

Haley Benson

### Into the Darkness: The Erosion of Empathy in the Age of Connectivity

“In an age of images and entertainment, in an age of instant emotional gratification, we neither seek nor want honesty or reality. Reality is complicated. Reality is boring. We are incapable or unwilling to handle its confusion,” (Hedges, 49). And so came the television, the computer, and the smartphone. Ours is a culture spurred on by spectacle, by entertainment, and it is something we’ve been taught to crave everyday. We have become addicted to distraction, to the *need* to be distracted. The screens we have created provide us with exactly that; amusement, spectacle, a realization that we never have to fear boredom again, and we never have to be alone. Screens offer us the opportunity to forever be an audience member because we always have something new to see. Television initially dictated the curriculum of our daily lives, as “a curriculum is a specially constructed information system whose purpose is to influence, teach, train or cultivate the mind and character of youth”, but the advent of the Internet has had a much more significant impact on that curriculum. The Internet allows us to have constant connectivity to every person we could possibly think of, but that connection is not real. We are conditioned to believe that we need our screens to feel connected at all times, however, all this really does is reaffirm the wish that people *want* to be connected to us. We want to be wanted, and often this need exemplifies the narcissistic qualities within us all. *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas* is a story about a people who immerse themselves in their vanities, without guilt or remorse for the consequences of their actions. In Omelas, the people willfully imprison themselves within a life of constant distraction and luxury, sacrificing their independence and calling into question whether there’s is a society worth living in.

Ursula LeGuin's *Omelas* instantly pulls readers into a seemingly idyllic world, one where processions literally dance through the streets, swallows soar through the skies, children race on horseback, and buildings are as magnificent as one can imagine. The first paragraph of *Omelas* is focused completely on articulating the setting and even sets up some rather commonplace character tropes. However, the story breaks from this plot line as the narrator states, "Joyous! How is one to tell about joy? How describe the citizens of Omelas?" (2). By referring to the characters in the abstract and breaking from the story to speak to the audience, the narrator is identifying herself as an outsider and informing readers that we are being told a story by a stranger rather than hearing about Omelas from an insider's point of view. This adds an element of unreliability to our narrator, we can no longer be sure if the narrator is telling us exactly how things are in Omelas or if her interpretation of this story is biased. The fact that our narrator is an outsider is solidified in the next few lines, "They were not simple folk, you see, though they were happy". The narrator, in referring to the people of Omelas as "they", creates an 'us vs. them' mindset for readers, and likely for herself. Our narrator acts like a tourist, taking a peak at the city and its people before reporting back to the real world. The story continues on in this fashion, going more in depth about the people of this city, while continually othering them. Our narrator is not one of the citizens of Omelas and, therefore, may not be giving us an accurate depiction of them.

The narrator's unreliability becomes even more obvious as the story goes on. This is most clear when the narrator states, "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...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". Though we cannot yet be sure how biased our narrator is, she clearly states that it's difficult for her to accurately describe such a city. The narrator even adds that Omelas might sound better "if you imagined it as your own fancy bids". At this point, the narrator could be making up almost everything about this city. If her only care is to make sure Omelas sounds like the best city on the planet, then she'll only tell us what we would imagine exists in such a place. When this utopian ideal becomes impractical to chronicle, our narrator states that we should just imagine Omelas as whatever we personally feel would be in a beautiful, joyous city like this. Basically, we should make it up as we go. Our narrator is, evidently, not too committed to a literal interpretation of what Omelas actually is, which calls into question how much readers can trust from what the narrator is telling us.

As the narrator finishes emphasizing just how happy the people of Omelas were, she states, "They were not less complex than us". Once again this highlights the us vs. them dynamic, but the narrator continues, instead focusing on us:

"The trouble is that we have a bad habit, encouraged by pedants and sophisticates, of considering happiness as something rather stupid. Only pain is intellectual, only evil interesting. This is the treason of the artist: a refusal to admit the banality of evil and the terrible boredom of pain. If you can't like 'em, join 'em. If it hurts, repeat it. But to praise despair is to condemn delight, to embrace violence is to lose hold of everything else. We have almost lost hold; we can no longer describe a happy man, nor make any celebration of joy".

The narrator plainly states that she believes there is an extreme difference between our society and that of Omelas. That difference is that Omelas is the city of happiness, while our society embraces evil, pain, and sadness because we find these qualities more interesting. This seriously impacts the reliability of the narrator in describing Omelas because, since she feels so strongly that our society is doing something wrong, she would likely try to

emphasize or exaggerate the “happy” parts of Omelas. Not only would this account for the fact that Omelas does sound like a fairy tale, but also it would mean that the account of the city we are receiving is not entirely accurate. Our narrator’s qualm with her perception of our society could easily be the driving force behind her incessant emphasis on the constant happy state of Omelas.

The narrator’s need for her audience to understand just how “joyous” Omelas is continues in her description of the actual city. On every street are “houses with red roofs and painted walls, between old moss-grown gardens and under avenues of trees, past great parks and public buildings”. The imagery in these first few sentences is vivid and picturesque. Along with these “great parks and public buildings”. In fact, the opening line of the story states that Omelas is “bright-towered”. These descriptions portray a beautiful city, with an emphasis on location and architecture. There appears to be some kind of natural quality, an aura of light enveloping what nature has provided and what man has constructed. Our narrator describes this foreign city using language connoting more of a feeling than a physical place. There is also the clash of new and old that can be found in the descriptions of houses with “painted walls” and “old moss-grown gardens”, which implies that Omelas has existed far longer than we are let on to know and that it is also well taken care of.

