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Chris Harvey
College of DuPage

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Gallant Conquerors

by Chris Harvey

(Humanities 101)

The Assignment: A brief examination of the cultural themes intrinsic to the epics *Beowulf* and the *Epic of Gilgamesh*.

Writing is second only to the spoken word for conveying ideas. Yet the spoken word has but a finite amount of time to reach others, while the written word can last for multiple generations and can even give infinite rise to countless more spoken words. It is writing that serves to remind us all of values and ideals that are common through all times.

Among the many tales and themes recorded in writing over the long course of humanity, few are as moving and consistently important as those of courage, loyalty and valor. These themes combined can be seen commonly as one attribute, heroism and the associated concept of 'Hero'. It is to this concept that many have turned to for guidance and inspiration, stretching from ancient times to modern days.

Beowulf and the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, two of the greatest epic poems ever written, are prime examples of such themes and their importance to human civilization. In both epics the concept of 'Hero' and the attributes analogous to it are brought up time and again. Although described in varying manners and to different degrees, the two heroes, Beowulf and Gilgamesh become perfect testaments to the concept of 'Hero'. Through brief analysis of the works themselves and the tales within them, it can be proven that the same heroic themes resound in both works and that those same themes were relevant to, and made no distinction between, the two cultures from which they hailed.

Many hold the common belief that *Beowulf* was first composed sometime between the middle of the seventh and the end of the tenth century (Heaney, ix) of the first millennium, in what is commonly known as Anglo-Saxon or 'Old English'. *Beowulf* is a heroic epic poem over three thousand lines long that entails the deeds of the Scandinavian prince for whom the tale is named. Although written in England, the tale is set in Denmark and touts an aura of historical credence while at the same time crossing into in the realm of fantasy.

The epic is known solely through a single manuscript that now rests in the archives of the British Library. Although almost destroyed in a fire during the eighteenth century the epic went on to be transcribed, interpreted and translated several times in later years. Over the past several decades the work has found its place in many a syllabi of academic institutions the world over.

The epic begins within the land of the Geats, currently situated in what is now southern Sweden. Beowulf is the most profound presence among the local warriors and as such is requested by his king to cross the ocean to the land of the Danes in order to clear their country of a man-eating monster called Grendel. After mortally wounding Grendel in unarmed combat by tearing the monster's arm off, Beowulf follows it back to its swampy abode, which leads the hero into a conflict with Grendel's mother, whom he also manages to slay in combat. Having defeated both monsters, Beowulf returns from the expedition triumphant and eventually proceeds to rule his homeland for fifty years as king. Unfortunately for Beowulf, a dragon begins to terrorize his kingdom. Being not only a great king, but also the hero who conquered the monster Grendel, Beowulf is obliged to confront the menace. During the encounter he manages to slay the dragon, yet meets his own death while doing so and thus enters the legends of his people as a warrior-king of great renown.

Throughout the epic, the character of Beowulf is highlighted again and again, often times shown in sharp positive contrast to other characters. This is made most evident in the comparison between Beowulf and the monster Grendel.

“So times were pleasant for the people there until finally one, a fiend of hell, began to work his evil in the world. Grendel was the name of this grim demon haunting the marches, marauding round the health and the desolate fens; he had dwelt for a time in misery among the banished monsters, Cain’s clan, whom the creator had outlawed and condemned as outcasts.” (Heaney, 9)

*“When he heard about Grendel, Hygelac’s thane [Beowulf] was on home ground, over in Geatland. There was no one else like him alive. In his day, he was the mightiest man on earth, high-born and powerful... (Heaney, 15)
...Now Holy God has, in His goodness, guided him here to the West-Danes, to defend us from Grendel.”* (Heaney, 27)

Although the above passages comparing the two characters can often be seen as metaphors, if not outright implications, of early Christian ideology (light vs. dark and/or heaven vs. hell) they serve to purposefully identify with the characters certain attributes. Mainly, as with the case of Beowulf, such descriptions support ideal or heroic traits such as power, nobility, loyalty and divine association among others.

Beowulf not only uses such heroic ideals to describe its characters, but as themes in and of themselves. Focus is given, in particular to the ideas of loyalty, courage and goodness, three attributes that all heroes possess. Perhaps the most often presented theme in Beowulf is that of loyalty and duty to one’s superiors, be they God or man. Frequently cited as an example of loyalty, is the passage of Beowulf in which the young warrior Wiglaf alone, after seeing the rest of his comrades flee, turns to help his king (Beowulf) during his final desperate battle.

