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Literary Devices: Teaching Social Contract Theory with A Short Story

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ABSTRACT

Teaching the social contract tradition to students can be frustrating. Works by Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau may seem arcane, abstract, or irrelevant to students. Yet, it is important for students to think about what processes or mechanisms would make consent and dissent legitimate. To address this problem, this paper explains how to use a short story, “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas,” to examine the procedures of obtaining consent and of engaging in dissent. This paper includes: a plot summary, two paths for integrating “Omelas” into syllabi, and a number of practical tools to use in the classroom, including discussion questions, learning objectives, and a classroom activity. After reading it, you should be able to decide if “Omelas” would be a good addition to your syllabus and, if so, how to use it in your classroom.

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Teaching the social contract tradition to undergraduate students can be frustrating. Students may find the writing style of Hobbes, Locke, or Rousseau fusty, while critical concepts such as the state of nature or tacit consent may seem arcane, abstract, or irrelevant. Some students may struggle to understand why the process of securing consent matters (Pitkin 1965; Herzog 1989; Simmons 2001). They may also miss that consent and dissent are often linked in the social contract tradition – that is, consent to a social contract tends to limit what counts as legitimate dissent or revolution from it (Walzer 1970).

Is it possible to get students invested in exploring the process of consent (and maybe even get excited by it)? This is a big ask, one that I struggled with until I came across a short story by Ursula K. Le Guin, “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” (Le Guin 2016). I have successfully used this thought-provoking work of literature in a wide variety of teaching contexts, including small seminars and large lecture courses, at three public universities. “Omelas” is disturbing. It depicts a suspicious process of consent to a social contract, one that raises questions about legitimacy. What’s more, the social contract is itself distressing because it is grounded on domination, injustice, and abuse.

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In addition to the substantive merits of “Omelas,” there are some practical considerations that make it an appealing addition to your syllabus (Parrish 2007; Fischer 2019). The story, which is approximately 2,800 words long, is readily available for free on the Internet. Also, students may be interested to know that the story crops up in a wide variety of places today. David Brooks centered a 2015 *New York Times* op-ed around “Omelas,” and the South Korean boy band BTS references it in a 2017 music video, which has over 279 million views (Brooks 2015; Choi 2017; Also see Lets Go North’s innovative short film. Lets_Go_North 2017).

The first section of this paper provides a brief summary of the plot of “Omelas,” while the two following sections discuss “Consent” and “Dissent.” The themes are discussed independently, so it is possible to read one section without reading the other. The two subjects are not explored exhaustively; there is plenty of room for your own insights and creativity. These sections should help you decide if “Omelas” is a good fit for your political theory syllabus and, if it is, what readings it can productively be paired with. Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau are obvious choices, but many other pairings are highlighted too. These suggested readings will help revise a syllabus or prepare a new one from scratch. The two sections on consent and dissent also provide material for lectures. The final section of this essay, “Toolbox for Teaching,” focuses on the nuts-and-bolts process of using “Omelas” and offers several pedagogical resources, including learning objectives, an in-class activity, discussion questions, and a summary table of materials and resources.

Plot summary

“Omelas” begins with a vivid description of an idyllic city whose inhabitants live in near-perfect harmony with one another and enjoy life immensely. The story describes the Summer Festival, which includes blissful images of gratification and contentment, along with a communal march to the grand meadow Green Fields. At the core of this beautiful community lies an ugly truth: the happiness of the citizens of Omelas depends on the misery of a lonely child locked away in a filthy basement. The child is unloved, miserable, uneducated, and tyrannized.

Le Guin suggests nothing can be done to relieve the child’s misery without destroying the community’s happiness. This relationship is absolute and unchanging. It is also well known. Every child between the ages of eight and twelve learns about the miserable child and confronts the painful, despotic arrangement at the core of Omelas’ joy.

