative centers around the two largest cities of Anarres and Urras, Abbenay and Nio Esseia respectively. The aesthetics of the two cities informs much of the initiation of the beginning, as the implied author contrasts the two to bring out the aesthetical and ideological

difference between them. The planet of Anarres for the most part consists of different shades of desert, where the lack of biological partners has led to a people that has surpassed historical determinism, free from predators and victims, to invent their own destinies (Jameson 272). Shevek is therefore quite amazed when he observes a large animal, a donkey, on his arrival in Urras. The contrast between the two cities is just one of many binaries that the implied author uses to show the practical results of opposite ideologies and ethical value-systems. The Odonian exodus grew what began as a small mining town into a small city, and slowly Abbenay became the unofficial central hub of the many settlements, towns, and cities on the decentralized planet. Uncommonly, Anarres is not an Eden-like paradise of lazy summer days and plenty of fruits like in "Omelas;" it is a dry and barren world, and it is through toughness, dedication, and hard work that the Odonian community make an existence for themselves. It is through solidarity and cooperation that survival is granted, and this struggle is ingrained in the principles of their ideology. The scarcity of Anarres and the Odonian ideal of practicality and decentralization result in a city where the roads were built before the buildings, creating an open city, accessible to everyone, modest and reserved rather than flashy as the cities of Urras, a true embodiment of the Odonian ideals, according to Shevek (Le Guin *Td* 95-100).

The nation of A-Io, home of the Ioti, is a beautiful one, with trees, plants, and animals of all sorts, all of which could not survive in the harsh climate of Anarres. On the whole, the lush nature of Urras and Nio Esseia is so different to Shevek that he is completely taken in by the beauty of the city, creating a stark contrast to the barren environment of Anarres, making him believe for a second that he had been wrong all along and that this world was the actual utopia. Quickly, though, his amazement over the city begins to sour and throughout the novel he finds more and more instances of practices that break with his values, such as the keeping of servants, the inequality of women, the lavish show of material wealth, et cetera. During these first chapters, the reader is invited into a critique of the capitalist world by the implied author, and by association of our own. The implied author's choices in her world building and the narrator's choices in describing it, including the description of Abbenay and Nio Esseia, add to the motif of socialist and anarchistic ideals as ethical cornerstones in a functioning utopia and are the first rhetorical interactions of the initiation. Throughout the beginning of the story as the authorial audience observes the principles of Odo, they are forced to make aesthetical judgments about the world and ethical judgments about the two ideologies, and these judgments form the main points in the discussion of the ethical value-system of this particular utopia. The initiation, as in "Omelas," is an invitation to an investigation of the

ideologies of the two worlds and what they result in, exposing the ethical value-system that informs the communities.

3.1.5   Odonian principles

Through the retrospective chapters and Shevek's musing on the differences between the worlds, we get a detailed look at the principles on which the Odonian society is built. Solidarity, communal living, and humility are at its core, summed up in the first half of Laia Aseio Odo's epitaph: "To be whole is to be part; true voyage is return" (Le Guin *Td* 84). It reflects the importance of solidarity and compassion in their society. For the Anarresti to be able to survive on their barren planet, they have to work together for a common goal, for the common good of everyone. However, being forced to work together also means being ruled, as Shevek so precisely points out at the end of the story:

> What we're after is to remind ourselves that we didn't come to Anarres for safety, but for freedom. If we must all agree, all work together, we're no better than a machine. If an individual can't work in solidarity with his fellows, it's his duty to work alone. His duty and his right. We have been denying people that right. We've been saying, more and more often, you must work with the others, you must accept the rule of the majority. But any rule is tyranny. (Le Guin *Td* 359)

Their community survives through dedication and hard work. The people *know* that they must cooperate with one another in order to survive, however, one of the most important principles, as the quotation reflects, is that they must choose and dedicate themselves to the project, and not be forced to work. Knowing that they must cooperate, they also avoid the ethos of competition that is so important on Urras (and in the modern western world). This points back to the title: they own nothing and therefore they have nothing to compete over, and therefore they can cooperate for the well-being of their society (Booker and Thomas 232).

