

Great Books IV

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My Experience with Great Books

The recent years of study in the Great Books, has proved to me individually, to be an extremely challenging and personal experience, revealing to me, my most basic and essential human instincts, desires and needs. These books are treasured and loved for a purpose, not merely for their stories and poetic writing styles, nor their observations of ancient cultures. Although these may be factors, I believe these books have stood the test of time because of their excellence in uncovering the human spirit. The Great Books are compelling and intensely relatable. An obvious example of this can be seen in the Hero of the *Iliad*, Achilles. Legendary war hero, Achilles, during the war, feels he has been treated unfairly and his honor has been damaged. He bitterly declares to Agamemnon that "[he is] minded no longer to stay here dishonoured and pile up your wealth and your luxury." Achilles' pride in this novel is poignant because it is all too familiar to the reader. The basic human instinct of pride is something that all humans have felt, and Homer's description of it proves to be subtle and expertly written.

On the opposite end of the Great Books, there are ideas that work in contrast to Achilles stubborn spirit and his desire to wallow in his suffering. In Fyodor Dostoevsky's novel *Brothers Karamazov*, eldest Karamazov brother, Dmitri, has a striking realization after being wrongly convicted of patricide. During a dream he sees great suffering in women and children and is bewildered by their grief. He asks "why don't they sing joyful songs," and " why are they blackened with such black misery?". Dmitri appears to have gained new perspective of his situation, and Great Books, in the same way, can serve as a point of orientation and lead to a

shifting in perspective. Dmitri wakes up in custody and, asks those around him "who put that pillow under my head?". This simple gesture of kindness means the world to Dmitri. He has changed from focusing on his suffering, to instead contemplating the good that he has been blessed with. This idea represents what studying the Great Books, as a whole, has done for me. It has constantly forced me to change my perspective and question my beliefs. A kind of "trial by fire" for the mind leads the reader to a deeper sense of maturity, and a deeper appreciation for literature, and the arts in general. The Sisters of St. Xenia Skete explain this by writing that "An uncultivated soul seldom has the discernment and balance to see clearly and honestly, nor the sensitivity to feel deeply"

A novel that I found to be incredibly impactful to my personal life is *Walden*, by Henry David Thoreau. This novel explored ideas of consumerism, simplicity of belongings and the simplicity of the soul, as well as contentment. Thoreau writes this book, not trying to tell a grand story or put up a façade of cleverness, but instead writes almost a diary, detailing his life in the woods and how he has personally come to a deeper understanding of himself through it. By living as simply as he can, Thoreau finds that "Rather than love, than money, than fame," he would instead take "truth". He focuses on inward development rather than acquiring wealth and possessions. He eventually comes to a conclusion about the human experience that is similar to that of Dmitri's. He writes that " The fault-finder will find faults even in paradise. Love your life, poor as it is. You may perhaps have some pleasant, thrilling, glorious hours, even in a poorhouse. " Life is something more than your earthly success or possessions or even your happiness. The essentials of life seem to be very subtle, and something that needs to be continually studied and strived to be understood. They are not something that you can possess, but more something that can possess you. They must grow inside of you, like the plants in

Thoreau's garden. The only way for that to happen is through cultivation and introspection, two things the great books offer in very generous doses.

Great Books has been, for me, a point to ground myself at, a place that the reader can see that others struggle and have struggled with the same ideas and problems that we have today. It serves as a sort of comfort, knowing that no human is alone in their condition. Even thousands of years ago, bards and scribes understood and went through trials that I am going through currently. The whole of the Great Books has shown me how close and connected humanity is, even through pain and trial. Dante, in his *Inferno*, famously writes that "The more a thing is perfect, the more it feels pleasure and pain." By studying the Great Books, the reader grasps a kind of humility, but also a greater understanding of true beauty and how it reflects the beauty and awesomeness of God. An understanding this beauty of God is reflected in the human soul, and through appreciating it, the reader seems to come to a deeper realization and understanding of God. The Great Books have served doubly as a comfort for me, knowing I am not alone in my struggles, but actually accompanied by the entire human race, all equally engrained with the human condition, but also as a kind of pushing for myself and my limits. I have been pushed to try and grasp ideas that previously seemed completely out of my reach, see Anselm's Ontological argument for example, and every time I have pushed myself, I have seen that these ideas are not only within my reach, but that I have the ability to make them very real and personal. In summary, studying this ancient and beautifully crafted literature, has revealed a greater depth to my soul, and my appreciation for higher beauty. To conclude, the Sisters of St. Xenia write that "We place our hopes upon the things which are beyond; and in preparation for the life eternal do all things that we do. Into the life eternal the Holy Scriptures lead us, which teach us through divine words."

Works Cited

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