

# Conflict between gods and humans in gilgamesh and "the odyssey" essay sample

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Elaborate sacrifices, wonderful feasts, jubilant celebrations, all of which are acts that demonstrate the reverence of humans for the supernatural gods; a common motif in both the ancient Mesopotamia depicted in Gilgamesh, and the ancient Greece of The Odyssey. What seems to be a perfectly harmonious relationship between men seeking protection and Providence from their guardian gods is actually quite complicated and can potentially turn tumultuous. In the aforementioned two epics, the earthly interests of men often clash with the wishes of the gods, and conversely, the gods often act blatantly without regard for humans, resulting in the classic conflict that pits men against gods. The ultimate foundation of this conflict in both The Odyssey and Gilgamesh is ironically a shared characteristic between men and the anthropomorphic gods: human ego and the consequent tendency to place one's own interests above those of others.

In the epic Gilgamesh, the conflict between the protagonist Gilgamesh and the divine gods is the direct result of differences in divergent interests. Gilgamesh is two-thirds god and one-third man (Lawall 13) and consequently he can overpower any mortal as the ruler of Uruk. The citizens of Uruk state that Gilgamesh's arrogance has no bounds by day or night (Lawall 13), an apt description considering the fact that no earthly challenge can stop Gilgamesh. He is free to do whatever he wants on earth as a sort of demigod. Hence, it is only natural for the egotistical Gilgamesh to seek more power in order to strengthen his status and glory, but in the process he must

confront the supernatural gods and their interests on three different occasions.

The first occasion involves the creation of and subsequent destruction of Enkidu. For the gods, Gilgamesh's unchecked power on earth is a threat to harmony as well as their authority. Consequently, it is in the gods' best interest to suppress Gilgamesh's growing strength. Hence, the goddess Aruru creates Enkidu, a mirror image of Gilgamesh, hoping to use him as deterrence for Gilgamesh. However, Gilgamesh's ultimate goal is to consolidate more power, not to lose it due to divine obstacles. He convinces Enkidu to become his sidekick as they battle Humbaba. At the beginning of the journey, Enkidu is reluctant to fight, but Gilgamesh gives him numerous encouragements. He tells Enkidu not to speak like a coward (LaWall 20) and to let [his] courage be roused by the battle to come (LaWall 20).

Gilgamesh is essentially instilling his own arrogance and the vainglorious pursuit of power into Enkidu, and consequently at the end of their adventure, Enkidu possesses a similar temperament as Gilgamesh. It is he who suggests that Humbaba must be killed when the beast begs for mercy. Therefore, Gilgamesh is twice as powerful with the companionship of Enkidu, using the gods' divine obstacle for his own interest. Nevertheless, the gods are not deterred and realize that the only way to ultimately suppress Gilgamesh is to kill Enkidu. As a direct result, Gilgamesh, whose previous disregard for death is replaced with complete fear. He becomes a tormented soul, a shell of his former glory. All in all, Gilgamesh and the gods are essentially playing

a tug-of-war over Enkidu, they both want to use him as a way to satisfy their own goals.

The second occasion involves Gilgamesh's conflict with the equally egocentric Ishtar. At first, Ishtar offers to marry Gilgamesh, a demand that is rudely rejected as the arrogant Gilgamesh defames Ishtar for her treachery toward her previous lovers. For the first time, the egotistical nature of both man and god is exposed simultaneously. The goddess has repeatedly harmed her lovers without regard for their wellbeing, acts that she later openly admit to her father as abominable behaviour foul and hideous (Lawall 25). In fact, her behaviors are not much different than the acts of violence that Gilgamesh ruthlessly commits at the beginning of the epic; they both act out of self-interests without regards for others. Instead of showing penitence for her vile deeds, Ishtar seeks revenge. She releases the Bull of Heaven in an attempt to destroy Gilgamesh and thus heal her bruised ego.

However, in the process, hundred young men fell down to death (Lawall 25), all innocent victims that must perish in vain so Ishtar can achieve her frivolous interest of punishing Gilgamesh. Ironically, Gilgamesh, the intended target, survives the attack and defeats the Bull of Heaven with help from Enkidu. Hence, the event set an important precedence, Gilgamesh has defeated a heavenly creature, and thus it will be difficult for the gods to confront Gilgamesh with direct force. Overall, Gilgamesh's conflict with Ishtar demonstrates that the gods are equally capable of committing repugnant acts as men in order to satisfy their own ego.

