This is Our World: The Ancient Masculine Struggle for a Meaningful Existence

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Assignment Description: Students will be expected to complete one essay relating to an event/movie/activity to one or more of the assigned readings. The assignment should consider the comparisons and contrasts between one movie/event and the book/concept it relates to. The assignment was completed for Great Book to 1700—Honors for Dr. Keith Lloyd and Dr. Leslie Heaphy.

Imagine a man so emasculated, so discontented with his depersonalized, run-the-rat-race, twentieth-century experience that, with a mysterious companion, he creates an underground system for other feminized individuals to get back to basics: regaining masculinity by beating the absolute tar out of each other. Sounds familiar, right? Now take the scene back to the third millennium BC, to a man ruling his kingdom in all the wrong ways who meets a man from the wilderness and goes on a journey to gain immortality and change the course of his life. Similar principles, different tales—what both of these stories showcase is masculinity, but masculinity of two very different varieties. Over-aggrandized masculinity standards in the twentieth century, as showcased by Chuck Palahniuk’s Fight Club, has skewed the honorable “legacy after death,” as seen in traditional hero stories like the Epic of Gilgamesh, by intensifying and perverting the need of today’s man for a meaningful existence.

Gilgamesh was a king unrivaled in his time, and also a distinct character in history—considered the “first tragic, mortal hero,” his tale is thought to be the first great hero epic in history, hailing from ancient Mesopotamia (Sandars 7). As is expected, the hero story in general is strongly masculine centered, and conveys themes that relate back to this, such as: savagery v. civilization, “escape from the common lot of man,” and the mortal man’s desire to be above the laws of death (Sandars 7). These themes, and the others showcased in the epic, center not only around masculinity but also around struggle; these two encompassing ideas lead back to a central concept greatly celebrated in Gilgamesh’s ancient time: the idea of a legacy after death, earned by one’s earthly deeds and carried down through one’s name. The unininitiated could ask: just how would one achieve such a legacy? Expanding back out to the two leading ideas, legacy is achieved through masculine actions and the struggle to achieve these.

But how does the importance of a post-mortem legacy translate into twentieth- and twenty-first-century standards? While it isn’t so blatantly stressed as it seems to be in ancient times—Gilgamesh speaks constantly of it: “I have not established my name stamped on bricks as my destiny decreed . . .”—the desire for long-lasting fame is still apparent (Sandars 70). In the opening scene of Fight Club, the narrator and Tyler Durden are atop a skyscraper rigged to explode by their space monkeys within minutes. With a gun stuffed down his companion’s throat, Tyler says: “The first step to eternal life is you have to die . . . This isn’t really death. We’ll be legend. We won’t grow old” (Palahniuk 11). While a little on the radical side, Tyler’s ideas of destroying the “old” world to create his own legacy mirrors Gilgamesh’s quest to become literally immortal and perform incredible deeds that will be remembered for eons.
Gilgamesh, at the beginning of the epic, is ruling his city, Uruk, in a less than desirable way. Citizens of Uruk are appalled by his arrogance—he steals virgins away at their bridal beds, he rings the war bells at his own whim, and basically stirs up a ruckus in the city until the gods intervene. While Gilgamesh is arrogant and confrontational, *Fight Club*’s narrator endures a banal and tedious existence. However, these two men face a similar problem: their respective experiences are leaving them discontented and out of touch. Gilgamesh is straying from his roles as a king, a leader, and a shepherd to the people; the narrator has lost his drive to live his own life. These experiences remain stagnant until the arrival of the antagonists: Enkidu and Tyler Durden. The arrival of these respective characters causes a catalyst in the lives of the protagonists, displayed, in both cases, through a fight. Enkidu stops Gilgamesh from taking another bride when they wrestle, and Tyler encourages the narrator to let go and fight him, throwing angst-releasing punches.

As each story continues now that each man has a companion, it seems like Enkidu and Tyler aren’t so much like antagonists and more like supporting characters; however, their relationships with the protagonists reveal them to be more twisted than was originally apparent—they antagonize their companions. After having a dream, Gilgamesh becomes agitated and cooks up an idea: “Because of the evil that is in the land, we will go to the forest and destroy the evil; for in the forest lives Humbaba whose name is ‘Hugeness,’ a ferocious giant.” In this way he plans to make his legacy (Sandars 71).

