

### *The Epic Hero as Force Majeure in The Iliad and The Epic of Gilgamesh*

*The Iliad* of Archaic Greece and 18th century Mesopotamia's *The Epic of Gilgamesh* are two of the best-known works of epic literature, and they describe two of the genre's best-known heroes: the fleet-footed warrior Achilles, and the godlike king Gilgamesh. I will attempt here to make the case that these two characters ably represent their entire archetype—the epic warrior-hero—which I believe exists to present an example of idealized, “superhuman humanity,” and a fantastic ability of rare individuals to influence events far greater than themselves. I will also argue that this is compelling because human beings are, by and large, used to impacting only matters of equal or lesser importance than their own lives, a mold that the epic hero breaks.

Achilles (alternately, Akhilleus or Achilleus; the first is used here, for consistency and because it is more common in modern discourse) is the central figure of *The Iliad*, the 24-book poetic work attributed to the (possibly apocryphal) Homer. Though Achilles does not even appear in the bulk of the work, he is nevertheless the driving element of the plot, and *The Iliad* is generally considered to be chiefly “about” him and his conflict with Agamemnon; as the first line reads, “Sing, goddess, the anger of Peleus’ son Achilles . . .” (59). Achilles is the prince of the Myrmidons, has come to Troy with the Greek army, and most importantly, is considered their finest warrior (Nagy 26–34). This last is an important point, if we are to be using Achilles as our heroic archetype; and there are indeed arguments that he is surpassed by others in many respects. Other warriors—Aias, Diomedes—seem as much or more powerful; Odysseus seems more capable, and Hector more noble. But the other Greeks are essentially depthless soldiers, Hector is a foil, and Odysseus, in Nagy’s words, “earns the title [the best of the Greeks] not for doing what he did at Troy but for doing what he did within the *Odyssey* itself;” (40) which is outside of our lens. Indeed, none of this is altogether relevant; the objective value of Achilles is not in question, so long as he is presented and perceived as the “best,” which within the *Iliad* he unequivocally is. Perhaps his virtue is more idealized than real; after all, we rarely see him actually fight, at least until his *aristeia* rampage at the end, which is not notably more impressive than the others already seen. “Fleet-footed Achilles” can’t even seem to catch Hector in Book 22 until the gods intervene (Benardete 123). But even if we are only dealing with the ancient equivalent of a “public relations” legend, no matter; it’s the image that counts, and the image of Achilles is the best of the Greeks.

Gilgamesh, with a similar background, is a king of the First Dynasty of Uruk. He is the strongest and most powerful man in the region, demonstrably so; the only other who appears to come close is Enkidu, and given that he is actually defeated by Gilgamesh in a wrestling match, it seems reasonable to give the Uruk king definite top billing. His failings are significant and by the end of the work may seem to grievously outweigh his strengths, but they are classic heroic flaws that strengthen the epic hero label rather than contraindicate it.

The notion of applying a standard template across separate works and even across separate cultures and periods is not a new one, and by now fairly accepted (if not yet uncontroversial). Joseph Campbell, in *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* as well as his other works, helped popularize the concept and coined the term *monomyth* to describe the generic hero's journey; additionally, scholars of both literature and psychology are well familiar with the notion of archetypes. The idea itself is accepted; innovation comes from its application.

What, therefore, do I mean here by "hero"? After all, the word is one with many denotations. In looking at Achilles, particularly, we have an added complexity, as "hero" has a specific meaning in archaic Greece. (The cultures that conceived Gilgamesh probably had ideas of its own, but not with the same name, and in any case they are no longer accessible.) "Heroes were a class of beings worshipped by the Greeks, generally conceived as the powerful dead, and often as forming a class intermediate between gods and men" ("Hero-cult" 693); in other words, Greek heroes were similar to Catholic saints, and to add to the confusion, Achilles himself is certainly this sort of hero. More currently, Dean Miller describes two contemporary definitions in *The Epic Hero*: First, ". . . the 'hero' of a particular incident, which means that he or she had intervened in some critical situation in an extraordinary fashion, acting outside, above, or in disregard to normal patterns of behavior . . ." (1). Second, the more colloquial ". . . 'X was Y's hero.' Here "hero" simply means a model, a kind of ideal to be striven for or imitated to the best of one's ability . . ." (1–2).