There is an argument to be made about the implausibility of Anarres, that these principles are results of the planet's conditions rather than the idealism of its people. As John Fekete states, "though the overwhelming survival necessities that test the solidarity of the empty-handed colonists are immanent in their history, nevertheless this environmental fate is really the product of transcendent intervention by authorial sleight of hand. Le Guin chooses to establish this bleak adversity as the laboratory for the socio-political experiment she constructs" (134). That Le Guin provides an unlikely setting for her utopian community is

problematic in that it necessitates a change in human nature, something which I will discuss at the end of this close reading. This drastic measure potentially creates a people that fails as an experiment in alternative societal systems for real-world human beings.

Their society is in many ways, according to Moylan, similar to that of the American frontier. "Indeed, Anarres is very much a frontier society which values minimal government, individual freedom, and locally exercised power, production, and consumption" (Moylan 96). The economy is based on basic survival and Odo's economic principles permeate through their whole society:

> the principle of organic economy was too essential to the functioning of the society not to affect ethics and aesthetics profoundly. "Excess is excrement," Odo wrote in the *Analogy*. Excrement retained in the body is a poison. (Le Guin *Td* 98)

The environmental lack of Anarres means that the Anarresti must build their lives on human efforts. Their ideology is in many ways structured around this need, and the implied author's positive description of their asceticism intends to challenge the assumption that material wealth is a prerequisite for happiness (Booker and Thomas 232). When Shevek is exposed to the capitalist system of Urras, he is shocked by the lust for profit, material gain, and power, and the inequalities this creates. He believes that if one removed "a human being's natural incentive to work – his initiative, his spontaneous creative energy – and replaced it with external motivation and coercion, he would create a lazy and careless worker" (Le Guin *Td* 82). In contrast, the economic model of Anarres produces only the things one needs, and only as much as is practical. The ethos of sharing is further exemplified when Shevek is given a book and directed to teach himself the Iotic language of the Urras through solitary study. He is to keep this a secret, but the idea that intellectual property is a thing is so new to him that he gets perplexed by moral confusion (Johns 180). Knowledge is of course supposed to be shared, as everything else. "Surely, freedom lay rather in openness than secrecy, and freedom is always worth the risk" (Le Guin *Td* 109).

In contrast to the city of Omelas, the utopia in *The Dispossessed* is not merely a beautification of existence, rather it is, according to Jameson, a return to the fundamentals of life. It is a place where humanity is not freed from violence, but freed from the determinisms of history itself, whether they are economic, political or social, collectively settling problems within the interpersonal relationships of the community instead of being judged by a law or some other institutional rule (275). Sexual activity for instance, as long as it is mutual and non-exploitative, is encouraged from childhood and all types of preferences are recognized.

Odonian partnerships are also based on free choice between equals. They must choose to bond, and the bond only exists until is stops working (Moylan 100). In our world marriage is an institution, but in a society where institutions are against official ideology, partnerships take the role of a mere function. This acceptance of change in relationships reflects the frugality that is the essential core of the Odonian economic model, and which has also become the core of the Odonian ideology.

As I mentioned previously, Shevek begins to see stagnation in his community. Instead of keeping to the rule of no-hierarchy, an elite or ruling-class is slowly and silently establishing itself, portrayed by characters such as Rulag, Shevek's mother, and Sabul, Shevek's mentor at Abbenay university. The lack of change means that the people have forgotten the most important Odonian principle, perpetual revolution.