Despite Enkidu’s reservations about harming a guardian of the forest, he still accompanies his friend. On the journey, Gilgamesh is confident and totally gung-ho for killing anything that crosses him. But when the two finally meet Humbaba, Gilgamesh can’t kill the guardian; it is Enkidu who convinces him, almost egging him on. The wild man says: “‘Do not listen, Gilgamesh: this Humbaba must die . . . First entrap the bird [Humbaba], and where shall the chicks [glory of light] run then? Afterwards we can search out the glory and glamour, when the chicks run distracted through the grass’” (Sandars 83). Enkidu has essentially guilted Gilgamesh into doing the deed—Gilgamesh, while desperate for fame, is too conflicted to actually commit to the actions, however gruesome, that would bring it. Enkidu does it for him. These instances, where Enkidu perhaps takes the situation past extreme, happen more than once in the epic, and are mirrored in *Fight Club*. For example, Tyler takes our narrator out on a seemingly unplanned chore, abducting a man named Raymond K. Hessel and threatening his life, because, as the narrator voices Tyler’s claims, “I’d rather kill you than see you working a shit job for just enough money to buy cheese and watch television” (Palahniuk 155).

Throughout both tales, the protagonists are plagued with their fears of mortality and are constantly struggling with it. Translator N.K. Sandars points out the Epic of Gilgamesh’s focus on “human concern with mortality,” which ends up being Gilgamesh’s driving purpose after Enkidu dies (7). The king ends up on a long and harrowing journey in search of immortality. While Gilgamesh’s journey is literal, the narrator goes on a similar type of journey that occurs within himself, including Tyler, as the antagonist is an internal part of the narrator. Gilgamesh travels beyond the mortal realm to the island of Dilmun; the narrator travels to the brink of insanity. In both instances, Enkidu and Tyler,
respectively, antagonize the protagonists to their extremes.

These journeys reflect the deep-seated state of man’s preoccupation with death and his fear of the unknown. And what is a journey without a guide to show the way? As Kevin Boon explains in his analysis of *Fight Club* in reference to man’s desire for violence, Tyler “surfaces to guide the narrator back toward his masculine legacy,” like some kind of dark and twisted guardian angel (272). His purpose as the guide is to preserve masculinity for the protagonist so that the latter can achieve glory. While the narrator is reluctant and even ignorant to Tyler’s purpose, Gilgamesh would have recognized it as he did after Enkidu had died. The tragedy that Enkidu and Tyler do not reveal to their companions, however, is the necessity of their deaths to become the legends they wish to be (Boon 274).

Upon Gilgamesh’s return to Uruk, he loses the flower of immortality bestowed upon him by Utanapishtim. It takes this devastating blow for the king to realize the futility of another journey; he simply takes his new companion Urshanabi to Uruk and shows him the grand walls and city, for “this too was the work of Gilgamesh, the king, who knew the countries of the world” (Sandars 117). Rather than fighting against the outcome and making his situation infinitely more difficult, as he has done many times before, he simply lets go of his endless quest, and his life as a king to his people can truly begin. Similarly, when the narrator finally begins to connect the pieces that lead to his discovery that he and Tyler are one person, his true journey to gain his life back begins, and he accepts that he is the one responsible for the building violence and mayhem. This acceptance of failure and responsibility by the protagonists is important in the making of the legacy because this becomes the pinnacle of their true masculinity. Rather than fight his destiny, Gilgamesh accepts it, and becomes one of the greatest kings of his time, and “none will leave a monument for generations to come to compare to his” (Sandars 118). His legacy is achieved through his growth as a not only a leader, but as a human being. He channels his masculinity for the good of his people, rather than for the destruction of others.

In the end, where does masculinity lead these two protagonists? How do their masculine antagonizing companions lead them astray, but eventually back on track? Gilgamesh and Enkidu were brothers of the best and worst kind: best in that they are perfect companions, “stormy heart for stormy heart,” and worst in that their combined masculinity wrought incredible havoc until Enkidu’s demise (Sandars 62). But without Enkidu, Gilgamesh would not have been pulled out of his original rut and would never had experienced his eventually enlightening journey for immortality. Gilgamesh fulfilled his prophecy as a great king and held himself to a high standard of strength, loyalty, and wisdom until his death. And while the idea of fulfilling a legacy translates into the more modern *Fight Club*, the idea of doing so with honor and loyalty is lost. The narrator may have gained wisdom, but he wasn’t able to grow from Tyler like Gilgamesh did from Enkidu—the narrator and Tyler, by the end of the book, are still very much connected and dependent of each other, and Tyler still has a destructive job to do. Their legacy has not yet been achieved, and until the narrator can rid himself of the madman inside his own body, he can never achieve the true masculine legacy that will come from wisdom and acceptance.
Works Cited

