

## Identify the Message of Ursula Le Guin's *The Ones Who Walk From Omelas* through Its Thematic Structure

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### Abstract

*The Ones Who Walk from Omelas* is a science fiction short story written by Ursula Le Guin. The story is about the socio-cultural condition in a city named Omelas. It describes not only the beauty of the city when they are holding a festival, but also the unseen picture that portrays contradiction rather than the festive event people celebrate in. By doing a thematic analysis, the writer in this study is going to convey the message brought by the story writer. This study is under the Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) focusing on the textual metafunction. There are two research questions suggested in the analysis. The first is what types of theme and mood contained in the story, and the second one is what messages by which the author wants to deliver. The theme, at the very first place, is divided into two categories based on the subject default, which are unmarked and marked theme. Besides, theme is classified into three types of meaning; experiential, textual, and interpersonal theme. For the mood analysis, there are three kinds of mood which are declarative, imperative, and interrogative. In the findings, it is found that the writer ends to use declarative mood in the story to describes the condition, while the imperative mood is used to invite the readers to follow the speaker's ideas and the interrogative mood is to criticize the society. Besides, the author also tends to apply unmarked theme and preposed theme construction in the story.

**Keywords:** systemic functional grammar, syntax analysis, textual metafunction, thematic analysis, mood, theme

### 1. Introduction

In the study of syntax, basically, a sentence has three types of functions, by which this idea is a kind of 'renewal of interest in grammatical theory' (Halliday, 2004: 56), that are psychological subject, grammatical subject, and logical subject. 'Psychological Subject meant that which is the concern of the message'. It deals with what the speaker has in his mind as reflected to what is said at the very first play of utterances. 'Grammatical Subject meant that of which something is predicated', in which it tells the relation between subject and predicate in the formal grammatical relationship. Meanwhile, 'Logical Subject meant doer of the action. It was called 'logical' in the sense this term had had from the seventeenth century, that of 'having to do with the relations between things', as opposed to 'grammatical' relations, which were relations between symbols' (Halliday, 2004: 56). Regarding this study, it takes psychological subject into account since it is the study on the

theme which the goal is to search the message implied in the story through the clauses presented. For example, when someone says *In the garden behind the school, there are beautiful flowers*, he embarks the sentence with the reference of a place or with an adjunct of place. The utterance means that the speaker emphasizes the intention in the place, while on the other side it also makes the other participant/hearer thinks about the place first as the first idea comes up in his mind.

Related to this study, the analysis focuses on the theme as psychological subject is done under the study of Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) focusing on the textual metafunction. It is called textual because it shows the relation between the clause and the context. In other words, textual metafunction corresponds its status of clause as a message. In terms of favoured type of structure, it has culminative pattern since the 'peaks of prominence located at beginnings and endings'

(Halliday, 2004: 61). The beginning of a clause of sentence becomes the theme, and the following element is known as rheme. By the definition, theme is ‘the element which serves as the point of departure of message; it is that which locates and orients the clause within its context’ (Halliday, 2004: 64). The point of theme can be seen at the beginnings of a clause that also becomes the focus of the speaker. Meanwhile, the rheme is functioned as the element which follows the theme as well as constitutes the message. ‘The relevance of Theme becomes significant when it is viewed within larger context of the text and not only from perspective of the clause’ (Fontaine, 2013: 140). We can take a look at the example of a sentence *The atmosphere outside is peaceful*. The theme is *the atmosphere outside*, while the rheme is *is peaceful*.

Regarding the analysis, the writer uses a science fiction short story titled *The One Who Walks Away from Omelas* authored by Ursula Le Guin as the object of this study. The story is about a named Omelas that portrays the happiness and the sorrow inside the town. It also conveys an injustice that has already been seen by people but nothing to do to solve the social problems. To achieve the goal as stated previously in this study, there are two research questions suggested. The first one is what type types of theme and mood contained in the story, and the second one is what messages by which the author wants to deliver. For the first question, the writer identifies the mood and its thematic status at the very first place. There are three types of mood, which are declarative, imperative, and interrogative. Thematic status is divided into two categories which are marked and unmarked theme. The unmarked theme happens when there is default case that conflates with the subject. It means that the subject is directly stated in the beginning. On the contrary, ‘the theme is said to be marked when it is not the Subject of the clause’ (Fontaine, 2013: 141).