What are the possible responses? “Omelas” describes three kinds of actions that citizens take. The first option, favored by most citizens, is agreement. Most citizens accept their inability to alter the situation. Their behavior is unchanged, and they enjoy life. Individuals in the second group visit the child periodically and witness its misery. They remain aware of suffering and injustice in their midst. The third group derives from the second. Some of those who see the child’s suffering leave Omelas altogether. They do not act together or coordinate their actions. The narrative is enigmatic about where the ones who walk away are going, saying that these individuals step into the vast and unknown wilderness outside of the city.

Consent

“Omelas” pairs well with many of the great thinkers of the social contract tradition because the story raises some thorny questions about consent. Social contract theory rests on the idea of individuals playing an active role in developing their government, at least hypothetically. This approach elevates ordinary individuals as political actors, bestowing on them the capacity to judge and consent on weighty political matters. We, average and unremarkable individuals, get to make choices about our government. The range of what we get to decide varies. Hobbes understood individual decision-making in narrow terms, as a one-time act of consent and transfer of power. At the same time, Rousseau envisioned a social contract in which citizens were the sovereign power and participated actively in democratic rule. Even in its minimal form, the social contract can be an emboldening idea. “Omelas” both pays homage to the power that the social contract confers on individual citizens and takes the concept of the expressed consent to the social contract very seriously. Still, the story presents a dystopian social contract that is exploitative, cruel, and despotic.

To see the centrality of consent in “Omelas,” recall that there are three actions that citizens tend to take in response to the injustice of the miserable child, agreement, witnessing, and walking away. The first is the most common; the majority of citizens accept the arrangement, and they consent to the life that it creates for them. The most open and explicit consent happens when citizens are children: they are informed about the community’s dependence on the child’s misery. This practice seems designed to combat willful ignorance or wishful thinking because it is transparent about the injustice, pain, and tyranny at the center of political life. Confronted with the situation’s injustice, some children struggle against consent, and some do go to see the child.

They would like to do something for the child. But there is nothing they can do. 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 the prosperity and beauty and delight of Omelas would wither and be destroyed (334–5).

These are the terms of the social contract in Omelas. They are “strict and absolute,” such that a single small attempt to improve the child’s happiness will result in the loss of joy of thousands of citizens (335).

There is, in other words, a clear social contract and a relatively precise moment of consent to its stipulations. Thus, “Omelas” repeats a key theme of social contract theory: the voluntary expression of approval by individuals to a specified division of political power. The city of Omelas solves a problem that social contract theorists from Hobbes forward have faced. Most people in the real world do not actually express consent to their government and, as a result, most governments are not legitimate, at least according to the strictest interpretation of the terms laid out in social contract theory. In Omelas, however, consent is explicit, and Omelas possesses a legitimate government, in this sense. Moreover, because of the clear statement of support, Omelas’ social contract is arguably more legitimate than most contemporary governments that we can think of.

Though “Omelas” includes expressed consent, it also exposes problems with consent. One difficulty is that children consent, not adults. It is hard to imagine that an eight to

twelve-year-old child would be able to choose *not* to consent to Omelas's social contract. To not agree would be to give up every source of protection, nourishment, shelter, learning, and love that the children know. Some Amish and Mennonite communities engage in a related practice, Rumspringa. Young people between the ages of 14 and 21 decide whether they want to remain a part of this tight-knit and restrictive community by exploring life outside of it (Mazie 2005).¹ Most choose to stay in their community. In comparison to Rumspringa, the age of consent in "Omelas" is low, and there is no opportunity for the children to experience life outside of Omelas. This seems to weigh the decision heavily in favor of consent, which raises questions about legitimacy. If the process is questionable, then the legitimacy of the agreement may also be thrown into question.

