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EDUCATION FOR LIFE: GREAT BOOKS SEMINARS AS A WAY TO PROVIDE TODAY'S UNIVERSITY STUDENTS WITH A PERSONALLY MEANINGFUL AND CIVICALLY RELEVANT EDUCATION

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Abstract

There is a widespread concern that the performance culture at modern universities raises anxiety levels amongst students and generates individualistic, career-oriented graduates (Brooks, 2001; Deresiewicz, 2015; Sandel, 2021). In addition, modern democratic societies struggle with a lack of social cohesion, increasing polarization and anti-intellectual tendencies (Kakutani, 2019). Modern universities can be said to have three missions, namely, to provide professional education, scientific research and training, and liberal education. The main argument of the paper is that liberal education, defined as the development of the student as a whole person, complements a professional and scientific education and deserves more attention given the concerns about both today's students and societies. The paper provides a short history of liberal education and of great books seminars as one way of providing a liberal education. The paper then discusses practical-educational questions about text selection and the role of the teacher. In the final part, the paper offers an example of a text that could be read as part of great books seminars, namely, E. M. Forster's *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, which provides students with the opportunity to think about the relationship between friendship, self-knowledge and purpose.

Key words: liberal education, great books seminars, university, literature, intellectual virtues.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, a growing body of literature has voiced concern over the prevailing culture in modern universities, particularly the rise of performance metrics, competitiveness, and a narrowly instrumental approach to education. Scholars such as Brooks, Deresiewicz and Sandel have warned that these developments contribute to elevated levels of anxiety among students and foster a model of higher education that prioritizes individual achievement and career advancement at the expense of broader human development.[1] As higher education increasingly orients itself toward market logic —emphasizing measurable outputs, employability, and professional specialization— it risks neglecting its role in fostering reflection, ethical judgment, and civic responsibility.

These institutional trends occur alongside different societal challenges. Contemporary democracies are grappling with a decline in social cohesion, increasing political polarization, and rising skepticism toward intellectual authority.[2] Such conditions call for renewed attention to the formative dimensions of education, such as in liberal education[3] and character education,[4] both of which have aims that overlap.[5] A formative education focuses not simply what students know or how employable they are, but who they become as a person intellectually and morally, and how they will engage as members of a pluralistic society. In this context, one of the missions of the modern university is more urgent than ever. While universities have traditionally pursued three major aims —professional education, scientific research and training, and liberal education—[6] the third is increasingly marginalized. Liberal education, understood as the cultivation of the whole person through intellectual formation, is often subordinated to or overshadowed by vocational and technical priorities.[7]

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[1] Cf. Brooks, D. «The Organization Kid». *The Atlantic*. https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2001/04/the-organization-kid/302164/; Deresiewicz, W. *Excellent Sheep. The Miseducation of the American Elite and a Way to a Meaningful Life*. Los Angeles: Free Press, 2015; Sandel, M. J. *The tyranny of merit. What's become of the common good?* London: Penguin, 2001.

[2] Cf. Kakutani, M. *The Death of Truth*. London: Wiliam Collins, 2019.

[3] Cf. Torralba, J. M. *Una Educación Liberal. Elogio de los grandes libros*. Barcelona: Encuentro, 2022.

[4] Cf. Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues. (2020). Character Education in Universities. A Framework for Flourishing. https://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Character_Education_in_Universities_Final_Edit-1.pdf; Brant, J. Brooks, E. and Lamb, M. *Cultivating Virtue in the University*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022.

[5] Cf. Torralba, J. M. «Character and Virtue in Liberal Education». In Peters, M. A. *Encyclopedia of Educational Philosophy and Theory*. Berlin: Springer Nature, 2020, pp. 1-5.

[6] *Cf.* José Ortega y Gasset. (2014). *The Mission of the University*. Routledge.

[7] Cf. Kronman, A. T. *Education's End. Why our colleges and universities have given up on the meaning of life*. New HAven: Yale University Press, 2007; Bok, D. C. *Higher Expectations. Can Colleges teach what they need to know in the 21st Century?* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020.

This paper argues that liberal education is not a dispensable luxury, but a vital and complementary component of higher education that deserves renewed emphasis. It plays a distinct role in equipping students not only for work, but for life as reflective individuals, thoughtful citizens, and capable interlocutors in democratic society. To make this case, the paper first offers a brief introduction to liberal education, with particular attention to the enduring tradition of great books seminars —an approach that exemplifies the potential of liberal education to engage students in meaningful conversations. The subsequent section turns from the «what» to the «how», and takes on practical-educational questions of text selection and the role of the teacher as facilitator of seminar discussions. The final section provides a case study of one such text —E.M. Forster's *Where Angels Fear to Tread*— and explores how the themes of friendship, self-knowledge, and personal purpose can serve as a meaningful invitation for liberal learning. Through this exploration, the paper seeks to show that liberal education based on great books seminars remains an important resource for universities in addressing the twin challenges of personal formation and democratic renewal in the twenty-first century.