Theme is also divided into three types which are experiential, textual, and interpersonal theme. Experiential theme is also called as topical theme for some authors such as Halliday and Matthiensen (2004). This theme concerns

with the first participant in the clause, or in other words, it usually refers to the subject of a clause. Textual theme can be identified from the use of conjunction, conjunctive adjunct, and continuative. According to Halliday (2004), ‘a continuative is one of small set of words which signal a move in the discourse: a response, in dialogue, or a new move to the next point if the same speaker is continuing’, such as *yes, no, well, oh*, and so on. ‘A conjunctive adjunct’ is ‘the adverbial group or prepositional phrases which relate the clause to the preceding text’, while ‘conjunction’ is a word or group that either links (paratactics) (such as *and or nor either* etc.), or binds (hypotactic) (such as *when while before until*, etc.) the clause in which it occurs structurally to another clause’. For the interpersonal theme, it is seen from the vocative (a personal name being used to address), modal comment adjunct (speaker or writer’s judgement on or attitude to the content of the message), and finite verbal operator (the small set of finite auxiliary verbs construing primary sense or modality, it also occurs in unmarked theme of yes/no question).

At last, the analysis of textual metafunction is usually used in critical discourse (CD) or critical discourse analysis (CDA). It is because the analysis enables us to see the message or intention of the speaker or the author about the story. However, this study is going further to the social interpretation that is common in CDA. The writer limits the analysis on the text only focusing on its linguistics. Therefore, this paper consists of two discussions. The first is the analysis on the types of theme and mood, and the second one is about the message that implies on the previous analysis. The last part is the final remarks in which the writer tries to point out the discussions as the analysis results.

## 2. Discussion

### a. The types of Theme and Mood

This first section aims to answer the first research question about types of theme and mood. The analysis consists of three parts, which are mood and its thematic status, types of theme, and theme construction.

### b. Mood and Thematic Status

As stated earlier, the basic clause structure for the textual metafunction is theme and rheme. This is also the base to understand marked and unmarked theme as the thematic status of a sentence seen by the onset of the clause/sentence. Simply, the unmarked theme is when the theme is the subject itself. However, if the theme is other than the subject, such as adjunct or complement, it is considered as marked theme. Besides, mood of a sentence can be identified into three kinds; declarative, imperative, and interrogative. Here is the analysis result about the mood and its thematic status.

#### b.1. Theme in declarative clause

The unmarked theme commonly happens in declarative clause. 'In a declarative clause, the typical pattern is one in which Theme is conflated with Subject' (Halliday, 2004: 73). It is also said that 'We shall refer to the mapping of Theme on to Subject as the unmarked Theme of a declarative clause. The Subject is the element that is chosen as Theme unless there is good reason for choosing something else' (p.73). In this study, it is found that the short story is mostly written in unmarked theme which often occurs in the declarative clauses with nominal groups or pronouns. The examples can be seen as follow.

- 1) **Children** dodged in and out, their high calls rising like the swallows' crossing flights, over the music and the singing.
- 2) **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 walked.

- 3) **They** were not simple folk, you see, though **they** were happy.
- 4) **I** do not know the rules and laws of their society, but **I** suspect that they were singularly few.
- 5) **Religion** yes, **clergy** no.

All subjects presented in example (1) to (5) are also functioned as Theme. From the sentences above, the unmarked theme is shown by the personal pronouns such *they* in example (3) and *I* in example (4). By uttering *they* to begin the sentence, the speaker tends to emphasize the subject he is talking about, while when the speaker uses *I*, it means that the speaker states directly about his thought or feel. However, the unmarked theme also occurs in other nominal groups such as *children* (1), *old people* (2), and *some* (2). The speaker uses such nominalization in order to state the subject involved in the story. The sentences in examples (1) to (4) does not operate adjuncts to be mentioned in the onset of the sentences because those are purposed to describe the subjects that plays in the story directly in which the subjects have something done.

However, we see another pattern of unmarked theme shown in example (5). Basically, it has nominalization religion and clergy as the subject. Since the story is a part of literature in which the language is somehow poetic, sometimes such formal grammatical pattern does not really recognized. If we pay attention to (5), it has no verb or linking verb to connect the subject to object. This is so called as ellipsis, by which there is something omitted for particular purposes, that in the literature it may give an aesthetic effect. It is syntactically wrong, but not that problematic for literature writing as long as the meaning can be grasped well.