One of the first concrete things we learn about this city is that it is “bright-towered by the sea”. Later on, the narrator states, “Far off to the north and west the mountains stood up half encircling Omelas on her bay”. Not only does this city seem like one of fairy tales, but also it paints the picture of isolation. Omelas is by the sea on one side and surrounded by mountains on the other, neither of which suggest the ability to get in or out

easily. The narrator goes on to state, “The rigging of the boats in the harbor sparkled with flags”, so while mountains may isolate the city, the sea clearly serves as a port for ships. Omelas appears fairly prosperous, and the flags likely symbolize that Omelas is its own nation, in contrast to possible other cities we don’t know of. We also see language that emphasizes a bright, new city with the boats that “sparkled with flags”. The idea of the boats sparkling implies a lightness, but the fact that the boats are sparkling “with flags” once against depicts a prosperous lone nation. In this case, the sense of isolation from the geography engulfing Omelas is not one of loneliness or fear. Omelas’ isolation signifies that it is special, unique, and safe. The mountains serve as protection and the seaports allow others to come and see how magnificent it is. Omelas only appears isolated because it stands out, like a city in the clouds.

While Omelas may be a beautiful city, the narrator’s focus is ultimately on those who live there. However, the first creatures she mentions are not people, but animals, which once again highlights the emphasis on nature. The very first sentence of the story states that the “clamor of bells...set the swallows soaring”. From the start there is an intensity in nature, which includes the animals Omelas was built around. Swallows are mentioned several times, “Children dodged in and out, their high calls rising like the swallows’ crossing flights over the music and the singing”. This line implies a relationship, a co-existence between nature and man. It also reiterates the flight of swallows. Swallows are often associated with the fluidity of movement and they have a connection to air. Yet, what makes these birds so perfect for this story is the fact that swallows only land by accident, and often need help doing so. They are birds not adapted to being on the ground and tend

to remain in flight. The continued mention of swallows suggests that, like the bird, Omelas is constantly in flight, on a high, and rarely comes down. This is a city constantly on the rise.

The narrator next takes us back to the north side of the city, “where on the great water-meadow called the Green Fields boys and girls, naked in the bright air, with mud-stained feet and ankles and long, lithe arms, exercised their restive horses before the race”. The fact that these characters are children enjoying themselves in nature suggests an undomesticated vitality to the town and those in it. While Omelas itself has been described as an up-to-date relic, the children seem to have all youth and no worries as they play amongst themselves in the mud. However, this section also introduces readers to another animal highly emphasized by the narrator. Horses are described as “the only animal who has adopted our ceremonies as his own”. This statement humanizes horses and gives them an existence on nearly the same plane as man in Omelas. In support of this, the narrator states that the horses, “wore no gear at all but a halter without bit”. This lack of confinement could be suggestive of freedom for these horses, perhaps even equating them with man.

Though the narrator takes care in describing the various forms of life that exist in Omelas, her point ultimately lands on the actual people who live there. The first descriptions of the people involve the processions in the “Festival of Summer”. While children are preparing for horse races, the official procession moves throughout the streets of Omelas. The narrator describes these movements, “Some were decorous: old people in long stiff robes of mauve and grey, grave master workmen, quiet, merry women carrying their babies and chatting as they walked”(1). The first mention of people in Omelas is as a part of these processions and their roles in them. The description of these people, however,

is interesting because it seems to be quite stereotypical. The elderly are dressed in more traditional robes, as if honoring some more archaic part of the city. The workmen are described as grave, connoting a serious nature that seemed to come over those men who acted as heads of their families. Lastly, the women are quiet and merry while carrying their children and talking amongst themselves. This may be the most stereotypical role of the woman as submissive to her husband, as a gossip, and as the family caretaker. The children are even given the typical role of carefree communal activities. These roles are vague and abstract, they give readers no actual information about who the citizens of Omelas actually are, only the roles they fit into.

The narrator starts her story with what now seems to be the beginning of the celebrations, “With a clamor of bells that set the swallows soaring, the Festival of Summer came to the city Omelas, bright-towered by the sea”. One can immediately see the magnificent city, shield their eyes from the light, and feel the warmth of summer. The story begins, as would any fairy tale, with the bells, festivals, and towers being highly reminiscent of palaces and parades of old. The first thing that draws the reader’s attention, however, is this mystical “Festival of Summer”. For the narrator, it is unimportant to know the exact purpose and goings-on of this event, only the meaning represented by summer matters. The story and city are immediately associated with warm weather, less hardship, even perhaps flourishing land, crops, and animals. Essentially summer implies fun, happiness, and festival implies a community event. This suggests that the warmth of summer could be supplied by the community, by a sense of comfort and ease. Perhaps this is a celebration of that ease and comfort that comes from being in a prosperous city.

Within the first few sentences of this story there is an emphasis on light, and this is a recurrent motif throughout the piece. It begins with Omelas being “bright-towered” and continues to the children being “naked in the bright air”. The emphasis on light presents the idea that Omelas is a place of goodness, warmth, and contentment. The narrator states, “The air of the morning was so clear that the snow still crowning the Eighteen Peaks burned with white-gold fire across the miles of sunlit air, under the dark blue of the sky”. If nothing else makes it clear, this is a city that thrives on light. Even the snow, typically associated with the cold and dark of winter, is “*burning with white-gold fire*” (italics added.) In fact the one mention of the word dark is only mentioned to serve as a contrast, exemplifying just how bright this city and its surroundings truly are. The emphasis on the quality of light within the environment, not just in the man-made structures, reaffirms the idea that the land Omelas inhabits is a naturally happy and good place.