> With the myth of the state out of the way, the real mutability and reciprocity of society and individual became clear. Sacrifice might be demanded of the individual, but never compromise: for though only the society could give security and stability, only the individual, the person, had the power of moral choice – the power of change, the essential function of life. The Odonian society was conceived as a permanent revolution, and revolution begins in the thinking mind. (Le Guin *Td* 333)

The difficulty of stagnation, that there is little reason for change once ideal conditions have been established, is one that is faced by all utopian projects (Booker and Thomas 231). If no change occurs within a society, conditions tend to deteriorate, and utopias become dystopias. The implied author implicitly comments that this willingness to change is what makes a society utopian, and presents her point by having the Odonian philosophy embrace perpetual change as one of its central principles (Booker and Thomas 230). The walls of these new "hidden institutions," also exemplified by the unquestionability of the Odonian system, make Shevek decide that he wants to travel to Urras to "unbuild walls" (Le Guin *Td* 8). His project becomes two-fold. One, to continue his work in physics, and two, to assess his society in contrast to another in order to correct the direction of Anarres.

3.1.6 Brainwashing

One can clearly argue that there is a degree of brainwashing within the system. As already mentioned, they live a life according to the principles of Odo, they are told horror stories about Urras in school, something which I will discuss later, but more importantly they have

their own language specifically developed as a measure to create an ideal society. This language, "Pravic," is designed to influence the thinking of the Anarresti, drawing clear parallels to languages such as "Newspeak" in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, incorporating important principles such as the equality between the genders and the society's communal nature. The latter is demonstrated in the use of the same word for "work" and "play," and few if any expressions indicating possession. This includes the words for parents, "the" mother instead of "my" mother, and sexual verbs which indicate mutual action, something two people do, not something one did or had (Le Guin *Td* 53) (Booker and Thomas 232). The implied author presents the indoctrination of the Anarresti as a positive conditioning: "The identity of the words 'work' and 'play' in Pravic had, of course, a strong ethical significance. Odo had seen the danger of a rigid moralism arising from the use of the word 'work' in her analogic system: the cells must work together, the optimum working of the organism, the work done by each element, and so forth. Cooperation and function, essential concepts of the *Analogy*, both implied work" (Le Guin *Td* 269). However, Pravic in reality indicates social and psychological control, people being contained with isolationist measures meant to keep outsiders out but works in reality as a kind of "thought police by ignorance." The language carries clear dystopian traits, something I will discuss in the section about utopian flaws in *The Dispossessed*.

Darko Suvin notes that the title of Le Guin's novel is a reference to Fyodor Dostoyevsky's novel *Demons* (1861), which is also called "The Possessed," a political and religious work that comments on how ideology can take possession of one's being (Bouet 40). The Anarresti are possessed by their ideology, the physical wall outside Abbenay has become a psychological barrier to the change they need in order to combat the stagnation that has seeped into their system since the revolution. The administrative bureaucracy serving the Odonian society has become self-serving, while non-conformists such as Shevek are denied work postings or driven to the asylum. Shevek himself is denied teaching posts by his mentor, Sabul, and his mother, Rulag, decides a vote against Shevek's efforts to open communication to other worlds (Moylan 100). As Bouet states, "ideology and power structures are generated, yet they bare the face of Odonism, the philosophy of anarchy, becoming akin to a possessing force, the wall or the wrappings enslaving the population" (41). To combat the stagnation, to bring back change to the Odonian ethos, Shevek takes the route of the ethical few in "Omelas," he walks away, though with the intent of coming back (Lindow 185).