Besides, the declarative clauses in the story also have marked theme when the Theme is something than the Subject. It is shown by the Adjunct and Complement. To make it clearer, let's take a look at the examples below.

- 6) **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.
- 7) **Far off to the north and west** the mountains stood up half encircling Omelas on her bay.
- 8) **Given a description such as this** one tends to make certain assumptions.

The sentence in (6) and (7) has prepositional phrase functioned as Adjunct of place for its theme. Meanwhile, the theme in (8) is marked by nominalization *Given a description such as this* functioned as Complement of the sentence. In order to see the differences in themes, the analysis discussed above can be summed up as it is.

NO	Theme	Rheme	Marked/Unmarked Theme
1	Children	dodged in and out...	Unmarked
2	Some	were decorous...	Unmarked
3	They	were not simple folk..	Unmarked
4.	I	do not know the rules ...	Unmarked
5	Religion	yes...	Unmarked
6	In the streets between houses ...	procession moved.	Marked
7	Far off to the north and west	the mountains stood up half....	Marked
8	Given a description such as this	one tends to make certain assumptions.	Marked

**Table 1. The table of unmarked/marked theme in declarative clauses.**

**b. 2. Theme in imperative clauses**

‘The basic message of an imperative clause is either ‘I want you to do something’ or ‘I want us (you and me) to do something’ (Halliday, 2004: 76). In other words, the sentences with imperative mood contain command, prohibition, or invitation, initialized with *let’s...*, *don’t...*, *let me...*, and so on. Here are the examples of the sentences with imperative mood.

- 9) **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,

- 10) **Let them join** the processions.
- 11) **Let tambourines be struck** above the copulations,

Examples (6), (7), and (8) are written in imperative mood in which (6) has negative polarity while (7) and (8) have positive ones. In the short story, the imperative clauses are indicated by the verb *let* in which the function is as the Predicator. Because the verb in imperative clauses is either predicator or subject, it belongs to unmarked theme.

NO	Theme	Rheme	Marked/Unmarked Theme
9	Let us not	however, have temples from which .... the deep godhead of the blood,	Unmarked
10	let them	join the processions.	Unmarked
11	let tambourine	be struck above the copulations and the glory of desire be proclaimed upon the gongs, and let the offspring of these delightfu	Unmarked

		I rituals be beloved and looked after by all.	
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**Table 2. The table of unmarked/marked theme in imperative clauses.**

**c.3. Theme in interrogative clauses**

The basic idea of interrogative clauses is the speaker wants to know something. It can be in a form of ‘yes or no’ question or Wh-question. Yes/no interrogative contains polarity by which the theme is functioned as Finite verbal operator or ‘the element that embodies the expression of polarity’ (Halliday, 2004: 75). By using yes/no question, the meaning is ‘I want you to tell me whether or not’. On the other hand, in Wh- question, the speaker asks for information according to the Wh- element. It might be asking about the place, reason, time, manner, etc. In the short story, the writer finds some sentences containing interrogative clauses, as seen in the examples below.

- 12) How is one to tell about joy?
- 13) How describe the citizens of Omelas?
- 14) Now do you believe in them?
- 15) Are they not more credible?

The theme for sentence (12) and (13) is *how*, while the rest elements are the rheme. However, those two sentences are different from (14) and (15). In (14), it is seen that the theme is shown by an adjunct of time *Now*. Therefore, it is included as marked theme in interrogative sentence. Meanwhile, in (15), actually there are two themes reflected from the sentence. which are theme 1 is *Are* and theme 2 is *they*. Sentence (15) is written in negative polarity since it has *not* that indicates negative in its sentence. Different from sentence (14), examples (12), (13), and (15) have unmarked thematic pattern since their themes carry the basic message of a clause.