The use of animals and light to bring about a certain understanding of Omelas by the narrator is clear, however, there is another manner in which she attempts to solidify the idea of this city as an ancient secluded paradise. As the story begins “With a clamor of bells,” it immediately highlights the significance of sound. In the festival, the first event readers are introduced to are the processions of people that walk through the streets. While processions are often associated with more solemn movements, such as funerals, in these processions, “the music beat faster, a shimmering of gong and tambourine”. The sounds here are described as clamors and shimmerings, which, while unusual, imply a magnificent and grandiose quality to the particular sounds of the festival in Omelas. Sound appears to have an authority over these events and over the city itself. The narrator states, “In the silence of the broad green meadows one could hear the music winding through the



city streets". The first and only time silence is mentioned, it is not true silence because it is overpowered by the music of the festival. What seemed like a bright and happy festival has taken over every part of Omelas to the point that there is nothing left uniquely to nature. Silence has become sound.

However, while Omelas may be presented to us as an alluring haven, not everything is as good as we are made to believe. This story is split into two halves, the first being dedicated to the prestige of the city, and the second to its martyr. This section begins, "In a basement under one of the beautiful public buildings of Omelas, or perhaps in the cellar of one of its spacious private homes, there is a room". As was noted earlier, there is very little mention of anything pertaining to or involving darkness in Omelas, yet this section starts off with the ominous mention of a basement or cellar. This immediately connotes darkness and is directly contrasted with the grandeur of the buildings above it. This room also, "has one locked door, and no window". This is significant in Omelas because so much of the city and its descriptions revolve around light, yet in this room there is close to none. There are "cracks in the boards", a "cobwebbed window", and "mops, with stiff, clotted, foul-smelling heads...near a rusty bucket". These descriptions are vivid, but they do not convey the same feeling of happiness that readers get earlier in the story. This is imagery intended to disgust, to provoke more serious emotion.

"In the room a child is sitting", yet this is no ordinary child. This child acts as an offering, a sacrificial lamb that the citizens of Omelas have decided is not more important than their luxuries. "It could be a boy or girl. It looks about six, but actually is nearly ten. It is feeble-minded. Perhaps it was born defective, or perhaps it has become imbecile through fear, malnutrition, and neglect". Comparatively, this is quite a shocking description of a

member of the great city of Omelas. This section is a clear shift from the idyllic to the dark, and that darkness is exemplified through the child in this room. Yet, though they are referred to as a child initially, the narrator always refers to them as “it”. This implies a kind of primitive and dehumanizing of the child, which is shown again through the focus on “it” being “defective”. So far, no citizen in Omelas has been described as anything less than perfect. The idea of a child being locked in a glorified broom closet is not a pleasing one, yet the narrator continues in her explanation of how this suffering came to be:

“They all know it is there, all the people of Omelas. Some of them have come to see it, others are content merely to know it is there. They all know that it has to be there. Some of them understand why, and some do not, but they all understand that their happiness, the beauty of their city, the tenderness of their friendships, the health of their children, the wisdom of their scholars, the skill of their makers, even the abundance of their harvest and the kindly weathers of their skies, depend wholly on this child’s abominable misery”.

This statement from our narrator makes it far more clear as to how any citizen of Omelas could live such a tragic life. They are *made* to, for the sake of their city and their people. This child is the only imperfection in Omelas, and, according to the narrator, it must be this way. This passage illuminates a dark secret hiding within the walls of Omelas, an evil that rivals all the good we have read about. For the citizens of Omelas, this one act, the forced suffering of an innocent child, is worth all the goodness and glory of their city. The existence of Omelas as we know it is entirely dependent on this one act of human sacrifice.

Yet, the people of Omelas do not necessarily view this child’s immense suffering as an evil act. When the child is explained to citizens, the narrator states, “They feel disgust...anger, outrage, impotence, despite all the explanations. They would like to do something for the child. But there is nothing they can do.” The citizens grow complacent to the atrocity they depend on to continue living a life of luxury. Though the situation is a

difficult one, they would rather live in a beautiful city than see it all come crumbling down. “But as time goes on they begin to realize that even if the child could be released, it would not get much good of its freedom...It is too degraded and imbecile to know any real joy”. They have decided that saving the child at this point would be pointless; they rationalize and justify their actions using the many-over-the-few mentality. They believe that because it has been treated so inhumanely for so long that there is no way it could ever rejoin society and enjoy it to the extent the citizens do.

The question arises, however, of how can a city, how can a people, whose existence centers on being good and happy, truly be either of those things with this secret literally lurking in the basement? Are they truly noble if they allow such suffering? Can they be honestly happy knowing that their happiness is only due to suffering? Is Omelas truly a great city if a lone act of kindness could bring down its walls? When discussing the consequences of such an act the narrator states, “but if it were done, in that day and hour all the prosperity and beauty and delight of Omelas would wither and be destroyed. Those are the terms”. This is the first mention of any kind of law or order to the city, but there is no sense given as to who is setting the terms, only the consequences of if they’re broken are known. The narrator continues, “The terms are strict and absolute; there may not even be a kind word spoken to the child”. The citizens of Omelas are left with a choice; to live their nearly perfect lives, content with the child’s suffering, or to show actual kindness and bring their city to ruin. Though this seems like a difficult decision, a city predicated on being good should not have a hard time making it, in fact, the decision to be kind to someone in pain should not even have to be made if compassion was truly a part of these people’s nature.

The citizens may be angry that this child is forced to live so horribly, yet they are the one's keeping it in pain.

Suddenly all the festivals and grand architecture and general emphasis on happiness is clear, because if the citizens of Omelas are not as happy as they can possibly be then the child has suffered for nothing. If the citizens do not keep themselves constantly occupied by happiness then they remember the pain they are putting the child through. They cannot live with themselves if they acknowledge their wrongdoing, so they must be continuously entertained. The narrator even states, "the faint insistent sweetness of *drooz* may perfume the ways of the city, *drooz* which first brings a great lightness and brilliance to the mind and limbs, and then after some hours a dreamy languor, and wonderful visions...as well as exciting the pleasure of sex beyond belief". The very air these people breathe in has been infused with a drug to keep them in a "dreamy languor", in a hallucination that is greater than all other pleasures. A constant state of drug-induced euphoria surely does not allow for wondering about whether their lifestyles justify the suffering of others. The best part about this wonder drug? "It is not habit-forming". No one will ever become tolerant to its effects, meaning there is no coming out of its influence.

