

Society in sparta as seen in gates of fire



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In Steven Pressfield's book *Gates of Fire*, a mortally wounded soldier named Xeones tells his life story to a Persian scribe under the order of King Xerxes of Persia. The story is told through a series of flashbacks, broken up by the scribe, who inserts his own notes. Xeones begins by describing life as a refugee in the mountains with his cousin Diomache and his slave, Bruxieus. Later, he tells of life with the men in the agoge, Dienekes, Alexandros, Rooster, Polynikes, and several others. Throughout the course of the novel, Xeo details life in Sparta, including the training of Spartan men and the roles that women played. The narrative culminates at the Battle of Thermopylae, where all are slaughtered except Xeones. One aspect of Spartan life that Xeones describes is the training of Spartan boys to become warriors. All Spartan men were supposed to train as soldiers, if they were able. It was only as soldiers and warriors that a Spartan man could be a citizen. The warriors were subjected to harsh exercises that would strengthen both the mind and the body. The Spartans believed that it was only through the strength and discipline of the mind that a warrior could discipline his mind. In describing the exercises, Xeo says that "The hardship of the exercises is intended less to strengthen the back than to toughen the mind. The Spartans say that any army may win while it still has its legs under it; the real test comes when all strength is fled and the men must produce victory on will alone. (Pressfield, 68) To the Spartans, the true mark of a man was how courageous he was. One of the prominent themes throughout the book is the shedding of fear. The exercises the Spartans endured were designed to drive all fear from their mind, so that in the face of battle, the Spartans would be fearless and fight to the best of their ability, without the hindrance of being afraid. In order to build courage and prove one's manhood, punishments

were severe. The boys, no older than fifteen, would hold on to a wooden bar while they were whipped. At any time, they could let go of the bar and the punishment would be over. Xeo tells a story of a boy named Tripod who refused to let go of the bar and was thus beaten to death. Xeo's friend, Alexandros, was comforted by his mentor, Dienekes, who explained that the eirenes, or men who were punishing Tripod, did not do so for their own pleasure, but to harden his mind against pain. Such punishments were designed to strengthen the mind and body against physical pain. Another example of how the eirenes were supposed to help the boys learn discipline and prove their manhood was for them to practice 'tree-fucking.' In this practice, boys lined up with their shields, one behind the other, and push over a tree. If they did not succeed, they ran the risk of being labeled as effeminate. Xeo describes the practice, saying "It was unthinkable that they be allowed to return to the city while this tree yet defied them; such failure would disgrace their fathers and mothers, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles and cousins, all the gods and heroes of their line, not to mention their hounds, cats, sheep and goats and even the rats in their helots' barns, who would hang their heads and have to slink off to Athens or some other rump-split polis where men were men and knew how to put out a respectable fucking." (Pressfield 71) However, showing one's courage and the definition of manhood extended far beyond practice for battle. Manhood was also shown in the ability to produce sons and carry on one's family name.

Dienekes is married to Arete, and has four daughters. However, since he is not a sire, or a father of sons, he cannot be chosen for the Three Hundred to fight at Thermopylae. He sees this as a dishonor. That he isn't as much of a man since he has no sons and cannot fight at the "Hot Gates." Dienekes is

often compared to Polynikes, who is much younger, and yet has more sons than Dienekes. While Polynikes covets the position Dienekes has amongst the warriors, he is one of the first to be chosen for the Three Hundred, since he has male heirs. Dienekes is only able to participate in the battle after he adopts the son of his bastard nephew, allowing him to have an heir. Xeones describes in detail phobologia, or the science of studying fear. The exercises that the men of Sparta perform are supposed to drive out fear and produce a state of, what Xeones called esoterike harmonia, or the state of self-composure in which the warrior drives out all fear and, metaphorically, produces an individual and unique note, which all things possess. While talking with Dienekes and Alexandros, Xeo learns not only about esoterike harmonia, or the self-composure, but also exoterike harmonia, in which the Spartan enters into a state of unity with his fellow Spartans, who produce a metaphoric harmony. Each individual note comes together to create a beautiful and harmonious accord. They are taught that “ In battle exoterike harmonia guides the phalanx to move and strike as one man, of a single mind and will. In passion it unites husband to wife, lover to lover, in wordless perfect union. In politics, exoterike harmonia produces a city of concord and unity, in which each individual, securing his own noblest expression of character, donates this to each other.” (Pressfield 76) In this way, Xeo learns that every person in the Spartan society has an individual place, and that they all come together in harmony. Another part of Spartan life that the reader learns about through Xeones’s tale is the role of women in society. The women are described as wearing no cosmetics or facial paint in other cities in Hellas, but in Sparta, the women Xeones encounters wear none of these. Throughout the novel, he encounters several Spartan women: Arete, <https://assignbuster.com/society-in-sparta-as-seen-in-gates-of-fire/>

the wife of Dienekes, Paraleia, Alexandros's mother, his own wife, and the wives of Alexandros and Rooster. The primary role of women, as can be seen in the novel, is to produce sons. Spartan women were meant to produce boys, who would then defend the city. Xeones describes them, saying " They were dams, these ladies, wives and mothers whose primary calling was to produce boys who would grow to be warriors and heroes, defenders of the city. Spartan women were brood mares, the pampered damsels of other cities might scoff, but if they were mares, they were racers, Olympic champions. The athletic glow and vigor which the gynaikagoge, the women's training discipline, produced in them was powerful stuff and they knew it." (Pressfield 124) The Spartan woman who is most prominent in the novel is Arete. The wife of Dienekes, she was first married to his brother, who died in battle. Arete has produced four daughters, but no sons. However, she still runs her household and manages her servants. From the novel, it appears that she is well respected by all, men and women, though most likely because of her husband's status. This doesn't mean that women are completely useless in Spartan society. The Lady Paraleia asks Xeones about the interrogation of her son by the Peers. It is clear by the way she speaks, that here, in the home, the women are in charge. In fact, Xeones even says " This was her way of letting me know that the women ran the show and that if I didn't want to find myself permanently back in the farmers' shitfields, I'd better start coughing up a satisfactory dose of information." (Pressfield 122) However, the women of Sparta had influence that reached further than just the home. One of the most striking examples of this is during the trial of Rooster. The Peers decide that he and his family should be killed. However, Arete prevented them from killing the newborn boy by forcing her husband

