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Great Books of the Modern Age

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### Two Boys and How They Differ

In the Civil War, many people did many uncivil things, such as spitting, shoving, and shooting, so its title is a bit of an unsolved mystery. Perhaps to dilute some of the confusion, Michael Shaara wrote a neat, little book for the layman: a historically accurate work of literature that plumbs the mystery that was the Civil war. In *The Killer Angels*, Shaara illustrates how on Monday, June 29, 1863, the North and the South armies closed in on Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. Over the next four days or so, as the famous Battle of Gettysburg ensued, a lot was learned about two of the leaders, General Lee and Joshua Chamberlain. General Lee and Joshua Chamberlain's differences include the strength of their faith, their clashing causes, and their differing views on education.

The first way they are different is that Lee's faith in God is apparently stronger than Chamberlain's. On a fine, cold, rainy Wednesday, July 1, 1863, General Lee emerges from his tent, says hi to a horse, and prays, in that order. The words contained in said prayer remain obscure, the passage just says, "He said good morning to the beautiful gray horse, the great soft eyes, said a silent prayer" (73). It is such a natural thing for him; it flows with the rest of his daily schedule of petting horses and whatnot. Later, on his way with Longstreet to meet George Meade, "He closed his eyes" (which is not recommended while riding a horse), and prayed Psalm 144, "Blessed be the Lord my

strength, which teacheth my fingers to fight and my hands to war” (85). He obviously found great comfort and strength in God and considered Him to be an integral part of the war.

Although not much is said about Chamberlain’s faith, he seems to have momentary doubts about Biblical concepts.

Sometimes he believed in a Heaven, mostly he believed in a Heaven; there ought to be a Heaven for young soldiers... but just as surely for the old soldier; there ought to be more than just the metallic end, and then silence, then the worms, and sometimes he believed, but just this moment he did not believe at all, knew Kilrain was dead and gone forever, that the grin had died and would not reappear, never, there was nothing beyond the sound of the guns but the vast dark, the huge nothing, not even silence, just an end...(308).

It sounds like he doesn’t believe that anything happens after that—that everything really does just fade away to nothing. Whether or not this is true doubt or just the musings of a critical thinker wondering a simple “what if”, he expresses clear misgivings. He doesn’t shy away from questioning his own beliefs.

General Lee’s second characteristic that differs from Chamberlain is that he is fighting more for independence than for equality. “With every step of a soldier, with every tick of a clock, the army was gaining safety, closer to victory, closer to the dream of independence” (110). It sounds all noble and good until one understands that although Lee “does not own slaves or believe in slavery, he does not believe that the Negro, ‘in the present stage of development,’ can be considered the equal of the white man” (page). He doesn’t believe in freedom for slaves, but in the freedom *to* enslave.

Chamberlain is also committed to fighting for independence; the only difference is that he believes in independence and equality. He believes in freedom for all, not simply the freedom to treat people however one likes. Given the context of the quote here... “This is free ground. Here to the Pacific Ocean. No man has to bow. No man born to royalty. Here we judge you by what you do, not by what your father was... Here’s a place to build a home... It’s the idea that we all have value, you and me, we’re all worth something more than the dirt” (30).

Lee’s third characteristic is that “He does not read novels or plays, he thinks they weaken the mind” (xvi). Whether or not this strange way of thinking is true of all short people, General Lee being a mere “five feet ten inches tall”(xvi), it is his intent to preserve his apparently strong mind by abstaining from recreational literature and works of fiction. What most other people would describe as some form of written art, this short-statured official sees as some form of mind-numbing aphrodisiac that deteriorates one’s cranial functions and blinds one’s perception of the real world. This is not to say that he is ignorant or illiterate, just that he obviously doesn’t place English class at a high value.

Chamberlain, on the third hand, was literally “A professor of rhetoric at Bowdoin College, sometimes professor of Natural and Revealed religion... An excellent student, Phi Beta Kappa, he [spoke] seven languages...” (xix) While this is speaking of a more formal education, not simply reading novels and plays, it seems to indicate that he was interested in literature and held the stance that literature actually strengthens the mind. He was fully engulfed in higher education before he willingly left his noble endeavors to pursue his long-time dream of engaging in warfare, soldierdom, and similar exploits (xix).

In summary, General Lee's and Colonel Chamberlain's differences include the strength of their faith, their clashing causes, and their beliefs on education. The most important difference is their level of faith: where Lee is devout and sure of himself, Chamberlain questions and wonders about God. Both attitudes can be learned from because while it is important to be steady in your faith, you cannot be truly committed if your heart is not honestly convinced. This attitude is reminiscent of 2 Corinthians 13:5: "Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves..."

#### Work Cited

Shaara, Michael. *The Killer Angels*. New York, Random House, 2003.