The Greek cult hero I will ignore, because while it was real, it is separate from my point; only the word "hero" gives it a seeming relevance. Miller's two modern definitions, however, are both highly relevant to my thesis, and together will serve as a good base to build on while I present and hone the specific definition I am developing here. I will call this the *force majeure* concept of the hero. In brief, this hero has the following characteristics: he is mythically powerful, physically and often politically or influentially as well; he is a warrior, swift, decisive, and capable of deciding on and executing plans of action with great alacrity and vigor; he frequently possesses some degree of divinity and interacts with the gods far more intimately than his fellows; his physical abilities give way to psychological struggles; and most vitally, the challenges he contends with are those most dear and critical to mankind, such as mortality. These aspects combine to create an archetype that represents what the reader or listener—generally, we may assume, a regular human being—can view as *fulfilling that which he wishes to fulfill and effecting the changes he wishes to effect, yet cannot*. In other words, the hero does what we lack the ability to do.

Let us examine each of these traits in turn, turning to the documents for evidence.

## Physical Nature

The most obvious and telling aspects of the hero are the physical. First, he must be vastly powerful, both in terms of physical strength and in martial prowess. Gilgamesh is ". . . for his stature renowned, . . . perfect in strength . . . Towering Gilgamesh is un-

cannily perfect” (I 30–38). Indeed, the text seems to suggest that Gilgamesh is literally a physically perfect being, resembling the first human created by the gods, rather than an imperfect replication via human birth (5 footnote). Achilles, in a similar vein, is *pelôrios*—monstrous—(Miller 193) and so powerful that his withdrawal from the Trojan War is a crippling blow—not metaphorically, but literally: the absence of his spear is a vast military loss, and much of the narrative centers on the attempts to bring him back to the field. As noted above, it is not relevant that we are given minimal evidence for this greatness, though the fact that the battle does perceptibly shift directions when he joins it is telling; it is good enough to take it “on faith” from the singer, since it is after all a work of fiction, and characters may happily be whatever they are defined as.

Why strength? It seems natural for a hero, but explaining why is more difficult, unless we turn again to the definitions. “Strength” is the ability to exert force. Force does work, and work is change; hence, to be strong is to possess the ability to make change, and this is very much in line with our idea of the hero. This can range from the most base (throwing a rock no other man could hope to lift) to the most grand (changing the course of a war according to one’s whims).

Another, related feature is speed—quickness or fleetness of foot. Achilles regularly receives the formula “fleet-footed [or swift-footed] Achilles,” and even when other specific feats of excellence are noted in his fellows (Aias certainly is the stronger, for instance), nobody is ever suggested as faster—something of an odd detail, in truth, because there is no clear reason why this should be harped on. Gilgamesh, with Enkidu, repeatedly makes “a journey of a month and a half in three days” (IV 4) or the like, with the text focusing on his relative speed compared to ordinary men; this shows up in nearly every one of his journeys. He even outruns the sun itself (IX 82–114)!

Speed, like strength, is the ability to make change—change in one’s location, fundamental to any endeavor. No matter what the culture or from what age, it seems natural to loathe the time spent on lengthy travel. *Gilgamesh* would have been a very different tale if we were forced to watch a detailed month-long trip merely to progress the story; likewise, by demonstrating how handily the hero bypasses this, we see how capable he is of directing his own world, by being where he chooses to be. A regular individual would have taken ages to make these journeys; an extraordinary man might do it more quickly; but a hero treats it like no journey at all, an entirely different level of challenge. Achilles would not be Achilles were he a lumbering, slow, dense behemoth; everything about him is agile and driven, master of his body.

Finally, we have physical beauty and magnificence. Achilles is considered, if not the most handsome player in the war (Paris holds that distinction), certainly a fine specimen; in his own boasting words, “Do you not see what a man I am, how huge, how splendid . . . ?” (XI 108). And Gilgamesh, as already mentioned, is physically perfect—“The Lady of Birth drew his body’s image / The God of Wisdom brought his stature to perfection” (I 51–52). Particularly because, in both epics, this appears somewhat less emphasized than the other elements, it seems reasonable to associate this heroic feature with the simplest of purposes: as everyone desires to be attractive, so that quality is given to our heroes, unless there is some special story-related reason to avoid it (if, for instance, ugliness helps drive one’s motivations).

