

The Leader's Journey: Consequence, Regret, and Reflection

By: Alexander Henry

Why should the lord of the country / flit about like a fool? / If you let yourself be blown to and fro / you lose touch with your root. / If you let restlessness move you, / you lose touch with who you are. — Lao-Tzu (*A World of Ideas*: 11th Edition, 62)

In several pieces of literature, many authors and critics often draw from “the hero’s journey,” popularized by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. It is a common literary motif where the “hero” of a story embarks on a quest, eventually returning home, changed in some manner. This is noted in a series of “stages,” primarily with Campbell’s version, typically organized in a way reminiscent of the classic three-act structure model in storytelling, with these acts labeled as departure, initiation, and return.

More specifically, the steps involved are: The Road of Trials with *The Inferno*, the sixth stage—listed under the second act, Departure—Atonement with the Father/Abyss in *The Remains of the Day*, the ninth stage, also listed under the second act, and The Crossing of the First Threshold in “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas,” the fourth stage listed under the first act, Initiation. In a similar form, a leader also undergoes such a journey, one typically of consequence, regret, and reflection of their actions through their life and leadership. These ideas are no better exemplified than in the primary sources for this analysis, with two of these pieces set in Europe, Dante Alighieri’s narrative poem, *The Inferno*, and Kazuo Ishiguro’s post-war novel, *The Remains of the Day*, and one work set in America, Ursula Le Guin’s contemporary short story, “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas.” Each of these works contains the aforementioned aspects of leadership that pertain to the theme of “journey,” as well as the consequences of one’s actions, reflection, personal regret, and the obligation toward others, albeit to varying degrees. However, it should be noted that there is and will be some overlap between these stages, and that Campbell is to act as an anchor and structure to this analysis.

Firstly, it must be defined as to what Campbell’s definition of a “hero” is, as this will become more relevant later. While the fourth edition of the *Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms* defines the hero/heroine as “Often synonymous with protagonist, a term referring to the main character of a work” (Murfin, 192), Campbell’s definition is slightly more specific. As noted in “The Power of Myth” with Bill Moyers, he states that the hero is “someone who has given his or her life to something bigger than oneself” (Campbell, Moyers, 151). However, this term seems to be a more modern approach to the idea, as Hjalmar Hjorth Boyesan’s article, “The Hero in Fiction,” provides a term in opposition to this idea. The statement is as follows:

The oldest hero, as well as the newest (if we except the very latest development), is the man who looms a head above all people. It is the king, the chieftain, the demi-god, whose strength, and prowess, and beauty, physical or moral, thrill the soul, and kindle, by admiring sympathy, the heroic possibilities in our own hearts. (Boyesan, 2)

These opposing ideas provide a particular contrast, as well as context, to the idea of the hero and the leader, as the terms the writer uses in reference to the “hero”—king and chieftain—



are unquestionably leadership figures. So, to see these two examples further gives credence to the idea that the hero, like a leader, must rise above others, whether it be to guide others, to save them, or to serve as an example. However, while this will become more relevant later, it is important to outline these definitions in preparation for when this arises in full.

With Dante, *The Inferno* is set in the medieval era, more specifically, the 1300s. The definition of a leader within this narrative poem is tremendously multifaceted, with multiple characters either being a leader in their former life, or taking on the role in death, with the latter being particularly emblematic of Virgil, noted by John Ciardi as the narrator's "symbol of human reason" (Ciardi, 16). Beyond this, leadership is presented in a more abstract manner, through the presence of leaders or figures of notable importance throughout history and mythology in the various circles, such as Lucius Junius Brutus, founder of the Roman Republic, and Hector, a Trojan prince and major character from Homer's *Iliad*.

Overall, the "leader" within *Inferno* is showcased and defined heavily through Virgil's guidance of the narrator, Dante, and his purpose to lead Dante from error. However, the role and term is still, ironically, humanized through its association with leaders, both real and mythological, who were condemned for various reasons, adding to the definition as someone who can make mistakes, and, while dramatized, Alighieri sets up the idea of a leader in his work through remarkable levels of humanity. A medieval leader becomes a figure to guide others, make mistakes, and suffers the consequences.

