

# Literary traditions



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

A king is technically a male ruler of a land, but what really is a king? What truly makes a king? That question could be answered in many ways through the knowledge of kings in our real world or even those in the literature we read. Gilgamesh, Odysseus and Oedipus are all kings in classic literary texts. Each king has a completely different dynamic than the other; likeable qualities and unlikeable qualities. All three of these men have qualities of what the model of a king should be, however they also lack certain aspects of the equation.

A king should always have the well-being of his people and land come first, as well as have the utmost respect for his people. A king should never abuse his power, but use his power to better his kingdom. When we are first introduced to Gilgamesh, he is a far cry from the model of what a true king should be. Gilgamesh is the king of Uruk, he is also two parts god, one part man. It is obvious that he considers himself more godly than he actually is. He is almighty and is feared by his people. In the beginning of the story he is the paragon of a king that abuses his power with no respect or thought for his people.

Gilgamesh has absolutely no regard for the lives of his soldiers, as he utilizes their forces whenever he feels necessary, even if it is not necessary to fight at all. On top of abusing the servitude of his soldiers, he also abuses his workers. Although Uruk is comprised of beautiful temples and ziggurats, Gilgamesh's only effort towards eradicating these extravagant structures was to force this labor onto his people. Gilgamesh seems to be fitting the character of a dictator better than that of a king. One of Gilgamesh's most horrifying qualities involves his lust for having sexual relations with women.

Gilgamesh would rape the wives of his nobles, sleep with a man's bride before her husband, and even go to the extent of laying with their daughters as well. In no way does Gilgamesh model what a king should be. The gods heard the towns desperate pleas to be freed of this monster of a king, Gilgamesh and this is where Enkidu comes into play. Enkidu is a vital force in changing the direction of Gilgamesh's leadership qualities. The gods create Enkidu to counter Gilgamesh and stand up to him. Gilgamesh was very strong and ferocious.

Enkidu was made to be just as strong as Gilgamesh, so that he would actually have a chance at overcoming Gilgamesh's cruel ways. Enkidu and Gilgamesh brawl, but then become best friends. It seems as if Enkidu has knocked some sensibility and sudden kindness into Gilgamesh. The two adventurously and bravely set off into the wilderness to the cedar forest. They plan on bringing the cedar back to the town, as its very fine wood for structures. A king should be adventurous and brave, even if he is scared, he should not show his people that he is, for he is their ruler.

Gilgamesh and Enkidu ventured towards the cedar forest in conquest for the wood even though they were told that it was guarded by the vicious Humbaba. Whether or not their intentions were to bring the cedar back and build something of it without the forced labor of Uruk's people is unknown, however it would be honorable if Gilgamesh had good intentions of building a beautiful structure for his town. What really gains the respect of a mass of people is knowing that their ruler is willing to make sacrifices for the betterment of his domain.

The wrongs Gilgamesh committed against his people will never be made right, however his conquest for cedar for the town is a first step. Gilgamesh also proves that his humanity has grown when he attempts to bring back a plant that keeps men young to the people of his town, even after he has failed to save himself from eventual death. Gilgamesh shows that he has some sense of compassion and care for the people of his town through this act of kindness. Although the plant is taken by a snake, as many say " it is the thought that counts. Gilgamesh is far from what a king should be; he is more of an example of the qualities a king should not possess, however he demonstrates a few admirable, king-like qualities. Odysseus is the husband of Queen Penelope of Ithika. Odysseus has many more admirable qualities that a king should have, as opposed to Gilgamesh. Odysseus is a great warrior that fights alongside his men and has gained the trust and respect of his men. He may be a ruler but he sees himself as equals to them on the battlefield; a very honorable quality to have, which demonstrates a genuine care for the country and its people.

