Gilgamesh And Enkidu, The Oldest Written Case Of Homosexuality

Are Gilgamesh and Enkidu in a homosexual relationship? The Epic of Gilgamesh, translated by Herbert Mason, answers yes, and further uses their relationship as a means for the heroic duo to become human. Homosexuality is the characteristic of being or having sexual desire towards someone or people of one's sex. For this essay, I will also be using the term homosexual to cover homoromantic as they are often used as interchangeable in society. The human condition is the concept of what struggles and emotions men face throughout their life, and how it causes humans to differ from other species. The journey of becoming human is the main plot point of the epic Gilgamesh. Gilgamesh goes from being god-like to humans, and Enkidu does from being animal-like to humans, but this process only begins after meeting each other and building their relationship. In Gilgamesh, the heroic duo of Gilgamesh and Enkidu have a homosexual relationship that reveals the human condition as being an experience of sexuality and intimacy.

The relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu is often reflecting the same connection between a husband and wife, proving both its homosexual nature and how the human condition is experienced with intimacy. In comparing their relationship to a husband and wife, one can infer that their relationship can be characterized in the same way as a heterosexual relationship. After killing Humbaba Ishtar comes to Gilgamesh and offers her hand in marriage, Gilgamesh responds by saying:

We outgrow out naiveteé

In thinking goddesses

Return our love.

He subsided in his insults

And turned away to his friend

Enkidu. (Mason 43-44)

When Gilgamesh talks about the outgrowing naiveteeé, it marks itself an accomplishment to him becoming human. By separating himself from Ishtar, a divine figure, referring to the goddesses as an entirety unconnected to himself, he is accepting his mortality and humanity. The rejection of Ishtar also reflects Gilgamesh and Enkidu's husband-wife by Gilgamesh refusing to leave Enkidu for Ishtar, like how a husband refuses to leave his wife, proving the strength of their intimate bond. Gilgamesh's acceptance is further supported when he refers to himself and Enkidu using the words "our love." This diction emphasizes them becoming human because if they are both seen as the same thing, humans, they have both grown away from their original identities, Gilgamesh a god and Enkidu an animal. This language also exemplifies to self their relationship as being similar to how a husband or wife after marriage become a single unit. The duo has a bond that parallels that of a married couple, which shows how, through their relationship, they have progressed towards becoming human.

Enkidu is associated with femininity throughout the poem, illustrating the queer nature of his and Gilgamesh's relationship, and the intimacy the pair experience. In some same-sex relationships, it is common for one person to take on a masculine role, and for the other to take on a more feminine part. Enkidu adopts a more feminine role in their relationship is commonly associated with female figures. The most prominent example is Enkidu's association with Ninsun, Gilgamesh's mother, through her blessing and his protective behavior towards Gilgamesh. Ninsun calls Enkidu before the hero pair begins their journey and tells him, "You are not my son but I adopt you / now protect [Gilgamesh]" (Mason 33). Ninsun "adopting" Enkidu links him to a Ninsun and female protective role. This connection reflects a husband-wife relationship revealing that he and Gilgamesh shared the same type relationship except with a same-sex partner. Furthermore, this passage is parallel when after Ninsun called for Enkidu to protect Gilgamesh, Enkidu attempts to stop Gilgamesh from entering Humbaba's forest. This parallelism further connects Enkidu to a feminine role. Moreover, this parallelism also follows the same time frame of Enkidu and Gilgamesh becoming human. Before Enkidu was tainted by the prostitute, he had no worldly connections or fear of death. After meeting Gilgamesh, his fear of death, a purely human characteristic, not only for himself but for Gilgamesh, can be seen through his protective nature. Because Enkidu exhibits feminine qualities and is associated with the female figure Ninsun, in order to further reflect a heterosexual relationship instead of a homosexual one, the intimacy between the Gilgamesh and Enkidu is described as more intimate than would otherwise be possible in a nonqueer partnership. Enkidu's gender role is suggestive of not only his homosexual relationship with Gilgamesh, but his becoming human and fearing death.

Gilgamesh and Enkidu's relationship and individual senses of identity only progress when they have physical contact with each other; this is suggestive of their closeness and the importance of sexuality in their journey towards becoming human. According to Dr. Gary Brown, "To touch someone you love is to acknowledge their presence and to communicate your desire for them." This is true in Gilgamesh and Enkidu's relationship because prior to Enkidu's death, there are many examples of expressing their relationship, such as: fighting upon first meeting, failing to touch each other during Enkidu's bad dreams, and Gilgamesh moving to touchEnkidu after he died. After Enkidu dies by the will of the Gods for killing the Bull of the Heavens, Gilgamesh sits "hushed as his friend's eyes stilled. / In his silence he reached out / to touch [Enkidu] whom he had lost" (Mason 50). Throughout the epic, Herbert Mason translates the poem with the senses of hearing, touch, and sight to emulate the experiences of suffering, life, and death. As in the case of this passage, the poem uses sight and touch to help portrays Gilgamesh's first experience with death. The first line of the section: "hushed as his friend's eyes stilled" is symbolic for Enkidu losing sight, or his connection to life. This is important for Gilgames and Enkidu's relationship because it marks the first point since meeting where they will no longer be allowed to be together, and the sight of Enkidu loses his sight offers closure to Gilgamesh. This passage further is the first significant experience Gilgamesh has had with being aware of the sounds around him, and with his suffering. Gilgamesh's over the top distress also gives insight into the depth of his and Enkidu's relationship with the level of grief in this passage and the rest of the book. Gilgamesh's desire to touch Enkidu one last time further supports both the homosexual nature of their relationship, and the concept of this touch is a critical moment for Gilgamesh in his journey of becoming human. Prior to Enkidu dying, Gilgamesh had no experience or encounter with death; this fueled his sense of identity as being more god-like. After the death of Enkidu, Gilgamesh comes to realize his own mortality since if Enkidu, his equal, could face death, then so could he. This realization would not have been possible if Gilgamesh and Enkidu's relationship had been shallow or that of companionship rather than

homosexuality because this touch of desire is what supports this change in mindset. The heroic pairs close relationship, coupled with their identities progression when they make contact with one another, leads to the conclusion that the human condition is an experience of sexuality with another.

Gilgamesh and Enkidu's homosexual relationship manifests itself in Enkidu's feminine and protective nature, the husband-wife parallels, and physical contact, all of which reveal the human condition in Gilgamesh as experiencing sexuality. While the LGBTQ+ community is becoming more recognized in modern literature, it is often ignored in ancient texts despite some primeval cultures such as ancient Greece having an LGBTQ+ mother culture story. By examining ancient texts such as Gilgamesh with an LGBTQ+ critical lens, one can reach a greater or alternative understanding of the text in the same way one may use a feminist critical lens. Modern societies focus so much on themselves that they miss lessons taught in ancient literature and art, a mistake that could easily be avoidable if it became a common practice to take modern ideas and look for them in ancient civilizations.

Works Cited

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