Additionally, "journey" is another multifaceted term regarding the work, defined for both the work and medieval era in both a literal and metaphorical sense. While it is, indeed, very literal in the sense that Dante embarks on a physical journey through not only the circles of Hell, but also Purgatory and Heaven in the following two parts—*Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*—it is, additionally, a mental and emotional journey. This can be seen through his reactions throughout the narrative, such as multiple instances of fainting spells within the first and second circles, Limbo and Lust. In addition, Frederick Griffiths' article, "Epic and Novel," also makes note of this idea of journey as follows, "The larger epic journey, as mapped by Dante and then Milton, begins infernally: with descent, mockery, and derision—that is, with the central mock-heroic operations of seeing the great ones of this world frozen, shrunk, and humiliated" (Griffiths, 31).

Furthermore, this also can coincide with Campbell's work, particularly with the sixth stage of the hero's journey, "The Road of Trials," under the second act, "Initiation," described as follows: "The original departure into the land of trials represented only the beginning of the long and really perilous path of initiatory conquests and moments of illumination. Dragons have now to be slain and surprising barriers passed—again, again, and again" (Campbell, 90). Put simply, this "road of trials" is defined as a tumultuous path that the hero—in this case, the leader—must take to continue their journey, whether it be physical, mental, or emotional in nature.

Through this, while it might be unintentional, Dante builds up the idea of a "leader's journey" as a guiding figure or someone of noble status embarking on a physical, mental, or emotional journey. Zygmunt Baranski's article, "Without Any Violence" makes a note of the potential inspirations behind such an idea: "In part, Dante seems to have been motivated by the

standard view that words are the precursors of actions: the representation of violence, and especially the ‘tragic’ celebration of warfare and heroism, can lead to real brutal behavior” (Baranski, 17).

This is something that can be seen as time goes on, particularly in the next work to define these terms, *The Remains of the Day*. While the post-war novel’s period—the 1920s and 30s in flashbacks, and 1956 in the novel’s present time—does not line up with its publication date of 1989, it will be used for the sake of this analysis. In a manner not too dissimilar from Alighieri’s presentation, Ishiguro’s novel paints a multi-faceted view of leadership through multiple characters. However, he shows considerably more restraint than Alighieri, narrowing these characters down to only two primary instances: the narrator, Stevens, and the unnamed butler at the end of the novel. But, for the sake of this analysis, the focus will be placed on Stevens, as he is unquestionably the most important character regarding this type of discussion.

Through Stevens, the definition of a leader is notably different compared to the medieval definition in *The Inferno*. While there are reminiscent characteristics in the form of acting as a guide to the other workers—albeit a limited one—at the hall as the head of staff, this definition of leadership through Stevens is distinct through being one of sacrifice and necessity, exemplified in him leaving his father on his deathbed to continue his work, sacrificing the time he had to ensure Lord Darlington’s dinner party goes well. While this is a point that can be attributed to Stevens’ status as the head of staff and his duty as a butler, the man’s holistic dedication to his role and unwillingness to drop the mask of professionalism creates a bond between the leader and the man, making it difficult, almost impossible, to separate them. This is something that is both a benefit and detriment, as noted expertly by Rob Atkinson in his article, “How the Butler Was Made to Do It: The Perverted Professionalism of *The Remains of the Day*,” where he remarks on the idea of professionalism as follows, “It is a professionalism that accepts the imperfection—indeed, the imperfectability—of both individuals and institutions without rejecting the possibility of virtuous professional lives and cultures” (Atkinson, 5).

Furthermore, this style of stern, “always professional” leadership can also be attributed to his late employer and master, Lord Darlington. This is something particularly noted by Meera Tamaya’s article, “Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day*: The Empire Strikes Back,” where she says the following, “Lord Darlington believes that the world should properly be divided into two classes: the strong and the weak, leaders and followers, masters and servants” (Tamaya, 8).