3.2   Judgments

As in "Omelas" the beginning of *The Dispossessed* lasts for a large chunk of the story. In both narratives, Le Guin spends much of the time describing the societies and their inner workings, exposing their ethical value-system in order to guide the authorial audience towards specific narrative judgments. If we view this story as a continuation of a thought experiment began by Le Guin with "Omelas," then we can surmise that this is another instance of what happens when ideology possesses rather than informs a society. Specifically, the implied author wants the reader to assess the ethical-value system of the society, to consider whether the resulting society benefits the individual, and whether it is believable as a utopia. Aesthetically, the break with the traditional utopian idea as demonstrated in "Omelas" makes the society believable in that it fosters a community that works together for the common good of all. The juxtaposition of Shevek's journey into the streets of Nio Esseia with the story of the Anarres draught shows how struggle makes people come together. In the first a hundred thousand people come together to strike and in the latter the hardship they endure reestablishes the solidarity of their community, "there is exhilaration in finding that the bond is stronger, after all, than all that tries the bond" (Le Guin *Td* 247). The implied author guides the reader through the two worlds, comparing and contrasting all sides of the theory and practice of their ideologies, showing that though the theory might be utopian, problems that plague all utopian projects also appear in theirs, such as stagnation.

The ethical value-system that the implied author envisions is sound and believable in theory. A utopia built on solidarity, humility and cooperation, tested through toughness and dedication, is quite believable but the result of idealism against the test of time shows why the utopia stagnates. Normal human tendencies are to pursue betterment of their own situation, and by that logic a tough environment like Anarres will lead to people slacking off or putting the workload on others. As we see in the end of the narrative when we meet the Hainish people, a post-scarcity utopian society, their status becomes instantly more believable when we learn that they have existed for hundreds of millennia and have become an elevated humanoid race whose utopia does not rise and fall on the whims of individuals (Le Guin *Td* 385). The choice of protagonist in Shevek follows the common trope of the idealistic hero who has extraordinary abilities, and his reflections on his own society and that of Urras makes it easy to believe that utopia can be realized, if only everyone was as committed as himself. However, it is fair to question the implied author's motives in using such a character, when

someone less ideologically certain might have agreed with Keng, the Terran ambassador, when she describes the ruin that is future Earth:

> The world that comes as close as any could to Paradise. […] I know it's full of evils, full of human injustice, greed, folly, waste. But it is also full of good, of beauty, vitality, achievement. It is what a world should be! It is *alive*, tremendously alive – alive, despite all its evils, with hope. (Le Guin *Td* 347)

The scientist's duty of being ethical, responsible, and honest nevertheless makes it possible that Shevek, as the narrator's focalization, represents what he sees truthfully and objectively even when he is horrified by what he sees. There is in fact more reason to worry that the implied author's choice of protagonist overshadows other options, such as women or racial minorities, their peripheral role being something I will consider in the larger discussion of the utopian idea.

When the launch comes in the form of an anonymous letter, leading in part to Shevek journeying into the streets of Nio Esseia, the global instability is established as an extension of stagnation of the Odonian society. The instability is that Shevek realizes that he has been imprisoned by the Ioti power elite, only to see what they want him to see, facilitating him finishing his theory which they can then use in an ambitious claim to power over the other nine known worlds. The narrative voyage, the development of the global instability in the narrative middle (Phelan *Ef* 18), sees Shevek lead the lower classes of Urras in a general strike, a social revolution to complete the aborted Odonian revolution which ended when the Urrasti gave the revolutionaries Anarres (Moylan 115): "We have nothing but our freedom. We have nothing to give you but your own freedom. We have no law but the single principle of mutual aid between individuals" (Le Guin *Td* 300). The idea of the socialist-anarchist ideology of Anarres is deemed so dangerous enough by the powers of A-Io, that they attack the demonstration with extreme violence; Shevek barely escapes with his life. In his escape he literally and figuratively jumps over walls, ending up at the Terran embassy and resolution. Booker and Thomas draw lines back to the activism of 1960s America and the events such as the Kent State Massacre, again pointing to A-Io as an analogy of Le Guin's contemporary capitalist society (234).

