

Gilgamesh vs.
modern day hero.
similar characters
comparison



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The concept of heroism is considered to be one of the most disputable questions for a long period of time. Different people offer their own interpretations of this word and use various examples to prove the positions chosen. In fact, there are many interesting ways to understand and use the term 'hero', and one of them is to address literature and compare the opinions of professional writers.

It is interesting to take literary examples from different periods: the stories about the heroes with supernatural abilities that are offered in the comic books during the Golden Age such as Batman or Superman and the stories with more than 2,000-year-old history like The Epic of Gilgamesh.

Of course, young people are more familiar with the events and traits discussed in the comic books. They know a lot or at least hear something about such fictional characters like Batman and Superman (Haslem, Ndalianis, & Mackie, 2007). Many comics' fans understand that the idea of a true hero is not new and has a long history; still, not all of them know much about the roots of heroic characters, for example, about Gilgamesh and Enkidu from The Epic of Gilgamesh.

It is possible to draw some parallels between the narratives introduced in Golden Age comic books and The Epic of Gilgamesh in order to learn more about our own understanding of heroism, our cultures, and a variety that may spawn these characters.

The characters from The Epic of Gilgamesh help to realize a true essence of heroism as a concept and accept heroes as ordinary people, who are able to develop good relations, set goals, and be obedient to the norms set by

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society; in comparison to such image of a hero, the ideas discussed in modern culture and the characters like Batman seem to be more aggressive and even provocative as these heroes do not find it necessary to follow a certain order but make use of their skills and possibilities to improve the world they have to live in.

When the reader first meets Gilgamesh, he is introduced as a highly flawed character. As a part god, he rules over his kingdom as a tyrant, taking women as he pleases and living in a perpetual state of war. Enkidu, his equal, is sent to calm him, but he and Enkidu continue follow Gilgamesh's campaign of various conquests.

When Enkidu dies, Gilgamesh decides to search for the secret of eternal life, only to be told that “ the life that thou seekest, thou wilt not find/ When the gods created mankind/ Death they imposed on mankind/ Life they kept in their power” (Jastrow & Clay, 2003, p. 12).

As a part god, Gilgamesh had always been striving for a challenge, something that he could be able to test his own strength. When he faced with the fragility of life, he wanted to find a way to escape his own death.

Gilgamesh is a character who was lost when attempting to surpass the limitations of his partial humanity. It was the only time he abandoned the quests that he was able to return to his throne and his responsibility and function as a proper king. Gilgamesh was a hero because of his character growth through his story arc.

This was to demonstrate to the audience the proper way to live one's life because "such teachings...indicate the didactic character given to ancient tales that were of popular origin, but which were modified and elaborated under the influence of the schools which arose in connection with the Babylonian temples" (Jastrow & Clay, 2003, p. 12).

This story proves that people have the ability to grow and they are not stuck forever in repeating the same mistakes. It demonstrates that people can be better people, and that even kings have lessons to learn. While Gilgamesh is a part god, the reader can see him as a person with a number of human qualities that ordinary people may also possess in everyday life.

The collection of the various Gilgamesh stories into a single defining text needs to be considered. The stories existed before they were collected, and their popularity was used to the advantage of the people recording the stories to give them additional meaning (Tigay, 2002).

Though the stories about Gilgamesh's adventures existed on their own, they were also altered by the author to teach the audience values. There were many different versions of Gilgamesh, and he was then given one single definitive version as he was recorded.

What the reader may rely upon nowadays is several versions that are considered to be the product of multiple authors' works, which are refined into meaningful versions with an intrinsic message to be delivered to the audience. So, the character of Gilgamesh becomes a kind of a tool to attract the reader and prove its urgency in modern society.

The reader has to understand how it was to be a hero, what qualities should be possessed, and how it was necessary to behave under certain conditions. It was not an easy task to present a hero and prove that he was worth of attention, still, The Epic of Gilgamesh is a wonderful example that may be both educative and inspirational for the reader.

Modern characters may have some similar traits inherent to Gilgamesh; still, there are also a number of differences to be observed. One of literary examples is Batman.

This character was created by Bob Kane. Being a child of an extremely wealthy family, Bruce Wayne, a future Batman, introduces his own basic story arc that is set in motion by a tragedy that affects his life; it is the murder of his parents. Exposed to the horrors of crime and violence, Batman understands what it is like to have some other will imposed upon him (Zehr, 2008). Though he did not want to lose his parents, he faced the situation when his parents were taken away from him anyway.

Batman is inspired to be a hero in order to stop other people from experiencing what he experienced, whereas Gilgamesh was imposing his violent will on his subjects at the beginning of the story. As a result of such differences, the fans of the Batman character has the required portion of control over live in such a way that the original audience of Gilgamesh never did.

Whereas the shaping of Gilgamesh allowed the authors to give it an additional meaning, the ability to control over his own life turns Batman into a commodity, something meant for consumption. In Frank Miller's Dark
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Knight Returns, there was a limit to which Miller felt he could re-imagine Batman and a limit to which the reader would accept from him as a character.

