

The Concept of the Hero in Gilgamesh and Odysseus

Name

Institution

The Concept of the Hero in Gilgamesh and Odysseus

Introduction

Gilgamesh and Odysseus are two heroes who lived in two varying time frames that were both striving to find the meaning of life. The Gilgamesh epic had its roots in early Mesopotamia while Odysseus was developed in early Greece. Despite the passage of time, both Gilgamesh and Odysseus have remained very popular and are constantly referred to by literature students and teachers from all over the world. Although there are many things that can be learned from the Gilgamesh and Odysseus epics, the most important ones are how heroes from these two societies were defined and regarded.

The epics of Gilgamesh and Odysseus present great similarities on heroes in both the Mesopotamia and Greek cultures. Although these two heroes lived in different time-frames, they were both self-confident. Gilgamesh from the epic Gilgamesh was the ancient king of Uruk in Babylonia, while Odysseus from the epic Odysseus was the leader of Ithaca in Greece. A close study of Gilgamesh presents him as someone that was overly confident (Abusch, 2001). This confidence made him to be chosen as the ruler of the people as they believed that he could protect them from their oppressors. Even though Odysseus did not possess much physical strength such as Gilgamesh, he was nonetheless self confident and he used this confidence and wit to deliver victory to the Greeks during the Trojan War. During the Trojan War, Odysseus faced instant death if found out but he persisted despite the danger that was facing him. The manner in which Gilgamesh and Odysseus conducted themselves before their people reveals that confidence was an important trait for heroes in both the Mesopotamian and Greek cultures (Abusch, 2001).

Another similarity that is evident in the two heroes is divine endowment. A closer look at the life of Gilgamesh reveals him as someone who was divinely endowed as his mother was the famous goddess Ninsun. This gave him much physical and spiritual strength, something that was not common among the people that they led. This was the same case with Odysseus who even though devoid of physical strength has much mental strength as opposed to the people that he led. By using this strength, Odysseus is able to make decisions that save the Greeks from destruction. The concept of divine endowment is therefore a trait that is common in both the Mesopotamian and the Greek hero (Gresseth, 2012).

Another thing that is identical in the life of the two heroes is the manner in which they make certain mistakes. Even though the two characters have a divine endowment that sets them apart from the other people, they all make mistakes that lead to their greatest lessons. Even though Gilgamesh is a part God and a part human, this does not prevent him from dying as he still ends up dying just like everyone else. This is the same thing with Odysseus who still passes through the challenges that ordinary people in the society pass through. At the end, the two heroes rely on the knowledge from their mistakes to make more intelligent decisions in their leadership roles (Gresseth, 2012).

Despite confidence being a universal factor for both the Mesopotamian and Greek heroes, there seem to be differences on how these heroes treated themselves. From the two stories, it is clear that Gilgamesh was only concerned about building his own legacy. This is seen from the way that he kept oppressing his own subjects in a bid to earn their respect. Throughout the story, Gilgamesh is seen killing and raping the daughters of the same people that he was supposed to be protecting. The behavior demonstrated by Gilgamesh was in sharp contrast to that of Odysseus who did everything within his power to protect the Ithaca people from harm. While Gilgamesh

kept on entering into war with his enemies, his motivation was to win more glory for himself, unlike Odysseus whose only motive for engaging in war was to be free and join his family.

These traits reveal that there were differences in the manner in which the Mesopotamia and the Greek heroes conducted themselves (Hope, 2010).

The other difference that sets Gilgamesh apart from Odysseus is the respect that is accorded to each one of them. From the two epics, Gilgamesh is presented as someone who lost the respect of the society at one time and had to fight his way back into getting that honor. However, there was not any point where Odysseus lost his honor despite the people around him harboring resentment towards him most of the time. This example reveals that heroes in Mesopotamia did not have much respect the way that those from the Greek culture had (Hope, 2010).

Conclusion

Even though written in different time frames and different cultures, the epic of Gilgamesh and Odyssey have numerous similarities as well as differences that shed light on the role and place of the hero in these two cultures. The heroes in these two cultures are people who are confident of themselves and also have divine endowment that make them make decisions that appear to be divinely inspired. However, there is a big difference in the way that these two heroes treat their subjects.

References

- Abusch, T. (2001). The Development and Meaning of the Epic of Gilgamesh: An Interpretive Essay. *Journal of the American oriental Society* 121(4), 614-622.
- Gresseth, G. (2012). The Gilgamesh Epic and Homer. *The Classical Association for the Midwest and South* 70 (4), 1-18.
- Hope, N. (2010). Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Heroic Life. *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 89 (2), 392-398