

Relationship versus alienation



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In the Stories of Achilles, Gilgamesh, and Job

As opposites, relationship and alienation reveal much about character.

In Homers The Iliad, Achilles tragic flaw, anger, and his petty pursuit of

honor cause his alienation from society. His reconnection comes only after his

friend Patroclus dies and he sees that he has focused his life on trivial rewards rather than love. Herodotus's title character, Gilgamesh, is also distracted from his friendship, and his friend, Enkidu, must die before he appreciates the importance of the relationship. It takes an unmediated conversation with God for the Bible figure, Job, to realize that his alienation is self-inflicted because he doubts God. After this recognition, he is able to regain his identity as a religious

shepherd. Achilles, Gilgamesh, and Job feel alienation from their individual

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beliefs, their relationships with others, or their relationship with their god or gods, but they also eventually work back toward regaining connection and rebuilding identity.

By definition, a story's tragic hero must have a tragic flaw. In *The Iliad*, the tragic hero Achilles displays excessive anger. Even though his anger motivates him as a great warrior, it is, conversely, his tragic flaw. Also known

in Greek as thumos (1), or intense spiritedness, this anger is the factor that separates Achilles from the rest of his society in a number of ways. His rage, or mnis (2), against Agamemnon and Hector causes his desertion the war effort,

the death of his friend, Patroclus, and his own eventual death. In Book I, Achilles is motivated by a need for the character trait that classified him as a hero...glory. His thumos causes Achilles to disconnect himself from society. He

is focused so much on the acquisition of glory and a divine reward for a glorious life, not to mention Briseus as his prize, that he cannot bring himself to battle.

Later, in Book XVI of The Iliad, Achilles anger is his weakness, and the cause of Patroclus death. Achilles sends Patroclus with the Myrmidons and lends him his own armor, telling him to repel the Trojans from the ships, but never go further. He reasons that his reputation would be ruined if Patroclus failed:

No doom my noble mother revealed to me from Zeus,
just this terrible pain that wounds me to the quick-

when one man attempts to plunder a man his equal,
to commandeer a prize, exulting so in his power.

That's the pain that wounds me, suffering such humiliation. (3)

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He continues to persuade Patroclus, saying you can win great honor,
great glory for me in the eyes of all the Argive ranks(4). Although Achilles
is appealing to Patroclus sense of friendship, Achilles himself is estranged
from his own sense of friendship because he is so blinded by his quest for
glory. In this case, Achilles alienates himself from his community.

Upon Patroclus death, Achilles awakens to the true spirit of his
relationship with his friend. The glory and honor that once ruled his life now
mean nothing compared to his bond with Patroclus. Achilles, the mighty
warrior,

falls ...overpowered in all his power, sprawled in the dust...tearing his

hair, defiling it with his own hands(5). However, his self-inflicted

alienation has cost him the life of his friend, and by the time he comes to

realize that love is more important than conquest, it is too late. The result,

Achilles isolation from community and relationship, has caused him to feel

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intense anomy (6), that there is no meaning or reason to life. Because of Patroclus death, he has become dehumanized and unattached to his own feelings

and rational behavior. His alienation from himself then leads to his inability to actively participate in his formerly comfortable society.

Both The Iliad and The Odyssey teach that it takes a long time for a person who has totally been lost in a traumatizing event, such as war, to finally be found. This idea of alienation from self, or disconnection from ones beliefs and personal history, is clear in the story of Odysseus. After his battles in the Trojan War, Odysseus must travel many years, not only to find his home, but to

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overcome numerous obstacles to rediscover his pre-war self. The Iliad also portrays this idea of self-discovery as Achilles attempts to renew himself after losing himself in war. First, however, Achilles rages on, as in the episode where he slaughters the men by the river. Although he still possesses

the thumos, he is working his way toward transformation. He never makes it home

like Odysseus, because he dies first, but this is what makes his heroism tragic.

Both Achilles and Odysseus become human after living for so long as machines of

war. As they rebuild their dignity, they both reabsorb into society, though

Achilles only lives on as a legend of war while Odysseus goes on to rebuilds his

relationships.

The story of Gilgamesh portrays relationships in much the same way as The Iliad. Once they meet, Gilgamesh and Enkidu become instant friends. In fact, they are so close that they have a yin-yang type relationship whereby they are

perfect complements for each other. What Gilgamesh lacks in bravery, Enkidu

makes up in courage, and what Enkidu needs in interpersonal skills, Gilgamesh

provides with his position as a semi-god. The first stanza of the poem

summarizes the story, stating Gilgamesh was a god and man;/ Enkidu was an

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animal and man./ It is the story/ Of their becoming human together (7). Since

Gilgamesh and Enkidu are not wholly man, they are alienated from society.

They

cannot relate to other members of their community because they are

unique. Their

differences, in fact, cause the strong bond of their friendship.

The alliance between Gilgamesh and Enkidu concludes in a similar

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fashion as the relationship of Achilles and Patroclus. As Gilgamesh and

Enkidu head off into battle, Gilgamesh convinces Enkidu to lead the warriors.

This resulted in Enkidu's death and the withdrawal of Gilgamesh into deep

seclusion from the public because of his guilt complex. It is as though half of

him has died along with Enkidu, and he feels the emptiness just as Achilles

grieves Patroclus:

Gilgamesh wandered through the desert/ Alone as he had

never been alone/ When he had craved but not known what

he craved;/ The dryness now was worse than the decay.

