

THE TORCH BY NOVA CLASSICAL ACADEMY

# THE TORCH

A DEEP DIVE INTO CLASSICAL EDUCATION

## The Torch: What is The Great Conversation? May 2022

**The Great Conversation** is a term used by Robert Hutchins and Mortimer Adler (editors of *The Great Books of the Western World*) regarding the stories that resonate in our lives, and is a cornerstone for classical education. Mortimer Adler said, "What binds the authors together in an intellectual community is the **great conversation in which they are engaged**. In the works that come later in the sequence of years, we find authors **listening to what their predecessors have had to say** about this idea or that, this topic or that. They not only harken to the thought of their predecessors, they also respond to it by **commenting on it in a variety of ways**".

As an example, let's take Homer's *Odyssey* and its place in the Great Conversation. The *Odyssey* is an ancient Greek epic poem that is considered, along with the *Iliad*, as the first works of literature in the Western world. The poem's main character, Odysseus, has been away at the Trojan War for ten years, and then spends the next ten years trying to reach his home and wife Penelope in Ithaca, all while being consistently rebuffed by the anger of the gods. There is more to this story in the original text, of course, but the *Odyssey's* plot and themes of **separation, hospitality, and return** have been revisited numerous times in literature and film since the poem's origin in 800/700 BCE (to name a few): Dante's *Inferno*, James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Madeline Miller's *Circe*, the film/novel *Cold Mountain*, the Coen Brothers' film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, and last but not least, *The Simpsons*.

As we can see, the Great Conversation is **magnificently open-ended**, can **move in any direction** the participants take it, and **builds upon a long tradition** of systematic and impassioned reasoning to understand underlying principles. The Great Conversation allows people to reflect on their place in the world and their relationship with the universe and inevitably think about and discuss the same basic questions that humans have pondered since antiquity:

- What is real?
- Who am I?
- Why am I here?
- What is life?
- What happens after I die?
- Is there a God or gods or nothing at all?

In the 1951 essay "The Great Conversation", Robert Hutchins wrote that we engage in these questions because "We want them to be heard again—not because we want to go back to antiquity, or the Middle Ages, or the Renaissance, or the Eighteenth Century. **We are quite aware that we do not live in any time but the present, and, distressing as the present is, we would not care to live in any other time if we could.** We want the voices of the Great Conversation to be heard again because we think they may help us to learn to **live better now.**" Isn't that a wonderful way to look at literature?

We at Nova Classical start teaching the framework for the *Odyssey* as early as first grade, and students formally read the poem in ninth grade. In the years leading up to ninth grade, students learn the Greek deities, hear and read stories of monsters like Polyphemus the Cyclops, Scylla and Charybdis. Because of intentional scaffolding, our students are able to engage in this challenging literature due to a community which "depends on a **common language, a common stock of ideas, and common human standards.** These the Great Conversation affords . . . [Man] should recognize the ties that bind him to his fellow members of the species and tradition. He should be able to communicate, in a real sense, with other men."

May we continue to strengthen our ties to each other through the Great Conversation,



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