

UNST 124g fall 2011  
*I would prefer not to.*

## 1 introduction

### 1.1 narrative fiction

Over the course of this class we have read material written in variety of rhetorical modes but with the exception of *Swamp Thing*, everything we have read has been non-fiction. With this assignment, and again later this term, we will return to narrative fiction. Defined most broadly, a narrative is a story or a fragment of a story that describes a set of events, placing them in a temporal context. Narrative always has a point of view—first, second, or third person—representing one or more participant in the story. That participant, the narrator, may be engaged in the action or an observer. Narrative is a ubiquitous feature of human culture. We tell stories to teach, to entertain, and to establish identity within and among groups.

An author chooses a rhetorical mode that suits his or her purpose but this selection alone does not govern the style and content of what is communicated. The **author's** attitude and background, the **audience's** attitude and background, the attributes of the **medium**, and the **context**—the time, the place, the community—all contribute to both how information is presented and how it is received. This is true of both non-fiction and fiction, though fiction's reliance on the imagination of the reader opens the narrative to countless possibilities. In this class we are less interested in the entertainment value of fiction and more interested in its exploration of the human condition.

At a minimum, fiction requires one or more characters, a plot—actions, thoughts, and dialog in some sequence—and a point of view. Other elements that characterize fiction are an introduction in which the setting is established and the plot is set in motion, rising action that builds anticipation in the reader, a climax in which one or more characters experiences a change or an important discovery, and falling action leading to a resolution. The climax in a fictional narrative usually involves conflict centered on the main character or characters in the story, a problem that must be solved or an obstacle that must be overcome.

Symbolism, allegory, and metaphor, all of which have universal and culturally specific qualities, are used in fiction to convey meaning to the reader. These are obvious and important in graphic narrative but they are important in literary fiction as well. These devices allow

the writer to draw connections across space and time, and within and outside the plot line of the story. Because they are implicit rather than explicit, these devices require intellectual work, and thus draw the reader into the story.

Ursula LeGuin asks quite a lot of the reader of *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas*. The story is not a “thought experiment” (what would the world be like if...), it is a challenge. She calls it a *psychomyth*, a neologism she uses to convey her own sensibility about the rhetorical mode. Myths are traditional stories that cultures use to explain the nature of the world and the human place in it. We will return to the function of myths later this term. You will find, on the internet, a lot of sloppy thinking and writing about this story, mostly involving critiques of utilitarianism. Let’s try to give it more respect than that.

## 2 assignment

1. We will read and discuss *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas* together on the first day of class.
  - As you read the story for the first time, you will notice that the narrator transitions between the first and third person. These transitions are used for a purpose. Please mark their occurrence on your text.
  - You will also notice that the narrator is very prescriptive about some attributes of the city of Omelas and quite vague about others. Identify these and think about how these distinctions are being used.
2. Read the story again on your own. This time, identify one sentence that best captures—to you—the meaning of the story. Write an essay in which you present, explain, and support that choice.

## 3 references

LeGuin, Ursula. (1975). *The Wind’s Twelve Quarters, The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas*. New York: Harper and Row.