The bored know nothing of this agony/ Waiting for diversion

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they have never lost/ Death has taken the direction he had
gained./ He was no more a king/ But just a man who now had/
lost his way/ Yet had a greater passion to withdraw/ Into a
deeper isolation. (8)

Gilgamesh is nearly empty without his friend. Because he feels Enkidu's
death is his fault, he is disheartened even more, and, in turn, he alienates
himself further from others.

Gilgamesh finds some comfort in relationships with other people, but he has
really only found more purposelessness. After a discussion with Ea, the poem
narrates that the transfer ...gave him pleasure, being his friend...,

however, ...they only know how to compete or echo... (9). His

self-inflicted isolation impedes Gilgamesh from interaction with other

individuals. Gilgamesh spends the remainder of the poem attempting to
rebuild

himself as a complete person by searching for the parts of him that died with

Enkidu. Near the end of the poem, the reader sees that Gilgamesh finally

reconnects with his emotions, ...realizing/ He had not come this far to hear

himself/ Recall the failure of his

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grief to save/ But to find an end to his despair (10). Finally, Gilgamesh

is recovering from the loss of Enkidu, and he goes on to attempt to reestablish

his relationships with his wife and the rest of society.

Of all stories of alienation, the tale of Job overwhelms the competition.

Imagine living a nearly perfect life, complete with piety, kindness, and love,

only to have it stripped away, seemingly for no reason, by a God who had been so

trustworthy. This is Jobs predicament. After committing himself to living a

virtuous life, God takes away all of Jobs belongings and infects him with

painful abrasions. Job cannot understand why God would need or want to do this

to such a faithful person, saying:

Although I am blameless, I have no concern for myself;

I despise my own life. It is all the same; that is why I say,

He destroys both the blameless and the wicked.

When a scourge brings sudden death, he mocks the

despair of the innocent.

When a land falls into the hands of the wicked, he

blindfolds its judges. If it is not he, then who is it. (11)

His inability to comprehend Gods reasoning causes him to feel alienated

from his own beliefs, and the God he had once venerated. Job feels that he needs

sound explanation of his condition, but none of his counselors provide him with

a satisfactory justification. Because there seems to be no reasoning behind Gods

actions, Job feels estranged from his values. Gilgamesh and Achilles also sought

explanation for their situations, but even the notion that they are semi-gods

cannot rationalize the death of their friends. Job, like Achilles and Gilgamesh,

needs to recreate the belief structure that, at one point, had always

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been enough to explain the ways of God.

In his newfound misery, these beliefs explained nothing for Job, and,

therefore, he also feels alienated from his God. Platos Allegory of the Cave

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seems to apply to this situation. According to the Allegory, Job is all alone in the cave. Although his friends try to comfort him with what they see in the shadows, the silhouettes of reality are only distorted interpretations of Gods real design and reason. Bildad even appears to admit that his counseling is not

Gods true word, declaring our days here on earth are but a shadow, and he continues to say that it is the destiny of the impious to live a hopeless existence (12). In terms of the Allegory of the Cave, Gods truth is only perverted as it is translated into shadows on the walls of the cave. Job, in his state of anomy, expresses that his eyes have grown dim with grief; (his) whole frame is but a shadow (13). He is indeed alone in the cave, and in this state of alienation, the truth of God does not reach him.

Job finally feels finds reason behind his circumstances when he has his direct encounter with God. In this first-hand meeting, God questions Jobs being almost as much as Job has in conversation with his counselors. God proclaims Have you comprehended the vast expanses of the earth? Tell me, if you know all this (14). Indeed, it had been Jobs hubris that had caused

him to isolate himself from his beliefs and God. Once God re-establishes Job's understanding of his place in society and in God's plan, Job is relieved from his alienation from himself, his community, and his God. Job confirms this when

he says ...I spoke

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of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know (15).

God's words bring Job to the realization that, although he is insignificant in comparison to divinity, he has no reason to feel alienated.

I find that I share certain characteristics with Achilles, Gilgamesh, and Job. All of us, because of our circumstances, have felt alienation from our beliefs, our communities, or our spirituality at some point. We don't want to give up our faith, but we struggle to find meaning or reason behind events that

happen in our lives. Achilles, Gilgamesh, and especially Job all have some type

of epiphany where they reconnect or begin the process of reconnection.

Although

I don't believe in God, one line in the Bible did bring me a step closer to

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understanding what I do believe. In Genesis, as the world was being created, God

says, Let us make man in our image, in our likeness... (16). As a

Unitarian Universalist, I believe that all creatures are interrelated and have

inherent worth and dignity. The fact that God uses the words us and our

affirms this notion of the interconnection of all things...that we are made in

the image of everything around us, from the trees to the oceans to the

birds(17). I was pleased to find personal meaning in a text from which I had

alienated myself. Although there are times when we find ourselves unable or

unwilling to connect with our friends, our spirituality, or even our own

beliefs, we are never alone. Alienation is only a feeling we have when we

think

that no one or nothing else is feeling the same. But how can we feel alone

when

we are made in the image of everything around us? Simply, we cant.

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Citations

1. from the student speakers lecture.

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2. Lesky, Albin, A History of Greek Literature, trans. de Heer & Willis,

London: Methuen & Co., 1966, pp24.

3. The Iliad, page 414, lines 59-63.

4. The Iliad, page 415, lines 97-98.

5. The Iliad, page 468, lines 28-30.

6. in-class notes.

7. The Iliad, page 15.

8. Gilgamesh, page 54.

9. Gilgamesh, page 77.

10. Gilgamesh, page 68.

11. Job 9: 21 through 9: 24.

12. Job 8: 9.

13. Job 17: 7.

14. Job 38. 18.

15. Job 42. 3.

16. Genesis 1: 24.

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