2. What is a liberal education?

The word «liberal» in liberal education has two meanings. Firstly, the goal is to help students to develop intellectual autonomy, meaning that they become confident and competent in their ability to think for themselves, to reflect and question, and to make sense of the world. Liberal education has the goal of educating the whole person[8] and contributes to human flourishing.[9] Unlike training that focuses on a specific discipline or profession, a liberal education encourages students to ask meaningful questions and to think deeply about how to live a good life. This type of education gets students involved in thoughtful conversations that help them develop the desire and mindset to think for themselves. It involves shared inquiry, in which both careful reading and classroom discussion play important roles. Secondly, liberal education is freely pursued in that it is a good in and of itself and not pursued for the sake of something else, such as a career.

Liberal education has its roots in ancient Greece, where education was understood not merely as the transmission of knowledge, but as the deliberate formation of character. As Werner Jaeger notes, the Greeks «were the first to recognize that education

[8] Cf. Roche, M. W. *Why Choose the Liberal Arts?* Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame, 2010; Torralba, J. M. *Una Educación Liberal. Elogio de los grandes libros*, *op. cit.*

[9] Cf. DeNicola, D. R. *Learning to Flourish. A Philosophical Exploration of Liberal Education.* London: Continuum, 2012.

means deliberately molding character».[10] Homeric poetry, for example, provided ancient Athenians with a model of the courageous warrior, which was thought to shape their character by means of imitation. In addition to this model of emulation, Plato —through the voice of Socrates— introduced a more reflective approach, famously declaring that «the unexamined life is not worth living».[11] For Plato, true freedom required the cultivation of both moral and intellectual capacities. Accordingly, he saw education not as the mere passing on of knowledge or technical information, but as a form of philosophical inquiry aimed at helping students perceive the deeper nature of reality.[12]

Building on Plato, Aristotle stated explicitly that an education aimed at developing the moral and intellectual virtues can be called *liberal*: «for occupations are divided into liberal (*eleutherioon*) and illiberal (*aneleutherioon*)… any occupation, art, or science, which makes the body or soul or mind of the freeman less fit for the practice or exercise of excellence, is mechanical… to be seeking always after the useful does not become free and exalted souls».[13] Aristotle cautioned against forms of education that prioritize utility at the expense of virtue. For Aristotle, liberal education was concerned with ends that are intrinsically valuable —namely, the cultivation of virtue— rather than with instrumental goals such as gaining political power or advancing a career. This classical distinction between liberal and vocational education underscores a key philosophical commitment: that the highest aim of education lies not in what it enables one to *do*, but in who it helps one to *become*.

The classical understanding of education laid the groundwork for what would become the traditional liberal arts curriculum that structured learning around the *trivium* —grammar, logic and rhetoric—, and *quadrivium* —arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music. As Dorothy Sayers explained in *The Lost Tools of Learning*, these arts and sciences did not primarily aim at the transmission of knowledge, but were intended to train students in the art of thinking itself.[14] For centuries, including throughout the medieval and early modern period, this education in the liberal arts was seen as essential preparation for the further study in the professions such as medicine, law, and theology.

In the nineteenth century, the enduring value of liberal education found a strong advocate in John Henry Newman. In *The Idea of a University* he emphasized that lib-

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[10] JAEGER, W. *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*. Vol. I. Transl. G. Highet. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939, p. XXII.

[11] PLATO. *Apology*. In *The Last Days of Socrates*. Transl. H. Tredennick. London: Penguin, 2003, 37e.

[12] Cf. PLATO. *The Republic*. Transl. T. Griffith. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, 518c.

[13] ARISTOTLE. *The Politics*. In *The Politics and The Constitution of Athens*. Transl. B. Jowett and J. Barnes.Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 1337b7-10 and 1338b3-4.

[14] Cf. SAYERS, D. *The Lost Tools of Learning: Symposium on Education*. London: CrossReads Publications, 1947.

eral education and liberal pursuits are fundamentally exercises of the intellect —of reasoned reflection and critical engagement. For Newman, the true mark of a liberal education is the formation of a lasting «habit of mind» characterized by intellectual freedom, fairness, calmness, moderation, and wisdom —what he described as «a philosophical habit».[15] Newman was writing at a time when the modern university was emerging as a complex institution composed of increasingly specialized disciplines. In this context, he saw liberal education as essential for helping students cultivate an integrated and coherent understanding of knowledge across fields. He argued that knowledge should not be fragmented or reduced to utility; rather, it should be understood as a unified intellectual pursuit: «When I speak of knowledge, I mean something intellectual, something which grasps what it perceives through the senses; something which takes a view of things… Not to know the relative disposition of things is the state of slaves or children».[16] In other words, liberal education is understood to promote a broad and connected understanding and, in this way, to cultivate intellectual freedom. In addition, Newman affirmed that such expansive understanding is not just useful but intrinsically worthwhile: «there is a knowledge worth possessing for what it is, and not merely for what it does».[17] This contemplative dimension of learning is central to our humanity: «Such is the constitution of the human mind, that any kind of knowledge, if it be really such, is its own reward».[18] After all, Newman argued, human beings have «an ardent desire for the acquisition of knowledge […and are…] satisfying a direct need of our nature in its very acquisition».[19]

However, it would be a mistake to interpret the liberal education tradition —based on thinkers like Plato, Aristotle, and Newman— as oriented exclusively towards intellectual and contemplative ends. The productive tension between the contemplative life (*vita contemplativa*) that aims at wisdom, and the active life (*vita activa*) that is aimed at engagement in society, politics, or a profession runs throughout the tradition, as marvelously charted by Kimball.[20] Liberal education has always encompassed not just the cultivation of wisdom, but also the formation of practical judgment (*phronesis*), that is, the capacity to make sound decisions in public and professional life.[21] As Kim-

[15] Newman, J. H. *The Idea of a University*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996, p. 77.