NO	The me 1	The me 2	Rheme	Marked/Unmarked Theme
12	How	-	is one to tell about joy?	Unmarked
13	How	-	describe the citizens of Omelas?	Unmarked
14	Now		do you believe in them?	Marked
15	Are	They	not more credible?	Unmarked

**Table 3. The table of unmarked/marked theme in interrogative clauses.**

**c. Types of Theme**

Basically, there are three types of theme, which are textual, interpersonal, and experiential. The main theme is experiential theme since it carries the initial experiential content and usually is conflated to the subject. However, in a sentence, experiential theme does not always occur as the beginning of a sentence. There are two other elements that might come up. The first is textual theme, and the second one is interpersonal theme. The analysis on its type of theme is purposed to know theme element containing in a sentence. The discussion about the theme type is still related to metafunctions as suggested in Halliday’s SFG. However, it must be understood that the analysis focuses on the textual metafunction which also seek for the theme element that occur in the beginning of the sentence.

Regarding this, in *The Ones Who Walks From Omelas*, the most frequent theme is the experiential them in which it emphasizes on the subject as the main theme. The other two thematic elements also occur in the short story in which the textual theme is more frequent than the interpersonal one. To know more details in what kind of sentences the thematic elements occur, let’s follow the discussion below.

NO	The me			Rheme
	Textual	Interpersonal	Experiential	
16			They	flared their nostrils and pranced and boasted to one another;
17	But		there	was no king.
18			They	did not use swords, or keep slaves
19	As		they	did without monarchy and slavery;
20	so		they	also got on without the stock exchange, the advertisement, the secret police, and the bomb.
21		Only	pain	is intellectual
22	If		it	hurts,
23			(you)	repeat it
24			We	have almost lost hold;
25			we	can no longer describe a happy man, nor make any celebration of joy.
26		Perhap	it	would be



		s		best if you imagined it as your own fancy bids
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**Table 4. The analysis on the thematic elements**

From the table above, it is seen that examples (16), (18), (21), as well as (23) to (25) have experiential theme in which the personal pronoun *they* are mostly occurred. *They* in this story is actually pointed to the people in Omelas since the story describing about the socio-condition in there.

Meanwhile, the writer finds out that the author uses conjunction to indicate the textual theme. Textual theme portrayed in (17), (19), (20), and (22) is belonged to paratactic conjunction, in which it is used to connect the sentence to the previous sentences or context. For interpersonal theme, the word *only* and *perhaps* indicates the writer’s judgment or attitude about the content of the message, so those two belong to the type of modal comment adjunct. By using *perhaps*, it shows that the speaker has probability about certain things. However, from sentence (26), this is not about doubt of the speaker but rather to invite or advice the participants/readers to follow what the speaker tells about.

**d. Thematic Construction**

For the last part of first section, the writer discusses on the grammatical constructions related to the theme. There are three kinds of theme construction. The first one is existential theme by which it is identified through the Subject *there* and has no experiential function. It is usually shown by the reference of place, for example *at the station, in a school*, and so on. Next is extraposed participant in which it is occurred in the pseudo-cleft sentences, or traditionally this type is under the heading of cleft-construction (Fontaine, 2013: 154). The last one is preposed theme which allows the speaker to direct the addressee’s focus.

Related to this type of theme construction, this work of literature shows that

preposed theme is frequently used. It means that the author wants to go directly to the main focus of the utterances rather than using the subject circumstances to begin. The analysis on preposed theme and other two themes can be seen in the table below.

	Sentences	Theme Construction
27	<u>But even granted trains</u> , I fear that Omelas so far strikes some of you as goody-goody.	preposed
28	<u>One thing I know</u> there is none of in Omelas is guilt	preposed
29	<u>As if that little private silence were the signal</u> , all at once a trumpet sounds from the pavilion near the starting line: imperious, melancholy, piercing.	preposed
30	It is too degraded and imbecile <u>to know any real joy</u>	extraposed
31	It is because of the child <u>that they are so gentle with children</u>	extraposed
32	<u>In the silence of the broad green meadows</u> one could hear the music winding through the city streets,	existential
33	<u>In a basement under one of the beautiful public buildings of Omelas, or perhaps in the cellar of one of its spacious private homes</u> , there is a room.	existential

Preposed construction is frequently used in order to connect the idea from the previous sentences. In this story, it can be portrayed from the use of conjunctions at the beginning of the clause/sentence. For example in (27), it tells the contradiction between the facilitations in the city

that purposes for giving benefits to the people, and the intention implied in it which is assumed that government serves such thing only to facilitate middle-class people or majority. However, the preposed theme does not always come up with conjunction such as *They were not simple folk, you see, though they were happy* (shown in example (3)). The use of conjunctions or adjuncts for preposed theme is not that much, but the author tends to write with preposed theme. Extraposed is used to emphasized the message of the clause/sentence. In (30) for instance, the phrase *too degraded and imbecile* actually has a relation to the next phrase *to know any real joy*. This sentence can be written as *To know any real joy is too degraded and imbecile*, but the author uses this cleft sentence to mark the intension which is helped by *it* functioned not as reference but to show off the point.

