

Gilgamesh and ramayana essay sample

[Literature](#), [Poem](#)



There was a time when gods and demons roamed the earth. A time when humanity lived at the mercy of divine beings, who executed their wills against the humans, following their own selfish desires and placing humans in a position of piety to these dominant beings. This time on earth is one of great men who fought against these demigods, giving them great fame passed on as stories in the oral tradition. Though it is unrealistic to believe that these men truly fought against divine beings, their stories played a role in the ancient world, which was the beginning of the formation of society and civilization. The epics of “ Gilgamesh” and “ The Ramayana of Valmiki” both served their societies as an outline of a moral code, defined the role of a hero, and instilled the belief of the fallibility of man, no matter how great.

One of the defining characteristics of a society is the possession of rules or moral code that individuals are expected to abide by. Today the majority of the societies of the world base their moral code on religious teachings from the Abrahamic religions, Hinduism, Buddhism, and the teachings of Confucius. The most well known set of rules to the Western world is the Ten Commandments from the Old Testament, detailing actions that are outlawed and the expectation of consequences for partaking in such behavior. Ancient civilizations needed to possess the same idea of rules and moral code in order to keep the population from existing in a state of anarchy, this is where the epic narratives found their value, and they were the first sources of moral expectations.

The character of Gilgamesh is portrayed as a mighty individual, capable of defeating any opponent. Unfortunately, Gilgamesh understood his unequaled power and took advantage of it, leaving “ no girl to her mother! / The

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warrior's daughter, the young man's spouse" (l. 73-74), meaning he would take privileges with the females of the city. The citizens of Uruk complained to the gods of Gilgamesh's abuses, leading to their creation of Enkidu. The character of Enkidu acts a foil to Gilgamesh, using his immense strength to help people instead of his own selfish pursuits. Enkidu assists a group of shepards and their herds by killing predators that would kill them, causing the poem to say, " Enkidu was their watchman" (ll. 49). The consequence of Gilgamesh's actions is the creation of his equal, someone who not only is his match in strength, but also someone who can relate to him and understand what it is like to be a superior man. The development of the friendship between the two ultimately leads to the death of Enkidu because of Gilgamesh's cursing of the goddess Ishtar. The elimination of the only thing that Gilgamesh prizes in the world, his friendship with Enkidu, all stems from his abuse of power, vanity, and cursing of a god; actions that the epic is characterizing as unbecoming of a man.

The trial by fire of Sita's purity and innocence in " Ramayana" details the moral expectations of the ancient Indian woman. Sita's imprisonment by the demon Ravana caused Rama to question her devotion to him, fearing that she allowed Ravana to make her impure and possibly even affect her feelings for Rama. In response to this fear of Rama, Sita demands a trial of fire to prove her purity, asking to " Kindle the fire...If I have been faithful to Rama in wind, earth and others are witness to my purity; may the fire protect me" (757). Sita is proven to have maintained her devotion to her husband throughout her imprisonment when the god of fire states, " Here is your Sita, Rama. I find no fault in her...even during the long period of her

detention in the abode of Ravana, she did not even think of him, as her heart was set on you” (758). This unwavering devotion of Sita to Rama lays the foundation for the Indian expectation of women and the importance of their vows in marriage.

The ancient epics of “ Gilgamesh” and “ Ramayana” were the first action hero stories. Modern action movies follow the typical plot of a single mortal man capable of performing heroic deeds beyond the realm of realistic expectation, gaining them fame among their peers. These stories each detail the societies’ beliefs of what it takes to be a hero, whether it be saving the world from aliens in modern movies or slaying fearful beasts in ancient stories. “ Gilgamesh” and “ Ramayana” both possess great battle scenes where the heroic namesakes of their respective stories end up victorious against a foe that is thought to be unbeatable. Gilgamesh slays two beasts, Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven; while in “ Ramayana”, Rama’s ultimate battle is against the demon Ravana. Gilgamesh’s impending battle with Humbaba is of concern to both his subjects and Enkidu, both of which feel that he will not have success. The citizens state, “ We have heard of Humbaba, his features are grotesque, / Who is there who could face his weaponry (II. 262-63)?

Gilgamesh is successful in his battle with Humbaba and follows up his battle with another one against the Bull of Heaven, another divine beast that meets its doom at the hands of the great warrior. The defeat of these two great beasts gave Gilgamesh an even higher level of fame amongst his citizens; he was no longer a tyrannical ruler, but rather a great warrior. Rama’s defeat of

Ravana was met with the realization that a mortal man had defeated a demon, “ alas, he who could not be killed by the gods and demons, has been killed in battle by a man standing on earth” (755). The idea that a mortal can defeat an immortal continues the theme presented in “ Gilgamesh” that an individual could make a difference, even against immense odds. Though it is later revealed that Rama is in fact the reincarnation of the god Visnu, he is still human and possesses the ability to die. Even though Rama and Gilgamesh are both mortal, they do not allow the fear of death to dictate their actions, but instead move forward with their planned battles with confidence that they cannot lose; this is what it means to be a hero, unwavering confidence against immense odds.

Often people of celebrity status are placed in a category of inhuman expectations. The president of a country is not expected to be make mistakes, a movie star is not expected to eat at Taco Bell, a famous writer is expected to speak and write with perfect grammar. These unrealistic expectations all stem from removing the human characteristics of celebrities due to their portrayed perfection and success in their endeavors. “

Gilgamesh” and “ Ramayana” both depict their heroes in a very humanistic light, each with their own moments of weakness to contrast with their great successes. Gilgamesh’s unequaled strength along with his conquests of Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven raise him to mythical status, yet there is an emotional side to Gilgamesh that is exposed following the death of his friend Enkidu. He begins with a long lamentation of for Enkidu, calling upon all sorts of people and nature to mourn his death. Gilgamesh then proceeds to act out

his emotions by “tearing out and hurling away the locks of his hair, / Ripping off and throwing away his fine clothes like something foul” (VIII. 62-64).

This outpour of emotion is not found in the earlier parts of the story, where Gilgamesh is portrayed as powerful and extremely confident. The fact that humanity does exist in Gilgamesh with all its emotion and power proves that even the most powerful of men are still in the end, men. This theme is evident in “Ramayana” as well during the scene following the kidnapping of Rama’s wife Sita. Rama falls into a state of depression and begins to blame himself for the fate befalling him by saying “No one in this whole world is guilty of as many misdeeds as I am, O Laksmana: and that is why I am being visited by sorrow upon sorrow” (751). In Aranya 64, Rama’s depression changes to anger when he discovers that Sita has been kidnapped by a demon.

He claims, “The demons have earned my unquenchable hate and wrath. I shall destroy all of them” (752). Rama’s anger continues to an even higher level when he states that “If Sita is not immediately brought back to me, I shall destroy the three worlds—the gods, the demons and other creatures” (752). The expression of anger by Rama, one who has shown unwavering devotion to dharma and even later exposed to be a god in human form, reinforces the idea found in “Gilgamesh” that all men are fallible and prey to their emotions, no matter how strong, famous, or devout.

The ancient epics laid the foundation for our modern stories and the purposes and plot lines contained in them. The Christian religious texts outline moral obligations, modern action movies show our society what it

takes to be a hero, and the daily news shows us the mistakes that our celebrities and elected officials make every day. The epics of “ Gilgamesh” and “ Ramayana” both make it very clear that we as humans have not changed much in the last 5000 years and we still maintain the same ideas in our society today as they did in ancient times.