Indeed, a provocative line of analysis to pursue in class is that this practice may actually be about instruction, learning, or manufacturing consent. Exposing the children of Omelas to the miserable child offers them an early lesson, perhaps their first, in how to accept and rationalize injustice and oppression. If socialization or acceptance is the primary political goal of early exposure to the oppressed child, it appears to be effective. Even those children who are terribly upset and even go to see the child in the basement come to accept the situation. These "young spectators are always shocked and sickened at the sight. They feel disgust... anger, outrage, and impotence" (334). But, eventually, even they rationalize the situation. They come to believe that releasing the child would not really help. The child in the basement "is too degraded and imbecile to know any real joy" (335). What the children may be learning, then, is how to ignore abuse, to explain away repression, or to become quiet and accepting citizens.

This is a lesson that appears to be repeated for most of the citizens of Omelas. Even adults who are presumably in a better position to refuse the terms of the social contract rarely do so. Most residents of Omelas echo their explicit consent to the social contract as children by tacitly consenting to it throughout their lives. Locke described tacit consent as owning land or enjoying life in a political jurisdiction and obeying that place's laws. Simply walking along a highway or inheriting property may reveal tacit consent. Locke argued that these actions showed that the individual implicitly agreed with the terms of the social contract. The idea of tacit consent makes the most joyful and non-political of events, the Summer Festival, appear somewhat different. From the perspective of Lockean tacit consent, this happy communal event is overlaid with political significance: it shows tacit consent. Indeed, if there are degrees of implicit consent, then the Summer Festival is a strong expression of it. The residents of Omelas do not just walk alone along a country highway, as Locke put it in minimal terms, they promenade together through the streets of their city. Adorned similarly in robes, they wend their way to the same location, the great meadow Green Fields. This is a cohesive and planned event in which citizens look and act in the same way. Again, this action may reveal an implicit agreement with the child's torture and imprisonment from a Lockean perspective.

Critics have argued that Lockean tacit consent creates a very high bar for non-consent. An individual would have to leave behind all of her or his property and emigrate to a new land to avoid showing tacit consent. As Hume put it, "Can we seriously say, that a poor peasant or artizan has a free choice to leave his country, when

he knows no foreign language or manners, and lives, from day to day, by the small wages which he acquires? We may as well assert, that a man, by remaining in a vessel, freely consents to the dominion of the master, though he was carried on board while asleep, and must leap into the ocean, and perish the moment he leaves her” (Hume 1875). Hume thought of the difficulty of leaving from the position of deprivation, while “*Omelas*” makes a similar point from the perspective of wealth, plenty, and pleasure. *Omelas* is an idyllic home filled with good times, families, and friends and, therefore, it may be hard to leave.

This juncture creates a terrific opportunity to ask traditional-aged college students about their political obligations to their home communities. If they left home to attend college, do they plan to return after they graduate? Why or why not? It would be interesting to explore if these choices are informed by race, class, gender, or sexuality, elements of identity that “*Omelas*” does not touch on. Students who are older or have families may want to think about generational differences in remaining close to home or moving away. In immigrant nations like the US, it may be helpful to ask whether students’ parents or grandparents were immigrants to the country. Did they leave for voluntary or involuntary reasons? What political obligations did they feel to the places they departed from? In the US, students may be interested to know that the nonprofit “Lead for America” sponsors “Hometown Fellows” and “State Fellows” to return to, serve, and revitalize the local or state communities in which they grew up (2019). Faculty teaching in Europe can connect this discussion about freedom of movement within the EU and recent efforts to curtail relocation within the EU, such as the 2016 Brexit referendum.

What “*Omelas*” reveals about consent in the social contract tradition is ambivalent. The social contract at the center of the story uses injustice, exploitation, and tyranny to secure peace, prosperity, and happiness. The means are unjust, and the agreement itself results in violence and harm to the child. It also brings joy to the majority. This may encourage students to take a more skeptical look at the canonical social contract texts and the means of securing agreement in them. Are all social contracts, even those of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, unjust and exploitative in some fundamental way? Perhaps canonical thinkers are simply adept at hiding or obscuring inequity, brutality, and tyranny (Mills 1997; Pateman 1988; Zerilli 1994).

