

A Spartan Dilemma

Topic

Ancient Greece (Sparta)

Objective

Students will identify that Spartan civilization was founded upon a militaristic point of view that allowed no tolerance for contrary views or physical limitations.

Materials

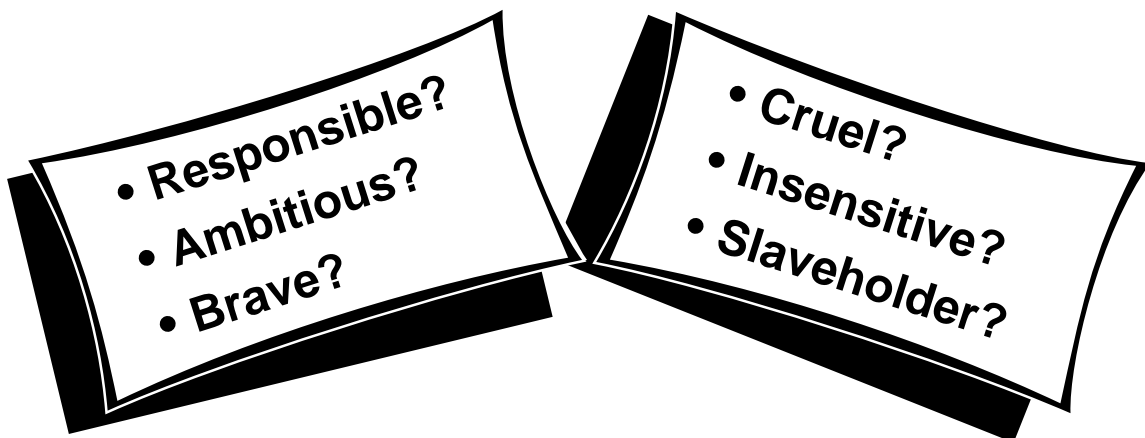
- the accompanying dilemma story, “Commander Lear” (page 60)

Preparation

Make a copy of the dilemma for each student.

Procedure

1. Have students grouped in teams of four. Have one student chosen as a team recorder.
2. Pass out the copies of the dilemma. Orally read “Commander Lear” to the class.
3. Have students within each group take turns listing positive qualities of the main character, Commander Lear. The recorder should list these qualities. In a similar manner, have team members take turns listing negative characteristics of Commander Lear.
4. For the remaining questions, have students pair off within each team and discuss them. After pairs have discussed the questions, they should share their responses with the other pair within the team.
5. The whole class should reconvene, and the teacher should review the items of the dilemma by allowing each team to share either their positive/negative qualities lists or their views on one of the other questions.
6. Explain to the class that they will begin learning about a “civilized” Ancient Greek city-state that promoted most of the actions presented in “Commander Lear.”



A Spartan Dilemma *(cont.)*

Background

Sparta, Athen's perennial nemesis among the Greek city-states, was founded on the idea of military might producing economic right. Like most city-states on the Greek peninsula, Sparta was unable to support itself solely from the products of the rocky, infertile soil. However, while most Greeks turned to the sea for trade and commerce, Sparta made the conscious decision to aggressively impose its will on neighboring city-states, subjugating their people into forced labor for the benefit of Sparta.

As a result, Spartan society developed into three classes. Spartans were the military faction of society constituting a mere five percent of the people. The vast majority of the people were traders, artisans, and slaves. The former enjoyed some freedoms while the latter had virtually none.

A Spartan male left home at age seven to enter into severe military training lasting until he became 20, whereupon he was considered in active service until the age of 60. While marriage was permitted, no Spartan could live with his wife until the age of 30.

Women were trained to be good wives of soldiers, and the "soft" education of the arts, literature, and philosophy were frowned upon as being unworthy for a warrior. Newborns were examined shortly after birth. Any birth defect or hint of infirmity immediately sentenced the infant to death by exposure, and it was left on a mountainside to die. Imperfect specimens would not be accepted in Spartan society.

"A Spartan Dilemma" is designed to be an anticipatory set prior to the class study of this Greek civilization. If time permits after the study has been completed, the instructor may wish to allow students to make a comparison between the Spartan attitude towards society and Hitler's view of an Aryan "master race" in Nazi Germany. For a more contemporary comparison, these Spartan ideas may be compared to the various supremacist groups that often make the news with their elitist racial diatribes.

Answers to discussion questions (page 60):

1. Answers will vary. Possible answers: responsible, ambitious, successful, brave, respected, caring (towards his son, and perhaps his wife, although the details are thin in that regard).
2. Answers will vary. Possible answers: narrow-minded, cruel, insensitive.
3. This land is very militaristic. The army (at least Commander Lear's portion) moves by foot. It does not value conventional education. Physical strength and stamina are prized almost to a fault. There would appear little room for opposing ideas.
4. Answers will vary.

A Spartan Dilemma *(cont.)*

Commander Lear

The day had dawned with wonderful anticipation for Commander Lear, a leader of one thousand of his land's best soldiers. His young son of seven was to enter the Youth Military Academy, and his wife was expecting another child very soon, perhaps this very day.

Lear beamed with pride as his son was met by Academy officials at the gate. Even though his son would never leave the Academy until the age of 20, the commander knew that to be a tough, disciplined soldier (perhaps an officer someday), academy life was required. It was what he had known. It had developed his skills as a leader of men in a land of bravery. It was what everyone who was truly worthy aspired to accomplish. Real men weren't interested in the art or words of other men; real men ruled other men.

However, his send-off for his son was interrupted by a messenger's panting announcement that his wife's time had come. Upon Commander Lear's return home, the midwife passed him with eyes gazing downward. A wailing in the next room alerted him to sharp emotional, not physical, pain. His wife was sobbing uncontrollably. He entered to find an apparently healthy baby boy comfortably cradled next to his mother.

But all was not as it seemed. His wife removed the blanket to reveal the infant's clubfoot. The right foot was positioned slightly askew, pointing outwardly somewhat perpendicular to his leg. This boy would never be able to march among the legions of soldiers. Commander Lear now fully realized the source of his wife's grief.

Upon notification of the birth of his son, the council elders would visit and inspect the child for physical fitness. This one would never pass inspection, and it would be killed. Inferior physical specimens could not contribute to the society, so they had to be done away with.

Commander Lear quietly walked out of the room. His joyous day soured. Like any good soldier, he followed orders well.



Respond to the following questions:

1. Name any positive characteristics you can detect in Commander Lear.
2. Name any negative characteristics of Commander Lear.
3. From the story, can you infer, or figure out, any information about the land in which Commander Lear lives?
4. What is your overall impression or feeling about the land in which he lives? Could such a place really exist? Why or why not?