Project Narrative - Lindsay Holmgren 12.14.2023\_mixdown

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[00:01:07] **Jim Phelan:** This is Jim Phelan, director of Project Narrative at the Ohio State University, and I'd like to welcome you to the Project Narrative Podcast. In a typical episode, a narrative theorist selects a short narrative to read and discuss with me or another host. Today I'll be talking with Lindsay Holmgren.

[00:01:26] who has selected Ursula Le Guin's 1973 story, The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas. Lindsay Holmgren is an associate professor in the DeSotel Faculty of Management at McGill University, where she also directs the Laidley Center for Business Ethics and Equity. Lindsay is a past president of the International Society for the Study of Narrative, and she currently serves the society, along with Dan Punday, as conference liaison.

[00:01:56] Lindsay has published on a variety of issues of narrative studies, including work on narrative telepathy in late 19th and early 20th century Anglo American fiction and metallepsis. Lindsay has also contributed to conversations in narrative medicine and especially in narrative and economics.

[00:02:16] Lindsay is currently the principal investigator for a project funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, which she has described this way. This project explores how our most pressing contemporary existential phenomena are rooted in. And perhaps shifting Western comportments of, toward time and how these potential shifts influence the economic choices of young people entering the workforce.

[00:02:46] So welcome, Lindsay, and is there anything you'd like our listeners to pay special attention to? Guin's story.

[00:02:53] **Lindsay Holmgren:** Thank you very much, Jim. And thank you for the introduction. And above all, thank you so much for inviting me to be interviewed for this fantastic podcast. And I'm very honored to be among all of those who have come before me and those who will be interviewed.

[00:03:10] In due time. So thank you very much. yeah, I will say a few things about Omelas before I read it. like many of the stories in the podcast Omelas has been taught and anthologized in many classrooms and texts. around the world as we know, Le Guin is remarkably prolific and this particular story is part of the collection, the Winn's 12 Quarters.

[00:03:35] It was first published in a science fiction anthology a couple years before it was published in the Winn's 12 Quarters in 1975. It won the Hugo Award for Best Short Story in 1974. So it's an ethical allegory, and we'll get into some of that when we talk. But worth noting is that she attributes her inspiration for the story to William James's The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life, as well as to Dostoyevsky's The Brothers Karamazov.

[00:04:05] And to introduce my reading, I'll quote her. She makes a witty statement, many of us know that Omelas is Salem backwards, right? With the O at the beginning, and she makes a witty statement in a foreword to one of the editions. Where do you get your ideas from, Ms. Le Guin? From forgetting Dostoevsky, and reading road signs backwards, naturally.

[00:04:28] Where else?

[00:04:32] So with that in mind,

[00:04:34] **Jim Phelan:** yeah, so now here's Lindsay Holmgren reading Ursula Le Guin's The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas.

[00:04:42] **Lindsay Holmgren:** With a clamor of bells that set the swallows soaring, the festival of summer came to the city Omelas,

# mmmmmmmm

[00:04:49] **Lindsay Holmgren:** bright towered by the sea. The rigging of the boats and harbors sparkled with flags. In the streets between houses with red roofs and painted walls, between old moss grown gardens and under avenues of trees, past great parks and public buildings, processions moved.

[00:05:10] 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 want. In other streets, the music beat faster. A shimmering of gong and tambourine, and the people went dancing. The procession was a dance. Children dodged in and out, their high calls rising like the swallows crossing flights over the music and the singing.

[00:05:45] All the processions wound towards the north side of the city, where on the great water meadow called Greenfield, Boys and girls, naked in the bright air, with mud stained feet and ankles and long, lithe arms, exercised their rustic horses before the race. The horses wore no gear at all, but a halter without fit.

[00:06:10] Their manes were braided with streamers of silver, gold, and green. They flared their nostrils and pranced and boasted to one another. They were vastly excited. being the only animal who has adopted our ceremonies as his own. Far off to the north and west, the mountains stood up, half encircling Omelas on her bay.

[00:06:37] The air of 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. There was just enough wind to make the banners that marked the racecourse snap and flutter now and then. In the silence of

[00:06:59] **Lindsay Holmgren:** the broad green meadows, one

[00:07:01] **Lindsay Holmgren:** could hear the music winding through the city streets, farther and nearer and ever approaching.

[00:07:08] A cheerful, faint sweetness of the air that, from time to time, trembled and gathered together and broke out into the great, joyous clanging of the bells. Joyous! How is one to tell about joy? How describe the citizens of Omelas? They were not simple folk, you see, though they were happy, but we do not say the words cheer much anymore.

[00:07:39] All smiles have become chaos. Given a description such as this, one tends to make certain assumptions. Given a description such as this, one tends to look next for the king, mounted on a splendid stallion and surrounded by his noble knights. Or perhaps in a golden litter born by great muscle slaves, but there was no king.