Any new version is automatically filtered through what we know about Batman, and the “ re-imagining” must continue to exist within the same basic space that the character has been in for the cultural memory of its reader. Batman fans know already what to expect from the story. They do not look to Batman to tell them how to act; Batman acts the way he does because that is how the reader wants him to act.

Similar to the way how Greek gods display human emotions, The Epic of Gilgamesh gods can be seen in a similar way. For instance, when Ishtar’s advances on Gilgamesh are turned down, she responds by sending the Bull of Heaven to punish him. This is an extremely temperamental thing to do.

Ancient peoples needed reasons for why droughts and other catastrophes existed, but they also were demonstrating how they could not be blamed for acting out in petty manners if the gods themselves acted in such a way.

Gilgamesh actions are also another way in which the ancient people attempted to explain their behavior.

Here was Gilgamesh, a part god, and he acted terribly towards his subjects. Of course, the story arc shows how he can be redeemed in the eyes of his people and ultimately is meant to be a way to instruct the audience. There is still that aspect to it, though, that shows that people can’t be expected to act morally at all times when not even the gods themselves keep these rules.

In Batman, however, the character wishes to seek justice, to correct everything that is wrong or inflicted by evil people. One of the main character's traits of Batman is refusal of killing people, even if he has to put himself in danger, he does want to ensure that some hoodlum that he tries to stop does not end up getting killed, whether it would have been his fault or not.

This aspect of Batman's character is taken to the extreme in Frank Miller's *Dark Knight Returns* (Booker, 2010). After Batman's main nemesis, the Joker, attacks an amusement park and kills dozens of innocent people, Batman still is incapable of killing him, even though leaving the Joker alive means that he would inevitably kill more innocent people.

The Joker ends up killing himself as a means to frame Batman, and in this we can find more sympathy for Batman as a character; he sticks by his principles no matter what, and for that he suffers from accusations of murder, which, because we know that he refused to actually do, he ended up getting himself into a difficult situation because of it. To strive to live out your morality at all times, that is what people may admire when they look at Batman, and it's something that they can hope to achieve ourselves.

Regarding the destinies of these two different characters, it is hard to believe that some similarities may be observed. Still, there are several things that unite Batman and Gilgamesh and prove that they both have the right to be called heroes.

Batman is the hero, who strives to be more important for the society than he is at the moment. He has to surpass his human limitations in order to
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become an appropriate part of the society on the one hand, and to be a superhero outside the society on the other hand.

In this way, a parallel can be drawn to Gilgamesh, who, being part god, contains a number of human qualities. Gilgamesh understands that he cannot bring his friend, Enkidu, back to life; still, he strives to find a way to be immortal. He finds immortality in a plant that will restore his youth, but he loses it to a snake.

Then he looks upon his own kingdom and realizes that this is his ticket to immortality, the great works that he's leaving behind and the stories that will be told about him. Both heroes want to be something more than simply what they are. Their struggles to fight the reality and the desire to change their own lives make them similar, make them heroes and humans at the same time.

In addition to a number of enemies in their lives, they define themselves as their enemies as well. They have to realize that they are not perfect and they have many things to strive for. This is why shows that true heroes should not have some supernatural powers or knowledge. What they should have is a desire to become better, to be developed, and to be accepted by society in the required way.

In general, the stories about Gilgamesh and Batman help to understand that true heroes are not easy to discover at once. Society is in need of heroes, still, it is not strong enough to admit this fact, this is why heroes have to search for different ways to offer their services and prove their importance.

Gilgamesh and Batman came from different epochs and introduce different images, still, they have one thing in common, and it is the desire to make this world better and provide society with hope that everything can be changed in case a certain portion of desire and possibilities is present.

Booker, M. K. (2010). Encyclopedia of comic books and graphic novels, Volume 1. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, LLC.

Haslem, W., Ndalians, A., & Mackie, C. J. (2007). Super/heroes: From Hercules to Superman. Washington, DC: New Academia Publishing.

Jastrow, M., & Clay, A. T. (2003). The Epic of Gilgamesh: An old Babylonian version. San Diego, CA: The Book Tree.

Tigay, J. H. (2002). The evolution of the Gilgamesh epic. Wauconda, IL: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers.

Zehr, E. P. (2008). Becoming Batman: The possibility of a superhero. Baltimore, Maryland: The John Hopkins University Press.

There are several books that are similar to the Epic of Gilgamesh. These books are Beowulf, Enuma Elish, The Iliad and the Odyssey, and The Pyramid Texts. Nevertheless, there are many more books that can be considered similar to the Epic of Gilgamesh.

The main characters of the book are as follows:

Other characters are Utnapishtim and his wife, Urshanabi, and the hunter.

Darth Vader from Star Wars is an epic hero because of his elevated status as a human being. Another epic hero example is Frodo Baggins from the Lord of the Rings. Harry Potter is an epic hero as well.

Both of them are heroic figures standing between human and divine. They do not have immortality of gods but they are more powerful than people. However, they have different strengths and weaknesses.