

Vanessa Carlson

Professor Blessinger

December 14, 2011

Media Studies

The Cost of Happiness: The Utopian Worlds of Omelas and Pleasantville

Ever wonder if life would be better in a perfect world? Some works of literature, as well as media, have depicted this concept as a utopia. The definition of utopia, according to the Oxford English Dictionary is, “A place, state, or condition ideally perfect in respect of politics, laws, customs, and conditions” (“Utopia, N. : Oxford English Dictionary”). In these utopian societies, however, there usually seems to be a catch to their flawless ways of life. One example of a utopian society is described in the short story, “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas,” by Ursula Le Guin, where residents live happily at the expense of a child’s misery. The nineteen ninety-eight film “Pleasantville” depicts another utopian society that is a “flashback to kinder, gentler times, good nutrition, and family values” (*Pleasantville*). Although these two utopian worlds are quite different at first glance, both are ignorant about reality. The film *Pleasantville* portrays a utopian society that relates to the short story “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” in that ignorance may not always be bliss.

The city of Omelas is described as a beautiful place by the sea. The author expresses that “Omelas sounds in my words like a city in a fairy tale, long ago and far away, once upon a time” (Le Guin). The term fairy tale resembles a utopian society in that it incorporates concepts that are not probable in reality. Omelas is, in a sense, a fairy tale in that its citizens live in a place “[. . .] without monarchy and slavery, so they also got on without the stock exchange, the advertisement, the secret police, and the bomb” (Le Guin). The short story also describes how

everyone lives in happiness in this society. Le Guin writes, “They were not naive and happy children – though their children were, in fact, happy. They were mature, intelligent, passionate adults whose lives were not wretched. O miracle!” The work of literature also mentions how Omelas’s citizens could do without the “luxuries” of technology (Le Guin). Like the film “Pleasantville,” Omelas seems to reflect a simpler time which, by today’s media, infers that it is also a happier time.

The utopia of Pleasantville depicts a television series set during the late nineteen fifties in the film *Pleasantville*. In Pleasantville, firemen are only needed to rescue cats from trees, the basketball team makes every basket, meals are over the top, the weather is perfectly warm and sunny every day, and everything is in black and white. It seems as if everyone and everything is perfect. The citizens of Pleasantville all appear to be happy, simple people living in harmony. According to Joseph Stain, the time period “[. . .] was a decade in which words like suburbia, automation, and togetherness became part of America’s everyday vocabulary-sleek, impersonal words connoting a new American comfortableness and an easy acceptance of conformity” (Preface). Like Omelas, Pleasantville demonstrates a simpler time. Another aspect Pleasantville has in common with the city of Omelas is that its utopian universe comes with a price.

On the outside, Omelas appears to be a paradise for all, but the city hides a deep, dark secret. That secret is the cost for this perfect world. The citizens of Omelas are well aware of this price and allow it for they do not wish to give up their utopian society. Hidden amongst the beauty and cheer, there is a dark and sorrowful room that is kept locked, as if the entire city wanted to pretend it is not even there. Ursula Le Guin writes, “In the room a child is sitting. It could be a boy or a girl.” The child is mistreated and neglected by the citizens of Omelas. Its misery is the only way their paradise can survive. No one can take pity on the child for it would

put their universe in peril. Like Pleasantville, if Omelas's universe is "messed with," their world would never be the same. The author describes the situation as, "To exchange all the goodness and grace of every life in Omelas for that single, small improvement: 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" (Le Guin). What does this neglected child symbolize? The child could be a symbol for the city's ignorance of the real world. The price seems less steep in reality where nothing is perfect, but society can take control and make the world a better place to live. As the title infers, there are some who do not wish to be aware of this ignorance and "walk away from Omelas." The difference between Omelas and Pleasantville is that Omelas is aware of what could be where as Pleasantville is completely unknowing of what reality has to offer.

