Tone and Imagery in “The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas”

It is safe to assume that most smaller stories contain bigger meanings. Ursula K. LeGuin’s short story “The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas” is a great example of this assumption. The city of Omelas is described as a utopian society faced with complexity of a dark secret. LeGuin challenges the ironic idea of appearance versus reality through the use of its imagery and tone.

LeGuin uses strong imagery thought the story to describe Omelas as a utopia. The very first sentence of the short story describes the sound of bells. Bells are festive instruments, and the sound is often associated with cheerfulness. Beginning a description with a cheerful noise can usually lead to bright and positive subjects. Further into the paragraph, Omelas continuous to gain its utopian status with its festive citizens. LeGuin describes the people as “decorous” (LeGuin 1) or fashionable, meaning that many citizens are fairly wealthy.

As the narrator says “they were simple folks…” (LeGuin 1), this indicates that the citizens of Omelas are smart; not only smart but orderly. The line “there was no king” (LeGuin 1) indicates that the citizens have no leadership, which would lead one to think of anarchy and lawlessness. However, LeGuin assures the reader of their civilized manner by saying that “they
were not barbarians” (LeGuin 1). This depicts Omelas citizens as civil; without one man with power over many, one could conclude that there would be no corruption. Also, the narrator also suggests the absence of systematic oppression with “they did not use swords, or keep slaves” (LeGuin 1).

LeGuin also depicts the social freedom of the citizens by not letting its men fit into the traditional gender roles. The young men are allowed to stray away from hypermasculinity by wearing “flowers in their shining” (LeGuin 3). Also, by describing the boys with “shining hair” (LeGuin 3) indicates that they pay special attention to their looks.

LeGuin also uses strong imagery to shift directions by describing trumpet sounds as “imperious”, “melancholy”, and “piercing” (LeGuin 3). The dreary trumpet sounds juxtapose to the jovial sound of the bells. This sudden negative imagery connects to the dark secret of the city.

The tone of the short story shifts from bright and cheerful to suspenseful and cynical; the shift in tone foreshadows the duality of the city. The cynicism of the tone is gradual, showing more sarcasm with each paragraph. In the first and second paragraph, the narrator uses words like “merry”, “bright”, “cheerful”, “dancing” and “exciting” to express the jovial mood of the Festival of Summer event taking place.

The third and smallest paragraph, however, takes on an extremely dark tone with using lines such as “considering happiness as something stupid” (LeGuin 2). Then immediately questioning the reader’s perception of the city.

As the narrator describes a drug-like substance in the air of Omelas, the use of the word “joyous” (LeGuin 3) to describe the city has a sarcastic tone. The constant questioning of the
city’s greatness connotes suspension that the narrator is leading to darker situation. The question “Do you accept the festival, the city, the joy?” (LeGuin 3) holds much cynicism and suspense, reflecting the city itself. The inner conflict in the air of Omelas’s citizens knowing silently of its dark secret in order to maintain its utopian status.

As the narrator uses “imbecile”, “fear”, “malnutrition and neglect” (LeGuin 4) to depict the mistreatment of the child, it completely juxtaposes the “merry” (LeGuin 1) depiction of the citizens earlier in the story. Understandably so, the speaker shifts to a frightening tone when the speaking on the child at all. As a reflection of the city’s duality, LeGuin depicts the opposing side of the citizens: “one of them may come in and kick the child to make it stand up” (LeGuin 4), this line depicts the inhumane living conditions in which the child was forced to live under. This analysis negates the previous interpretation the citizen’s humanity and civility (by governing themselves without anarchy or oppression).

LeGuin’s short story “Those Who Walk Away From Omelas” is perplexing and clever. Throughout the various shifts of tone and imagery in the story, the reader can sense the tension between the narrator and the story. With each paragraph, the narrator’s tone becomes darker and darker until the mysterious secret is revealed to the reader. Even in the last paragraph, where nothing is resolved, depicts hopelessness. With its strong imagery and tone, this story will surely become a classic that provokes young minds for years to come.