## Personal Qualities

Two of the most notable similarities of Achilles and Gilgamesh seem to be at odds: they are both royalty, and they are both warriors. Gilgamesh is perhaps a king first, and Achilles a soldier first, but the former is still a fighter and the latter still a prince; the two go hand in hand. Fortunately, neither trait is hard to explain in the context of our theory. Political weight is such a simple way of imparting the power to create change that it seems almost like cheating; indeed, it is interesting to note that in neither of our heroes is their *political* power the focus of their feats. (We may perhaps interpret this to suggest that true change, or at least that which matters most, can only be brought about by real, personal deeds, not by edict. But this is socio-political analysis, and beyond our scope here.) Still, granting a position of societal power is a convenient way of skipping over other potential difficulties, such as the mundanities of survival and basic acts; if Achilles were busy hunting and farming, he would have rather less time to be glorious. Warriorhood is even more simple, ascribable to the base, animal association of battle with action. To hack, slash, and volley is the simplest and most direct way to address the world; perhaps it is not the only way, or even the best or most important, but to at least have the *ability* to take matters physical (as Achilles nearly does by murdering Agamemnon in Book 1) gives the hero a baseline of power. Gilgamesh may find eventually (in Utnapishtim's home) that strength of body fails him, but if he had lacked it from the start, the narrative would never have begun. This is so fundamental that one is hard-pressed to think of an epic hero from any tradition who is not a warrior, at least when the need arises (Walsh); the heroic shoemaker is difficult to imagine, unless he too becomes a warrior in time. In short, both political force and the capacity for violence are *baselines of competence for change* that allow the hero to more readily address larger matters without being caught in the more minor kinks of everyday life.

Also immediately obvious of our heroes is the more unique trait of divinity. This is manifested in numerous ways, two among them most important. First, we find that they are at least partially gods by birth; Achilles' mother is Thetis, a sea-goddess, and Gilgamesh is somewhat arbitrarily two-thirds divine (1 50). (The involvement of the gods in a hero's creation is another common element, visible in the alternate myth that Achilles was washed in the river Styx to grant him invincibility, or that Enkidu was created divinely in order to balance out Gilgamesh.) Second, the hero has a degree of interaction with the gods that far outstrips his peers; he may converse with them (Achilles directly, namely with Thetis; Gilgamesh chiefly through dreams), he may ask favors and gifts or receive commands and advice (see again Achilles and Thetis, or Gilgamesh and Utnapishtim, though the latter is not entirely a god), and most importantly, the gods will play a major role in altering the course of the hero's life (Achilles is aided in battle time after time, and Anu's decision to slay Enkidu motivates Gilgamesh's gradual existential crisis). What is especially interesting about heroic divinity is that it is never entire; the hero is never actually an immortal god, nor wholly controlled by heavenly interests. ". . . the mixture . . . of these two parents [mortal and immortal] [is] central to the heroic biography" (Miller 70). Achilles is one-half godly, Gilgamesh two-thirds, and while this may give them greater power than their all-human brethren, it does not

make them immortal or even *inhuman* in any significant way; they are human in every way that matters, allowing us to connect with them in a way quite impossible with a true god. Zeus and Anu are not “characters” we can see ourselves reflected in; Achilles and Gilgamesh are humans like us, merely better.

## Role of the Hero

Now that we have some conception of what identifies the hero, we can examine his role in the epic. First, it is imperative to observe that, though the hero is physically imposing, his physical feats are *not* the focus of the epic; as noted previously, his abilities exist chiefly to simplify his true challenges, making him capable of confronting more complex matters because the basic are no obstacle. The central conflict in both *The Iliad* and *Gilgamesh* are the psychological struggles of their heroes, not their feats in battle.

That is not to say that great feats are not undertaken and achieved; indeed they are. In fact, both our stories showcase a number of these. Achilles—once he makes his appearance again, with the death of Patroklos—is granted a glorious aristeia, spearing many valiant Trojans and culminating by killing Hector himself (xx 156–xxi 611; xxii 321–360). Gilgamesh defeats Enkidu in a wrestling match (i 96–107), slays the mighty Humbaba (v 126–151), and kills the Bull of Heaven (vi 125–144). These are great achievements, but pedestrian, which is revealed by the ease with which they accomplished, and the *passé* way they are described; to these heroes, such things are their bread and butter. Only after the feats of action are completed do the real challenges, those that trouble them, begin.

The challenges of the heroes originate with the commonplace—regular battles, for instance, as any man might participate in—so that we may understand them and view them as human. But once that bond is created, they are free to move afield, usually by confronting one of two things: either feats superhuman by dint of scale, or matters superhuman by their very nature. At this stage, Gilgamesh outruns the sun, sails to the end of the earth, and seeks the secret of immortality. Achilles battles a river god, kills a fellow hero-prince, then broods moodily on the nature of death.