[00:08:05] They did not use swords or keep slaves. They were not barbarians. I do not know the rules and laws of their city, but I suspect that they were singularly few as they did without monarchy and slavery. So they also got on without the stock exchange, the advertisement, the secret police and the bomb. Yet I repeat that these were not simple folk, not dulcet shepherds, noble savages, bland utopians.

[00:08:38] They were not less complex than 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 is interesting. This is the treason of the artist. A refusal to admit the banality of evil and the terrible boredom of pain.

[00:09:08] If you can't lick them, join them. 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. How can I tell you about the people of Omelas? They were not naive and happy children, though their children were, in fact, happy.

[00:09:43] They were mature, intelligent, passionate adults whose lives were not wretched. Oh, miracle! But I wish I could describe it better. I wish I could convince you. Omalas sounds in my words like a city in a fairy tale, long ago and far away, once upon a time. Perhaps it would be best if you imagined it as your own fancy fix, assuming it will rise to the occasion.

[00:10:10] For certainly I cannot suit you all. For instance, how about technology? I think that there would be no cars or helicopters in and above the street. This follows from the fact that the people of Omelas are happy people. Happiness is based on a just discrimination of what is necessary, what is neither necessary nor destructive, and what is destructive.

[00:10:37] 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. Floating light sources, fuel less power, a cure for the common cold.

[00:11:02] Or they could have none of that! It doesn't matter, as you like. I incline to think. That people from towns up and down the coast have been coming into Omelas during the last days before the festival on very fast little trains and double decked trams, and that the train station of Omelas is actually the handsomest building in town, though plainer than the magnificent farmer's market.

[00:11:29] But even granted trains, fear that Omelas so far strikes some of you as goody goody. Smiles, bells, parades, horses, blech. 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.

[00:12:03] Although that was my first idea. But really, it would be better not to have any temples in Omelas. At least, Not manned temples. Religion, yes. Clergy, no. Surely the beautiful nudes can just wander about, offering themselves like divines who plays to the hunger of the needy and the rapture of the flesh. Let them join the processions.

[00:12:28] Let tambourines be struck above the copulations, and the glory of desire be proclaimed upon the gongs. And, a not unimportant point, Let the offspring of these delightful rituals be beloved and looked after by all. One thing I know there is none of in Omelas is guilt, but what else should there be? I thought at first there were no drugs, but that is puritanical.

[00:12:59] For those who like it, the faint, insistent sweetness of Druze may perfume the ways of the city. Druze, which first brings A great lightness and brilliance to the mind and limbs, and then, after some hours, a dreamy languor and wonderful visions at last of the very arcana and inmost secrets of the universe, as well as exciting the pleasure of sex beyond all belief.

[00:13:26] And it is not habit forming. For more modest tastes, I think there ought to be beer. What else? What else belongs in the joyous city? The sense of victory, surely. The celebration of courage. . But as we did without clergy, let us do without soldiers. The joy built upon successful slaughter is not the right kind of joy, it will not do.

[00:13:53] It is fearful, and it is trivial. A boundless and generous contentment. A magnanimous triumph felt not against some outer enemy, but in communion with the finest and fairest in the souls of all men everywhere, in the splendor of the world's summer. is what swells the hearts of the people of Omelas. And the victory they celebrate is that of life.

[00:14:21] I really don't think many of them need to take drews.

[00:14:26] Most of the processions have reached the green fields by now. A marvelous smell of cooking goes forth from the red and blue tents of the provisioners. The faces of small children are amiably sticky. In the benign gray beard of a man, a couple of crumbs of rich pastry are entangled. The youths and girls have mounted their horses and are beginning to group around the starting one, of course.

[00:14:53] An old woman, small, fat, and laughing, is passing out flowers from a basket, and tall young men wear her flowers in their shining hair. A child of nine or ten sits at the edge of the crowd, alone, playing 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 only wrapped in the sweet, thin magic of the tune.

[00:15:27] He finishes, and slowly lowers his hands holding the wooden flute, as if that private silence were the signal. All at once, the trumpet sounds from the pavilion near the starting line. Melancholy and piercing. The horses rear on their slender legs and some of them neigh in answer. Sober faced, the young riders stroke the horses necks and soothe them, whispering, quiet, quiet there, my beauty, my hope.

[00:16:01] They begin to form in rank along the starting line. The crowds along the racecourse are like a field of grass and flowers in the wind. The festival of summer has begun. Do you believe? Do you accept the festival? The city? The joy? No? Then let me describe one more thing. 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.

[00:16:41] It has one locked door and no window. A little light seeps in dastardly between the cracks in the board. Secondhand from a cobweb window somewhere across the cellar. In one corner of the little room a couple of moths, with stiff, clotted, foul smelling heads, stand near a rusty bucket.

[00:17:06] **Lindsay Holmgren:** The floor is dirt, a little damp to the touch, as cellar dirt usually is.

[00:17:10] The room is about three paces long and two lying, a mere broom closet or disused tool room. In the room, a child is sitting. It could be a boy or a 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.