Dissent

“*Omelas*” begins and ends, from title to conclusion, with walking away. This focus invites students to grapple with the effectiveness and political significance of leaving. We are sometimes told that people “vote with their feet,” a phrase that suggests other ways of communicating political messages than casting ballots or deliberating on policies (Warren 2011). “*Omelas*” takes this idea seriously and, so doing, it can provoke class discussions about the benefits, proclivities, and risks of exit, especially as it relates to dissent or resistance.

The story suggests that walking away is a form of opposition, but it is essential to consider the arguments against that position. When students think of political opposition, they may think of civil disobedience or protests on the street, which are intended

to illuminate a fundamental political injustice within their communities. In these examples, protesters remain within their political organization, direct their actions toward the public, and act to correct a political wrong.

In contrast, walking away from Omelas does nothing to address the central injustice; the child remains miserable and abused. Also, it may be intended to influence the citizenry or leaders in the city, and it may not alter or undermine the social contract in a direct way. This raises the question as to whether more radical opposition is needed. Perhaps it would be morally right to oppose the social contract altogether, despite the majority's loss of happiness. As Kant put it, "all politics must bend the knee before the right" (Kant 1991; Singer 1994). Applying the categorical imperative to the child's situation could suggest a more radical and direct approach to righting this moral wrong.

A critic might argue that exit looks more like an abdication of political responsibility than opposition to injustice. The most robust version of this view will depict those who walk away as radically self-interested: they only care about saving their own souls, not helping the child. They leave to remove themselves from an unjust situation, to wash their hands of it. In protecting their own morality, however, they condemn the child. Arendt makes a related point about individual conscience: it can be satisfied through individual action (in this case, leaving) and does not require action to alter the political world. An adherent of individual conscience does "not pretend that a man's washing his hands of [a moral wrong] would make the world better or that a man had any obligation to do so" (Arendt 1972, 60). Another potential criticism is that the ones who walk away may actually do more harm than good. They resign their own happiness by leaving, and the child's misery is unchanged. So, from a utilitarian standpoint, walking away may lead to greater net unhappiness.

What are the arguments in favor of exit as a kind of opposition or dissent? The first is a pragmatic one: leaving is the only available political action to express disagreement. Omelas may have the outward appearance of a democracy: individuals are referred to as "citizens," and the city has no king, knights, or slaves. Unlike every contemporary democracy that we know of, however, there is no way for citizens to create political change. Omelas lacks civil disobedience, street protests, and political movements; it does not appear to have elections, representatives, or lobbying. By sharply curtailing political actions and democratic accountability, the story suggests that residents face a similar choice to the slogan, "My country, love it or leave it."

One way to understand the story's emphasis on exit is to consider it in light of Albert Hirschman's *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* (Hirschman 1970). Hirschman argued that is when individuals lack voice within an organization and cannot change it internally, their impetus to exit rises. This is what happens in Omelas: lacking the normal democratic channels to voice their displeasure, dissent, or opposition, individuals leave. A great companion to "Omelas" on this point is James Scott's discussion of secretive modes of resistance in highly restricted political contexts in *Weapons of the Weak* (Scott 1985). Reading "Omelas" alongside Adam Michnik's "Why You Are Not Emigrating..." can also be an effective way to prompt critical thinking along these lines (Michnik 1987). As James Baldwin's self-exile to France suggests, a radical sense of powerlessness can occur within democracies (Baldwin 1955).

Leaving does nothing for the child in the short term, but it can harm the city. The exiters not only withdraw their consent, they remove themselves. So doing, they take away everything that they might contribute to Omelas. Exiting parents and adults will no longer assist with raising children, for instance, or caring for the elderly. Exiting workers remove their labor and will no longer contribute to Omelas's economic life by creating goods, supplying services, or engaging in trade. Young and middle-aged adults also take away their reproductive capacities from Omelas; leaving is a de facto refusal to create more children for the city. At the individual level, these losses might be sharply felt. Walking away could mean losing a parent, a lover, a child, a friend, or a neighbor. At the communal level, a substantial departure could have an effect as well. Mass migration from East Germany in 1989–90 played a role in this country's collapse (Pfaff and Kim 2003).