[16] *Ibid.*, pp. 84-85.

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 85.

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 78.

[19] *Ibid.*, p. 79.

[20] Cf. Kimball, B. A. *Orators and Philosophers. A History of the Idea of a Liberal Education*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1986.

[21] Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

ball points out,[22] for the Roman philosopher Cicero, for example, immersion in literature, history, and philosophy was not merely pleasurable; it nourished the capacities for rhetorical eloquence and reasoned argument, both of which were essential for engagement in public life.

Building on this classical ideal, the twentieth century has seen significant movements and voices that understood a liberal education as the best preparation for citizenship and the professions. Specifically, the ideal gained significant momentum in the United States after World War II. The authors of the influential *General Education in a Free Society*,[23] commonly known as the Harvard Redbook, argued that a broad general education was crucial for developing free democratic citizens and professionals. This vision stood in contrast to education narrowly focused on preparing scholars or pure scientists. The Redbook emphasized that education should «help young persons fulfill the unique, particular functions in life which it is in them to fulfill, and fit them so far as it can for those common spheres which, as citizens and heirs of a joint culture, they will share with others».[24] Importantly, education was understood as more than the simple transmission of knowledge; it involved «the cultivation of certain aptitudes and attitudes in the mind of the young».[25] These included the ability «to think effectively, to communicate thought, to make relevant judgments, to discriminate among values».[26] Although the Redbook did not explicitly use Aristotelian terminology, these capacities closely correspond to Aristotle's concept of *phronesis*, or practical wisdom —the reflective and ethical judgment necessary for responsible action in both public and professional spheres.

Building on the enduring connection between liberal education and public life, more recent thinkers have emphasized the critical role of the humanities in preparing students for active citizenship. Hannah Arendt, for instance, recognized the humanities —literature, history, and philosophy— as essential for understanding the plurality of human experience, as essential preparation for public life.[27] She argued that the study of literature, history, and philosophy trains individuals to understand plurality —the coexistence of diverse perspectives— and to exercise judgment in complex, shared spaces. This leads to an attitude that «knows how to take care and preserve and admire the things of the world».[28] The humanities teach students how to think with

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[22] Cf. *Ibid.*

[23] Cf. *General Education in a Free Society. Report of the Harvard Committee.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1945.

[24] *Ibid.*, p. 4.

[25] *Ibid.*, p. 64.

[26] *Ibid.*, p. 65.

[27] *Cf.* ARENDT, H. *Between Past and Future. Six Exercises in Political Thought.* New York: Viking Press, 1961.

[28] *Ibid.*, p. 225.

and among others, to consider issues from multiple viewpoints, and to find one's orientation in a common world. In this sense, a liberal education does not retreat from the world but equip students to enter it thoughtfully and responsibly, as citizens capable of navigating the demands of collective life.

Martha Nussbaum builds on this humanistic tradition that argues that liberal education is vital for sustaining democracy. In *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, she contends that literature and philosophy cultivate essential democratic capacities, including critical thinking, empathetic imagination, and the ability to see the world through the eyes of others.[29] Without these —she warns— education risks becoming narrowly instrumental and incapable of preparing students for meaningful civic engagement. Like Arendt, Nussbaum sees the humanities not as luxuries, but as democratic necessities.

Alongside the cultivation of wisdom and practical judgment, a third important aim of liberal education emerges, namely, the development of a sense of personal purpose.[30] In recent decades, critics such as Kronman and Deresiewicz have voiced concern that higher education has become overly career-oriented, often neglecting deeper questions of identity and purpose.[31] Kronman argues that without addressing the greater questions of what life is for and what *my* life is for, a career-focused education lacks meaningful direction.[32] Supporting this, Hitz elaborates on how the intellectual pursuit of reading great books can change the course of one's life, as it has done for notable and diverse figures such as Augustine, Einstein, and Malcolm X.[33] Montás, in a candid autobiography, recounts how liberal education centered on great books gave him an enduring sense of purpose.[34] Today, as many students are recognized as «emerging adults»[35] who explore their identity and goals, liberal education plays a vital role in meeting these developmental needs. It provides a space to ask deep questions, develop a coherent sense of self, build meaningful relationships, and engage with broad, foundational questions in order to help shape a purposeful life.

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[29] Cf. Nussbaum, M. C. *Not for Profit. Why Democracy needs the Humanities.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010.

[30] Cf. Roche, M. W. *op. cit.*

[31] Cf. Kronman, A. T. *op. cit.*; Deresiewicz, W. *op. cit.*

[32] Cf. Kronman, A. T. *op. cit.*

[33] Cf. Hitz, Z. *Lost in Thought. The Hidden Pleasures of an Intellectual Life*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020.

[34] Cf. Montás, R. *Rescuing Socrates. How the Great Books Changed My Life and Why They Matter for the Next Generation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021.