The narrative end sees Shevek truly embrace his hatred for the Ioti ideology as he meets with the Terran ambassador:

> There is no freedom. It is a box – Urras is a box, a package, with all the beautiful wrapping of blue sky and meadows and forests and great cities. And you open the box,

and what is inside it? A black cellar full of dust, and a dead man. A man whose hand was shot off because he held it out to others. I have been in Hell at last. Desar was right; it is Urras; Hell is Urras. (Le Guin *Td* 347)

His rant draws lines back to the child in the basement of "Omelas," and the implied author almost shouts her intent to the authorial audience: utopia is solidarity and solidarity fails in competition with power and obsession with material wealth. "True voyage is return," says Laia Odo's gravestone, and Shevek's journey reaches its chiasmus when he gives away his theory to all the known worlds and returns to what is likely to be an unwelcome Anarres. Along with him he brings the Hainish Ketho, and a hope that the experience of opening up to outside contact can break the stagnation that threatens their society.

3.2.2   Utopian flaws in *The Dispossessed*

Remembering Phelan's notion that the implied author communicates the story to the audience for her own purposes, these purposes seem quite clear. The implied author guides the authorial audience towards condemning the capitalist system of A-Io and their obsession with material wealth, making them reflect on their own society and the alternative ideals they could desire and pursue. As the flesh-and-blood author herself wrote in 2015 in a critical essay published in *Motherboard*: "Every benefit industrialism and capitalism have brought us, every wonderful advance in knowledge and health and communication and comfort, casts the same fatal shadow. All we have, we have taken from the earth; and, taking with ever-increasing speed and greed, we now return little but what is sterile or poisoned" ("Future of the Left"). Almost 50 years earlier *The Dispossessed* presented a similar criticism of capitalist ideology in the analogy of America as A-Io and in the words of the Terran ambassador when she describes what she sees as the future results of its development. Shevek, the stranger in a strange land, is there to observe and cast judgment over it while at the same time providing an alternative to that development. There is reason to argue, however, that the novel falls short of its intention, that the reader does not reach the same conclusions as the implied author guides them towards.

There are different reasons for this, though I will argue that the main reason is ethical rather than the fact that 50 years after the novel's publication, capitalism has become the global standard. Nor is it a result of narrative form as Moylan, for instance, in part argues:

"Ambitious and well-meaning, *The Dispossessed* finally falls victim to the historical situation it opposes. Because it does not sufficiently break with the limits of the phallocratic-capitalist system in its own formal practices, the novel ensures that the enclosure of life by the dominant system is preserved more than it is negated" (119). He argues that the choice of a male intellectual protagonist, and that the novel is made within the traditional ideology of male privilege and world capitalism, undermine the author's intent to express a radical vision that would transcend that ideology. Moylan's arguments represent an important criticism of Le Guin's narrative, of course. But where the novelist really falls victim to her own intent is in the ethical value-system she presents, failing to provide an alternative that takes into consideration the anthropological, the less than ideal individual who is not able to adopt moral rigidity by sheer will and insight (Fekete 134). Not everyone can be like Shevek, who appears as a moral *Übermensch*; life is much more complex than that, not nearly as flexible to moral and social intervention as the implied author proposes. He also works as the embodiment of the thought that ideas may circulate, but never material goods. This creates, according to Khouri, a "paradox of a writer who upholds free examination of ideas, but imposes austerity regarding material abundance" (52).

The problem is the principle that material dispossession is necessary for ethical wealth. As John Fekete puts it, "in other words, a narrowing of the objective horizons, the incorporation of the power of scarcity and survival necessity into the very structure of the situation, mark Le Guin's ambiguous utopia as less hopeful than is commonly supposed" (135). Asceticism is one way to reverse the focus on material comforts of Le Guin's contemporary America, and by association the modern western world, and though I agree with the sentiment as with most of the other Odonian principles, the ethos of taking away the comforts of modern life looks like degeneration pretending to be progress. One can claim that the very environment of Anarres makes the aesthetical judgment of their society valid, that the Odonian principles could work in a place as barren and difficult as this planet. However, it also forces an individual to take part, to be a productive member of society. The question then becomes what would happen to, for instance, a handicapped person, or someone else who does not have the opportunity to be a productive member in such a society. There are real-world historical ideologies that have answered that question, but that answer has never been utopian, and the implied author does not provide a resolution either.