It is also important to note that dramatic departures may be a way of drawing public attention to the injustice of the abuse of the child. Walking away creates a vision that is "quite incredible" (336). One way to prompt further discussion on this point is to raise the concept of a "noisy exit" or a "spectacular exit" (Kirkpatrick 2019). In this case, the exit itself is used to draw public attention to injustice or problem. Examples include moral resignations from political office, self-immolations, and hunger strikes (Bargu 2016). The exit *becomes* the political message. The departure itself expresses the actor's political opposition to a wide range of public audiences. The self-immolations occurring in the Tibetan Autonomous Region of China are a contemporary example (Woeser 2016).

It can be productive to ask students whether walking away would qualify as a noisy or spectacular exit, as described in the story. If not, what would a spectacular exit from Omelas look like? Would the ones who walk away leave behind a letter or make a speech (as politicians making a noisy exit from their positions sometimes do), or could they do something more dramatic like a hunger strike or self-immolation? This presses students to think about how the ones who walk away could radicalize exit, the only available form of political action.

As with consent, "Omelas" presents an ambiguous view of dissent.² The story's ambiguity makes it a pleasure to teach: there is room for debate, exploration, and critical thinking. Is exit the best available mode of dissent, or is it a mostly fruitless action that, short of cleansing the individual conscience, does little to address the horrific wrong at the center of Omelas? Both arguments are plausible. "Omelas" encourages thinking about a form of political action that can be neglected by political science. Political scientists tend to focus on internal change mechanisms, such as voting, civic participation, and activism. "Omelas" handicaps readers in this respect – it ties one, maybe even two hands behind our back – and, so doing, it asks how we might operate when a change from within is not an option. One answer is that, in the absence of getting our hands dirty in politics, we must use the extremities that remain available: our feet.

Toolbox for teaching: Learning objectives, class exercises, and discussion questions

I have taught "Omelas" to undergraduates at three public universities, using it in upper-division seminars and in a large, introductory lecture course with discussion sections.

It works well in introductory courses because the writing is clear, and ideas are presented in a straightforward and captivating way. Indeed, some students may have read “Omelas” in high school (though typically not about social contract theory). However, I have found the piece works best in small seminars because they provide more opportunities for in-depth analysis.

While “Omelas” is a joy to teach, I have encountered a challenge on the issue of identity and diversity. “Omelas” presents the citizenry as an undifferentiated whole and omits discussions of groups and identities. In this respect, it is similar to canonical social contract texts. At my current university, in which the student body is about 18% Latino, 7% Asian, 3.5% African American, and 1.1% American Indian, Alaskan Native, or Native Hawaiian, this absence presented a challenge. At first, I struggled to make this text meaningful to students who see politics through the lens of their own identity or who believe that identities are a salient and consequential element of political life.³

I’ve found it is best to openly acknowledge the absence of explicit mentions of identity in “Omelas” and then to frame this absence as an opportunity to critically engage with the text. How might race, gender, sexuality, or class influence who is willing to consent in Omelas? Would identity play a role in who would be ready to walk away? My goal with these questions is to prompt students to re-think the text or to think beyond it. Students can, if they want, take this process even further by creating works that push beyond the boundaries of the short story. For instance, I have allowed students to write a sequel or a prequel to “Omelas” to explore an element or idea (such as identity) lacking in Le Guin’s version. In addition to giving students the chance to write creatively about politics, this kind of assignment enables students to see the politics within literary or cultural works that may, at first glance, appear a-political.

This challenge highlights the practical side of incorporating “Omelas” into your course. Adding any new reading to your syllabus can be simple. You can type it in! However, this is not the same thing as figuring out how to teach the new reading when that day arrives. It is necessary to have a concrete list of objectives and a specific plan to meet these goals. In what follows, I provide a series of pedagogical resources that will help you to translate your enthusiasm for adopting “Omelas” into comprehensive lesson plans. These pedagogical resources include learning objectives, classroom activity, discussion questions, and a summary table of materials and resources.