[35] Cf. Arnett, J. J. *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

3. Liberal education and great books seminars

One way of providing students with a liberal education is by means of great books seminars.[36] In a way, great books seminars have almost as long a philosophical history as liberal education. In the classical tradition, «great books» were thought to provide young students with models to imitate: «All literature, all philosophy, all history, abounds with incentives to noble action, incentives which would be buried in black darkness were the light of the written word not flashed upon them».[37] For centuries, it was taken as a given that the content of the *trivium* and *quadrivium* largely consisted in what today we would call great books. These concern texts that are great on account of their depth, complexity, and scope. They are great because they address great questions. Nussbaum has rightly pointed out that great books should not be understood as authorities from which to copy answers to great questions.[38] Rather, great books are authorities in the sense that they constitute worthwhile conversation partners when thinking about great questions ourselves. Students in great books seminars engage directly with primary sources. They are encouraged to enter into intellectual traditions on their own terms, which is an important pathway towards intellectual confidence and independence.[39] Didactically, the primary aim for a teacher is to encourage students to read and develop the habit of reading. This kind of encouragement has more to do with «lighting a fire» than with passing on knowledge.[40]

In the United States, the golden age of the Great Books programs occurred during the first half of the twentieth century (1929-1945), with the establishment of the Columbia core curriculum in 1919, the great books program at the University of Chicago (1931), and the great books curriculum of St. John's College in Annapolis (1937).[41] At large research universities, such as the University of Notre Dame, a Liberal Studies program is based on the rationale that great books provide the content that helps students overcome the fragmentation of knowledge at universities focused on specialized

[36] Cf. DeNicola, D. R. *op. cit.*

[37] Cicero. *Pro Archia Poeta*. In Gamble, R. M. (ed.). *The Great Tradition. Classic Readings on What it means to be an Educated Being*. Wilmington: ISI Books, 2017, p. 69.

[38] Cf. Nussbaum, M. C. *Cultivating Humanity. A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997; Nussbaum, M. C. *Not for Profit. Why Democracy needs the Humanities*, *op. cit.*

[39] Cf. Hitz, Z. *op. cit.*

[40] Cf. Baena Molina, R. «Reading for pleasure. From narrative competence to character education». In Brooks, E., Cohen de Lara, E., Sánchez-Ostiz, A., and Torralba, J. M. (eds.). *Literature and Character Education in Universities. Theory, Method, and Text Analysis*. London: Routledge, 2021, p. 17-33.

[41] Cf. Torralba, J. M. «La idea de educación liberal. De cómo se inventaron las humanidades». In Arana, J. (ed.). *Falsos Saberes. La suplantación del conocimiento en la cultura contemporánea*. Madrid: Biblioteca Nueva, 2013, p. 65-78.

disciplinary education, and provides students with a common language to address great questions.[42]

Great books programs often follow set reading lists that reflect a shared intellectual canon, though these can evolve over time. However, a fixed canon is not required to conduct a great books seminar or to incorporate great books into individual courses, and one could argue that a fixed canon may feed into the mistaken assumptions that only the books on the list can be considered «great» and that these books can or should be considered as authorities, which is what Nussbaum warned against.[43] Instead, it is more helpful to understand the «greatness» of a book in terms of its ability to raise questions that concern human beings across time and place. Letting go of a fixed canon opens up more space for books about topics and themes that may resonate with students. At the University of Navarra, Spain, for example, instructors use canonical lists as inspiration but prioritize personal insight and enthusiasm in choosing texts.[44] This flexibility supports a core aim of great books seminars, namely, to ignite intellectual curiosity, which is more effectively achieved when instructors teach works that they themselves find compelling. Such an approach has the positive effect of broadening the scope of what may count as a great book.

Some guidance as to the selection of great books is offered by DiYanni who, in *You Are What You Read*, suggests that teachers select texts in pairs, by which he means two or four texts on a shared theme.[45] This could be a mixture of philosophical, literary, or historical texts. Involving students in the selection process can also enhance engagement. For instance, a great books course could focus on the theme of friendship. Many philosophers deal with this theme, such as Aristotle in the *Nichomachean Ethics* (books eight and nine), Montaigne in his essay *On Friendship*, Simone Weil in a chapter on friendship in her *Anthology*, and Nietzsche in a short chapter on friendship in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. These are relatively short and philosophically rich texts that offer diverse perspectives on friendship. Students may then be invited to select a literary work exploring friendship and analyze it through the lens of different philosophers, for example in a paper assignment. Numerous literary works explore the theme of friendship, such as Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Saint

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[42] Cf. Roche, M. W. *op. cit.*; Stapleford, T. A. «The Program of Liberal Studies after 65 Years. Blending Scholarship and Core Texts at a Research University». In Cohen de Lara, E., and Drop H. (eds.). *Back to Core. Rethinking Core Text in Liberal Arts & Sciences Education in Europe*. Wilmington: Vernon Press, 2017, pp. 75-90.

[43] Cf. Nussbaum, M. C. *Cultivating Humanity. A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*, *op. cit.*; Nussbaum, M. C, *Not for Profit. Why Democracy needs the Humanities*, *op. cit.*

[44] Cf. Sánchez-Ostiz, A. and Torralba, J. M. Intellectual and ethical education of university students through core texts seminars: The case of the great books program at the University of Navarra. *Church, Communication and Culture* 9(2), 2024, pp. 345-360.

[45] Cf. DiYanni. R. *You Are What You Read. A Practical Guide to Reading Well*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021.