When stripped of it's descriptors, Omelas is really just a place that fills the air with drugs and keeps it's people entertained with festivals and beauty so that they can ignore the fact that their lives are only so magnificent because they force one child to bear all the weight of their suffering. The characters are given such hollow descriptions, that they must be emblematic of the false utopian society they are depicted as a part of. Everything in Omelas is described positively; even the horrible life of the child is spun to be a good thing, or at least a necessary thing, for everyone else in the city. The narrator must have had a

purpose in doing so, there must be something more these people and this city are meant to symbolize.

*Omelas* was written in 1973, which immediately followed the 1967 social phenomenon called the Summer of Love. This was a movement created by “hippies”, who were anti-war and criticized the rising capitalistic nature of the United States. There was an intense focus on art, beauty, and, obviously, love. The popularity of The Beatles, flower power, and rock and roll showcased the ideology of this movement, the nature of which can be seen on a surface level in *Omelas*. The drug *drooz* that was infused into the air was very likely meant to resemble the easy flow of drugs through the streets of San Francisco during the summer. The generally good nature of the citizens of *Omelas* is also compatible with the love-driven (literally) views of the people who participated in the festivities. This also included a deep appreciation for poetry and writing, further emphasizing the importance of art in this generation. The narrator of *Omelas* states;

“I fear that *Omelas* so far strikes some of you as goody-goody...If so, please add an orgy. If an orgy would help, don’t hesitate. Let us not, however, have temples from which issue beautiful nude priests and priestesses already half in ecstasy and ready to copulate with any man or woman, lover or stranger, who desires union with the deep godhead of the blood...But really it would be better not to have any temples in *Omelas*--at least, not manned temples. Religion yes, clergy no”.

The narrator, through continuing to exemplify her unreliability by suggesting we, the reader, adds an orgy if it aids our understanding, clearly emphasizes the free-spirited nature of *Omelas*. Though it has been described as an ultimately good place, it is not prudish. The carefree sexual nature that the narrator describes in this passage is indicative of the carefree spirit guiding the Summer of Love, and the entire hippie movement. The narrator also focuses on the strange nature of religion in *Omelas*. Though there is some kind of belief system, it is not one that involves man. In fact, we don’t even know if this

religion involves any kind of deity. The narrator depicts this when she says, "Surely the beautiful nudes can just wander about offering themselves like divine soufflés to the hunger of the needy and the rapture of the flesh. Let them join the processions". Those our society looks to for the interpretation of God are no more important in Omelas than those in need. They are not separate from the population, they do not preach *to* the citizens, they are a part of them.

Though it is quite clear the similarities between *Omelas* and the Summer of Love, there is another important element at work that is far more subversive than the portrayed ideals of the hippie generation. That is the element of entertainment, of amusement. While the priests and priestesses can run around copulating with all the poor citizens they like, *drooz* floats through the air, and the city is built so beautifully one can't help but focus on it at every chance they get, a theme begins to reveal itself. Nearly everything good the narrator describes about Omelas serves as a distraction. One reason for this is likely because if the citizens are not constantly in a state of drugged up happiness, they might remember that they are only so happy because a child is suffering so greatly. However, most people would think there would be at least one person in the entirety of Omelas to be kind to the child, even by accident. The narrator states, "One thing I know there is none of in Omelas is guilt". There is our answer. The citizens of Omelas do not feel bad in their decision to choose their lifestyles over an actual life because, according to the narrator, they do not feel any guilt.

The narrator continues in this vein, "...to throw away the happiness of thousands for the chance of the happiness of one: that would be to let guilt within the walls indeed". Whether the people of Omelas are incapable of guilt or choose not to feel guilty is not

clarified. What is clear is that they consciously put another human through hell in order to live like kings. The fact that so many of them can live happily with this knowledge adds to the fact that all the good in Omelas only serves to distract the citizens from realizing their mistake and from feeling their guilt. They need their distractions because acknowledging that the child's suffering is bad would mean that evil exists and they are doing nothing to stop it. They choose themselves over the child, luxury, entertainment, and beauty over empathy and compassion. The citizens fear this guilt; they don't wish to feel it because guilt comes at the expense of their vanities.

“They feel disgust, which they had thought themselves superior to. They feel anger, outrage, and impotence, despite all the explanations. They would like to do something for the child. But there is nothing they can do”. The knowledge of the child causes a complete collapse of character for the citizens, initially. They cannot believe themselves capable of vile emotions like anger. However, according to the narrator, they willfully accept that they are helpless in the matter. They have to do this because if they acknowledge that they have the power to help the child, yet they choose not to, they would feel guilt. The very thing that makes Omelas great is the one thing that could ruin it. Therefore the citizens must be distracted from their choices, because otherwise they would lose everything. So they throw festivals and horse races, they use religion and sex to distract the needy, and drugs and entertainment to distract everyone else.

There are so many events going on in Omelas, the festival, the horse race, the dancing processions, the music, the drugs, it not only is distracting to those within Omelas, but for readers as well. Omelas can be described as;

“a peek-a-boo world, where now this, now that, pops into view for a moment, then vanishes again. It is a world without much coherence or sense; a world that does not

ask us, indeed, does not permit us to do anything; a world that is, like the child's game of peek-a-boo, entirely self-contained. But like peek-a-boo, it is also endlessly entertaining" (Postman, 77).