[00:17:41] It picks its nose and occasionally fumbles vaguely with its toes or genitals as it sits hunched in the corner farthest from the bucket and the two moths. It is afraid of the moths. It finds them horrible. It shuts its eyes, but it knows the mops are still standing there, and the door is locked, and nobody will come.

[00:18:07] The door is always locked, and nobody ever comes. Except that sometimes the child has no understanding of time or interval. Sometimes the door rattles terribly and opens, and a person or several people are there. One of them may come and kick the child to make it stand up. Others never come close, but peer in at it with frightened, disgusted eyes.

[00:18:36] The food bowl and the water jug are hastily filled. The door is locked. The eyes disappear. The people at the door never say anything. But the child who has not always lived in the tool room and can remember sunlight and its mother's voice sometimes speaks. I will be good. It says, please let me out. I will be good.

[00:19:02] They never answer. The child used to scream for help at night and cry a good deal. But now it only makes a kind of whining. Yeah, yeah. And it speaks less and less often. It is so thin, there are no calves to its legs. Its belly protrudes. It lives on a half full cornmeal in Greece a day. It is naked. Its buttocks and thighs are a mass of festered sores as it sits in its own excrement, continually.

[00:19:44] They all know it is there, all the people of Balalas. 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 fine, and some do not. But they all understand that their happiness, the beauty of their city, the tenderness of their friendships, it is there.

[00:20:08] And 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 is usually explained to children when they are between 8 and 12, whenever they seem capable of understanding.

[00:20:32] And most of those who come to see the child are young people, though often enough an adult comes.

[00:20:41] No matter how well the matter has been explained to them, these young spectators are always shocked and sickened at the sight. They feel disgust, which they had thought themselves superior to. They feel anger, outrage, impotence, despite all the explanations. They would like to do something for the child, but there is nothing they can do.

[00:21:07] If the child were brought up into the sunlight out of that vile place, If it were cleaned and bed 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. Those are the terms. To exchange all the goodness and grace of every life in Omelas for that single small improvement.

[00:21:39] To throw away the happiness of thousands for the chance

[00:21:46] That would be to let guilt within the walls, indeed. The terms are strict and absolute. There may not even be a kind word spoken to the child. Often the young people go home in tears or in a tearless rage when they have seen the child and faced this terrible paradox. They may brood over it for weeks or years.

[00:22:15] 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. A little vague pleasure of warmth and food, no doubt, but little more. It is too degraded and imbecile to know any real joy. It has been afraid too long ever to be free of fear.

[00:22:38] Its habits are too uncouth for it to respond to humane treatment. Indeed, after so long, it would probably be wretched without laws about it to protect it, and darkness for its eyes and its own excrement to sit in. Their tears at the bitter injustice dry when they begin to perceive the terrible justice of reality and to accept it.

[00:23:02] It is their tears and anger. The trying of their generosity and the acceptance of their helplessness, which are perhaps the true source of the splendor of their lives. Theirs is no vapid, irresponsible happiness. They know that they, like the child, are not free. They know compassion. It is the existence of the child and their knowledge of its existence that makes possible the nobility of their architecture, the poignancy of their music, the profundity of their science.

[00:23:38] It is because of the child that they are so gentle with children. They know that if the wretched one were not there sniveling in the dark, the other one, the flute player, could make no joyful music as the young riders line up in their beauty for the race in the sunlight of the first morning of summer.

[00:23:58] Now do you believe in them? Are they not more credible? But there is one more thing to tell, and this is quite incredible. 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.

[00:24:32] These people go out into the street and walk down the street alone. They keep walking and walk straight out of the city of Fomalhauts through the beautiful gates. They keep walking across the farmlands of Omelas. Each one goes alone, youth or girl, man or woman. Night falls. The traveler must pass down village streets, between the houses with yellow lit windows, and on out into the darkness of the fields.

[00:25:06] Each alone, they go west or north towards the mountains. They go on. They leave Omelas. They walk ahead into the darkness. And they do not come back. The place they go towards is a place even less imaginable to most of us than the city of happiness. I cannot describe it at all. It is possible that it does not exist.

[00:25:36] But they seem to know where they are going. The ones who walk away.

[00:25:44] **Jim Phelan:** Okay, Lindsay, thanks very much. This story is very rich, so there's a lot to talk about, but maybe we should start with the big reveals at the end. In the framing comments, you mentioned ethical dimension of the story. So maybe we could start there and maybe say something about the, ethics and the kind of challenges that Le Guin is presenting to her readers.

[00:26:09] **Lindsay Holmgren:** Yeah, sure. So There are, you know, there's a range of readings and people talk about them from, different perspectives. Le Guin herself talks about the scapegoat narrative, and, we can certainly see that this is that kind of scapegoat narrative, a scapegoat allegory, and the reference, of course, to Salem and to the tragic witch trials, of course, calls our attention to that and while this then sets up the question of whether one makes this choice, right, it's, the utilitarian question of whether we want to privilege privilege.

