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Essay Assignment

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Jack Skellington and Gilgamesh: Cultural Immortality

Buried within the ancient text of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and the grotesque scenes of Tim Burton's *The Nightmare Before Christmas* are striking parallels between the main characters of each story. These similar roles create comparable storylines, each of which feature journeys for a type of immortality. The Babylonian epic begins with King Gilgamesh of Uruk, who torments his own subjects for sport. To the relief of his people, he meets the equally-strong wild man, Enkidu, and the two become best friends. Sadly, as divine punishment for slaying the Bull of Heaven, Enkidu dies. Devastated, Gilgamesh journeys to find a former mortal known to have achieved eternal life: Utnapishtim. Despite his efforts, Gilgamesh is unable to attain immortality; yet, he gains a form of symbolic immortality by realizing the work he has contributed to the foundation of Uruk (Sandars, 1972).

The Nightmare Before Christmas, on the other hand, is an American stop-motion film. Its protagonist is Jack Skellington, the Pumpkin King of Halloween Town. Although Jack is the master of nightmarish spectacles, he grows bored with the mundane repetition of Halloween, deciding that he would like to become Santa Claus. He is aided in this quest by the manmade ragdoll, Sally, whose efforts facilitate his rescue of Santa Claus from the villain's clutches. Only upon failing his original goal to become a master of Christmas does the protagonist realize his true purpose as the King of Halloween (Elfman & Burton, 1993). Jack's misguided quest to create a Halloween-style Christmas

that will leave an everlasting impression upon the children of the world is noticeably reminiscent of events in the aforementioned Babylonian epic. This reminiscence is particularly notable when comparing the characters of Enkidu and Sally, Utnapishtim and Santa Claus, and Gilgamesh and Jack.

In spite of her delicate existence as a sentient ragdoll, Sally plays a significantly parallel part in *The Nightmare Before Christmas* when compared to the animalistic Enkidu in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. Secretly in love with Jack Skellington, she refers to him as her “dear friend” (Elfman & Burton, 1993). She goes as far as to give him a Santa Claus costume to help him achieve his dreams of ruling Christmas. Perhaps the most iconic scene in the film is the closing scene, wherein Jack and Sally realize that they were essentially created for each other and are “simply meant to be” (Elfman & Burton, 1993).

Likewise, when Gilgamesh describes a dream he experiences about Enkidu, he mentions adoring him as a wife and treating him as an equal (Sandars, 1972). Although Enkidu sadly passes away, he and Sally play a virtually identical role of helpmeet to the hero. For example, Sally is pained by Jack’s miserable boredom and agrees to aid him in creating a Halloween Town Christmas (Elfman & Burton, 1993). This is comparable to Enkidu’s assistance in Gilgamesh’s ambitious attack on Humbaba, the guardian of the Cedar Forest (Sandars, 1972). More striking, however, are their reactions to the protagonists’ actions. While Sally’s love for Jack ensures her cooperation, she believes that his plans to direct Christmas are wrong. As Jack flies away with his skeleton reindeer to deliver ghoulish gifts, Sally makes the statement, “I sense there’s something in the wind that feels like tragedy’s at hand. And though I’d like to stand by him...can’t shake

this feeling that I have” (Elfman & Burton, 1993). Her lamentation reveals that, while she desires to support Jack, she knows that his misguided actions are harmful.

Swayed by a similar adoration for Gilgamesh, Enkidu guides his friend to the Cedar Forest. During the clash with Humbaba, he cries, “My friend, Humbaba, guardian of the Forest...finish him, slay him, do away with his power! Humbaba, the forest guardian: finish him, slay him, do away with his power, before (Ellil) the foremost learns, and the great gods become angry with us” (Sandars, 1972). This quotation is evidence of the fact that Enkidu believes that Gilgamesh’s actions are wrong. Nonetheless, his love for Gilgamesh outweighs his guilt—a remarkable reflection of Sally’s emotions. Sally and Enkidu’s roles are harmful to their own characters, as Sally is held hostage by the villain, Oogie Boogie and Enkidu is killed by Humbaba’s death curse (Elfman & Burton, 1993; Sandars, 1972). However, devoid of these characters, Jack and Gilgamesh could not proceed with their quests for immortality. Therefore, regardless of their aesthetic diversities, Sally and Enkidu fill essentially identical, essential gaps within their storylines.

In addition to the hero’s helpmeet, *The Nightmare Before Christmas* and *The Epic of Gilgamesh* include “the hero’s idol” role, which is played by Santa Claus and Utnapishtim respectively. Upon accidentally stumbling into Christmas Town, Jack beholds the incredible holiday and finds himself obsessed with the idea of Santa Claus. He explains this during one of the film’s songs, saying, “Christmastime is buzzing in my skull...will it let me be? I cannot tell.” This is followed by, “You know I think this Christmas thing is not as tricky as it seems. And why should they have all the fun? It should belong to anyone! Not anyone, in fact, but me!” (Elfman & Burton, 1993). This

scene is reminiscent of the depression Gilgamesh suffers subsequent to Enkidu's death. Recalling that he is one-third mortal, he desires an escape from death. As he hopelessly wanders through the wilderness, he mutters, "Grief has entered my innermost being; I am afraid of death and so I roam open country. I shall take the road and go quickly to see Utnapishtim, son of Ubara-Tutu." Gilgamesh decides that, by becoming like Utnapishtim, he will defeat his debilitating fear of his own mortality (Sandars, 1972). These analyses reveal that Santa Claus and Utnapishtim act as equal functions in their stories, each manifesting possible remedies for the protagonists' emotional turmoil.