Of course when Postman wrote these words, he wasn't talking about the fictional land of Omelas, but the very real nature of American society at the growing popularity of color television. In many ways, Omelas does not make sense. All we get from the narrator is that "these are the terms". Readers have no knowledge of who made those terms, and why none of the citizens seem capable of breaking them. Omelas is a place full of entertainment, as we can clearly see, and it is much like our society in that aspect. We are a society based in entertainment. One can see that through the medium of television back in Postman's day and in the ever-advancing iPhone today. We are constantly inventing and reinventing technology to make it more accessible and better suited to occupy our time. There's no reason to pick up a newspaper when you can get all your information from articles posted on Facebook or Twitter, after all.

Postman wrote his book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, in 1985; a time when it had become unusual to meet an American family who did not have a TV in their living room. This was a serious concern of Postman's because television became the primary way Americans heard their news and got their entertainment. Shows, the news, almost anything you could imagine that was capable of being filmed, could be broadcasted straight into your living room, the room where a family spends the majority of their time together. "A technology becomes a medium as it employs a particular symbolic code, as it finds its place in a particular social setting, as it insinuates itself into economic and political contexts. A technology, in other words, is merely a machine. A medium is the social and intellectual environment a machine creates" (Postman, 84). Technology has the ability to severely



impact the way in which we communicate to others and relate to our surroundings. In Postman's day, the TV was the largest threat to our understanding of the world because it dictated the curriculum through which we viewed it. Postman gave his own interpretation of this curriculum as "a specially constructed information system whose purpose is to influence, teach, train or cultivate the mind and character of youth. Television, of course, does exactly that, and does it relentlessly" (145-6). The impact of TV goes far beyond whether we actually have conversations or cultivate real connection with other people anymore, but actually changes the way in which people think and behave. Kids growing up today have a completely different understanding of the world than kids who grew up before TV because they have been taught to think differently.

The idea of creating a technology that could broadcast breaking news all over the country at once seems like it would be an efficient use of resources. The idea is, if we have the technology we might as well make the most of it. However, using television to inform the masses has never been its main use in homes. "The average length of a shot on network television is only 3.5 seconds, so that the eye never rests, always has something new to see" (Postman, 86). TV programs have not been created to inspire deep thought within viewers, but to keep viewers amused for as long as possible. Postman continues, "what I am claiming here is not that television is entertaining but that it has made entertainment itself the natural format for the representation of all experience" (87). The issue here is that we now expect everything we're told to be amusing to some degree and otherwise we lose interest.

"To be unaware that a technology comes equipped with a program for social change, to maintain that technology is neutral, to make the assumption that technology is always a friend to culture is, at this late hour, stupidity plain and simple," (Postman, 157).

Television, as with most technology today, demands our attention. It dictates our schedule by setting its own, and for some reason we can't help but abide by it. We create technology with the intention of bettering our lives, but we do not consider the consequences those innovations will have on society. Television, smartphones, and computers all represent the new mediums we rely on, that in itself is a huge social change. Going from a literary world to a digital one has been a significant change not only in the way we understand the world, but in how we relate to each other. "As we are drained of our 'inner repertory of dense cultural inheritance,' Foreman concluded, we risk turning into 'pancake people—spread wide and thin as we connect with that vast network of information accessed by the mere touch of a button'" (Carr, 196). The more we use our phones, the more disconnected we become from others and ourselves. We turn into flat, simple characters, much like those described in *Omelas*, because we needn't have to look away from a screen. Human connection becomes unnecessary, culture fails to thrive, and eventually there may not be anything to look at if we ever put down our screens.

In *Omelas* the narrator asks us about the inclusion of technology in the city, and she states it is up to readers because the inclusion of anything in *Omelas* is however our "own fancy bids". There are no cars or helicopters, apparently because these are happy people.

The narrator then offers her own interpretation of that happiness;

"Happiness is based on a just discrimination of what is necessary, what is neither necessary nor destructive, and what is destructive. In the middle category, however—-that of the unnecessary but undestructive, that of comfort, luxury, exuberance, etc.—-they could perfectly well have central heating, subway trains, washing machines, and all kinds of marvelous devices not yet invented here...Or they could have none of that; it doesn't matter".

This definition of happiness, and the happiness spoke of throughout *Omelas*, is reliant on the fact that each citizen understands it, that there is a kind of collective acknowledgement

of it. Happiness is understanding what is and is not destructive or necessary, but that should be read as what is destructive or necessary to the survival of the city. Most would consider empathy to be a good thing, yet in this society, empathy for a suffering child could lead to the destruction of Omelas, and therefore happiness. It would seem that other than advancing their own luxury, the people of Omelas have no interest in the world outside Omelas. In fact, the single moral dilemma to solve in the city is one they all essentially ignore. This leads to a vision of an apathetic collective, one that is resigned from their own versions of morality or happiness, and has accepted the terms that this city has offered them. They do not make their own path, but live as they're told to.

Omelas almost feels like a cult at this point; everyone does and believes the same things, they participate in the same activities, they even apparently sacrifice their personal views of morality in return for luxury and comfort. Much like what is offered by television, the citizens all partake in a kind of artificial reality where they deny any semblance of personal control. All you have to do is tune into the screen to tune out the world. Television has been around many decades, and now a new culprit exists that could have even more dire effects on this group mentality; the Internet. "... 'technologies are not merely aids to human activity, but also powerful forces acting to reshape that activity and its meaning' .... Sometimes our tools do what we tell them to. Other times, we adapt ourselves to our tools' requirements" (Carr, 47). Such is the case in Omelas, as a city once built by man has now imprisoned them, and such is the case with society's newest and most refined tool, the Internet. An endless base of information and entertainment that can be packaged neatly into everyone's back pocket through smart phones. Constant entertainment is literally at our fingertips, as is constant connection. We are never far from our friends, or strangers,

because social media allows us to be connected to everyone all of the time. You can now request to be friends with a stranger halfway around the world in a few seconds.

