

Gene Yang (geneyang702@gmail.com)

10th Grade

### To Stop and Smell the Roses

Always the same question: “why are Classics important?” Cue the responses: because they help us make sense of the modern world, because we can learn from history, or because they help us develop critical thinking skills. Are these answers wrong? Not exactly. But they all seem forced, grabbing at any hint of significance Classics has to offer. If you ask a Classics major what drew them into Classics, you aren’t likely to get a lot of people who went into Classics to make a difference in the world, or to make sense of modern politics, or to develop critical thinking skills. The most honest answer is going to be that they went into Classics because they enjoyed it. And that should be reason enough.

I tell people that my interest in Classics began with a “How to Read Greek” course in summer camp – that somehow, a week of the alphabet and stammering through *Antigone* sparked off an unexpected passion. My interest didn’t magically start then, of course. I had been learning Latin for a few months at that point and had a basic knowledge of Greek mythology. But for nearly a decade, I had been set on a purely scientific path. Like too many kids, I thought Classics was a dull field full of dusty literature. The reason I point to my time in that class as a turning point is because, while I was admiring Antigone’s argument of morality against Creon, it clicked for me what place Classics had in the world.

We study Classics because it offers us pockets of humanity in a world moving at breakneck speed. Classics give us a chance to slow down, let old stories canter on our emotions,

and remember who we are. Nature cannot condone an individual that doesn't strive for the improvement of the group. She demands that we improve, adapt, and sacrifice ourselves for future generations. Classics remind us to balance our sometimes blind drive for improvement with humanity. When you feel relief after Athena reveals Ithaca to Odysseus, are impressed by the complexity of Aristotle's theories, or admire Antigone's bravery in pursuing her own values, then in those moments Classics gave you individual, human enjoyment. Moments like these are increasingly rare in a world that values sacrifice of individual joy for collective improvement.

At the heart of the labyrinth of Classics are the Greeks, the inexpressible force that warrants the whole. Beginnings of science can be traced back to the Milesians and their avoidance of supernatural explanations. It took a thousand years for philosophers to conclusively chip away at the Aristotelian worldview in favor of the Newtonian. Homer, whoever he is, left us the *Odyssey* and *Iliad*, two of the most important and exciting tales in Western literature. Classics and ancient Greece are so intertwined, it's impossible to have one without the other. When you read Roman poets, chances are they're striving to mimic Greek verse. Greek astronomy, such as Ptolemy's model of the heavens, influenced the Islamic astronomers. This doesn't mean that focus should be put on the ancient Greeks alone. When pursuing Classics, however, studying the Greeks is as natural of a requirement as studying the layout of the maze.

If learning the arts of ancient Greece is like learning the layout of Classics, then learning to read classical Greek is like learning to use Ariadne's string. But translations by experienced scholars exist, is it necessary to learn all the word endings and voices and all the tedious grammar? The problem is that when a work in one language is stuffed into another, subtle references and nuances are bound to be lost. I recently read a Korean translation of *Harry Potter* and was irked at how stilted the conversations between characters felt. Implied arguments

through word choices, quirks of speech for characters, and even variational length of sentences were lost. The original language of a text is always the most accurate to the artist's vision. When you read poems and tragedies in their original tongue, you're exposed to a barrage of flavorful wit and powerful philosophy inviting deeper insight than possible with a translation. To not learn Classical Greek when studying ancient Greece is to deprive yourself of the flavor of Classics itself.

Maybe Classics doesn't offer a straightforward justification for its importance in the world. Maybe the argument that it gives us humanity in a murderously efficient world is weak. But the small moments of individual enjoyment and humanity that Classics can provide is infinitely valuable. If you don't enjoy Classics, that's a perfectly valid reason to not learn it. Someday it might click for you, the same way it did for me in a dim classroom with my *Antigone* handout sprawled on my desk.