

The discovery of ancient greek civilization ideals through greek literature



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In order to understand a culture, it is important to understand their arts, ranging from their music, their visual arts, to their theatre, etc. One of the most important arts used to understand a culture is literature.

According to the Merriam-Webster's Dictionary, literature is defined as writings in prose or verse, especially writings having excellence of form or expression and expressing ideas of permanent or universal interest. By understanding the literature of a certain culture or civilization, it is deducible what human characters were honored and cherished by the people of the time. During the Greek civilization, two works are able to be used to find out what the Greeks admired in the human persona. In the Iliad, the epic poem commonly attributed to Homer, and in Sophocles' drama, Antigone, are both examples. In the Iliad, it follows the story of Achilles, an Achaean, who refuses to go to war (after an attack on his honor).

Patroclus, his close friend, volunteers to wear his armor and go into battle. During the battle, Patroclus is killed by Hector, the head of the Trojan armies. Achilles, in anger, goes to war, and kills Hector. To bring even more dishonor to his death, Achilles does not bury the body, and instead lets the birds of the air attack the flesh.

Finally, he gives in to King Priam's pleas to return the body to Troy, out of sympathy. This epic poem demonstrates much of what was idealized by the ancient Greeks. For example, in one passage, they visually praise themselves, by calling themselves "the bronze-armed Achaeans". This indicates that they not only thought that it was a good thing to be strong, but they also took pride in their strength. As well, when King Priam begs Achilles,

he is moved as the "...words stirred within Achilles a deep desire to grieve for his own father. " While the ancient Greeks did believe in the natural order of justice, they did find a place for compassion and empathy, making them very humanistic.

As for other indications for what they admired, they admired the will in humans to act for justice no matter what. For example, Achilles tells his mother that he is going to war to avenge the death of Patroclus, and that it is pointless to hold him back. Indeed, the Iliad brings to light some of the more important values held in respect by ancient Greek society. In the play "Antigone", by Sophocles, is again fueled with traits that Greeks admired. The play begins chronologically with the death of Oedipus, who was the king of Thebes.

However, more tragedy occurs when his two sons, Polynices and Eteocles fight over who is heir to the throne. They end up killing each other, and Creon (Oedipus' brother-in-law) assumes the crown. In a decree, he outlaws the burial of Polynices, as he feels that Eteocles was actually the rightful heir. Antigone, Oedipus' daughter, chooses to oppose the decree and bury her brother, which results in her death.

Again, this play demonstrates the values that were at the heart of ancient Greek society. For example, the rights of individuals were more important than the laws decreed by the king, something the Greeks would have been familiar with, as they believed in direct democracy, rather than royalty, or powerful elitist oligarchies. As well, while the ancient Greeks were a predominately a male authoritarian society, they still respected strong

women, like Antigone. As well, when Antigone defies the king's decree and buries her brother, she chooses to follow divine law, rather than human law. In keeping with the customs of the time, this would have been very appropriate, as the people would have respected the idea that serving the gods would be more appropriate than adhering to man-made laws.

Again, the play "Antigone" demonstrates some of the powerful ideals held in esteem by the ancient Greeks. In conclusion, the ancient Greeks' treasured values are easily discoverable through their arts, specifically Greek literature. Sophocles' "Antigone" and Homer's "Iliad" provide vivid examples of this ancient civilization which treasured respecting "gods' laws", the strong will of women, pride in their physical strength, etc. However, these values have not only been left back in the Golden Age of Greece.

Instead, we still find these ideals in today's society, particularly western culture, which is still heavily influenced by the art, philosophy, and science of Ancient Greece. As the nineteenth-century poet Percy Shelley put it: "We are all Greeks."