It is not a coincidence that mortality is one of the universals confronted by the hero; indeed, in Miller’s words, it is “necessary to his essence” (122). Death is the ultimate example of what the hero is for. The hero is our surrogate, our champion, best of everything we are and assigned to do what we cannot and battle what we are unsure how to defeat. Though other matters may arise (the banal, such as winning a war, or the philosophical, such as challenging power roles within a class system [Walsh]), there is no more universal human struggle than mortality. Our heroes see it approaching—for Gilgamesh, with Enkidu’s death, and for Achilles, with the combination of Patroklos’s and Hector’s deaths and the prophecy of his own—attempt to confront it, and in the end, seem to succumb. We must find our surrogate victory, if there is one to be had, in compromise and acceptance. Gilgamesh fails in his quest and resorts to resignedly describing the wonders of Uruk, his “immortality by works”. Achilles, though his story is incomplete within *The Iliad*, seems to accept his own fate and march toward it with

chin high. In this way, the epic reconnects with the human condition, for to actually “solve” the problem of mortality would once again catapult the hero into the realm of gods. In a practical sense, the hero can confront the issue, but the singer of the song or author of the tale cannot answer it any better than the next man; all that can be done, it seems, is console; thus, in the end, the hero has the same fate as ourselves.

The actions of the hero thereby encompass an “arc,” beginning with the commonplace to allow a strong connection with the audience, proceeding to the most superhuman levels, then returning to a human state with the conclusion (even if that conclusion is merely the universality of death). This is not to be confused with other epic “arcs,” such as Campbell’s Departure—Initiation—Return (see *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*); it is not even a plot arc, though it proceeds parallel to one, which can be described with the D—I—R model or any other that pleases. It is a progression from the human to the superhuman and back again, a sojourn beyond the bounds of mundane existence that allows us to tease the limits of our worldview.

## Conclusion

Why bother with this definition of the hero? What does it yield?

To start with, it does not stand in opposition to other definitions. It is quite happy to coexist with the Greek cult-hero, and even to contentedly overlap with the meaningless idea of the “protagonist.” However, particularly in epics and indeed in much of fiction, it seems to fit the archetypes very well, and in that way, may begin to explain some of the reasons behind our stories.

Quite simply, there is something remarkable about a human being affecting great things, because as a general rule, it is not the norm. In a democratic society, the best example is voting; one man’s vote has some relevance, but he may wonder if its presence, absence, or aim would make any difference to the overall outcome, and he would be right. By and large, regular individuals are cogs in an encompassing machine, small portions of greater wholes. For an individual to, *in his own right* and wholly in his own power, completely create or influence entire, significant events—a war, a battle, the fate of a people—is alien to us, save for rare moments or rare individuals.

The *force majeure* hero serves as a model for the extraordinary, in a straightforward way. We can watch his actions and stand both intrigued and impressed, because in our ordinary lives, we do *not* see such things, unless we are friends with champions or rub noses with emperors. If a novel shows us “what it’s like” to risk a city on a roll of dice, then the hero shows us how the gambler would behave. They are role models, not for morals, but for vigor of existence; they are Roosevelt’s “man in the arena.” We can model ourselves after him, but probably we will not; at the end of the day, it is mostly a spectacle. Heroes and their feats are simply more interesting to experience than everyday ones, and consequently make better fiction; who wants to hear about the ordinary? *The Iliad* is about Achilles, because he is the best of the Achaeans; if it were about one of the Trojans he kills, it would perhaps be more real, the protagonist more familiar, but it would not be compelling, nor would it be epic. We seek the non-dull, the non-every-

day; we seek to elevate ourselves above the grim realities of death, not hear about it in another medium.

Perhaps most of all, however, the extraordinary hero acts as *our* hero. If we cannot, in all our base, drudging capacity as mortals, successfully combat our greatest enemies—whatever they may be—then at least we can create a hero, John Steakley’s “the best of us—the best of our best, the best that each of us will ever build or ever love,” who can fight those battles for us. Never mind if he wins, or if his victories provide succor in our own lives; at least he has the tools we lack, has the competence we crave, and has the excellence we all strive for.



## *Bibliography*

- Benardete, Seth, Ronna Burger, and Michael Davis. *Achilles and Hector: The Homeric Hero*. Chicago: St. Augustine's Press, 2005.
- Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004.
- Heidel, Alexander. *Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963.
- Homer. *The Iliad*. Trans. Richmond Lattimore. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961.
- Louden, Bruce. *The Iliad: structure, myth, and meaning*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006.
- Miller, Dean A. *The Epic Hero*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002.
- Nagy, Gregory. *The Best of the Achaeans: Concepts of the Hero in Archaic Greek Poetry*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998.
- Tigay, Jeffrey H. *The Evolution of the Gilgamesh Epic*. Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 2002.
- The Epic of Gilgamesh*. Trans. Benjamin R. Foster. New York City: WW Norton & Company, Inc., 2001.
- Walsh, Thomas. Professor of Humanities, University of California Santa Cruz. Personal interview. 7 Nov. 2006.
- Walsh, Thomas. Class lecture. Heroic Epic. Social Sciences 2 075, University of California Santa Cruz, Santa Cruz, CA. 28 Nov. 2006.