Euxupéry's *The Little Prince*, John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*, and Don DeLillo's *White Noise*.

Great books seminars not only imply a certain content in terms of the readings, but also a certain methodology in terms of teaching. This methodology is usually called Socratic or dialogical.[46] The Socratic methodology has several characteristics. Firstly, the student is the protagonist in the learning process, not the teacher; even though the teacher has an essential presence. The teacher serves much more as a facilitator or —in Socratic terms— as a «midwife».[47] Secondly, the Socratic method presupposes not just any type of question. Socrates understood the «what is» question to be the fundamental question of practical philosophy.[48] This question, being fundamental, is the first of a range of other questions by means of which the student exercises the faculty of judgment. Thirdly, the Socratic method entails asking meaningful questions that engage the student in an existential way. This implies a certain level of integrity; a student cannot get away with answering a Socratic question in terms of what other people think or what a specific text might postulate.

Great books seminars often run in small classes with a maximum of around twenty-five students. This allows for intense class discussions. To stimulate discussion and provide students with a sense of confidence and ownership, a great books seminar may start out, first, with a round of introductions. The teacher may then open up the discussion by asking, for example, how students experienced the text. Is there anything in the text that surprised them or that they agreed or disagreed with? If a student mentions a specific point, then this can be an «in» into the text. If the class is shy and not much comes up, then it is worthwhile to ask a more specific question: What are the topics or themes in the text? And, if there are several, how do these themes relate? Again, the point is, for the teacher, to understand to how the students read the text, what strikes them in the text, and what do or do they not understand. Their questions and observations offer the best way «in» to the text. Very often, if a student raises a question about the text, one may ask what passage in the text they are referring to. This is an opportunity to return to the text and ask the student to read the passage out loud. Subsequently, rather than the teacher offering her interpretation, the teacher needs to pose the question back to the class. What does the author mean to say in the specific passage? How might this relate to a bigger theme in the text? From there, an engaged discussion may evolve. The key towards engagement is starting out with the students'

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[46] Cf. Brooks, E., Cohen de Lara, E., Sánchez-Ostiz, A. and Torralba, J. M. (eds.), *op. cit.*

[47] Plato, *Theaetetus*, 148e-151d. In J. M. COOPER (ed.). *Plato. Complete Works.* Transl. M. J. Levett, rev. M. Burnyeat. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1997, pp. 157-234.

[48] *Cf.* Plato, *Gorgias*, 448e. In J. M. COOPER (ed.). *Plato. Complete Works.* D. J. Zeyl. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1997, pp. 791-869.

readings and, as a teacher, allowing one's own understanding of the text to guide the discussion without imposing it on the discussion.

The teacher, in other words, needs to let go of her authority and eagerness or sense of duty that may cause her to provide her own interpretation of the text; the emphasis is on asking questions instead of providing answers. Furthermore, in great books seminars, the objective is not primarily to go through a text in an orderly fashion, covering all steps of a philosophical argument or the entire storyline in a novel. Rather, the main aim is to engage the students in reading and trying to understand the text, and having a shared conversation about the meaning of the text. Such a conversation may meander, and students may bring up new points. The teacher is responsible for some of the rigor of this conversation, meaning that there are moments that the teacher has to tell the class to return to the text when the conversation relapses into the voicing of personal opinion. Also, the teacher often fulfils a role in connecting a discussion of a specific passage to the theme of the book as a whole, even though more advanced students should be capable of synthesizing the reading as well.

As a specific kind of liberal education, great books seminars provide an important context for the development of intellectual and moral virtues. Firstly, great books deal with overarching or ultimate questions, meaning that engaging with great books cultivates the mind towards comprehensiveness. Contemplating questions such as what is the good, what does it mean to be a human being, what is justice, entail theoretical reflection of the world in a disinterested way. This remove from the world and its everyday material or realist pursuits develops the ability to assess that world.[49] There is a «contemplative seeing (*theoria*)» afforded by the invitation of great books to engage in deep and fundamental questions.[50] In short, great books seminars tend towards the cultivate contemplative wisdom.

Secondly, great books seminars cultivate practical wisdom. Great books may provide moral examples to imitate, as Cicero argued, but also models of moral complexity. This offers the reader an opportunity to practice moral deliberation and reflection. Bohlin highlights the educational value of «morally pivotal points» found in works of great literature, defined as «dramatic markers that help to illustrate the characters' movement in a new or slightly refined direction».[51] Becoming more attentive to a literary character's moral development helps the reader in ethical reflection and refined judgment. It is a great reading technique, and one that I will illustrate below with a reading of E. M. Forster's *Where Angels Fear to Tread*.

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[49] Cf. Roche, M. W., *op. cit.*, p. 29.

[50] Steel, S. *The Pursuit of Wisdom and Happiness in Education. Historical Sources and Contemplative Practices*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2014. p. 70.

[51] Bohlin, K. E. *Teaching Character Education through Literature. Awakening the Moral Imagination in Secondary Classrooms*. London: Routledge, 2005, p. 6.

Thirdly, great books seminars develop intellectual humility. Encountering a range of arguments and perspectives in texts requires engagement with different positions, and helps to develop a sense of openness and awareness of one's own limitations. Classroom discussions on texts that address meaningful questions require each participant to listen attentively. A sense of integrity is involved in intellectual humility when the student develops the ability for self-reflection and self-correction in the process of reading great books and discussing these with others. Great books provide students with a well-rounded view of what it means to be human across time and place, and this may feed into intellectual humility as well.