These details in totality cause Ishiguro’s novel to align with the ninth stage of the hero’s journey, “Atonement with the Father/Abyss,” under the second act, “Initiation,” of which Campbell describes the step as follows: “Atonement consists in no more than the abandonment of that self-generated double monster—the dragon thought to be God (superego) and the dragon thought to be Sin (repressed id)” (Campbell, 107-10). In essence, it is a confrontation of a figure of high power, not necessarily a father or deity figure specifically, though these choices are a typical one.

Furthermore, this confrontation is not entirely about direct action, but rather about making a choice to incorporate the father or grandly figure into the new ideology of the

protagonist/hero. In this sense, both Stevens' father and Lord Darlington would fall under this, as Stevens himself would incorporate both his father's and his lord's ideology into his decisions. With his father's, as noted in the story, being stated by Stevens himself as, "You see, I know my father would have wished me to carry on just now" (Ishiguro, 111), and Lord Darlington, through his unwavering devotion in the same scene, saying momentarily afterward, "To do otherwise, I feel, would be to let him down" (111).

Conversely, the definition of "journey" is notably consistent when compared to Alighieri's original structure, as Stevens goes on, not only a literal, physical journey across England to meet Miss Kenton, but on said journey—albeit through reflection and flashbacks—he also embarks on a mental and emotional journey. In addition, what makes the journey so important is the reflection that Stevens undergoes during this long road trip. It allows him to look back on the decisions he made as the head of staff, the words he chose, and the regrets he has, particularly toward Miss Kenton—now Mrs. Benn—how she felt about him, as well as the unwavering trust he had in Lord Darlington up until his death, uncertain if such devotion was the correct course of action. Thus, this expression of the leader's journey creates a convergence between Alighieri's original structure and *The Remains of the Day*.

Following, the next work to discuss is Ursula Le Guin's contemporary short story, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas," written in 1973. The idea of a "leader" within this story, as opposed to the prior works discussed, is considerably different, as the pseudo-paradise of Omelas does not have any actual leader, as Le Guin notes, "But there was no king" (Le Guin, 1). Additionally, the city also has no listed rules, only stated to be "singularly few" (1). However, there are two places where the idea of a "leader," as structured by Dante and reinforced through Ishiguro, can be seen: the unnamed, titular "ones who walk away" and the suffering child. Regarding those who walk away, their contribution to the idea of leadership is another reinforcement of Dante, in that those who leave Omelas act as their own guide—as Le Guin notes that "each one goes alone" (4) toward, presumably, a better place.

Furthermore, in Omelas, the suffering of a single child extends the paradisaical nature of the city, so much so that Le Guin states, "there may not even be a kind word spoken to the child" (4). While not a guide, as showcased in *The Inferno*, Omelas instead takes from *The Remains of the Day*'s view of leadership, as the child can be seen as a leader through their physical, mental, and emotional sacrifice for the sake of necessity regarding Omelas' paradise. Additionally, these notions present for the child and those who walk away also pertain to the work's definition of "journey." As seen through all three of the prior works, the child retains the idea of a mental and emotional journey through its suffering.

This idea is still present within those who leave Omelas, but the emphasis is evidently placed more on the physical journey of leaving the city, something that would cause it to be relevant to the fourth step of the hero's journey, The Crossing of the First Threshold, under the first act: departure, defined and described by Campbell as: "Beyond them is darkness, the unknown, and danger; just as beyond the parental watch is a danger to the infant and beyond the protection of his society danger to the members of the tribe" (Campbell, 64). But it is also in this

relevance where Jerre Collins' article, "Leaving Omelas: Questions of Faith and Understanding," also makes a point in support of this comparison. Collins states as follows, "If leaving Omelas is like going from life into death, that death (according to the faith of those who leave) leads to a new, transformed life in a place beyond the mountains, a life so different from the present life that it is unimaginable" (Collins, 8). The unknown is unquestionably one of the most terrifying things that can be confronted—and to equate the danger found in such to death is surely a fitting comparison, just as so is the idea of a new life awaiting in the unknown.