[00:26:47] The many over the safety of the one or the benefit of the one. And this is the question that Oh, millions seem to decide by and large, they're going to privilege the happiness of the many And we'll talk about the degree to which that's a decision, as sort of, I work through a somewhat different reading.

[00:27:10] It's, aligned, of course, with, this reading of the scapegoat narrative, but I'd like to look at it today through the lens of economics. Oh, great. Okay. Unsurprisingly. Um, yeah. Tell us more. Yeah. Given that my wheelhouse, a little bit. Yeah. And you'll see that this idea that, one has to pay for the happiness of others aligns very well with this economic reading of the story.

[00:27:40] And I'll also say that Le Guin herself called attention to the ways in which we have to believe in a monarchy every bit as much as we choose to believe in capitalism, right? So she, does call attention to the challenge of the capitalist regime in her own language when she.

[00:28:00] Accepted or prized. So with this in mind, I intimated at the beginning that the text invites allegorization. And I'd like to suggest that the collective that the narrative produces you know, we have the we narrative and of course the you that the narrator is addressing.

[00:28:19] The collective, we essentially represents, I'd say, a sort of normative ideology that the Omal choose to protect the happiness of the many. Okay. Over the, yeah. So with that in mind, Omahas might be what some would call a symbol of what some would call the plural sector. tHe plural sector, neither private nor public, is something that I'll elaborate on a little bit below.

[00:28:47] but for now, I'll say that they're members of this plural sector whose social contract is binding for those who stay. We can think of, the witch trials as a horrifying historical example of the scapegoat, but today, through the lens of economics, I'll think about this as an externality.

[00:29:06] So I'd like to view the child through the lens of what we refer to in economics as an externality. So, put simply, externalities, Are side effects or consequences of industrial or commercial activity. That affects other parties without this being reflected in the cost of the goods or the services involved.

[00:29:30] Okay. Yeah. So one way to think about it. So you're

[00:29:33] **Jim Phelan:** paying attention to the profits, the bottom line, the, this kind of thing, and then , these other things, the side effects, the consequences. We call them external as a way to, not pay attention to them.

[00:29:47] **Lindsay Holmgren:** That's right.

[00:29:48] That's right. and, one way that we can think about externalities, sort of, that's very present in many of our minds, many of our listeners may know that 33 attorneys general in the United States have recently brought a class action suit against META and Instagram to account for the META mental health costs to young people and adolescents.

[00:30:10] to which social media can give rise. So this is really interesting when we think about it in this sense because this is both An externality, their mental health is a cost, but from an economic perspective, you also have the financial. Costs involved in that. You have social services, you have health care services, you have pharmaceutical services, and then you have, the effect to the workforce.

[00:30:34] So there wind up being these, other costs that aren't built into the cost of the product itself. Now, externalities can be positive. It does happen sometimes, but an externality is a positive outgrowth that isn't, that isn't. Right, but

[00:30:47] **Jim Phelan:** when, when MEDA does their credits and deficits and, or expenses and so on.

[00:30:52] These social expenses, the, the pharmaceuticals, the social services, et cetera. That's not part of their calculation, right? No,

[00:31:01] **Lindsay Holmgren:** they're not at all concerned about those things. And so by and large, when we think of externalities, it's a pejorative, it's a pejorative Yeah. Good. Yeah. Yeah. So Now we turn to the child.

[00:31:12] Well, and you know, obviously we can also see climate change broadly as an externality, right? But, and then you can, you can

[00:31:19] **Jim Phelan:** think about other, other ways in which capitalism, global capitalism functions and climate change becomes an externality. Yes. Good.

[00:31:28] **Lindsay Holmgren:** Yeah. Yeah. So now to turn back to the child, well, the child can be understood as a scapegoat.

[00:31:37] It can also be understood as an externality and that's partly due To the extraordinary degree in my reading here that I'm one of my readings, but the one that I'd like to focus on here, the extraordinary degree of rationalization in which the citizens of Omelas have to engage in order to keep the child there.

[00:31:58] Yes, absolutely. Right. So they have to happen. And what's interesting is they have to happen in the service of eradicating guilt. Yes. Right? We have this one thing I know there is none of in Omelas, it's guilt. Exactly, yeah. And, you know, how is that possible? So what the text does is represent that.

[00:32:20] Rationalization, that moment that shared sort of collective rationalization in the only free and direct discourse we get in the narrative. So it's the only sort of interiority we really get among the citizens. And I'll just read that section. Yeah, it's a good reminder.

[00:32:37] **Jim Phelan:** Sure.

[00:32:38] **Lindsay Holmgren:** Okay. Okay, great. So again, we have, you know, often the people of own loss go home in tears or in a tearless rage when they have seen the child has faced this terrible paradox.