Fourthly, great books seminars foster the joy of learning for its own sake. Hitz writes about the *pleasures* of the intellectual life, while recognizing that these higher pleasures are curious pleasures in that they require toil and dedication.[52] Hitz emphasizes a sense of «flow» that is developed by means of the sustained effort to read and understand great books. Roche emphasizes the «intrinsic joy of engaging our faculties».[53] Developing a joy of learning for its own sake is important and relates to intrinsic motivation to learn, being more effective and reliable than extrinsic motivation.[54]

Finally, great books seminars train virtues of character. Many intellectual pursuits presuppose virtues of character and, therefore, it is likely that the two develop together.[55] Among the moral virtues that are presupposed and developed in great books seminars are: integrity or intellectual courage inherent in the possibility of self-correcting one's position in intellectual debate, diligence in preparing for class, resilience («grit») in pursuing understanding of a complex text, focused attention required to parse a complex and meaningful argument, the ability to listen to others.

Overall, being a good physician, or engineer, teacher, consultant, lawyer, etc., ultimately implies being a good human being. A university education should therefore at least in some parts of the curriculum provide students with the opportunity and material to reflect on the richness and complexity of human existence. Great books eminently constitute such materials. They provide for a humanistic education in terms of cultivating the ability to morally deliberate about concrete dilemmas in an integrated way, that is, in light of an enhanced understanding of the good life.[56]

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[52] Cf. Hitz, Z., *op. cit.*

[53] Cf. Roche, M. W., *op. cit.*, p. 36.

[54] Cf. Baehr, J. *Deep in Thought. A Practical Guide to Teaching for Intellectual Virtues.* Cambridge: Harvard Education Press, 2021.

[55] Cf. Roche, M. W., *op. cit.*

[56] Cf. Brooks, E., Cohen de Lara, E., Sánchez-Ostiz, A. and Torralba, J. M. (eds.), *op. cit.*

4. How to read: Forster's *Where Angels Fear to Tread* as an example[57]

To illustrate the capacity of great books to cultivate ethical reflection and human understanding, a specific literary example is now considered. E. M. Forster's *Where Angels Fear to Tread* provides a valuable narrative through which themes such as friendship, self-knowledge, and personal purpose may be explored. The novel was written in 1904 and gives us a story about an English woman called Lilia who, following the early death of her husband, leaves her daughter with her family-in-law in order to travel to Italy together with her friend Caroline. Once in Italy, Lilia falls in love with the handsome Gino and decides to stay. Her dead husband's family is furious and sends Lilia's brother-in-law Philip to Italy in order to prevent a misalliance and save the reputation of the family. However, Philip arrives too late. Lilia has already married Gino and soon becomes pregnant. She gives birth to a son, but dies in childbirth. At this point, Caroline —Lilia's old friend— travels to Italy hoping to rescue the child from what she perceives will be a difficult life. She is soon joined by Philip, who travels to Italy again, this time with his sister. The story takes several more turns, and has a dramatic ending.

One way to read the story, for ethical purposes, is to focus on the moral development, the relationships, and development of personal purpose of the main character, Philip Herrington. Philip is born in Sawston, a town where everything British is the norm, and raised by his mother who cares more than anything about keeping up appearances. When we first meet Philip in the novel, he is 24 years old, a young man with aesthetic sensibilities and a self-declared lack of character. He laments that he has «a weak face. I shall never carve a place for myself in the world».[58]

Philip comes across as what Hitz, in *Lost in Thought. The Pleasures of the Intellectual Life*, has called a «spectator».[59] A spectator is someone who loves spectacle and is curious in the negative sense of the word. The word can be applied to the tourist who visits places merely for entertainment and consumption, without the attempt —as Hitz puts it— to reach for something beyond, an opportunity for growth, healing, understanding or awe at something greater than oneself. The spectator has a desire for being entertained for entertainment's sake, for the thrill of a shocking story, for other people's misery. There is something nihilistic about the spectator; it is a form of empty thrill seeking and there is a lack of moral seriousness. The spectator, as Hitz argues, is «trapped at the surfaces of things».[60]

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[57] This section is loosely based on a keynote that the author delivered during the Association for Core Texts and Courses annual conference in Dallas, TX, April 2023.

[58] Forster, E. M. *Where Angels Fear to Tread.* London: Penguin Classics, 2007, p. 51.

[59] Cf. Hitz, Z., *op. cit.*

[60] Ibid., p. 141.

In *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, Philip idealizes Italy and, at the beginning of the novel, advises Lilia to see the little towns, visit lake Como and the cathedral of Milan, and meet the people. He says: «Love and understand the Italians, for the people are more marvelous than the land».[61] He is described as being intoxicated by the idea of Italy, and proclaims «I do believe that Italy really purifies and ennobles all who visit her».[62] It is a vain observation, because as soon as Philip finds out that Lilia is about to *marry* an Italian, his love for Italy proves to be superficial. Forster writes: «For three years he [Philip] had sung the praises of the Italians, but he had never contemplated having one as a relative».[63] Philip, who has not felt a sense of responsibility in his life, now obeys his mother and travels to Italy with the purpose of preventing the marriage. He tries to dissuade Lilia from the marriage, blaming the glamour of Italy for seducing her. But she tells him that she intends to remain with Gino for love. Philip then turns to Gino and insults him by offering some money to leave Lilia alone, whereupon Gino reveals that they are already married. The altercation where Gino forcefully pushes Philip to the ground represents a culture clash between, on the one hand, a British Edwardian upper middle-class mentality with its conventions, double standards, hypocrisies and, on the other hand, Italian lower-middle-class conventions and values, the sense of honor and heartfelt emotions. Intercultural communication, we may say, comes with complications.