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to claim it as his own. In doing this, he became eligible for the Three Hundred. The women of Sparta were also the ones who galvanized the Spartans into action. Refugees from other cities came to Sparta, young mothers with children. There, the wives of Spartan warriors heard their stories and spurred their husbands into action, telling them of the horrors the citizens had been through. Xeones says of the Spartan women that “ The women’s scorn excoriated the city. A delegation of wives and mothers presented itself to the ephors, insisting that they themselves be sent out next time, armed with hairpins and distaffs, since surely the women of Sparta could disgrace themselves no more egregiously nor accomplish less than the vaunted Ten Thousand.” (Pressfield 140) Therefore, while women don’t appear to have a major role outside of birthing the future Spartan warriors, they are the ones who, in the end, encouraged the Spartans to make a stand and fight the Persians. Though not much is said about the economic status of Sparta, several things are explained that allow the reader to infer the economic status. The men of Sparta are employed as full time warriors, and women are only meant to be wives and mothers. Therefore, the food was grown and provided by a group of people called the Helots. Helots were a group of people, somewhere between serfs and slaves, that provided most of the economic support for Sparta. The Helots were Messenians and Laconians, both regions being controlled by Sparta. One of the only examples of this other culture was in Rooster. Rooster was the bastard son of Arete’s brother by a Messenian woman. He was in charge of the animals, until he was given to Alexandros’s father as a squire. It was only through the support of the Helots that the Spartans were able to have a standing military at all times. Though it is not expressly stated in Gates of

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Fire, the general attitude toward other Greek nations is one of contempt. The Spartans see themselves as superior, since they have the strongest military and since they're unburdened with corruption, like most of the other city-states are. Even Athens looked to Sparta as a city to be admired. Polynikes summed up the Spartan views on other city-states when he said " Observe the specimens in any nation other than Lakedaemon. Man is weak, greedy, craven, lustful, prey to every species of vice and depravity. He will lie, steal, cheat, murder, melt down the very statues of the gods and coin their gold as money for whores. This is man. This is his nature, as all the poets attest. Fortunately God in his mercy has provided a counterpoise to our species' innate depravity. That gift, my young friend, is war." (Pressfield 118)

Polynikes doesn't just speak of other nations. He speaks of every nation except Sparta, or Lakedaemon. This includes city-states such as Sparta or Thebes. The Spartans believe that they are superior to the other Greek city-states, as they only concern themselves with war, rather than greed or depravity. There are several benefits to life as a Spartan. Spartans are very well off economically. Since the Helots supported the Spartans monetarily and agriculturally, Sparta was a wealthy nation. It was also very well respected. The other Greek city-states followed the command of the Spartan king and commander of the army, Leonidas, at Thermopylae. Also, with a full time, standing army, the city-state of Sparta was one of the most well-protected cities in Greece. However, the biggest advantage to Spartan life was the emotional closeness of Spartans to each other. In battle, each man's shield protected not himself, but his fellow man. Therefore, one had to completely trust and rely on the man to his left to protect him. Through the training that started in boyhood, the Spartans learned to rely on each other

and completely trust one another. Suicide addressed this when he described the 'glue' that held the Spartan army together. "I understood then that it was the glue that made the phalanx great. The unseen glue that bound it together. I realized that all the drill and discipline you Spartans love to pound into each other's skulls were really not to inculcate skill or art, but only to produce this glue." (Pressfield 260) While Suicide was not a Spartan by birth, he saw the advantages to the camaraderie and the life of a Spartan.

However, Xeones shows that there are several down sides to living in the Spartan society. Boys are raised away from their families, and are raised to be warriors. The training they are subjected to is harsh and occasionally, in the minds of the reader, cruel. If one was a Helot in Spartan society, their life would be miserable. Helots were not only looked down upon, but occasionally were treated cruelly. The worst part of Spartan society was the fact that their men were often at war, and if not at war, training for it. The harsh training conditions and the wars that the Spartans fought in led to a short life expectancy for Spartan men. Arete, the wife of Dienekes, sums the situation up by saying "What is more natural to a man than to fight, or a woman to love?...What could be more contrary to female nature, to motherhood, than to stand unmoved and unmoving as her sons march off to death? Must not every sinew of the mother's flesh call out in agony and affront at such an outrage? Must not her heart seek to cry in its passion, 'No! Not my son! Spare him!'" (Pressfield 191) While the Spartan men faced a shorter life expectancy, it was the Spartan women who had to deal with the fact that they were losing their sons and husbands. Therefore, it was incredibly emotionally taxing to be a Spartan woman. Through his narrative, Xeones describes Spartan life without ever being a Spartan by birth. It is

through Xeon's that the reader gets to discover the life of the society Xeon's adopted as his own, and the reader feels a sense of loss as each character, including Xeon's himself, dies. While the work is one of fiction, it does a wonderful job in detailing the life of Spartans as they prepare for the Battle of Thermopylae and the Persian War.