English 1B Fall 2015 **Critical Analysis Sketch on “Omelas”**

**Note:** This is a sample sketch—something between an outline and a rough draft-- for a critical response to “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas.” Although I’ve followed the order of the sections described on the assignment sheet, that doesn’t mean my paper would keep them in this order.

1. **Introductory section to the Essay:** Maybe begin the essay with the central question of the story, relating it to relevant current issues in our own time. I’d end this section with a brief statement of my point, reserving the full thesis for later. Here’s a sketch of that opening:

If offered a house in a beautiful utopia of your design with the single stipulation that you would buy that utopia with the suffering of other people—even one innocent child’s unmitigated misery, would you take it? Or would you walk away from the tainted paradise? Or would you do something else—maybe rescue the child and start a revolution? As we contemplate the flood of refugees who are currently fleeing the failing societies in Africa and the Middle East where no one’s human rights are really secure, and as we contemplate the ways in which our own affluent society is inextricably linked to the desperately poor people laboring in foreign sweatshops and living in slave-like conditions as they pick the crops we eat, it is hard to see this as an abstract question.

In one of her most influential stories, “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” (1973), Ursula K. Le Guin offers readers this philosophical conundrum in the form of a “psychomyth,” as she calls it. She doesn’t explain the motivation of the people referred to in the title, but she invites us to identify with them. But is that really the best choice? After having read both this story and Le Guin’s sequel, “The Day Before the Revolution,” I’m inclined to throw in my lot with the revolutionaries. But as Le Guin shows us, this is not at all a simple question.

**Analysis:**

* 1. **Identify the film’s or story’s enduring human concerns** :
* How can we see past our society as it is to imagine something better?
* How can the rights of the individual be protected against the self-interest of the larger society?
* How can we resist our society’s belief system when it conflicts with our individual conscience?

**Discuss these concerns**: Quote/paraphrase lines from the story where Le Guin tells us the society’s beliefs and where she discusses the ones who walk away. Maybe bring in some details from the sequel where she answers her own question. Acknowledge the courage of those who walk away (maybe compare them to the people who left America to found a slavery-free society in Liberia?) But then challenge the idea that walking away is enough. Quote from Berenice Olivas’ essay about this.

* 1. **Interpret a theme and thesis in the work:** Le Guin’s Omelas story seems at first to focus on the beauty of the society that rests on the misery of the scapegoat, while also giving us enough graphic details about the misery of the child. Ultimately, though, she focuses our attention on the ones who reject the status quo by putting them in the title and giving them the last word. Still, by leaving it so open-ended, she allows us to imagine any number of actions they might take afterwards. Maybe this is because she believes there is more than one good response to the situation? (Then list a few possible courses of action and discuss, use analogies with history or our current time. Maybe Malala, Bono, Yunus, Mycoskie, Mandella.
1. **Evaluation:** Strengths of this story: vivid description, narrator’s voice complex and intriguing; complex, ambiguous ending suits the complexity of the situation in the world. Weaknesses: Maybe she needed to steer people a little more clearly away from the idea that walking away is enough? It seems like the most obvious interpretation, but from her second story we can see that it wasn’t what she had in mind.
2. **Response:** I really loved the story when I first read it and accepted its most obvious “moral” without deeply considering its implications. Now that I’ve read the sequel, though, and now that I know more about how radical social change happens in the world, my response is completely different. It is a sign of a great work of literature that you can keep coming back to it throughout your life and find food for thought there.