Lilia's marriage turns out to be an unhappy one as the romance wears off quickly and she feels trapped in the Italian village and by the patriarchal disposition of her husband. Lilia loses self-confidence, tries her hand at becoming a Catholic, and becomes pregnant as an attempt to secure her unfaithful husband. She gives birth to a boy, but tragically dies in childbirth.

At this point, Philip finds himself completely disillusioned with Italy and the idea that the beauty of Italy can transform people. Forster writes: «Italy, the land of beauty, was ruined for him. She had no power to change men and things who dwelt in her. She, too, could produce avarice, brutality, stupidity —and what was worse, vulgarity».[64] However, once he is told to go return to Italy once more in order to «rescue» Lilia's son from Gino so that the baby can be brought up the English way, he recovers some of his spectator sensibilities because «the expedition promised to be highly comic. He was not averse to it any longer; he was simply indifferent to all in it except the humors».[65]

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[61] FORSTER, E. M., *op. cit*, p. 3.

[62] *Ibid.*, p. 6.

[63] *Ibid.*, p. 14.

[64] *Ibid.*, p. 52.

[65] *Ibid.*, p. 69.

Philip shows himself wonderfully immune to the moral seriousness of the situation. To Philip, everything can still be regarded as mere entertainment.

This is where Lilia's friend, Caroline, comes in. Caroline has decided to return to Italy out of a genuine concern for the baby. Philip observes that Caroline «really cared about life, and tried to live it properly».[66] When they meet, they muse on the beauty of Italy together, and «anger, cynicism, stubborn morality —all had ended in a feeling of goodwill towards each other and towards the city which had received them».[67] Caroline sees right through Philip «And you —your brain and your insight are splendid. But when you see what's right, you're too idle to do it».[68] Philip responds by saying: «you are quite right: life to me is just a spectacle».[69] Caroline continues by reflecting that «There's never any knowing —how am I to put it?— which of our actions, which of our idlenesses won't have things hanging on it forever».[70] Philip assents to the idea that one's actions and character impact the course of one's life, but he is not yet prepared to take it to heart.

In this vein, without moral urgency, Philip talks to Gino about the baby, knowing that the interview will come to nothing, whereupon his sister Harriet tragically decides to take the matter into her own hand. She steals the baby, but the carriage topples over and the baby dies.

At this point, we encounter at what Bohlin refers to as a «morally pivotal point» in the novel.[71] For the first time, Philip comes to deeply realize the existential nature of his flaws —his spectator life— and takes responsibility. He observes: «It is through me that it happened, because I was cowardly and idle». He decides that «therefore he, and no one else, must take the news of it to Gino».[72] Realizing that Caroline had seen him for who he is, and seeing her comfort Gino, Philip falls in love with her: «There came to him an earnest desire to be good through the example of this good woman. He would try henceforward to be worthy of the things she had revealed. Quietly, without hysterical prayers or banging of drums, he underwent conversion. He was saved… Life was greater than he had supposed, but it was even less complete».[73] Philip decides that he will not go back to his small town. And when Caroline confesses that she is in love

[66] *Ibid.*, p. 82.

[67] *Ibid.*, p. 85.

[68] *Ibid.*, p. 109.

[69] *Ibid.*, p. 110.

[70] *Ibid.*, p. 112.

[71] Bohlin, K. E., *op. cit.*

[72] Forster, E. M., *op. cit*, p. 122.

[73] *Ibid.*, p. 130.

with Gino and not with Philip, «[i]n that terrible discovery Philip managed to think —not of himself but of her».[74]

For Philip, we may say that his travels to Italy were meaningful; he undergoes a moral transformation. But the moral transformation would not have occurred without an experience that involves suffering —namely, holding Lilia's dead baby in his arms— and the moral friendship that he develops with Caroline, a friendship in which Caroline openly confronts him with his own shortcomings. The experience of new things, as Forster shows in the book, creates opportunities for change. For Philip, it was important to leave his hometown and to be away from his dictating mother and the exaggerated concern for keeping up appearances. Also, the beauty of Italy seems to have made him more susceptible to a genuinely human connection. However, we may say that it takes more than mere travel to bring about meaningfulness. Forster shows us that only when something touches Philip's *inner* life, by means of conversations that make him think and touch his heart, that he grows as a person. Meaningfulness is connected to our inner lives, and great books likely have the potential to open up our inner lives perhaps even more than travel does.

