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Scholarship Contest

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How Has My John Adams Education Impacted Me?

*Why do I have to read all of these old books?*

When I began high school at John Adams, I secretly asked myself this question every English period. My teachers probably would be surprised to hear this, considering I'm known for being an avid reader. However, at fourteen, my purchases from Barnes and Noble consisted of fast-paced, commercial novels while Homer's *Iliad* lay abandoned on my desk. For me, books were for entertainment and not learning. I considered myself a reader, but, in reality, I couldn't analyze literature beyond the surface level. Sure, I could identify syntax, metaphor, simile, allusion, etc., but that differs from truly understanding a work. Now that I am a graduating senior, I understand that reading is a means of discovering truth. Whether a philosophical treatise or a work of fiction, a 'great book' is one which pokes at a question about the human condition.

This never truly struck me until my Sophomore year. On the first day of class, armed with my freshly sharpened pencils, we read and annotated a section of Boethius's *The Consolation of Philosophy*. Boethius argued humans have higher aims than the material. He wrote, "One's virtue is all one truly has, because it is not imperiled by the vicissitudes of fortune." Sitting there in Dr. D's class, I stared down at the words I'd just read. Another person, alive fifteen hundred years before myself, had put to paper thoughts which kept me awake at

night. In this musty, old treatise, I found comfort and answers to questions I'd been asking all my life.

When I read Boethius, I'd experienced my first break up, lost a very dear friendship, and dealt with a medical emergency in my family. Although these struggles are slim compared to Boethius' imprisonment, my fifteen year old self could hardly distinguish between the two. Yet, I found a strange solace within *The Consolation of Philosophy*. As he overcame his own struggles, he helped me overcome mine.

Not only did Boethius' words help me, but also the people I studied him under. The community at John Adams built upon the principles Boethius taught—in order to achieve true happiness, one must cultivate inner virtue. The teachers here have certainly taught me grammar, but, more importantly, they never strayed from the ethical debate within a text. John Adams prepared me to be a *good* person, not just a career-driven one.

Although I read avidly before John Adams, I did not read carefully. If we only view literature as entertainment, then the books we read are only distractions. As I journeyed through the rest of the Sophomore Year curriculum, from hell with Dante to Paris with Dickens, I was not pulled away from my struggles. Instead, these works forced me to confront them. Great books do not serve material gains, but they serve a purpose much deeper and much more important.

When we read, we realize we are not alone in our existence. Our loneliness, our wonder, our love, our hate has already been reflected on by the millennia of writers who preceded us. In *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley warns us about the dangers of playing God. In *Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad tests our sanity within the depths of the African jungle. In *A Tale of Two Cities*, Dickens demonstrates how society collapses when revenge informs our political decisions.

Decoding the ciphers between each text's line, the world felt less hopeless. A writer hidden in some library has likely already wrestled with your greatest struggles.

Most importantly, my education gifted me with the ability to educate myself. Curiosity is the hardest virtue to teach, but with the help of my mentors, I found myself interested in everything. Not only literature, but all the elements which accompany a good novel—its history, its philosophy, and its culture. Since Sophomore Year, on my own, I've studied Virginia Woolf, Ancient India, Leo Tolstoy, and Christian theology. Because I go to John Adams, I have been able to discuss these topics with my mentors as well. I would linger during Passing Period, desperately waiting to ask them a question I'd stumbled across the night before.

What the truly educated person understands is how little they know. The gaping chasm between what one knows and what one wishes to know always encourages my curiosity. That is likely why Thomas Jefferson wrote, "Bigotry is the disease of ignorance, of morbid minds; enthusiasm of the free and buoyant. Education and free discussion are the antidotes to both." Without John Adams, my education would have ended with the bare minimum.

Since my study of Boethius, literature has consumed me. Beyond those cheap paperback copies, I became a true admirer of writers and now aspire to be one myself. The fourteen year old who cursed Homer is attending a liberal arts college in the Fall. Under John Adams' mentors, curriculum, and values, I have come to appreciate the canon passed down to me. I'm not forced to spend my leisure time amongst these old writers, I want to. At no other school have I observed the same encouragement to follow one's passions. This, in my opinion, is the true mission of John Adams Academy. Through the pursuit of knowledge and virtue, John Adams cements a future within the American canon. It is a legacy of which I am proud.