“Next thing, they say, the noble son of Weohstan saw the king in danger at his side and displayed his inborn bravery and strength. He left the head alone, but his fighting hand was burned when he came to his kinsman’s aid.” (Heaney, 183)

This passage, among others similar, relates to the reader the dire extent that one’s loyalty may be pushed to. It was, in fact, due to Wiglaf’s loyalty that Beowulf was able to defeat his final adversary, and so it can be seen that loyalty allows one to accomplish great feats.

Along with loyalty, courage and goodness are also two themes addressed in Beowulf. Beowulf is almost constantly involved in feats of great courage throughout the tale. Beowulf displays his courage with unrelenting tenacity: from his steadfast commitment to dispatch the terrifying Gendel, to his descent into the monster’s swamp to combat its mother, even until his final battle with the great wyrm. This trait, combined with goodness that radiates from Beowulf’s very character and his just deeds, serves to cement his place as a hero.

The epic poem Beowulf not only possesses a great hero, but also relies on the attributes of its hero to advance the tale itself. These same attributes serve as themes that are presented time and again in the poem itself as a testament to their importance. Even today these themes, as they were for centuries, are used as inspiration to many as an example to emulate so that they to may become what Beowulf was, and what every generation desires, the pinnacle of all that is good: a hero.

Although not as well known to modern audiences as its later cousin *Beowulf*, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* still resounds with heroic countenance and ideals. The account of Gilgamesh’s grand adventures is the oldest recorded work of such magnitude. The epic was recorded in Sumerian some time around 2000 BCE (Kovacs, xxiii) on twelve large clay tablets in cuneiform script. The first eleven tablets are commonly recognized as the actual tale, while the twelfth tablet is usually seen as a ‘sequel’ or follow-up story to the initial tale. The poem recounts the grand adventures of Gilgamesh, King of Uruk (the capitol city of what was then Babylon, present-day Iraq), and his loyal companion and friend Enkidu.

Beginning around 2000 BCE, the myriad stories and myths that compose the Gilgamesh epic were initially recorded in Sumerian, a language that bears no relation to any other. The Sumerian accounts of Gilgamesh were eventually combined into a larger version of the tale, of which versions in the

Akkadian (a Semitic Babylonian language with close ties to Hebrew), Hittite and Hurrian languages survive. The Akkadian version is the fullest account of Gilgamesh's narrative and is what composes the twelve clay tablets mentioned above. These tablets were found in the ruins of the library of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh (Kovacs, xxi). The library was destroyed in 612 BCE by Persian forces, an act that caused all of the tablets to be damaged in some way. Yet perhaps the most intriguing piece of the work was not destroyed. Although it is exceedingly rare for ancient literature to indicate an author, the Akkadian tablets actually name one (Kovacs, xxi): Shin-eqiunninni. Not only is the *Epic of Gilgamesh* the oldest surviving literary work, it is also written by the oldest named author.

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* begins in Uruk, the capital city of Babylon. The young king Gilgamesh, not knowing the precepts to ruling a kingdom, is harsh towards his people. Due to this the god Anu creates man to act as Gilgamesh's *zikt* (this word can be translated into English as 'foil' or 'counterpart'), Enkidu. Although made to be adversaries, Gilgamesh and Enkidu quickly become friends and live at length in Uruk. Yet as time passes the two grow restless until Gilgamesh proposes a grand adventure. Their first goal is to clear the Great Cedar Forrest of all its trees, a task made all the harder due to the forest's guardian, the demon-giant Humbaba. After slaying Humbaba, Gilgamesh and Enkidu clear the forest and use the timber to construct a grand gate for the city of Uruk. This action gains Gilgamesh great renown, especially with the goddess Ishtar who offers to become Gilgamesh's lover. When Gilgamesh declines her offer, Ishtar becomes infuriated and begs her father, the god Anu, to release the Bull of Heaven to destroy Uruk in retribution. Anu agrees and the Bull of the Heaven descends to Uruk. Yet Gilgamesh and Enkidu kill the divine animal before the city can be destroyed. Against his better judgement, Enkidu taunts the goddess Ishtar with their victory over her, an action that causes Enkidu to become singled out as the target of the goddess's vengeance for both this transgression and that of slaying Humbaba. Enkidu, suffering through months of hellish nightmares, slowly dies. Enkidu's death greatly upsets Gilgamesh who realizes that he too is mortal and also close to death. In a desperate attempt to prolong his life, Gilgamesh sets out on a final journey. Gilgamesh wishes to travel to the Far-Away, a place where he may find the secret to immortality. After a long a perilous journey Gilgamesh finally reaches the Far-Away. There he meets the immortal Utnapishtim, who tells Gilgamesh that if he can stay awake for six days and seven nights he will teach him the secret to immortality. Gilgamesh lays down determined to stay awake but soon falls asleep. When he wakes Utnapishtim informs him that he failed his task and will not receive the secret to immortality, but takes pity on Gilgamesh and gives him a magical plant that will restore youth to the great king. Gilgamesh does not trust Utnapishtim so he decides to travel back to the city and test the plant on an old man first. However, on his return to Uruk a snake slithers inside Gilgamesh's pack and eats the plant. Gilgamesh is distraught by this turn of events and realizes that he no longer has a chance at life. The tale ends with Gilgamesh's return to Uruk at which point he commands his life be recorded on tablets of lapis lazuli.