Meanwhile, in existential theme construction is usually initialed by the reference of places. However, it might be shown by attaching the reference of circumstances as happened in (32). The main idea of this existential theme is *in the green meadows*, but the author added information of the surrounding as well and becomes *in the silence of the broad green meadows*.

#### e. Messages from the Textual Analysis

This story written by American author Ursula Le Guin wants to criticize society by portraying the social conditions. Through the analysis on textual metafunction contains messages implied in the story. It can be said, firstly, that the author tends to used unmarked participant portrayed in the story. The speaker of the story tends to use personal pronouns such as *I*, *we*, *they*, and *you*. *I* refers to the speaker who is assumed as a part of Omelas citizen, *we* refers to the speaker and perhaps other people in Omelas, they can be for the society, people, or government, and *you* refers to the participant whom the speaker talks to. From this unmarked theme, it can be said that there is the intention from the speaker to be closer or not make a distance towards the hearers, so that he can deliver what comes up in his mind well about the city of Omelas. The topic of his story is also

proven by the use of other group of nominalization such as *some*, *children*, *old people*, *most procession*, etc. where they are exist and need to be concerned. By performing the subjects as the theme, it means the subjects have salient place in this context.

But even so, the unmarked theme is also occurred in the interrogative sentence functioned as the hedge as well as emphasizing the intention such as happens in the example (14) *Now, do you believe in them?*. Here, the author wants to point out that binary opposition about now and the past in which the speaker is questioning whether it is necessary to change or not. The others occur in the questions initial with *how* in order to invite the other participant to think about the way to go or think of philosophical things, as reflected in the example (12) and (13). It is added by the unmarked theme in yes/no question in which the speaker requires yes/no answer about particular idea. By using interrogative mood, actually the speaker wants to engage the participants to take involve in his idea about Omelas. This thing is also strengthened by the use of imperative mood in the clauses with the Predicator as the subject and the theme shown in the word *let*. It seems that the speaker prefers using *let* rather than prohibiting or commanding the participant, for example by using the imperative such as *don't*. In the story, the speaker is actually criticizing the people in Omelas, but he can control it through the language use as reflected in the imperative clauses. He seems enforces the people but firstly he makes the people/participants to think it first of what is going on, what social problems faced in Omelas. On the other side, the marked theme is mostly shown in the prepositional phrase indicating places. It means that the speaker wants to tell the condition or circumstances in the city.

For the types of theme, the author frequently uses experiential theme. It is purposed to emphasize that the subjects are prominent in the sentence rather than the circumstances other than subjects. In the short story, the role of the subjects of the subjects is various. If it is seen by using transitivity analysis, the subjects can be the experiencer,



affected, actor, and also agent, in which the subject as actor and agent is mostly used. Even though it is not the focus of the analysis, the subject role is also important to know the elements of experiential theme happened in the story.

### 3. Conclusion

To sum up, from the analysis on textual metafunction, it is found that the author of *The Ones Who Walks Away from Omelas* mostly applies declarative mood with unmarked theme in the story. The purpose is to portray the message about the problems happened in a place named Omelas in which the people seem ignorance with the social problem that they know. It is proven by the thematic analysis including the mood that implies the relation between the subjects and the circumstances of the city. The unmarked theme indicates that the author directly emphasizes to the related subjects which are mostly refers to Omelas people. The preposed theme construction is also used to direct the intention in the theme that begins in the clauses and see the relation between the theme and the previous clauses. The declarative mood helps to make the story more descriptive. Meanwhile, interrogative and imperative mood helps to support the intention of the message which function is to criticize the attitude of the people of Omelas and invite them to think like the speaker suggested.

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