The gist of Le Guin's Odonian ideals are effective and a society based on many of her Odonian principles would be a very humane one. But those who impose societal control,

whether inward control or outward, can not be considered utopian, making Anarres a utopia only by self-profession, something they have in common with many historical civilizations with ideologies that resulted in something much closer to dystopia. The most problematic point, perhaps, is the Anarresti language Pravic, a supposedly rationally invented language reflecting the values of their society. It is supposed to reinforce the utopian project, but in reality, it becomes a tool for systematic thought control and arguably the main reason for their isolationist measures. Though Le Guin presents the indoctrination of the Anarresti as a positive conditioning, Pravic's function as social and psychological control, contained with isolationist measures meant to keep outsiders out, in reality works as a kind of "thought police by ignorance." Walter Myers goes so far as to conclude that the society of Anarres is a dystopia: "If the society of Anarres in *The Dispossessed* is not a dystopia, it has all the machinery of one, from a language designed to influence the thinking of its people through every weapon needed to keep that language from being changed" (Booker and Thomas 233). The change he is referring to is the fact that normal evolution makes languages change, especially a language that is clearly created for a reason develops quickly as the language is taken into regular use with the slang and words taking on more contexts. Though well-intended, the isolationist measures the Odonians have to live by to uphold their language, the walls they have created around their society, restrict freedom of knowledge and communication, which results in limiting their understanding of others and preventing subjectivity (Bouet 230). Arguably, Pravic facilitates implicit systems for control and restrictions on thought which has led to a stagnating society where individual initiative is stifled by the pressure to conform to societal norms.

As a continuation of the "Omelas" thought experiment, *The Dispossessed* is a rich novel that works best in its critique of contemporary society. As a utopian project it falls short. However, the alternative Le Guin presents is too idealistic in its conception to be more than a selection of largely admirable principles to keep in the mind when engaging with the world. In the end the novel works best, in my opinion, as a beautiful narrative about one man's journey to make the world a better place and to come home. In the next section, I will finally gather my conclusions about the two utopian texts and discuss whether utopian ideas fail to be more than just that, ideas, and finally discuss them in relation to anti-utopian thought, asking if *trying to make something better for everyone, just makes it worse for someone*.

4 Conclusion: The Flaws of Utopia

Utopian fiction envisions worlds or societies that are better than the one the flesh-and-blood author is living in. In her two narratives, Le Guin has conducted a thought-experiment on the utopian idea. In "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" she presents the implications of a society collectively taking an ideological route that subjugates a single individual for the benefit of all, while in *The Dispossessed* she attempts to present an alternative to contemporary ideology, as caricatured in "Omelas," showing admirable principles that such a society could base itself on. The result, as shown in my analysis, is two failed utopian projects, one by design, the other by its own idealism. As I have shown, both expose the problematic aspects of the ethical value-systems that substantiate their respective ideologies. Though everyone carries different value-systems, understood as the result of culture, experience, and upbringing, I believe that by using Phelan's rhetorical theory of narrative I have shown that the issues within the ethics of the two narratives are not just a result of personal sensibilities, but objectively problematic.