This lengthy epic poem supports the same heroic values as *Beowulf*. Although written almost three thousand years earlier, the same ideals of courage, loyalty, goodness and a divine association are still prevalent in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. In *Gilgamesh* the reader can identify a more god-like character than *Beowulf*, but at the same time a being equally heroic.

The theme of loyalty is played upon heavily in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Specifically the loyalty between Gilgamesh and Enkidu, as well as Gilgamesh and the Gods, is examined quite often. As Wiglaf did in *Beowulf*, Enkidu plays the part of a secondary, somewhat lesser hero who follows the main hero and supports him fervently yet plays no less significant role. While Enkidu is debatably the lesser of the two heroes, Gilgamesh remains just as loyal to Enkidu, as Enkidu is to Gilgamesh. Many passages outline this respect and loyalty between the two heroes.

"As for human beings, their days are numbered, and whatever they keep trying to achieve is but wind!

Now you are afraid of death—what has become of your bold strength!

I will go in front of you, and your mouth can call out: 'Go on closer, do not be afraid!'"

(Kovacs, 43)

The breadth of Enkidu and Gilgamesh's loyalty to each other is proven multiple times throughout the epic. In fact it is their loyalty that often leads them to victory against high odds or unspeakable beasts.

Unlike its later counterpart, the Epic of Gilgamesh involves a greater degree of divine association with its heroes. Gilgamesh is a prime example of this given his godly heritage.

*"Whose name, from the day of his birth, was called 'Gilgamesh'?
Two-thirds of him is god, one-third of him is human.
The Great Goddess Aruru designed the model for his body, she prepared his form...
beautiful, handsomest of men, ... perfect"* (Kovacs, 4)

The same qualities of godly progeny can also be seen in Enkidu.

*"Let him be equal to his (Gilgamesh's) stormy heart, let them be a match for each other
so that Uruk may find peace!"
When Aruru heard this she created within herself the zikrtt of Anu.
Aruru washed her hands, she pinched off some clay, and threw it into the wilderness.
In the wildness she created valiant Enkidu,"* (Kovacs, 6)

Such divine qualities are usually associated with heroes of all types, yet it seems a hallmark of solely ancient literature that heroic figures are either descendants or direct products of the gods themselves. Yet the device of a divine connection, be it paternal or not, serves only to enforce the goodness and validity of a hero.

Finally, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* exudes descriptions of the courageous feats that both Enkidu and Gilgamesh perform. From the lengthy wrestling match in which Gilgamesh and Enkidu first meet to the slaying of the Bull of Heaven, the bravery and valor of the two heroes is constantly tested, and it is found most assuredly in sufficient quantities.

"At his second snort a huge pit opened up, and 200 Young Men of Uruk fell in. At his third snort a huge pit opened up, and Enkidu fell in up to his waist. Then Enkidu jumped out and seized the Bull of Heaven by its horns. The Bull spewed his spittle in front of him; with his thick tail he flung his dung behind him. Enkidu addressed Gilgamesh, saying: 'My friend, we can be bold' ... I shall grasp the bull...I will fill my hands." (Kovacs, 54)

This and similar passages recounts the tenacity and courage with which the heroes Gilgamesh and Enkidu dispatch their adversaries. Both heroes show that they are willing to confront all types of evil and continue on towards victory, while relying on their courage and skill in combat to do so.

