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HON ENGL 1102

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29 September 2019

A voice for the voiceless

It is easy to put on a blindfold as an American. Even with all the technology that allows us to see into the world, it is quite easy to remain benighted to all the misery. It’s easier to ignore the devasting pain and evil that is too far off to reach us. Hear no evil, see no evil. That’s just the way it is, right?

I grew up in the Southern United States of America in a middle-class, white family. I was given a free education, plenty of food to eat, and a bed to sleep in. Many people would describe me as privileged. I would describe my situation as fortunate, blessed, and completely undeserving. I haven’t always had this mentality, though. I didn’t know that I was so blessed, until I had something to compare. My ignorance was lost in the summer of 2014, when I left the comforts of my home country for the first time. I went with a mission team to Tegucigalpa, Honduras for a short stay that would impact me more than I could’ve ever imagined. It wasn’t until I witnessed the extreme poverty and suffering of men, women, and children in Honduras that I realized my position as a white, middle-class American. My world changed, and there was no going back. This is why I chose to focus on Ursula Le Guin’s short story “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas”.

At first, when I began reading LeGuin’s story, I read it as simply that- a story. However, before I was halfway through, I discovered that it was more than that. I realized that the author’s purpose was to draw a metaphor towards an important, and very real concept. The purpose of my research became centered around finding out what the concept was that LeGuin created her metaphor about.

I set out to discover the meaning of this short story as it relates to our society. Since this type of story is open to different understandings and perceptions, I started off my research by seeking the interpretations of others. I found that my own interpretations were only validated as I researched what others gathered. Le Guin’s short, yet impactful story is about a joyful and peaceful city that only remains so at the expense of a young child, who experiences immense suffering and neglect. At first, my mind jumped immediately to how Americans turn a blind eye to the suffering, poverty, and hunger that takes place every day in developing countries. Afterall, I too experienced the tension of coming back to the comforts of home after being exposed to the brokenness of the outside world. I expected this to be a popular interpretation, but it was not among the first that I came across. However, Paul Thomas did propose that Le Guin’s story is indeed about the privilege that exists at someone else’s expense. In his explanation “‘The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas’: Allegory of Privilege”, he proceeds to claim that the U.S. cloaks the reality of their privilege and refuses to open the closet and face what is happening behind closed doors. This is still only one interpretation of a very open and intriguing story. So, I continued to seek new interpretations.

My contiguous thought as I read Le Guin’s short story surrounded the narrative of one man- Jesus Christ. I was somewhat surprised to find the same perception of the story in an article written by Mr. J Collins. He saw what I saw. The author stresses that the Omelas people knew about the connection between the city’s happiness and prosperity at the expense of the child’s suffering. This story and the one of Jesus’s life can be compared clearly. The child in the closet is the ultimate sacrifice, Jesus Christ. The Omelas people that experience freedom and joy at the expense of the child, is humanity which was saved by Jesus’s sacrifice. Although it was so clear for me to see, I was a bit surprised to find that others made the same connection.

My research began to feel redundant as I searched online, so I decided to conduct a personal interview. I asked my mom to read the story and give her interpretation of it. I was careful not to give context or express any of my opinions prior to her reading, so that her interpretation would not be swayed. When she finished reading, she was almost at a loss for words. I feel that most people react this way initially. Her initial thought of the story was an analogy for heaven and hell. Her words immediately sparked my interest. She went on to contrast the two types of people that witnessed the darkness: those that chose to stay and those that chose to walk away. She analyzed the ones that stayed as hopeless; they saw the darkness and saw nothing passed it. The ones that walked away, she saw as the ones with hope for something more. By leaving Omelas, they sought something better than the tragedy they witnessed. I found her interpretation interesting. It was similar to mine and Mr. Collins, but different enough to be unique. Her most profound statement, to me, was “They portray this place as a perfect utopia, but it doesn’t mean it’s beautiful if it’s all they know.”

Through this research, I rediscovered the truth about my nature as an American. It is true that it is simply easier to live life with blinders on. It is easy to come home after being exposed to suffering and continue on with normal life, but I don’t want to. My heart breaks for the ‘child in the closet’. I’d like to think that I wouldn’t be one of those that know about the child and continue to live in the joyful and prosperous city. I’d like to think that I’d be the one that seeks something greater, like those at the end of the story. More than that, though, I’d like to think that I’d be the brave one that stands up against the injustice; the one that speaks up for the child trapped in suffering. In the Omelas society and in the American society alike, we need people who will fight for the weak, speak out for freedom, and be a voice for the voiceless.

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