Therefore, there is reason to ask whether the utopian idea in itself is ethically problematic. My thesis falls short in regard to this question as it does not include any other utopias with which to compare Le Guin's, but as one of the most influential critical utopias of the modern era of sf, I believe I can at least make some tentative claims. The readings have shown that utopias by definition must be envisioned through the lens of ideology, as Jameson states: "the effectively ideological is also, at the same time, necessarily Utopian" (Moylan 19). For these ideologies (the set of shared practices creating a belief-system) to shape a whole society, they must be indoctrinated into every individual, demanding some sort of system for social control. In "Omelas" it was the suffering child and that everyone knows about it, and in *The Dispossessed* it was their language, education, and their planet's demands for survival. Remembering that the definition of ethics involved any strengthening or weakening of a person's virtues, it must be argued that such a system of control weakens human beings' tendencies for self-control and self-determination, creating an ethical value-system at the base of their utopian projects that does not serve the positive ethical intentions of the individual, only their society. Such a system is then arguably not one that leaves an ideal state of tranquility and justice where social issues have been solved, even if the two other – political and economical issues – are better than in the real world. All in all, this means that the utopian projects fail to live up to its definition; They are therefore not utopias.

To envision a functioning utopia would mean then, to create an ideal society for *every* individual. However, if our personal ethics are shaped by culture, experiences, and upbringing, such a society must cater to the needs of all, or every single person must be incarnations of the moral *Übermensch* Shevek, something of course neither society can, nor the human condition allows. In the words of Fekete, "If human life is not a geometric problem where every unknown bears a determinate relationship to the known facts and to the system or organizing principles, then no system will be able to generate, account for, instrumentalize, or co-ordinate every particular within it" (140). The critical utopias explore the unrealized potential of human community, as I mentioned in the beginning of the thesis, attempting to create a utopian society filled with ordinary relatable people. The issue that my reading of Le Guin's narratives have shown, is that even if the aesthetics of her story is believable, that is as a place that can organically produce people with positive ethical qualities, the idealistic perfection they must exhibit for the community to be utopian, is unattainable for most, making them unrelatable and extraordinary.

The question then becomes an anti-utopian one, whether someone always has to suffer for most people to enjoy a better society. In "Omelas" the answer is obviously yes, the utilitarian ideology at its base requires someone to suffer for the good of the rest, making it fairly easy to classify this story as anti-utopian, since it essentially functions as a criticism of utopian projects. In *The Dispossessed* the answer is not as obvious, however, seeing that the whole society suffers collectively, and it is through that suffering that they uphold the utopian idea. One can argue that the principles that are attributed to Odo herself are utopian, and that those elements that carry anti-utopian or dystopian tendencies are attributed to those that came after; she died before the settlement of Anarres after all. The readings have shown two narratives that are successful in demonstrating the problematic sides and fallacies of utopia, whether done on purpose or not. Arguing that they are essentially anti-utopian holds water, but as I will show next, it is not necessarily the most precise conclusion.

Jameson suggests that the anti-utopian genre stems from the fear of the emergence of a dictator or something similar, who in turn makes imagining utopia impossible (86). This fear is not obvious in any of the two narratives. Odo is never thought of in that regard, at least not by the Anarresti, rather she is an image of the possibility of utopian longing. Perhaps then, Le Guin's narratives are not essentially anti-utopias but rather examples of the power of dreaming up better scenarios, the longing for something better. Where *The Dispossessed* works best after all, is not as a blueprint for utopia, but as literary expressions committed to

thinking the world differently, or as Moylan says in his conclusion, "as a diverse series of preconceptual images which express the dreams behind that political activity and anticipate the social alternatives that many are still working for" (198). Jameson boils the anti-utopian definition down to a fear of utopia (211). If viewed in this light, Le Guin's narratives are not anti-utopian at all, they rather embody the ethos of imagination as the first step towards progress. Her thought-experiment did not result in a practical idea of a functioning utopia, but it implicates contemporary ideology, precisely pointing to its problematic sides and starting an imaginative process of finding alternatives. Capitalism is today the dominant ideology, but its principle of endless progress and never-ending consumption is not sustainable, so if we can not imagine something better, then how can we change or adapt? Jameson's sentiment becomes, then, an "anti-anti utopia," a confrontation with the fear of utopian dreaming. He claims that utopian literature performs a "critical negativity, that is in their function to demystify their opposite numbers" (211).