Teachers of great books seminars, implicitly or explicitly, hope that the texts that we read with our students matter to them. We wish that the texts are meaningful to them and, perhaps once in a while, even transform them or help them live their lives in a better way. There is increasing evidence in the field of literary studies that what we read changes us, and several paradigms have been defined that help us understand better when and how readers connect to texts so that these become meaningful. For example, there is the phenomenon of recognition, whereby the reader connects to the book on account of feeling «addressed, summoned, called to account» by a character or by a specific plot line. Often, recognition invites self-reflection, and Felski writes: «as selfhood becomes self-reflexive, literature comes to assume a crucial role in exploring what it means to be a person».[75] In all honesty, when I first read *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, when I was about 16, the novel did not work for me in this way. I was too young, I think, to understand or recognize the potential tragedy of Philip's life. I focused more on the character of Lilia, but in a dismissive way, thinking that she was being a bit foolish. I missed the complexity of the novel. However, it is in re-reading the novel with students that I have come to appreciate the way in which Forster presents his characters and, through them, invites the reader to experience Philip's moral transformation with him.

[74] *Ibid.*, p. 133.

[75] FELSKI, R. *Uses of Literature*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008, p. 25.

Profoundly transformative experiences may depend on serendipity, where the reader comes across the book at the right moment in one's life, and where the encounter is a powerful one. The beauty about a liberal education by means of great texts seminars is that the possibility of such experiences —whether more or less transformative— becomes part of a formal education. However, oftentimes great books seminars do not result in moral epiphanies. Literary texts such as Forster's *Where Angels Fear to Tread* invite discussion about who we are and how we live our lives. This meets important needs of today's students. Unlike Philip, who initially seemed rather comfortable as a spectator, students sometimes have a kind of existential anxiety and are struggling with the threat of meaninglessness. As Montás argues: «this is precisely where the greatest value of a liberal education lies: in turning students' eyes inward, into an exploration of their own humanity under the provocation of works that have proven their power to inspire just such self-reflection».[76] As such, liberal education is an education not for making a living but, rather, for living meaningfully.

In the classroom, one may guide the discussion by asking the following questions:

1. Why did Forster title his book *Where Angels Fear to Tread?* One may note that the title is an allusion to a line in a poem by Alexander Pope: «Fools rush in where angels fear to tread», which opens up themes of cultural arrogance, moral blindness, and unintended harm caused by seemingly noble intentions.
2. Where and when is the novel set? Students should note that the novel takes place both in England and in Italy, and that both countries are shown to differ in culture, habits, relationships, and outlook on life. What is the significance of the culture clash for the plot of the novel? And in what way does it impact the main character Philip's moral development?
3. One could then turn to the different characters —Philip, his mother Mrs. Harriton, his sister Harriet and sister-in-law Lilia, their friend Caroline, and the Italian Ginio— and ask the students to trace their moral development or the lack thereof. In particular, what are the morally pivotal points in Philip's life? Where are the other characters, such as Caroline, when these happen? How do Philip's journeys toward self-knowledge and virtue intertwine with one another? What is Philip's relationship to his mother, Mrs. Harrinton, and what role does she play in his moral development? Overall, which of the characters in the novel have the most reliable judgement?
4. An important theme to discuss is the impact of suffering and guilt on moral development. In Philip's case, the impetus for awareness about his character and consequences of his actions is a terrible event. In what ways can the shock of suffering serve as occasion for moral growth?

[76] MONTÁS, R., *op. cit.*, p. 19.

5. Another important theme is the relationship between Philip and Caroline. Caroline, as Philip's friend, does not hesitate to confront him with his moral shortcomings. Is this something friends should do? What can we learn from this relationship about friendship, self-knowledge, virtue, and personal purpose?

Forster's *Where Angels Fear to Tread* is likely to resonate with students, who are close in age to the protagonist and may find its themes of friendship, self-knowledge, and personal purpose particularly meaningful. The novel could be effectively paired with F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, which explores parallel themes such as developing a sense of self, the complexities of friendship and love, and the pursuit of happiness amid a world preoccupied with superficial beauty. Alternatively, Forster's novel might be paired with novels that explore self-discovery, moral growth, and the quest for purpose within the framework of cultural conflict. One such example is Hella Haasse's *The Black Lake*, which is a coming-of-age story of an unnamed Dutch boy who grows up in the Dutch East Indies (modern-day Indonesia) during the final years of Dutch colonial rule. He forms a deep childhood friendship with a Javanese boy named Oeroeg. As the boys grow older, the socio-political and racial divisions of colonial society set them apart. The main character's moral journey is one of increasing and painful self-awareness whereby he gradually realizes his alienation from both his friend and the country he once called home. Like Forster's *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, Hella Haasse's *The Black Lake* is a novel about friendship, the clash of cultures, and journey towards self-awareness, to which Haasse adds the theme of (de-)colonialization.

5. Concluding remarks

Whatever great book a teacher selects to read and discuss with students, a liberal education based on great books seminars remains an important pathway towards offering a formative university education. Great books seminars cultivate the intellectual, ethical, and civic capacities that students need to develop intellectual independence and navigate a complex world. Great books seminars are promising tools for fostering the development of students as whole persons —individuals who are not only prepared for professional success, but who have grown in their intellectual abilities, sense of purpose, and willingness to engage in reasoned debate, listen to others, develop empathy, and take on different perspectives. As such, great books seminars help equip students to contribute thoughtfully to democratic life. Great books seminars invite students into a shared conversation across time and place. In doing so, a liberal education based on great books seminars affirms the university's responsibility not only to train minds, but also to shape citizens and human beings capable of living meaningfully with and among others.

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