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Class

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## Book Review

### Summary

In Thomas Cahill's book, *Sailing the Wine Dark Sea: Why the Greeks Still Matter*, the author explores different historical sites with readers that are located in Greece. He focuses on areas where great battles and artistic events took place. He explains the relevance of ancient sites found in Athens and Sparta. The book reads like a historical survey and not as a textbook. It does seek to make Greek mythology relatable to different audiences. The book traces the rise of Greek civilization. It highlights the accomplishments of the Greeks in the fields of art, science, education, and warfare. Cahill's novel gives the Greeks their proper accolades for their accomplishments in history.

Each chapter in the book focuses on a different Greek story or event. The chapters bring mystical figures to life and puts them into the context of their accomplishments. Cahill describes the essence of the Greek culture with vivid storytelling. The Greeks loved to wage war for honor and glory. It was a rite of passage for a man to bloody himself in battle. Cahill uses Homer's *The Iliad* to demonstrate this concept. The Greeks went to war with the Trojans essentially over an insult to one man's honor. Going to war was seen as a way to regain one's honor. The poets would write odes based on the actions of the Greek heroes. Greeks also enjoyed competition and games. Cahill explains that this is the origin of the Olympics. Additionally, Cahill discusses the love of wine, music, and art in Greek culture.

Cahill's devotes a chapter on the development of the Greek alphabet. According to him, this set the precedence for the all other aspects of Greek culture. The Greek alphabet allowed people to read and write their stories. These stories became the famous poems, epics, and myths that are still being enjoyed today. Cahill talks about the Greeks' love and contribution to music in later chapters. The major and minor cords are attributed to Greek music craft. The Greeks were deeply involved in music and Cahill informs readers that music was integral to Greek life. Social gatherings were just as important to Greek life.

Cahill's later chapters talk about how Greek men and women would gather together to talk about philosophy and other news of the day. The Greeks were keen on socializing and having large gatherings. Greeks were avid hosts and frequently help symposia. These gatherings were relaxed and entertainment functions. Greek gatherings like the ones Cahill writes about set the standard for social events in all societies. Greek philosophy became famous after gatherings like the ones Cahill wrote about. The next chapters of Cahill's book discuss Greek myths and religion and how the affected everyday Greek life.

Cahill's book reflects on different Greek myths to explain why Greeks did certain things. In one chapter, he discusses why Greek ate great quantities of meat. This is because animals were the primary sacrifice offered to the gods. Eating meat was another way of honoring the gods. Cahill talks about other Greek trends that were set in place to honor the gods. Cahill is detailed in his descriptions of Greek life and traditions. Cahill also writes chapters dealing with Greek contributions to math, science, politics, and medicine. Each chapter brings to light the enormous contribution the ancient Greeks had om history and the modern world. The Greeks were responsible for many to the ideas and philosophy people enjoy today. The book ties the legacies left over from the ancient Greek world so that the reader can connect the dots.

## Questions

People have different reasons for doing battle. In Homer's *The Iliad*, the story celebrates the battle prowess of both the Greeks and Trojans. In *The Iliad*, heroism does discriminate between people. People still find honor in battle. This has not changed through the centuries. Being a soldier is still adds distinction and elicits reactions of awe, just like during Homer's time. Also, people are willing to enter into battle for all types of reasons. These reasons can be honorable or they can be over trifling conflicts. Modern man is no different than the Greeks and Trojans when they waged war.

Ancient Greek culture excelled at creating cultural developments. This was due to their keen intelligence. The Greeks had a drive to make their lives advanced as well as entertaining. They fostered ideas and intellect among themselves. I do not think that luck played a factor. The Greeks lived in the middle of a vast trade ocean. They easily spread their ideas and culture this way. If luck had any part to play in Greek culture, it was that it flourished in an area where ideas could travel from region to region. Greek culture is called the Golden Age, and this age may not have occurred if they did not live close to an ocean.

The book talks about Pericles' vision of democracy. Pericles became the leader of Athens and ushered in a new era for Greece. Pericles' democracy involved direct involvement with the representatives. The democracy under Pericles was exclusive. There were restrictions on who could serve in the democratic government and court systems. The laws of on Greek citizenship often excluded certain individuals. Males were considered Greek citizens only if their fathers were Greek citizens. This is not too different from the requirements to serve in government today. Greek democracy as the foundation for the democracy found in the west today. However, there were some changes that were made to democracy since the Ancient Greece. Men and women

have to be American citizens and meet certain age requirements to serve in government. The modern democracy is more inclusive but there are still restrictions.

The Ancient Greeks were already deeply involved in religious rites before the dawn of Christianity. They carried on this spirit of worship into Christianity. The Greeks are mostly responsible for the direction Christianity took. For example, the concept of reward and punishment after death influenced the Christian heaven and hell. Additionally, many of the Greek fables influenced Christian stories of morality. Greek schools of thought added to Christian beliefs as well. Schools like Stoicism taught compassion, selflessness, and charity. Philosophy was highly influential to the Christian religion. Another contribution to the Christianity was the belief in spirits or souls. Greeks believed that living things had souls, and these must be guided during the afterlife. Christians took this belief and added the concept of souls into their doctrines. The belief in souls is part of the foundation of the Christian religion. The arts also influenced the Christian religion. Greek art influenced art inside Christian churches and other forms of religious art.

The people of Athens thought themselves to be the center of the world and unassailable. This was hubris on their part. Athens entered a long, drawn out war with Sparta that they thought they could win. This war inevitably led to the defeat and decline of Athens. Entering into long wars is not beneficial for any country or state. Whether one is the victor or the defeated, it takes a toll on the people involved. It can lead to the decline of any great nation. Athens believed that it could not be defeated. Even the strongest nations should take heed that they can be defeated if they enter into long wars. The future of humanity hinges on each decision. If a country makes decisions out of pride, then they run the risk of losing all they have fought to obtain. Hubris should not be a part of any nation.

### Assessment

Thomas Cahill's novel is a good mix of storytelling and historical facts. The book reflects on how the Greeks have influenced modern day culture. It connects the past with the present in a way that appealed to me. History is made of real people and interesting stories. The book helped me to connect the past with the present. The book is mostly strong with well-laid out chapters. Cahill is a historian, so he knew the right amount of information to put into the book. Many people do not wish to study the Classics anymore. Cahill makes the ancient world interesting for a modern audience. Cahill showed his strength as both a historian and a storyteller.

There were a few minor weaknesses in the books. First, I felt as though Cahill focused too much on the arts and not enough on science and math. There was not an equal amount of writing on the subjects. Perhaps Cahill believed that people would be more interested in the arts instead of the sciences. Secondly, Cahill quoted a great deal in his book. I felt as though he could have used more original wording and prose. Too much quoting shows a lack of original ideas. Lastly, Cahill has a biased perspective. His book is definitely from a humanist view point. There is no mixture of perspective in his book. His comparisons were weak during certain chapters of the novel. Additionally, I felt there were some unnecessary discussions in the book that did not add to the material.

Overall, Cahill's book is a great introductory text into the lives and contributions of the Greeks. The tone is lively and the chapters always held my interest. The book is education as well as entertaining. It proves that history is not always facts and figures. The Greeks lived their lives devoted to the pursuit of greatness. The book brings that spirit to life in vivid detail. Cahill's book may have some weak points, but it still maintains its relevance. *Sailing the Wine Dark Sea: Why the Greeks Still Matter* is perfect for people interested in the Ancient world.

Works Cited

Cahill, Thomas. *Sailing the Wine-dark Sea: Why the Greeks Matter*. New York: Nan A.

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