Though Postman was primarily concerned with the effects of television, the effects of the smart phone are much more significant. Carr states, “It’s that the Net delivers precisely the kind of sensory and cognitive stimuli—repetitive, intensive, interactive, addictive—that have been shown to result in strong and rapid alterations in brain circuits and functions” (116). Casually surfing through the Internet is actually changing the way our brains work, literally molding us to be able to better use the tool. Much as the people of Omelas do, we enter into terms with the Internet as soon as we get our first smart phone or computer. We agree to always be connected to our friends, to have the ability to talk to a person thousands of miles away in seconds, to be able to look up anything in an instant. A medium that literally changes the processes in our brain as we use it is a medium to end all mediums.

It is rather interesting how there is no mention of singular activities in Omelas. Besides the suffering child, there is only one character that truly exists alone. “A child of nine or ten sits at the edge of the crowd, alone, playing on a wooden flute. People pause to listen, and they smile, but they do not speak to him, for he never ceases playing and never sees them, his dark eyes wholly rapt in the sweet, thin magic of the tune”. Though alone, this child is in a constant state of distraction, always performing for others, but never interacting with them. This is not an activity that produces any kind of private thought either, there appears to be no privacy at all here. No privacy and no silence. In today’s society, we are always wrapped up in our phones, it might be the only way we know how to communicate or learn anymore. The newest generations have only ever known life with

smartphones; they impact how we learn, communicate, even think. “By allowing us to filter out distractions, to quiet the problem-solving functions of the frontal lobes, deep reading becomes a form of deep thinking. The mind of the experienced book reader is a calm mind, not a buzzing one” (Carr, 123). Reading used to be the primary way to spend time alone because there was little else one could do besides read a book or the newspaper. Reading gave us the chance to relax and develop thinking skills that can be easily skipped over when you hop from link to link on the web. Reading fosters thought because it is complex, whereas the Internet allows you to just search for an answer and be done with it. Of course, we never truly can put down the Internet like we can with a book.

The citizens of Omelas can never give up the terms of their city, and it is the Internet that sets the terms for our society. There are probably very many of us who would believe that we’d act differently if we were in a situation like the people of Omelas. That begs the question, however, of why we haven’t now. Many do not see the danger in giving away our society, and our minds, to technology. The ever-innovating tech world is not to blame for our sudden and dramatic lack of control in our lives, though, because we are the ones who allowed it to become so powerful;

“Google is neither God nor Satan, and if there are shadows in the Googleplex they’re no more than the delusions of grandeur. What’s disturbing about the company’s founders is not their boyish desire to create an amazingly cool machine that will be able to outthink its creators, but the pinched conception of the human mind that gives rise to such a desire” (Carr, 176).

Just as Omelas imprisons itself within its own walls, we create the technology that goes on to take over our lives. We *need* it, we *crave* it, and, if it hasn’t happened already, one day we won’t know how to live without it. That is what has happened in Omelas; the citizens have become so entrained in their happiness, in being content, that they have become apathetic

about it. The narrator never gives us any examples of the citizens being unhappy with the terms or feeling that they are unjust. They have decided that the city they built, the happiness they procured, justifies their imprisonment. We have created the technology that imprisons us, but we are arrogant enough to believe that we are the ones in control.

The characters described in Omelas, as I have said before, are incredibly stereotypical. They are flat, uncomplicated, and easily controlled. All it took for the citizens to forget morality and empathy were a painted building, a beautiful park, and a dancing procession. Their vanity overrode their conscience until there was nothing left of them but a character trope. This is a fear many share about today's tech-centric world, "as we come to rely on computers to mediate our understanding of the world, it is our own intelligence that flattens into artificial intelligence" (Carr, 224). The people of Omelas rely on the terms to tell them how to keep their city and lives great, and we rely on access to the Internet to do the same. Computers and smartphones can give us directions, tell us about Napoleon, or provide sources for an essay. We have everything we'll ever need to know in our hands and all that information requires very little effort or know-how to access. In all likelihood, we don't actually know or have memorized anything about the French Revolution, but we do know exactly what to look up to find it, and can do it in seconds.

The Internet offers us more than just quick, easy information; it offers connection. To be exact, it offers constant connection to all your friends, family, even to strangers. One can literally have whole conversations with people oceans away in mere seconds. However, this ease and immediacy of contact is not wholly a good thing. "It's not a true dialogue, as a verbal conversation would be, but one diatribe followed by the response to the diatribe. Doing it all onscreen also takes out the human element of empathy, nuance, and face-to-

face interaction” (Twenge & Campbell, 118). When people speak in person, they have a conversation, which requires you to respond to others, to listen to what they have to say, to think about your response to them. Screens act as a kind of mask, allowing us to forego these rules of conversation in favor of having one-sided discussions that others can tune into or not; conversation only goes as far “as your own fancy bids”. This seems to be the whole point of social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and the like. One can post about their life and their thoughts, anything they feel like saying, and everyone they’re friends with can see by “following” them. These are not platforms promoting discussion, they let you present your point of view and if someone else feels like chiming in, they can comment on it. This type of communication does not require conversation, in fact, all it does is promote the idea that people want to hear about your life and your thoughts so bad that they can do so on several different apps.