Learning objectives

- Describe consent and/or dissent in “Omelas.”
- Compare consent and/or dissent in “Omelas” to canonical texts in the social contract tradition.
- Demonstrate a capacity to examine literary or cultural artifacts through a theoretical lens.
- Evaluate the legitimacy/effectiveness of consent/dissent in “Omelas.”
- Justify reflective judgments about moral goods.

Classroom activity

I've had great success with this opening classroom activity, which I adapted from Peter Frederick's marvelous "The Dreaded Discussion: Ten Ways to Start" (Frederick 2020). This is an activity that generates wide-spread, even eager participation. It also creates connections among students, especially those drawn to the same image or theme.

Ask students to jot down a concrete image that stuck with them from "Omelas." The students don't have to remember the image perfectly; this is not a test of their memory. The idea is to tap into something, big or small, that they remember. The story is short, and it is brimming with memorable images, so most students will come up with something quickly. As the students share their visions, write their responses down on a white or blackboard. If your class is a blended one with in-person and online students meeting simultaneously, you might use Google Jamboard to record their answers. Since students' responses may overlap, I find it helpful to ask, "Did anyone else have that image, too, or something close to it?" In my experience, many students will spontaneously volunteer as to why an image stuck with them. At the same time, I do not make this a requirement, and I do not praise students for offering an explanation. I want to keep the expectation low and to be consistent in my requests. Some students may not be willing or able to explain right away why they were drawn to an image. Once we have a full list of images, I ask the class to look for themes. I will write these in bold or in a different color on the board/Jamboard. From this list of motifs, it is straightforward to segue into your discussion questions.

Discussion questions

Following Bloom's taxonomy, these discussion questions begin with more basic skills, such as remembering and describing. They advance to higher-order thinking skills, such as analyzing and evaluating. These discussion questions can be used in face-to-face classes and discussion boards in online or hybrid courses.

Consent: Hobbes, Locke, or Rousseau

- The ritual with the children is clearly painful to some of the children and probably their parents. Why do they do it?
- Describe how the process of consent in Omelas is similar to consent in Hobbes/Locke/Rousseau. Describe how it is different.
- Analyze how race, ethnicity, class, gender, or religion influence consent in "Omelas"/Hobbes/Locke/Rousseau? Do you think some individuals or groups might be less willing to consent than others? [This question can be modified for exit/walking away.]

Tacit consent: Locke and Hume

- Locke introduced tacit consent, which means demonstrating support for a social contract through everyday actions. Locke gave examples like owning land, walking down the highway, or inheriting property. Describe examples of tacit consent in "Omelas."

- Take a stand on whether any of these actions might meaningfully demonstrate agreement with social and political arrangements. Why or why not?
- Taking issue with Locke's notion of tacit consent, Hume argued that it would be difficult for poor or working-class individuals to leave a society they did not like. Analyze how class might influence exit in *Omelas* and/or in our current political world.

Political obligations today

- [Assign students to read "*Omelas*" and read about the "Hometown Fellows" program at "Lead for America" online.] "*Omelas*" raises questions about our political obligations to the communities that raised us. Do you have a hometown that you are particularly attached to, or did you move around a lot growing up?
- If you have a hometown, analyze if you owe something to the people or the place?
- Analyze the efficacy or political significance of the "Hometown Fellow" program at "Lead for America."

Freedom of movement and COVID-19

- Describe who walks away in "*Omelas*." Why do they leave, and where do they go?
- Brainstorm examples of movement or exit in contemporary society that, like in "*Omelas*," shows a rejection of the existing moral or political order.
- "*Omelas*" assumes that individuals are free to leave the community if they wish. Yet, the current political context is quite different; the global COVID-19 pandemic has severely limited freedom of movement. Analyze why freedom of movement important in "*Omelas*." Analyze whether freedom of movement is crucial in contemporary society.

