

2021 Classical Literature Scholarship—First Place

Rachel Gundersen

A Life Worth Living

I wanted to start this off with “it was a dark and stormy night”, however, our story begins at 8:00 am in the Freshmen Socratic classroom. We were halfway through the *Iliad*, a book that was dearer to me than some of my siblings, when Mz decided to drop a bomb that would define my next 4 years at Maeser. Her proclamation was disturbing to my soul; the searing pains of her words permanently branded my heart and wounded my developing mind. My intellectual fabric was tainted by the stains of reality. I was devastated.

“The Trojan war didn’t actually happen” she said in passing as if not realizing the gravity of her words. The ground might as well have cracked open and swallowed me whole. There was no reason to continue with my classical education. I would have preferred staying in my state of illiterate ignorance than face the treacherous realities of the world.

I pursued a vendetta against the system; I needed to fight “the man.” How? you might ask. I had no idea. The way I saw it, I had two options. First, disprove centuries of recorded history and confirm that a massive, destructive, decade-long war did indeed happen. Or second, disprove centuries of recorded history and confirm that a massive, destructive, decade-long war did indeed happen. The odds were stacked against me.

Despite my troubling enlightenment, I needed to face the truth. The *Iliad* was fake, books were lies, myths were deception. Words were dead. My gut reaction mirrored the thoughts of Ray Bradbury: I wanted to burn. Burn it all. But, after researching the consequences for mass arson in Utah I began rethink my plan. I guess fake books weren’t as bad as jail time.

To some, this may sound dramatic. It is dramatic but sometimes drama is necessary. The *Iliad* was a more than just a book. The characters were just as alive as my classmates. I couldn’t understand how something so tangible could have never existed in the first place.

The *Iliad* was a fraud; an imposter. But, at the same time, it wasn’t. The *Iliad* was something breathing with life. The words of it were living in the stories of my experiences. I

reflected the honor of Hector when I put on my uniform each morning. Achilles' rage was mirrored in the infuriating anger I felt towards my sister when she stained my favorite pair of pants. Andromache's love was the same love that I saw my parents have for each other. I was the vessel in which the words were held and I am the means by which its story lives on.

I never disproved centuries of history on my vendetta for justice, I didn't have to. It made no difference to me whether Hector truly walked on this earth or if the blood of Patroclus was spilt on the sacred battle ground. What mattered was that the battles that were fought in the days of Homer are the same battles being fought today, tomorrow, and forever.

As I continued on my journey through the Maeser Socratic curriculum I discovered countless stories that I longed to be true. After each book experience, without fail, I would take something with me as I retired it to the shelf. Each lived a "good life" in a unique way and changed me for the better. Each book was real to me regardless of its factual evidence in a history textbook because of my ability to recognize my own face in the mirror of their story. We read classics because they are relevant to us today. If a book's message is no longer a life worth living, its words are as meaningless as the appendix of a TV guide.

When all anger is calmed, when honor is something we no longer strive for, when sorrow and grief are wiped from the face of this planet, the *Iliad's* life can end. Until the day we heal all pains, keep peace between nations, and greed is abolished with charity, we must continue to read, not just the *Iliad*, but all literature. We must continue to learn from their breathing pages. We must remember the doctrines hidden within their bindings. Most importantly however, we must live their lives for ourselves. With their sage advice, our lives become colored with wisdom and filled with potential. The *Iliad* allowed me to discover a life worth living: a life of literature.