Unfortunately for the protagonists, their schemes prove to be misguided. Gilgamesh fails Utnapishtim's test to avoid sleep as well as his excursion to use the youth-restoring plant. He is then forced to return to Uruk empty-handed (Sandars, 1972). Similarly, Jack is reprimanded by Santa Claus for his unsuccessful takeover of Christmas. Despite this disappointment, Santa Claus gifts Halloween Town with snow. He wishes the citizens a Happy Halloween to remind Jack of his true purpose in life, just as Utnapishtim urges Gilgamesh to clean himself and resume his role as King of Uruk (Elfman & Burton, 1993; Sandars, 1972). As the two adventures come to a close, Santa Claus and Utnapishtim are thus successful mentors for Jack and Gilgamesh, illustrating the ridiculousness of their original plans and helping them to unlock their full potentials.

The third reflection of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* characters and plot in Tim Burton's *The Nightmare Before Christmas* is displayed by the protagonists: Jack Skellington and Gilgamesh. As the son of the goddess Ninsun and King Lugalbanda, Gilgamesh is the partially-divine King of Uruk. The Babylonian author describes him as follows: "In Uruk, the Sheepfold he would walk about, show himself superior, his head held high like a wild

bull.” His boredom of being unchallenged leads him to constantly bludgeon the men and rape the women (Sandars, 1972). Although Jack Skellington is not abusive, he is the skeleton King of Halloween Town. He is the personification of Halloween, calling himself “the master of fright and a demon of light.” Consequently, he is depressed by the lack of challenge in his life, claiming, “Yet year after year, it’s the same routine, and I grow so weary of the sound of screams.” This sense of worthlessness leads him to neglect his subjects by leaving to seek excitement (Elfman & Burton, 1993). It is this crucial characteristic of dissatisfaction that ultimately drives the desires and goals of Jack and Gilgamesh.

More importantly, however, is the conclusion these figures reach upon failing their lofty objectives. After creating a gruesome batch of Christmas presents, Jack and his skeleton sleigh team visit the people of earth. Horrified by the gifts, the military destroys Jack’s sleigh and, consequently, any hopes he had of becoming Santa Claus. Jack is severely depressed by this catastrophe, considering hiding from the world for all eternity. As he ponders his mistakes, however, the hero realizes that his efforts were genuine. While he enjoyed his momentary hope of becoming the King of Christmas, he states, “That’s right, I *am* the Pumpkin King! And I just can’t wait until next Halloween!” (Elfman & Burton, 1993).

In a similar fashion, Gilgamesh is distraught when he loses the youth-restoring plant to a snake. As the boatman Urshanabi ferries him back to his city, his sorrow is abruptly replaced by pride in the following quotation: “Go up on the wall of Uruk, Urshanabi, and walk around. Inspect the foundation platform and scrutinize the brickwork! Testify that its bricks are baked bricks and that the Seven Councilors must

have laid its foundations!” (Sandars, 1972). Gazing at the city walls he constructed with his own hands, Gilgamesh finally appreciates his role as the King of Uruk. By helping in the foundation of this civilization, he realizes that he can achieve cultural rather than literal immortality—a striking reflection of Jack’s decision to revel in his title of “Pumpkin King.” It is therefore apparent, when comparing the two characters, that Jack and Gilgamesh experience equal unrest, goals, and satisfaction proceeding failure.

To casual viewers, the gothic charm of *The Nightmare Before Christmas* and the ancient thrill of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* seem utterly incongruous. When subject to deeper analysis, however, the concordant nature of these two stories is striking. As illustrated in the aforementioned passages, Sally and Enkidu each serve as the heroes’ true companions who strive to help them achieve their dreams. Regardless of their loyalty, Sally and Enkidu inwardly acknowledge the foolishness of Jack and Gilgamesh’s endeavors (Elfman & Burton, 1993; Sandars, 1972). Additionally, Santa Claus and Utnapishtim represent the heroes’ ultimate goals, which prove to be unattainable (Elfman & Burton, 1993; Sandars, 1972). Finally, the protagonists, Jack and Gilgamesh, are remarkably similar, possessing analogous dissatisfaction, desires, and eventual revelations. These resemblances aid in guiding the tales toward similar outcomes, which unearth an intriguing observation—the observation that the seemingly opposite ancient East and modern West appear to value the concept of cultural immortality over literal immortality (Elfman & Burton, 1993; Sandars, 1972).

The stories point out that Jack and Gilgamesh are doomed to fail in their attempts to transform into entities that they are not destined to become. Each hero is born with an original purpose. In this case, they are the King of Uruk and the King of Halloween

(Elfman & Burton, 1993; Sandars, 1972). While Gilgamesh cannot avoid death and Jack cannot immortalize himself as the master of Christmas, the heroes can earn greatness by working to develop their cities. This greatness will then cause them to be remembered by the civilizations they helped to shape. In closing, the message that has transcended eastern cultures to western cultures is that it is futile to pursue a divine existence. Immortality is gained, not through supernatural abilities, but by leaving one's mark on his or her culture.

References

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