Exit and morality

- A critic might point out that walking away does nothing to help the imprisoned and abused child. Analyze if leaving is still the morally right thing to do.
- Imagine someone you know well permanently left the country. Consider all the groups and organizations that this individual plays a role in, including immediate and extended family, job, volunteer efforts, involvement with religious organizations, and community service. Describe how this person's departure would change the community.
- Kant wrote that "all politics must bend the knee before the right." In "*Omelas*," Kant's imperative might mean that the child should be freed despite losing the majority's happiness. Take a stand on whether this would be a moral action.

Summary of resources

Primary Texts	Le Guin, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" <i>The Wind's Twelve Quarters</i> , 275–284	Hobbes, <i>Leviathan</i> , chapter 13–14	Locke, <i>Second Treatise</i> , ¶ 4–15; 87–89; 119–122 (tacit consent); 222–225 (revolution)	Rousseau, Chapter I, III, IV, VI, and VII
Consent Resources	Hume, "Of the Original Contract"	Amish Rumspringa: <i>Devil's Playground</i> and <i>Amish: Out of Order</i>	NGO / website: "Lead for America: Start Where You Live"	Walzer, "The Obligation to Live for the State," <i>Obligations</i>
Dissent Resources	Kant, excerpts from Peter Singer's <i>Ethics</i>	Hirschman, <i>Exit, Voice, and Loyalty</i> , 1–20 (exit and voice); 21–29 (exit)	Woesser, "Why Are Tibetans Setting Themselves on Fire?"	Kirkpatrick, "Resistant Exit," 135–137 and 142–145
Le Guin Resources	Le Guin, preface to "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas," <i>The Unreal and the Real</i>	Le Guin, "The Day After the Revolution," <i>The Wind's Twelve Quarters</i>	Le Guin, <i>The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia</i>	Burns, <i>Political Theory, Science Fiction, and Utopian Literature: Ursula K. Le Guin and The Dispossessed</i>
Cultural & Journalistic Resources: Omelas	David Brooks, "The Child in the Basement," <i>NYT</i> op-ed	BTS, "Spring Day," music video	Let's Go North, short film	"Pushing Boundaries: Science Fiction and Feminism, Ursula K. Le Guin" PBS

Coda

As I hope you see, "Omelas" can be a very fruitful text for your students. It invites students to think critically about the process of consent and dissent by giving them a simple political fable to work with. "Omelas" also has the virtue of opening up questions but not necessarily answering them. "Storytelling," as Hannah Arendt noted, "reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it" (Arendt 1968, 105).

One final thing: if you do use "Omelas," please let me know. I am interested to hear if the story provided your students with an opportunity to think carefully about what might make consent legitimate. Did it prompt them to think about the benefits and limitations of exit? Le Guin was rightfully proud of the capacity of "Omelas" to goad and provoke. She delighted in its "long and happy career of being used by teachers to upset students" (326). It is my hope that this long and happy career will continue in your political science classes.

Notes

- Two video resources can be used to compare "Omelas" with Rumspringa: *Devil's Playground*, an award-winning documentary, and *Amish: Out of Order*. Several useful short videos from *Amish: Out of Order* are available on the National Geographic website (Gingerich 2010; Walker 2002).
- For a more extensive discussion of resistance and revolution in Le Guin's work, consider pairing "Omelas" with the short story "The Day After the Revolution" or the novel *The Dispossessed*. "Revolution" focuses on a dissident who exited from Omelas, led a successful revolution, and founded an anarchist society. *The Dispossessed* revisits this same anarchist society decades later (Burns 2008; Le Guin 1974a; Le Guin 1974b).
- Le Guin, who wrote in a male-dominated genre, science fiction, and pushed to make it a more inclusive form, described herself as "a woman writer of science fiction." She noted that she was "a very rare creature," one that "was at first believed to be mythological, like the tribble and the unicorn." (PBS 2020)

Notes on contributor

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