[00:32:51] They may brood over it for weeks or years, but as time goes on, they begin to realizeso we have a realize, right? that even if the child could be released, it would not get much of its good of its freedom, a little vague pleasure of war. So

[00:33:10] **Jim Phelan:** now, just to interrupt for a second, so it's like at this stage that Le Guin shifts into the free and direct discourse,

[00:33:16] **Lindsay Holmgren:** right?

[00:33:16] Yes, absolutely. Absolutely. And it happens. Mid sentence. Yeah, mid

[00:33:21] **Jim Phelan:** sentence. Right, right. Sort of after the, I mean, if you're looking at the text, like, after the colon, it would not get much good of its freedom colon, and then a little vague pleasure of warmth and food, that, that does seem to be the indirect discourse.

[00:33:33] Yeah.

[00:33:33] **Lindsay Holmgren:** Yeah. Yeah. And yeah, it would not get much good. So it is too degraded and imbecile to know any real joy. It has been afraid too long ever to be free of fear. It's habits are too untruth for it to respond to humane treatment indeed after so long It would probably be wretched without laws about it to protect it and darkness for its eyes and its own Experiment to sit in right and then we get the narrator's bitter injustice But interestingly they recognize that they are not free and that comes from the narrator, but this is sort of this moment, you know, where that slip between the narrator and which, you know, I'm very interested in that relationship, perhaps telepathic between, the narrator and the city.

[00:34:25] When the narrator says they know that they like the child are not free. So we've gone from realize to know, right? So we've moved through the stages of rationalization here. so To, go back now to this question of externalities, the rationalizations are part, in my view, of the tension at the center of the text on this reading, because the narrator wants to suggest that these are rational actors whose decision to keep the child is taken with a considerable degree of agency.

[00:34:57] Right. Right. They work through it, right? Decide they choose to keep the child there, right? But much like the rationalization in which, you know, active participants in the capitalist regime have to engage in order to continue doing the things we do that we know are harmful to, say, members of the global South, who, separate consequences of climate change.

[00:35:25] I see these people as going through those same rationalizations, collective rationalization to keep their town happy. Right. Exactly. Yeah. And what's really fascinating to me about this too is that it's also interesting to think about this in terms of the economic value placed on Now, what we call the so called happiness quotient, right?

[00:35:49] So, I once came across this great quotation, and I think it was in The Economist, that went something like this, the idea of politicians grinning at us and telling us how happy we are is positively Orwellian. Yeah, yeah. It's this, it's this happiness as currency. Right. Yeah. Yeah. So, this winds up sort of playing a role in how I read.

[00:36:13] Yeah. So just to close then on this reading major global corporations that are, and you know, other homogenizing factors. Such as computer technologies, like social media, sort of start to diminish the plural sector. And I said that I would mention, I would elaborate on the plural sector a little bit more.

[00:36:35] So the plural sector is neither public nor private, and it flourishes within local communities that have their own character and flavor and whose community organizations, right? So NGOs. Activist NGOs or religious organizations, their range of other community organizations that are neither public nor private, they help to support and maintain that shared sense of collaboration and local identity.

[00:37:04] So what's really fascinating on this reading is that, ironically, Omalas, a unique idiosyncratic town that sort of functions on its own community identity and its shared sense of purpose. Becomes itself at a meta level in the actual world, a representation of an externality with an externality of globalization with a representation of itself inside of itself, a child.

[00:37:36] Right? Interesting. So, yeah. Yeah. Yeah, that's good. That's my reading for

[00:37:40] **Jim Phelan:** today. Yeah, yeah. No, that's good. I, think I'd just like to, come back to your general point about this being a kind of ethical allegory and, you know, note that it's the kind of allegory it is. is one in which there's a lot of sort of freedom given to audiences to decide how to allegorize.

[00:38:02] Right? Yeah. So it's not, it's not like a Pilgrim's Progress allegory or an Everyman, you know, medieval drama allegory where there's a clear one to one, right? But also I think a lot of the that we can do would sort of reinforce each other. Right? So, your great, focus on the economics and the way it works with capitalism and so on, right?

[00:38:23] We could then say, yes, and let's think about race, right? If we think about the child, right? As, in the U. S., right? We could say, okay, black people, right? And then the citizens are the white supremacists and so on. , and then we could map that onto what you're doing with Aligarh.

[00:38:42] If we wanted to be radical academics, we could talk about adjuncts, right? And the way in which the whole system relies on adjuncts, right? Yes. and we could, I'm sure we could think about other things, but, but that's, I think one of the really interesting, features of this kind of allegory is the way in which it allows, it invites this kind of multiplicity of things.

[00:39:04] and in doing that, I would suggest it sort of highlights the similarity among these different kinds of structures.

[00:39:12] **Lindsay Holmgren:** Oh, yeah, that's excellent. Yeah, it certainly does do that. And, you know, another thing to sort of layer on top of that and where it resists that sort of closed allegorization is.

[00:39:27] The ones who walk away are sort of unknown, so we don't know about them, we don't know where they go, and in a sort of classic utopia, it's closed, and there's a sort of authoritarian control over the future that you imagine that the classic utopia tries to envision, and, and this one doesn't do that, right?