Jameson has, admittedly, put me in a precarious situation. His confrontation of the anti-utopia, presenting the utopian project as something concerned with the stuff of dreams, of imaginative utterances of solidarity and tolerance, implying that such dreams should be obsolete, resonates deeply with me. I would rather that the world concerned itself with dreaming up alternatives to the ideologies of today, than just criticize those who do so, and if that is the understanding of anti-utopia, my argument must change into an argument *for* utopian longings. Something which is ironic, considering the Odonian principle of change. Le Guin's fictions can be seen as critiques of the utopian idea and contemporary powers' presentation of themselves as utopian, but it is not a critique of utopian dreaming itself. It is important that we do not think of democracy and capitalism, and the different versions of both that almost all of the world adheres to, as perfect systems, our world needs alternative systems and alternative thinking.

Fekete writes that "the capacity of SF to generate a virtual infinity of parallel models and to do so with a sophisticated self-consciousness about ideological/synecdochic/value parameters - may yet be one of the most crucial human resources and one of the best grounds on which to learn to expand our minds and realities" (141). As noted in the Introduction of this thesis, Le Guin believed with Shelley that the imagination is the greatest instrument of moral good, and in using her imagination she has written works whose imperative is not necessarily to present the perfect utopian system but to expose the world to alternatives and to expand our minds and realities. Reflecting on Jameson's argument, I have found that my

argument must be changed, I will therefore rather conclude that utopian dreaming is necessary for imagining alternatives to these systems, that utopia as a form is not the representation of finished alternatives, but the imperative for being able to imagine them.

His hands were empty, as they had always been. (Le Guin *Td* 387)

Summary and last thoughts

The reading of just one author's utopian fictions is not likely to expose everything about the utopian idea, and it would be interesting to explore this analysis of the narrative ethics in Le Guin in context with other utopian fictions by different authors. A continuation of this project could look more thoroughly at premises for utopian thought that different narratives share, and what these differences imply about the ethics of the utopian idea. It could also explore the narrative techniques authors use to guide the authorial audience towards the same anti- or anti-anti-utopian conclusions as Le Guin's fiction do. Nevertheless, I believe that this thesis has illuminated many of the important aspects within utopian thinking, much because that Ursula K. Le Guin was a brilliant author whose thinking and writing are not merely narrative art, but also philosophical works of a high order, considered some of the most important critical utopias of the period.

Le Guin believed that there was no way to act morally or responsibly if you cannot or will not imagine the results of your actions, and she took that ethos and put it to work, imagining the results of the actions of many people in their attempts at creating utopias. I believed that there were inherent flaws in the utopian idea and have attempted to analyze these works of imagination through the lens of narrative ethics to examine the underlying ethics of utopia. In order to thoroughly discuss this theory, I split my problem statement into three parts, asking why the child in "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" had to suffer, whether *The Dispossessed* succeeded in its utopian project, and in the end whether the inherent flaws in the idea of utopia meant that trying to make things better for everyone, always made things worse for someone else.

James Phelan's rhetorical theory of narrative proved to be a good tool for exposing ethical issues within the text when it showed why the child had to suffer in "Omelas," by

revealing the inhuman choice between utopia and the freedom of the individual. In the analysis of *The Dispossessed*, Phelan's theory helped show how the ideological indoctrination of the individual was needed for a utopia to work. The demands of social control, underscoring the ethical value-system of a utopian project, do not leave an ideal state of tranquility and justice, proving that it is not possible for the utopian idea to live up to its definition. This makes them examples of utopian longing, but not of utopian communities, which means that the novel fails in its utopian project. My attempt at arguing for the idea of anti-utopia, however, revealed to me the positive impacts inherent in utopian longing. Only by envisioning something better can we expand our minds and realities, and in the end hope for change.

> We cannot solve a crisis without treating it as a crisis. If solutions within the system are so impossible to find, then we should change the system itself. (Greta Thunberg)

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