Social media outlets and their ability to keep people constantly connected to any person they’ve come into contact with instills a sort of disconnect. Sure, you can catch up with people you haven’t seen in years, but always through a lens. You are not forced to reply in a timely manner or pretend to be interested as you would in a regular conversation because the screen protects you. The rise of cyber bullying is a testament to this fact; screens provide users with anonymity, they can suddenly say or do as they feel because they are not actually harming anyone in the process, they’re just making use of a medium with far too much potential. It seems that much of social media has become competition; we all keep track of our ‘frenemies’ from high school to compare how far each has gone since graduating, and subsequently feel better or worse about ourselves depending on the answer. The traits of hyper-competition and self-obsession are most commonly seen in

narcissists. “Narcissists think they are smarter, better looking, and more important than others, but not necessarily more moral, more caring, or more compassionate” (Twenge & Campbell, 24). We are only taught to care on a surface level when we learn through the Internet. Screens, an innovation long in the works since the television, set us apart from whatever we are viewing. “What steps do you plan to take to reduce the conflict in the Middle East? What are your plans for preserving the environment or reducing the risk of nuclear war? What do you plan to do about NATO, OPEC, the CIA, affirmative action, and the monstrous treatment of Baha’is in Iran? I shall take the liberty of answering for you: You plan to do nothing about them” (Postman, 68-9). All that seems to be important in the world of social media is that you *look* like you care. As with all things done through screens, one only needs to feign emotion to be accepted.

The Internet is not wholly a bad thing, and at this point it would be hard to imagine life without it. The issue comes in when we forget that there is a world beyond the screen, and when our life through the screen becomes all that matters to us;

“Narcissism sneaks into the picture, however, in many ways. First, the Internet allows the fantasy principle to trump the reality principle. The Internet makes it very easy to be someone you’re not, and that alternative persona is usually better, or cooler, or more attractive. Second, most Internet communication is through images and brief self-description, placing attention on the shallower aspects of the person...Third, people who are desperate for attention have access to a huge potential audience on the Web...” (Twenge & Campbell, 122).

Many people would probably like to look like, get paid like, and have the attention of celebrities, but this wish becomes a problem when they use the Internet to enhance a false perception of themselves. The fantasy principle refers to what we wish we were, whereas the reality principle is what actually is. In reality you can’t airbrush yourself or glamorize the more mundane details of your life, it is what it is. However, the Internet allows you to



fudge the facts to make yourself sound more like a celebrity. This in turn sparks competition to see who can get the most likes, or who can buy the nicest car, or any number of possibilities. Our lives no longer our own because we feel the incessant need to constantly perform for and outperform everyone else on the Internet. In *Omelas*, there might not be social media, but the citizens are certainly kept distracted through competitions and the over-the-top glamour of the city and its events. The people of Omelas perfectly exhibit fantasy trumping reality, as they would rather drown themselves in beauty, music, drugs, and happiness than face the fact that they are forcing an innocent life to suffer. The narrator continues her description of the narcissistic citizens through the fact that all that gets reported about them are the shallow details. They appear to be a people constantly distracted, content, and completely disconnected from their reality.

“Cultures that cannot distinguish between illusion and reality die” (Hedges, 143). Omelas lives in a permanent state of illusion; forcing contentment on themselves rather than feeling the guilt from imprisoning another life. The narrator points out multiple times that the fall of Omelas will come if guilt is let within their walls, if they show any semblance of humanity to this single child, Omelas will fall. Instead of allowing empathy within the walls, the citizens are kept docile, “consumer goods, and a comfortable standard of living, along with a vast entertainment industry that provides spectacles and appealing diversions, keep the citizenry politically passive” (Hedges, 148). The enticing factor of Omelas is that everything is so beautiful, that it is some kind of free society where everyone is happy and they have orgies and drugs and live in a constant state of euphoria. However, what the narrator does not appear to consider is whether this euphoria is used as distraction so that Omelas could continue to exist.

It appears the citizens chose their beautiful city and seemingly happy lives over the child, so they descended into narcissism because they have to focus on themselves to forget the child. They have to focus on spectacle and distraction to forget they have imprisoned themselves within the walls of their city. “They descended into orgies of self-indulgence, surrendered their civic and emotional lives to the glitter, excitement, and spectacle of the arena, became politically apathetic, and collapsed” (Hedges, 189). The citizens of Omelas have essentially made this child a slave to their vanities; it only exists to serve the needs of the city and its people. They have lost the ability to think for themselves and instead walk around in a state of constant distraction and contentment because they are terrified of leaving a life of luxury.

The people of Omelas seem to suffer from a condition similar to our own, they have chosen a life of imprisonment. Just as they cannot give us their materialistic values, we cannot give up ours either. We have created technology that threatens to destroy our way of life through constant amusement. “ ‘Celebrity and connectivity are both ways of becoming known. This is what the contemporary self wants. It wants to be recognized, wants to be connected: It wants to be visible...This is the quality that validates us, this is how we become real to ourselves—by being seen by others’ ” (Hedges, 22-3). The curriculum of the screen has taught us to believe that we need the approval of others to be happy and that our lives are not full if they don’t include thousands of likes and followers. Soon, we will no longer know how to exist without some sort of paparazzi, and we will cease to exist without it. In Omelas, what would happen if they stopped for a few moments with no distractions? Would they feel guilt? According to the narrator, the people of Omelas are incapable of feeling guilt. This is a rather interesting point to emphasize as the term

psychopath can be described as, “superficial charm, grandiosity, and self-importance; a need for constant stimulation, a penchant for lying, deception, and manipulation, and the inability to feel guilt” (Hedges, 33). This is not to say that every single person in Omelas is a psychopath, but perhaps they morph into one through their deception of themselves through distraction and their refusal to feel guilt or empathy. This is not to say that every person with an iPhone or Internet access is a psychopath either, but perhaps our constant need to deceive ourselves and others of who we truly are drags us further into the pit of anti-empathetic masses.