Odysseus is also very convincing and sneaky. In many cases these would be bad characteristics of a king, however Odysseus uses these talents to his advantage in a way that does not belittle his people. A king should have a natural way with words" since they do hold the voice for the whole country. This quality can be useful in negotiation if used honorably. Odysseus puts his quick words and thinking into effect when him and his men are trapped in the cave with the Cyclops. He blinds the cyclops and his men and him ride out of the cave clinging onto the bellies of the sheep.

Although his actions saved him and his men, a quality of Odysseus that is not so admirable revealed itself as they were sailing away. As the Cyclops was blindly throwing boulders at Odysseus and his crew escaping, Odysseus yelled back to the Cyclops his identity. Cyclops, if any mortal man ever asks you who it was that inflicted upon your eye this shameful blinding, tell him that you were blinded by Odysseus, sacker of cities. Laertes is his father, and he makes his home on Ithaka" Odysseus has too much pride and ego to just quietly sail away. He wants his bold actions to be known that they were indeed his actions.

Having too much pride counteracts the act of being brave. Is Odysseus brave because he is genuinely a heroic fighter or is he brave because he desires the attention that comes with being brave? He also proves disloyal to his wife after years of trying to get home. Penelope, his wife, stayed loyal and faithful to her husband throughout the many years that he was gone, as well as hopeful of his return. Odysseus went astray sleeping with Calypso for seven years. If Odysseus was so set on getting home, his genuine intentions are questionable if he spent that long of a period with Calypso, practically being pampered.

Odysseus' genuineness is questionable as well as his ego, however he has many more admirable qualities as a leader than Gilgamesh possessed. Oedipus is the king of Thebes. Of the two previously discussed kings, Oedipus best fits the more suitable qualities of what a king should be, although he is cursed. Oedipus has been ruler for quite some time now. If a king can rule a parcel of land for a great period of time and keep the peace

in his domain, he must be doing his job correctly. He is a respectable leader who has brought good fortune for his people under his leadership.

Oedipus seems to have the genuineness that Odysseus lacked. Oedipus seems to genuinely care about his land and its people, as he listens and tends to their problems. He managed to solve the riddle of the sphinx and save his people from famine and sickness. He brought it upon himself to do this to lift the curse from his land. What really proves Oedipus' genuine nature is when he accepts the fate that he gave whomever was the killer of Laius. Despite Oedipus' fortune in being a successful leader, misfortune sought refuge in his ultimate fate.

When Oedipus was born he was sent out to the hills to die because an oracle stated that it was in the infant's fate to grow up and kill his father and murder his mother. However, baby Oedipus was pitied and taken far away to live so that he would never know this fate. When the murder of Laius came into question, Oedipus stated that whomever killed him should be punished and exiled. A negative quality emerges when this comes into question.

Oedipus points his finger at Creon as the murderer and is in complete denial of the accusations that he himself is the murderer.

Denial is never a good quality to have. As a king, a leader must accept what is and do what is necessary to move on or solve the problem at hand. Well, as the oracle predicted, Oedipus killed his father, who turned out to be Laius. When he found his fate to be true, he gouged his eyes out because he could not bear to see the reality that had become his life and the people who were affected by it. Oedipus wanted to be taken away, so he exiled himself as he said

the killer should be. Oedipus shows much shame and humility in these acts, even though he had been in severe denial before the truth surfaced.

A king such as Gilgamesh, in this situation might have just blamed another man for the crimes and continued with his life. Although it is a shame what happened to Oedipus, the fact that he accepted the fate that was his speaks for the type of person he is. A king is a real person, although with higher power, under it all he is a human like the rest of mankind. Although he was a great leader he shows rue emotions and remorse, that any decent human being has; Oedipus shows that he is not above the law by accepting his own fate that he pinned on himself.

Not abusing his high status is a true quality of an admirable king. Gilgamesh, Odysseus and Oedipus when compared are vastly different kings from one another. They all have qualities that make them a good king and qualities that make them a bad king; some more than others. When it comes down to what a good king is, decency is what really is most important when having such great power. When this decency is lost and power is abused, a bad king is in throne.