[00:39:46] In 1973, the narrator, and Llywelyn perhaps are saying, I don't know. Yeah. I don't know where they're going. Right. Yeah. It's completely left off to the reader. Right. To determine. Think about that. And it has to do with that relationship between the reader, of course, and the narrator.

[00:40:06] Yeah. Yeah. So

[00:40:07] **Jim Phelan:** maybe another way to come back to that, right, is the kind of double movement of the story, right? On the one hand, we're getting the movement of, all right, well, here's Omelas, here's how it works, here's, well, build the story world, right? and then I'll give you , these big revelations at the end.

[00:40:23] So there's all that. but then there's the second movement, which is the narrator narratee relationship, the narrator saying, all right. I know you're skeptical. You're not going to buy this, right? Will you believe it? Will you believe it? You know, and then to say at the end, and we get to two things, well, all right, maybe you don't believe it, but now will you believe it if I tell you about the child?

[00:40:46] And now will you believe it if I tell you about the ones who walk away, right? Right. So there's this this whole idea about A people who are happy, but they are complex they are not simple, they are not what do you call them, bland utopians, um, etc. Right? and then we end, okay, I, think you will believe me if I tell you these two things about it, right?

[00:41:13] the child and then the one to walk away. Let's think about the, what's kind of the narrative logic of that or the rhetorical logic of that to say, all right, if I tell you this, maybe you'll believe.

[00:41:26] **Lindsay Holmgren:** so the narrator is fascinating here, right? The narrator is trying to align, I'll say herself, align herself with the reader by saying, I'm with you.

[00:41:40] We are the week, right? You and I are the be here and we share as, air you day thinking individuals, you know Who are not part of this collective. we share the knowledge that in order to be a erudite thinking reading individual we clearly are not, happy with Grins from ear to ear all the time in our lives.

[00:42:06] Yeah. we are thoughtful people, and to be thoughtful, we have to invest in pain. and then this narrator says, No, we have to admit that there's something wrong with that. so let's start with that for us, right? there's something wrong with the idea that darkness and pain are whence knowledge derives, right?

[00:42:25] Suffering is whence knowledge derives. Let's start with the premise that happiness is acceptable, but then how do I get you to believe in a kind of happiness that seems also intelligent? And there's some really funny moments here. One of my favorites is when the narrator is talking about what they can have, what sort of comforts they can have in Omelas, they're saying you certainly can't have cars, You might have fuel, less energy, you might have these other things. what kind of technology can you have? Yeah. And the narrator says, I think there would be no cars or helicopters in and above the streets. This follows from the fact that the people at home lots are happy. So this is just kind of following on the heels of this. We have to stop thinking that happiness is stupid now We see that this narrator is really manipulating logic in a way to make us buy into a Sustainable happy life as one that is the logical life and Now that you're part of my, we surely, you already know that it follows logically from the fact that people are happy that there would be no cars or helicopters.

[00:43:43] And, and this sort of goes on this sort of waffling back and forth and then as you like it, right? So trying to get us to dispense with our stable renderings of what thoughtful, happy people would look like. And destabilize them from a Western individualist, I would say capitalist largely unsustainable society and say, happiness inside of this kind of utopia is antithetical to that.

[00:44:15] And you have to recognize that happiness derives, but it's still the narrator unsure of herself and consistently trying over and over again. To get us to believe in this.

[00:44:28] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah. Right. And also that, as you like it and this, let's imagine this and that and so on. It raises another question, I think, which is, the narrator actually reporting on, a place, Omelas, or is the narrator inventing it herself, sort of allegorizing, right?

[00:44:46] So that, if we just say she's reporting on the place, we can say, okay, all the allegorization is coming from Le Guin. Right? But if, we then if we would attribute the agency of that to the narrator, then we might make her like uh, the internal allegorist.

[00:45:00] and so then Lewin might be doing a kind of meta commentary on allegory.

[00:45:05] **Lindsay Holmgren:** nice. Yeah. Absolutely. Yeah. Great. Great way to think about it. and then we could go as far as into an almost solipsistic view, like maybe this is all just completely a construct of the narrator's mind and we're just inside of the narrator and there are who've made that sort of an argument as well, that it only exists as this representation that we're getting in the ones who walk away from a lot.

[00:45:30] But yes, absolutely. We're seeing so many different levels of, meta levels of potential means of recognizing how allegory is staged, right? It's a dramatization of allegory itself, which, you know, points to the other James, right? William's brother, uh, Who, uh, was invested in that dramatization of the action and even of interior monologues like that.

[00:45:56] Yeah. Yeah.

[00:45:57] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah. So maybe we could, from the perspective of this most recent discussion about the narrator's role in, inventing or reporting and so on come back to that last paragraph about the ones who walk away, right? Because there's some striking features of that in terms of, narrator sort of limits of knowledge or, unwillingness to say much more than that they walk away, on the one hand, the narrator is presenting it as, okay, if I tell you this, this will maybe increase the credibility of, my story. And yet, at the same time There's this, I can't describe the place they're going to, it's possible it doesn't exist. They seem to know where they're going, the ones who walk away but I'm not going to tell you, I can't tell you.