Although in many ways quite different from *Beowulf*, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* still possesses the same heroic themes of loyalty, courage, and goodness (albeit more from divine influence where Gilgamesh is concerned). These traits were just as important to the people of the ancient world as they were over a thousand years later, and as they still are today.

Even though centuries apart, the two works *Beowulf* and the *Epic of Gilgamesh* still resound with the same themes. Humanity, it seems, has not changed its idea of what a hero should be or the proper themes of the heroic narrative since their inception. Yet the two works often seem simultaneously similar and dissimilar. Why is that so? Given that the two epics were written millennia apart and in different cultures, secular ideas were to differ. However, that still does not change the fact that the concept of 'Hero' was the same to both cultures; merely the way of expressing it differed.

A main point of friction in relating *Beowulf* to the *Epic of Gilgamesh* comes from the somewhat divine qualities of both epics' main heroes. Many of the more divine aspects of the polytheistic hero Gilgamesh are radically different from those of the monotheistic character of *Beowulf*. This can be seen, however, not as a difference in the heroes themselves but either epic's idea of human choice versus divine

predestination. The two heroes, while themselves embodying different divine characteristics, serve more as religious mediums of the cultures they hail from. Gilgamesh's tale can be seen as one of man's faulty struggle against the predestination of the gods, while *Beowulf* involves itself more with the Christian idea of self choice provided through God's aide. Perhaps the comparison between the two heroes can be seen somewhat as an indirect evolution of religion itself.

Loyalty, conceivably the heroic theme given the most clout in both epics, is played out in similar ways but with one difference. Both tales stress and highlight the importance of loyalty to one's fellow man yet it is in the capacity of which loyalty is given to 'superiors' that differs. In *Beowulf* loyalty to one's superiors is stressed just as importantly as it is to one's fellow man. Christian values can certainly be identified as an influencing factor for this. Given that God is the being that is superior to all others and there is a hierarchy (at least during the latter half of the first millennium in which *Beowulf* was written) to lesser and lesser superior figures in which a given man can find his place. The reverence given to kingly figures such as Hrothgar, God and, later, Beowulf himself serve only to support the trait of loyalty to 'superiors' in *Beowulf*. The *Epic of Gilgamesh*, however, does not have the same view of loyalty to one's superiors as *Beowulf* possesses. More emphasis is placed on loyalty to fellow man while the loyalty to higher figures goes unquestioned or unexamined. The basis for this attitude can be seen in the tenets of most polytheistic religions that the gods are vain and punish those who question their loyalty to said gods. It can be said that the loyalty to one's 'superiors' is implied in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* while it is openly examined and explained in *Beowulf*.

Both Gilgamesh and Beowulf stand firm on one heroic theme, that of courage. The two epic poems place the same emphasis on courage. Both view it in some manner as the ability and willingness to face down all dangers and threats presented, and emerging from them victorious. Only one facet of courage between the two stories could possibly be debated. As Professor J.R.R. Tolkien stated in his essay, *Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*, "But we may remember that the poet of *Beowulf* saw clearly: the wages of heroism is death." In *Beowulf* such a statement holds true, where the ultimate price paid for the courage and victories of the hero, is death. Yet with the *Epic of Gilgamesh* the hero does not pay this weighty price, at least it is not recorded or told in any tale. We are left with the impression that Gilgamesh will die simply of old age, and it can therefore be argued that one death is/was perhaps more courageous than the other. Is it more noble to die in battle fighting overwhelming odds or to die of old age after accomplishing a long life filled with many deeds of valor attributed to one's name? Although the battles and adversaries differ, the trait and theme of courage remains the same. In courage, it seems, all cultures can agree.

Although sharing many similarities and differences, the two epic poems *Beowulf* and the *Epic of Gilgamesh* both hold their ground on the heroic values and themes that resonate throughout them. Even though the cultures from which the two tales hail differed, the concept of 'Hero' did not. The ways of expressing what a hero was changed, but the essence of the hero remained the same.

Through this brief examination of two of the greatest works of literature, the central traits and themes of the heroic concept have been explored. While differing from one culture to another in how they are presented within a given work, the meaning and value of those traits and themes remain the same. It is perhaps due to the lasting and profound effect that the concept of 'Hero' has on humanity.

The three main heroic themes of Courage, Loyalty and Goodness applied in both epics. It is these themes that last from culture to culture. They are universal indicators of what is believed to be necessary in a hero no matter the time or place. Although the expressions of these values may change, the concept of 'Hero', an ideal to look forward to and strive to obtain never does.

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