

# Defining humanity through the depiction of loss and suffering in epic poems

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Defining Humanity through the Depiction of Loss and Suffering in Epic Poems  
Casey Dalton 10/8/2010 Forms and Expressions in World Literature Though epic poems, such as Homer's *The Iliad*, or *Beowulf*, were meant to entertain, spread religion and culture, and perhaps even to preserve historical truths, they also have a rarely noticed, possibly accidental agenda; defining humanity. Even tales such as *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and *The Tragedy of Sohrab and Rostam* have a mutual theme, though they come from completely different cultures and time frames. That theme is that what makes us mortal; what makes us human is the aspect of loss and suffering in our lives.

This is true throughout all epic poems, whether subtle or not. *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, an ancient Mesopotamian story of a king and his brotherly bond, is a fairly obvious representation of the theme connecting humanity to loss and sorrow. This story dates back to one thousand B. C. E. and "can rightly be called the first true work of world literature." ("Longman Anthology: World Literature" Volume A 57-97) According to the epic, Gilgamesh was a great warrior and king of the city-state Uruk.

He was described as almost god-like. This idea is embodied by now popular stories such as the story of Hercules, who is half-man, half-god. He is both praised and feared for his power. The epic reads, "Supreme over other kings, lordly in appearance, he is the hero, born of Uruk, the goring wild bull." ("Longman Anthology: World Literature" Volume A 57-97) Gilgamesh wields all of this power, yet he cannot control himself as a god would. He kills

the locals' sons, and rapes their women; possibly out of sheer boredom. He has been given more power than he can handle.

In order to correct the problem, the god Anu convinces the goddess Aruru that Gilgamesh requires a counterpart to keep him occupied. Aruru creates Enkidu, an equivalent to Gilgamesh in size and strength, and they become loyal companions. Enkidu has a dream that he is attacked and killed by " a man of dark visage" (" Longman Anthology: World Literature" Volume A 57-97) and soon after, dies. Gilgamesh cannot handle the loss of his dear friend and companion. He stays with the body until it is a host to maggots, and then wanders in the wilderness by himself, mourning. Then, realizing that he is mortal as well as his beloved Enkidu, Gilgamesh sets off on a quest to find his " ancestor Utanapishtim, who joined the Assembly of the Gods, and was given eternal life. " (" Longman Anthology: World Literature" Volume A 57-97) The story of Utanapishtim's gift was Noah's Ark-esque.

In which, he was given immortality for building a boat to save humanity and all other living things from a flood. Utanapishtim give Gilgamesh a plant that is said to reverse age. Gilgamesh tells a ferryman, "...this plant is a plant against decay by which a man can attain his survival. I will bring it to Uruk-Haven, and have an old man eat the plant to test. The plant's name is ' The Old Man Becomes a Young Man. ' Then I will eat it and return to my youth. " (" Longman Anthology: World Literature" Volume A 57-97) The plant is stolen by a snake, being a literal representation of a loss of immortality; making him human.

Though, it is also a representation of a rebirth; of the realization that comes to Gilgamesh. After all these events, Gilgamesh realizes that though physically he will die, he can live on through the legacy he leaves behind. And so, he returns to Uruk and becomes a leader, a hero, and a proper king. The theme of loss causing expression of humanity is proven through this passage, " Over his friend Enkidu, Gilgamesh cried bitterly, roaming the wilderness. ' I am going to die! - am I not like Enkidu?! Deep sadness penetrates my core, I fear death, and now roam the wilderness- I will set out to the region of Utanapishtim, son of Ubartutu, and will go with utmost dispatch! '" (" Longman Anthology: World Literature" Volume A 57-97) Before Gilgamesh's loss of his companion, mentally, nothing separated him from being a god. He had the strength and ability to conquer anything or anyone. After Enkidu's death, he realizes that no matter how powerful he may be, he is still a mortal and a human.

Gilgamesh succumbs to a symptom of being human, mourning his loss. Previously, he had taken many lives carelessly, but when his companion's life was taken, he becomes deeply emotional. He becomes irrational and wanders through the wilderness, becoming nomadic, like an animal. It's as if he is attempting to avoid being human; to avoid being mortal. On Gilgamesh's return to Uruk, the epic reads, " A snake smelled the fragrance of the plant, silently came up and carried off the plant. While going back it sloughed off its casing. At that point Gilgamesh sat down, weeping, his tears streaming over the side of his nose.

" (" Longman Anthology: World Literature" Volume A 57-97) The death of his friend caused him to realize that he, too, was mortal, but the loss of his only possible source of immortality caused him to realize that he will never be more than human. Though, the human life he lives is his opportunity to become ' immortal' to his people. The tale of The Tragedy of Sohrab and Rostam is a part of the Shah-nama or, The Book of Kings. Though it is a Persian epic, and was originally written around the year nine-hundred eighty-one, it has many strong similarities to The Epic of Gilgamesh. This epic starts off with a hero by the name of Rostam whose cherished horse wanders off and is captured. In search of the horse he comes across the fairest of maidens, Tahmine, who was well aware of his heroic reputation and wished to bear his son. They conceived a son.

Rostam leaves his seal with Tahmine, to give to their child and they proceeded to live separate lives. The son is named Sohrab and is born Turkish, opposing the Iranian Rostam, due to political issues. The father and son are unaware of their relation, and meet each other in the battle field. Rostam mortally wounded Sohrab, and with his dying breaths, still unaware of their relation, Sohrab vows that his heroic father will avenge his death, and reveals the seal given to him upon leaving home for battle. Rostam had " slain the one he held most dear. " (" Longman Anthology: World Literature" Volume B 509-18) He is then overcome with grief for the rest of his existence. This is the tragedy; the loss of a son, one's attempt at becoming ' immortal', a legacy.

Had Rostam not mistakenly slain his own son, and they had joined forces, they would have been an unstoppable force. Secrecy and bad politics kept the son from his father, thus keeping the son from being identified with his father, which is where the deeper meaning lies in the epic poem. Though god-like, Rostam was a mortal, and incidentally had destroyed his only son, who had not yet become identified with his father. As in Gilgamesh, the only hope for one to become near immortal is through one's legacy, being another common theme pning across the spectrum of epic poems. Rostam had destroyed his only physical possibility of creating a legacy with his own hands, there lies the tragedy. Though, Rostam lost his link to everlasting life, it created one for Sohrab. Never knowing the sorrow of a substantial loss, Sohrab was killed in perfection; he died in a god-like image.

Addressing Rostam, a man says, " Once from afar I saw his arms and neck, His lofty stature and his massive chest. The times impelled him and his martial host to come here now and perish by your hand. " (" Longman Anthology: World Literature" Volume B 509-18) Sohrab's image will be preserved as a god's, as unflawed, never knowing the feeling of suffering; the feeling of loss. Epic poems are not unlike other genres of literature in that they all share common themes and ideas, no matter how conflicting the cultures of which they are tied to. All epics, especially tragedies, remind us of what it means to be human. Whether intentional or not, these poems directly connect humanity to, through our mortality, the loss of what one holds dear. Though, it is taken one step further and is connected to pity, sorrow, and grief.

Without these emotions, one is not human. Works Cited The Longman Anthology: World Literature. 2nd ed. Volume B. Pearson Longman, 2008. 509-18. Print.

The Longman Anthology: World Literature. 2nd ed. Volume A. Pearson Longman, 2008. 57-97. Print.