The third occasion involves Gilgamesh's pursuit of immortality. After Enkidu's demise, Gilgamesh realizes his ultimate weakness, the vulnerability to death. He laments about how the end of life is sorrow (Lawall 28) and admits that he is ultimately afraid of death (Lawall 30). In the process of mourning, Gilgamesh develops his selfish need to acquire the secret of immortality from Utnapishtim. When Gilgamesh travels next to the sea on his journey to find Utnapishtim, he meets the goddess Siduri, who comments on the pointlessness of Gilgamesh's journey. She states, when the gods created man they allotted to him death, but life they retain for their own keeping (Lawall 32).

This statement is especially important since it reveals the selfish nature of gods, in order for them to establish an aura of superiority over men, even great ones such as Gilgamesh; they must keep the secrets of immortality to themselves. Consequently, Gilgamesh can never overcome the ultimate folly that is associated with his humanness. No matter how much glory and power he has while he is living, the gods will always supersede him in status and he must inevitably face death. Overall, the disagreeing interests between Gilgamesh and the gods fuel the conflict in the epic; Gilgamesh wants glory, power, and most importantly immortality to satisfy his immense ego, while the gods want obedience and respect.

In *The Odyssey*, there is a similar conflict between Odysseus and the gods as earthly interests clash with divine goals. Throughout the journey, numerous goddesses attempt to seduce Odysseus for companionship, yet he always keeps an earthly aim in mind; to get back to Ithaca. Kalypso even entices

Odysseus with the ability to be immortal, youthful, all the days come (Lawall VII 275), a divine gift that is obvious quite important, reserved specifically for the gods. Yet for Odysseus, such an offer has little effect since he is not fearful of death, instead he would rather risk his life for a chance to return home. Upon leaving Ogygia, Kelypso asks Odysseus, can mortals compare with goddesses in grace and form (Lawall V 221-222)? This question shows that the gods has no understanding of human marriage and commitment, for them loves is hinged upon the preservation of beauty and youth. Thus they cannot fathom the amount of hardship Odysseus is willing to endure to complete his journey. In the end, Odysseus earthly commitment creates conflicts with the goddesses who are trying to seduce him with the divine gift of immortality, an important trait for the gods, but not so for a man who is trying to return to the realm of men.

Unlike the goddesses who use divine temptation, the male gods uses wrath to deter Odysseus and to satisfy their own egos. The greatest obstacle Odysseus has to overcome is the fury of Poseidon after blinding his son, a Kyklopes. In fact, he bring the wrath of Poseidon upon himself due to his uncharacteristic loss of self-control, allowing his ego to take over and reveal his name to the Kyklopes and thus taking credit for his brilliant scheme and a temporary victory over a god. If he refrains from ever revealing his identity, he can have a much easier trip without the punishment from Poseidon. However, Poseidons own ego also contributes to the conflict. In order to show his power over the hapless Odysseus, Poseidon is relentless in his attempts to avenge the blinding committed upon his son. Nevertheless, Zeus

also demonstrates a similar kind of ego, which allows him to act bluntly without regard for the Phaiakians who are simply helping Odysseus out of hospitality. Before the actual incident, Poseidon goes to Zeus and supplicates for the permission to destroy the Phaiakian vessel that has brought Odysseus back to Ithaka.

Poseidon specifically states that he respectand would avoid your [Zeuss] anger (Lawall XIII 172), so in all likelihood, he would have not turned the vessel into stone without Zeuss blessing. Nevertheless, Zeus not only gives Poseidon the permission to destroy the Phaiakian vessel but also suggests the method to turn it into stone so that mortals may gape at that for generations (Lawall XIII 184). Therefore, Zeus is not only committed to punishing the Phaiakian but he is also flaunting his power. However, this oddly contradicts his advocacy throughout the novel for hospitality. Consequently, it seems that Zeus is more interested in appeasing his brother, a god, rather than upholding a righteous act, demonstrating the fact that gods will ultimately place the importance of divine affairs above the earthly affairs. All in all, the egos of Odysseus, Poseidon and Zeus create the conflict that complicate Odysseus journey home.

In the epics Gilgamesh and The Odyssey, the two protagonists has opposite goals; Gilgamesh is trying to enter the divine realm as a god, while Odysseus is attempting to escape from the gods and return to the realm of man. Nevertheless, they have to clash with the gods when the earthly interests of the protagonists disagree with the divine interests and authority. These conflicts emphasize the idea that the gods are not always dependable for

human. Therefore, humans should never rely on full support from the gods, nor should the gods expect unconditional obedience from their subjects. In fact, the depictions of the unpredictable gods in the two epics are similar to the modern perception of natural forces. Hence, early struggles between men and gods are very much like the struggle between men and nature today. The ancients only attempt to make natural occurrences more palpable and justifiable through attributing human behaviors to their causes in the form of the anthropomorphic gods with wishes and egos that oppose human interests.

#### Bibliographies

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