However, a deeper look at *how* these themes are present within these works must also be considered, whether in totality or brevity. Each work carries the idea of "journey" in their core premise, with *The Inferno* being a descent into Hell, *The Remains of the Day*, a journey across England, and "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas," with an unknown journey away from the pseudo-paradise. In *The Inferno*, the theme of consequence is especially present, particularly that of consequence in reference to one's actions in life, as shown through the various circles of Hell, their punishments, and their symbolism with *The Inferno*.

Furthermore, while only addressed briefly, Northrop Frye's essay, "The Critical Path: An Essay on the Social Context of Literary Criticism," supports this notion, stating, "But, of course, we read the *Inferno* through its imagery and action, as a representation of the actual life of man" (Frye, 29). This can be further supported through the third circle, Gluttony, by a figure named Ciaccio, someone whom Dante uses to explore the politics of his home—and, by proxy, causing the parallels drawn between the sin and the thirst for power to circle back to the theme of consequence. In addition, this also partly illuminates the potential socio-political occurrences of the time, something seen in Ishiguro's novel and in Omelas' suffering child, showing that every "hero," or, in this instance, the "leader," will have constraints.

In addition, while reflection and the obligation toward others are considerably minor traits within *Inferno* compared to *Remains of the Day* in particular, personal regret can be found in the concept of Hell in totality, though one such example is within the second circle, Lust. The soul within the Canto, a medieval noblewoman named Francesca da Rimini, states the following, "The double grief of a lost bliss / is to recall its happy hour in pain. / Your Guide and Teacher knows the truth of this" (Alighieri, Canto V, l. 118-20). While not the most explicit, there can be a semblance of regret seen in these lines, though, as mentioned before, the overarching notion of Hell—as Dante presents—showcases the idea of personal regret in a more abstract form. As, naturally, it can be presumed that the very concept of Hell is one that generates a feeling of personal regret through the suffering and torment subjected to its denizens.

In *The Remains of the Day*, the theme of consequence is considerably more abstract in its presence, as much of the "consequence" that can be found through Stevens' reflections is primarily seen in his strained relationship with Miss Kenton, later Mrs. Benn. The themes of reflection—not dissimilar to *The Inferno*'s relation to personal regret—can be seen throughout the novel entirely through Stevens' literal reminiscing and reflection on the events of his workplace, as it is a core theme in the work as a whole. Following this, personal regret is another theme present, though only appearing explicitly at the end of the novel, culminating in Stevens'

verbal expression of despair and uncertainty in his choices and his potentially misplaced trust in Lord Darlington.

Regarding the obligation toward others, this is both to the character's benefit, as well as his detriment. Stevens consistently regards the late Lord Darlington with tremendous praise and respect, noting that his suits were "kindly passed on to me over the years by Lord Darlington himself" (Ishiguro, 11), as well as—during his service, at least—having complete faith in him. This, naturally, extended to the company he kept, and the decisions he made, even if he did not understand them or felt "distress" toward a particular matter, as noted during his conversation with Miss Kenton, saying, "you were as distressed about the episode as I was" (161). Furthermore, even in his doubt and despair, he continues to praise him, expressing the trust he held in the man as he speaks to the unnamed butler at the end of the novel.

However, this obligation, as noted before, also proved to be damaging, best surmised by Meera Tamaya's article, "Ishiguro's '*Remains of the Day*': The Empire Strikes Back," stating, "Some of the most painfully ironic moments in the novel occur when Stevens lives up to the standards set by his father so well that he sacrifices his dying father's needs in order to ensure that Lord Darlington's dinner party runs smoothly" (Tamaya, 6). In his feeling of obligation toward Lord Darlington, he willingly and gladly uses the time to meet his expectations, sacrificing his personal life as a result.