Pleasantville's society is turned upside down once the main characters Jennifer and Dave are transported into the television series. Jennifer, or her role Mary Sue, attempts to make changes to Pleasantville's perfect world. As quoted by Lucia Hall of the magazine, "The Humanist," Jennifer declares that, "Maybe, it needs to be messed with." Suddenly, Pleasantville's black and white world begins to change which is signified by the appearance of color. Jonathan Rosenbaum, the main film critic for the Chicago Reader until 2008, suggests that sin is introduced into this utopian society. This is signified in the scene when the girl offers Dave, or Bud, an apple, which is in color

(Rosenbaum). This is done in what seems to be a symbol of the Garden of Eden, which is Pleasantville's



Figure 1: Pleasantville's Lover's Lane
(*Pleasantville Black and White, and Color.*)

Lover's Lane. The image at the right depicts the signs of change in a utopian society. Other signs of change begin to appear such as the emersion of fire, content inside books, sex, and the concept of a world outside of Pleasantville. Before, the

citizens of Pleasantville were so caught up in their perfect universe that they became ignorant of what reality could offer. Like Omelas, there are some in Pleasantville who oppose this change and attempt to put an end to it. Others try to conceal the change as best as they can. In one instance, Bud's mother, Betty, begins to transform into color. Bud, seeing her distress, disguises



her face with her still black and white makeup.

The image on the left portrays this event. The story of Pleasantville depicts the “loss of innocence and the power of change”

(“Pleasantville Trailer - YouTube.”). The

Figure 2: Concealing change (*Pleasantville in Color*).

characters Dave and Jennifer bring to the light how Pleasantville maybe is not the utopia everyone thought it was. As with Omelas, for Pleasantville, ignorance is not always bliss.

The plots of “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” and “Pleasantville” question the perfection of utopian societies. In both stories, the citizens are ignorant of the reality they are kept from. The price the two worlds pay for utopia proves unworthy in the end. This forms a question for humanity in general, “Is perfection really worth it?” Society today strives for perfection in almost every aspect whether it is relationships, work, school, or sports. If perfection was even possible in reality, what would be the price? For both Omelas and Pleasantville, ignorance seems to be the only way their worlds work. In reality, maybe the grass is not greener on the other side.

Works Cited

- Hall, Lucia, K.B. "Pleasantville." *The Humanist* 59.1 (1999): 45-6. *ProQuest Discovery*; *ProQuest Research Library*. Web. 12 Dec. 2011.
<<http://www.ezproxy.dsu.edu:2786/docview/235279721/1339644D1631C5379E1/1?accountid=27073>>.
- Le Guin, Ursula. "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas." *The Wind's Twelve Quarters: Short Stories*. New York: Harper & Row, 1975. Print.
- Pleasantville*. Dir. Gary Ross. Perf. Toby Maguire, Reese Witherspoon, Don Knotts. New Line Cinema / Warner Bros., 1998. DVD.
- Pleasantville Black and White, and Color*. Digital image. *Zuguide.com*. Web. 12 Dec. 2011.
<<http://www.zuguide.com/Pleasantville.html>>.
- Pleasantville in Color*. Digital image. *Jonathan Rosenbaum.com*. Creative Loafing Media. Web. 11 Dec. 2011. <<http://www.jonathanrosenbaum.com/?p=6523>>.
- "Pleasantville Trailer - YouTube." *YouTube - Broadcast Yourself*. 24 Feb. 2007. Web. 14 Dec. 2011. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iAiyrees0uM>>.
- Rosenbaum, Jonathan. "The Way We Weren't | Movie Review | Chicago Reader." *Chicago Reader | Music, Movies, News, Culture & Food*. CL Chicago, Inc., 2011. Web. 11 Dec. 2011. <<http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/the-way-we-werent/Content?oid=897710>>.
- Satin, Joseph, ed. "Preface." Preface. *The 1950's: America's "Placid" Decade*. Vol. 6. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960. Print. Houghton Mifflin Research Series.

"Utopia, N. : Oxford English Dictionary." *Home : Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford University Press., 2011. Web. 12 Dec. 2011.

<<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/220784?redirectedFrom=utopia>>.