[00:46:48] Um, it's an interesting choice, right? especially given what seems to be the strong and clear our indictment of those who stay and rationalize, right? Right. Right. So what do we make of that? I think, a complication to the idea of the ethics of walking away.

[00:47:10] Absolutely. So maybe we could talk about that a little bit. Yeah.

[00:47:14] **Lindsay Holmgren:** so, there are two aspects of that that are interesting to me. One is The narrator, when the narrator arrives at this final paragraph, the narrator has sort of shifted syntactically, the means of questioning whether or not you believe, right?

[00:47:29] So the narrator says, now, do you believe in them? Are they not more credible? Right. So there's this sort of now, it's the negative right, right. Formulation to sort of suggest we're past a question now. right. They not more credible. Obviously there's one answer to that.

[00:47:49] Right. At that point then, the narrator says, but there's one more thing to tell, and this is quite incredible. so, the narrator has decided, now everything I've told you is credible, we agree on that. So, this is all, we're all good here. I've got my rhetorical question in there.

[00:48:08] Are they not now credible? Yeah,

[00:48:10] **Jim Phelan:** yeah, alright, okay. Yeah, we've got the pain, we've got the pain, and the suffering. So you'll believe

[00:48:18] **Lindsay Holmgren:** me, yeah, right. You'll believe me. my story world is well created, it's actual, and we can think through all kinds of things. But this next question, this next thing is incredible.

[00:48:30] I can't make you believe this. Yeah, but I'm gonna tell you what it is. Not only is it incredible and you're not gonna believe it But I can't even describe it and maybe it doesn't exist. Yeah,

[00:48:41] **Jim Phelan:** But what she does insist on is that there is a group that walks away Right they

[00:48:47] **Lindsay Holmgren:** do and they walk away Alone.

[00:48:51] Yeah, one by one right and walk one by one. But again, we'll look precisely at the language Then we're left with the title, but they seem to know where they are going. The ones who walk away from Amalas. And what's fascinating about this, just from this question of the collective that we had throughout the narrative.

[00:49:14] So we have this collective that represents this normative decision, normative ideology that they share. But the title, the ones who walk away from Amalas, it's the singular one, right? Right. Right. So. it suggests they are each individual ones, but they have been made into some sort of a plurality here, when they walk away.

[00:49:42] A similar action.

[00:49:44] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah. Right. Because they do the same thing, we can group them, even though they're doing, acting individually. Yeah. That's

[00:49:51] **Lindsay Holmgren:** right. So, if we're looking at this, like through the lens of the modern liberal subject, we can say, well, There's the one there's the individual But the individual is moving in a direction that they know and it is shared with the other ones So somehow this will be shared.

[00:50:10] This space will be shared and That it is left Indescribable that the narrator cannot describe it at all, but it possibly does not exist I read it or one possible reading is that it puts the onus on us reader to determine What does this mean are the ones who walk away? Do they know where they're going?

[00:50:31] Are they going? out of the cave and, into the light to in a, platonic reference here, right? Are they moving? Out of the cave into the lake so that they can return and free the child or are they moving away because they're refusing to participate in the system. Right.

[00:50:51] If they come back and free the child, are we left with the cycle of sort of a coldian cycle of revolution that ultimately serves to reinforce itself? what are we left with? If they come back and we have. Jemisin's The Ones Who Stay and Fight, a short story that's written in response to this, that suggests that staying and making a difference is possible and ought to be done, but these ones walk away.

[00:51:15] So where do we stand on that walk? what is our Imagination going to tell us and what do our ethics tell us about whether this contributes to the good by removing yourself from this collective ideology or this, and you might say. it's a collective, if we're thinking about it through that capitalist lens, I raised earlier, it could be said to be a sort of collective delusion, right?

[00:51:45] It's means of imagining that these activities that we engage in are not actually hurting someone else, because In order not to feel guilt, one would have to get to that point of imagining what's not happening. Right, right. So what does walking away signify? does it allow that system to continually reinforce itself?

[00:52:07] Does it ultimately result in More people walking away? These are the questions. Right. And where do we start?

[00:52:15] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah, and it's also striking, right, that it's not like the ones who rise up and rebel, right? the ones who fight for the child. They're not, present in this story, right?

[00:52:26] They're the only option. So when you say, yes, there's kind of challenge to the audience here. Like, well, what would you do, right? How do you judge? Walking away, as opposed to doing something, how do you judge staying and rationalizing. I mean, there we're pretty strongly guided to, judge negatively, those who stay and rationalize,

[00:52:49] Walking away is something, but what do we make of that? And interestingly, we don't get their rationalization, right? that's right. You know, and that's another way in which I think Le Guin is handing it over to her audience. All right. what would you do? Right? Would you walk away?