In Omelas, the theme of consequence can be seen in multiple different ways, primarily through the suffering child. The first manner by which it is present is through the child's presence itself, as someone suffers to create prosperity—making that paradisaical nature a consequence of the city's one blight. Inversely, the titular "ones who walk away" can be seen as a more typical consequence of the suffering child's existence—as, by discovering the one blight this supposed utopia has—it disillusiones the citizens, presenting three kinds of actions taken, presented well by Jenet Kirkpatrick's article, "Literary Devices: Teaching Social Contract Theory with a Short Story," where she describes these actions that the citizens take:

The first option, favored by most citizens, is agreement. Most citizens accept their inability to alter the situation. Their behavior is unchanged, and they enjoy life.

Individuals in the second group visit the child periodically and witness its misery. They remain aware of suffering and injustice in their midst. The third group derives from the second. Some of those who see the child's suffering leave Omelas altogether.

(Kirkpatrick, 2)

While reflection and the obligation toward others are not heavy, primary traits, as the story of Omelas is told through a narrator disconnected from the city itself, the idea of personal regret can be seen, such as Le Guin a scant few examples of reactions toward the child: "They feel anger, outrage, impotence, despite all the explanations" (Le Guin, 4). However, there can be a perspective made for an obligation toward others, as there are likely some who leave that do so out of obligation to not perpetuate this cycle of suffering for the sake of Omelas' prosperity.

To continue this, there must be a comparison between the heroes of these works, as the Bedford Glossary would term, and Campbell's definition of a hero, beginning with Dante. As the

narrator, as well as main character and thereby protagonist of *The Inferno*, he would certainly fall under the guise of “hero” by general terms. However, by being placed under the scrutiny of Campbell’s definition, it is also his journey that must be analyzed as well. While the direct reason for why he undergoes the journey through Hell (and, consequently, Purgatory and Heaven), the work itself is an allegory of the soul’s journey toward God. With that in mind, Dante assuredly would fall under Campbell’s definition, offering his life to someone so unfathomably larger than himself.

In *The Remains of the Day*, this idea is present in the primary relationship within the novel, that of Stevens’ role as the servant to Lord Darlington. Stevens, although only middle-aged, dedicated his life to serving his late master—and, as discussed prior—was willing to sacrifice any semblance of personal moments for the sake of him, such as a final conversation with his father while the man was on his deathbed. While Lord Darlington may not be a godly figure, nor does Stevens ever compare him as such—there is a unique humbleness to his praise—he is of considerably higher status. Though this dedication serves as both a benefit and detriment, it would certainly allow him to fall under Campbell’s definition of “hero.”

Finally, regarding Omelas, it is important to note that the definition of a “hero,” as the Bedford Glossary described, cannot be applicable here. While the narrator would technically be considered the main character under such circumstances, there are two candidates that should be presented for a more accurate analysis: the titular “ones who walk away,” and the suffering child. It is a rather simple case to make for the suffering child.

Though not willingly, they are indeed giving their life for the sake of something far greater than themselves: the pseudo-paradise of Omelas. As noted prior, it is in their suffering that this idea of perfection is maintained. However, the case of those who walk away is of particular interest. While they do not strictly offer their lives in the conventional sense, they do sacrifice and offer their lives within the city—something that would assuredly deem them quantitative of Campbell’s definition of a hero, as ones who offer their prosperous life for another. In that sense, with how much misery the child undergoes, it is not difficult to assume that something “bigger than oneself,” as Campbell says, would be the sanctity and sacredness of another human being’s comfort, or, more simply, morality itself. However, it should be noted that this topic as a whole merits further study.

To close, the idea of a hero and their journey is one of great debate and contention, as well as its associated terms. However, by looking at these works—though fictional and even dramatized narratives—they are not too dissimilar to that of a leader’s journey throughout life. There is consequence, regret, reflection, and trials to undergo, ones that test a person in various ways, all to guide others to greatness. It is a long and difficult journey, one that occurs throughout one’s entire life—as opposed to the typical hero’s journey being a single adventure—but it is one that must be done, not just for the sake of being an effective guide and leader, but for the sake of bettering oneself.

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