The need people today to feel to become a celebrity is an epidemic, it is a need that we have been taught time and again by the curriculum that TV and the Internet set for us. We have been conned and amused into becoming oblivious to the immense changes happening within and around us. We judge each other by how many likes we get or how many people follow us, and our morality and ability to empathize with others get thrown out the window. It seems that many people do share qualities with psychopaths, as we seem to find comfort in distraction and self-obsession. However, these qualities “urge us toward a life of narcissistic self-absorption. They tell us that existence is to be centered on the practices and desires of the self rather than the common good” (Hedges 33). What will happen when we come down from the high of only being in love with an unrealistic image of ourselves? In Omelas the consequences are clear; their city will come tumbling down, along with their happiness, wealth, and overall vanity. “The shock of reality brings with it the terrible realization that we are not who we thought we were. Fear controls us. We do not control it” (Hedges, 20). The reason why the citizens of Omelas will not be kind to the

child is not because they love their luxuries so much, but rather because they fear life without them. The loss of their vanities is synonymous with the loss of their identities.

The newest generation is currently growing up, completely unaware of life without the Internet, the iPhone, and privacy. In Omelas, the city has been selected because it is isolated, its privacy makes it special, unique. We have given up that privacy in favor of constant and immediate connectivity, and now there are millions of people who don't know how to live without these things. "Established truths, mores, rules, and authenticity mean nothing. Good and evil mean nothing. The idea of permanent personalities and permanent values, as in the culture at large, has evaporated" (Hedges, 10). Social media allows us to change every single facet about ourselves with the click of a button, and people are actually happy about this. While contentment is rampant in Omelas, it seems we can never truly be content in our lives because of the unrealistic belief that there will always be something better on the horizon. The ethic of always continuing to better yourself has apparently been transformed into the idea that you can accomplish this bettering through deception rather than through hard work. "And, in the end, both entertainment and consumption often provided the same intoxication: the sheer, endless pleasure of emancipation from reason, from responsibility, from tradition, from class, and from all the other bonds that restrained the self" (Hedges, 49). The Internet has acted as the ultimate source of entertainment and consumption. We must always have the latest update, the newest app, and the most to show off. We entertain others and ourselves with trivialities and products that are constantly being updated so that we will always have more, more, more.

This same need for more things is the driving force behind the sacrifice of the child, of "it". The citizens of Omelas constantly need and are given more; that is the deal they've

made. They have chosen entertainment, commodities, and to indulge their materialistic nature rather than provide a moment of empathy and kindness. It is not that the people are unaware of what they're doing, the narrator tells us that they have all seen "it", and feigned disgust before moving on with their lives. "Degradation as entertainment is the squalid underside to the glamour of celebrity culture," (Hedges, 34). In the case of Omelas, it is not so much that they are enjoying "its" suffering, but that they profit from it. Not only do they accept that the suffering of one is worth all their vain desires, but they reap the rewards for choosing vanity over empathy with no regard or acknowledgement that what they are doing is wrong. They feel no guilt, and they're okay with that.

However, surely in such a city there would be at least a few who could not partake in the forced happiness, the refusal of guilt;

"At times one of the adolescent girls or boys who go to see the child does not go home to weep or rage, does not, in fact, go home at all. Sometimes also a man or woman much older falls silent for a day or two, and then leaves home. These people go out into the street, and walk down the street alone. They keep walking, and walk straight out of the city of Omelas, through the beautiful gates...Each one goes alone...They leave Omelas, they walk ahead into the darkness, and they do not come back".

Clearly the walls of Omelas are not so impenetrable. After all, the story is named after those who walk *away* from Omelas, not those who stay. The narrator gives us no suggestion as to where these people go, and merely hints at why. The mention of silence in this section is not interrupted or false silence as it is in the rest of the narrative, but finally actual silence. Those who end up leaving do not partake in the culture of consumption and amusement after seeing the child, but choose to be silent, to be alone. In Omelas, this is extraordinary behavior. It is not coincidence that the only people described by the narrator as being alone and silent for any length of time are those who choose to think for themselves and leave.

The emphasis the narrator puts on darkness in this section is also of note. We know that Omelas is described as a very light, bright place, but when one chooses to walk away they walk “into the darkness”. Wherever one goes when they leave Omelas is directly contrasted with the city itself through the accentuation of light versus dark. The contrast of the individual versus the collective is also exemplified here because those who walk away are choosing to be alone, to think individually, rather than continue to participate in the groupthink exhibited by Omelas’ citizenry.

Omelas is a city bathed in the illusion that they are justified in their distractions, that the suffering of a child is worth their gluttonous consumption. Their materialism is not so unfamiliar to our own society. There are very few people who choose to not spend their day constantly distracted by screens. The few may not be stuck in the illusion that the citizens of Omelas are in, but they are certainly alone. “The culture of illusion, one of happy thoughts, manipulated emotions, and trust in the beneficence of power, means we sing along with the chorus or are instantly disappeared from view like the losers on a reality show,” (Hedges, 53). *Omelas* is a story completely focused on the inner workings of the city and its people, however, despite being named after the ones who walk away, the narrator spends very little time actually discussing the few who do choose to leave. All readers actually know about these people is that in leaving Omelas, they are heading into darkness, into a place “even less imaginable to most of us than the city of happiness”. Those who walk away do not know where they are going, and it is unlikely that our society will ever figure out a way to exist without the constant draw of ever-advancing technology. However, these characters in Omelas still know that they must leave, that leaving is the only way to escape the prison they have created for themselves. We have built the walls that imprison us, only

in our case those walls are the alluring amusements of technology that have the power to replace every single connection in our lives except its own. That is the ultimate goal of entertainment. "It is designed to keep us from fighting back," (Hedges, 38).