[00:53:06] Alright. You probably flatter yourself and you wouldn't stay, but would you walk away? And if you didn't walk away, what would you do? what would it mean how would you, respond here?

[00:53:16] **Lindsay Holmgren:** Yeah. Yeah. Absolutely. And I think this is part of this ambiguity for which the story is.

[00:53:23] is part of what makes it such a rich narrative Exploring the range of ethical implications involved in so many of our activities and in race relations in the United States, in the ways in which the wealth of nations are

[00:53:43] **Lindsay Holmgren:** held in the hands of very, very few and the degree to which we are willing to.

[00:53:49] Continue to participate in that we can say that we find it problematic and then order our holiday gifts on Amazon. Right, right. And when we do those things, this text is asking us to say, these are problematic, right? And this is reading it through this particular lens. If these things are problematic.

[00:54:10] Then, at the very least, walking away would be a first step. This is a literal step, one step, and you know, the narrator tracks them through, it's light when they leave. It's dark by the time they get out of the city. So, that's why this has been, related to the allegory of the cave, because the darkness then enables those light sources from stars to start to emerge.

[00:54:36] And, and then there's, is there the possibility of going home? Who knows, right? Who knows that possibility of return exists? But we're left to decide. Is it better to walk away or is it better to try to change within? And these are also the major questions that we ask ourselves. I'm a person who it's a.

[00:55:01] Humanities person and a faculty of management, right? So the question is, do you? Stay outside of management faculties, or do you, try to contribute to the good from within, right? Right,

[00:55:13] **Jim Phelan:** right. Or just study narrative and economics and think about, you know. That's

[00:55:17] **Lindsay Holmgren:** exactly right. That's

[00:55:18] **Jim Phelan:** exactly right.

[00:55:19] And, you know, like in the story, in a way, you know, I think one feature of the story that you know, one way to build on your reading is to say this is a story that makes the externality and internality, right? And you can't, avoid that, right?

[00:55:33] **Lindsay Holmgren:** That's exactly right. That's exactly right.

[00:55:35] And it's. fascinating that it can itself, the whole city can, and incidentally it's person in my faculty, Henry Mintzberg, who conceived the idea of the plural sector, an alternative to imagining a civil society, just because. For a range of reasons that he provides, but yeah, understanding it in the context of the plural sector and sort of this utopian plural sector representation there.

[00:56:02] And it is itself an externality of, capitalism is, ironic, right? And you wouldn't want to walk away. That's the thing. You need to stay, you need to stay and make that utopian. World work. Yeah. Right. And that's what Emison is trying to suggest as well. And we Yeah, great. But okay. Well, but yeah, it's just a wonderful, wonderful, rich, yeah, beautiful time.

[00:56:30] I actually might quickly, if we have a

[00:56:31] **Jim Phelan:** moment Well, I was just gonna say, we, probably should wind up, but if you have some final things to say Yeah. now we can

[00:56:38] **Lindsay Holmgren:** turn to that. Well, I'd like to say those final things actually through the lens of our author. Okay. beCause. She actually herself in the afterwards to an addition that I have Quotes a person who sent her a letter, and this has to do with what you and I discussed earlier about the many possible interpretations of, the story's central tensions, the paradoxes built into this story and I'd love to quote her here, she takes the view shared in this letter, paraphrasing it to write very much.

[00:57:16] So this is in response to the letter from this, reader, in this view, we're not the utopian planners of Dostoyevsky's tale, nor are we the free judging minds of James's, and this is one of James's proposition, Omelas already exists. No need to build it or choose it. We already live here in the narrow.

[00:57:46] foul prison. We let our ignorance, fear, and hatred build for us and keep us in, here in the splendid, beautiful city of life.

[00:58:01] **Jim Phelan:** Oh, okay. That's a great way to end.

[00:58:04] **Lindsay Holmgren:** Isn't that remarkable? So we are the childs. Yeah, yeah, right. We are the people of Omelas. Yeah. And we are the people who are just, consistently contending with these Paradoxes within which we live, and, have a planet that has globally been brought out of the level of poverty that it was previously in, largely as a result of capitalist endeavors. But those very endeavors, which is the argument used to support it, but those very endeavors are the same endeavors that stand to, bring us and other species down.

[00:58:35] So So it's a remarkable final quotation, so I'll leave us with that thought. Yeah, no, that's good.

[00:58:42] **Jim Phelan:** That's good. Yeah, right. Yeah. Great. Yeah. All right. Well, thanks so much, Lindsay. and I want to thank so much, Jim. Yeah. And I want to thank our listeners and say that , we're always happy to get feedback, which you can send to our Project Narrative email address.

[00:58:57] which is projectnarrative@osu.edu, or on our Facebook page, or to our Twitter or X account, which is @pnohiostate. Thanks again, Lindsay. very

[00:59:13] **Lindsay Holmgren:** much, Jim. See you soon.