

Perseus, Gilgamesh, and Paul Atreides: Three Mythological Heroes

The hero motif is as ancient as the human race itself. Every religion, every philosophy, every way of life has some sort of great person to look up to, reverence, or fear. This touches on our desires to see and be something greater than what we are right now. Oftentimes this hero becomes a king due to his persistence. In ancient Mesopotamia, the greatest hero was Gilgamesh, ruler of Uruk and seeker of eternal life. Greece gives us, among others, the hero-king Perseus, who goes on great quests to save damsels and destroy monsters. There are many examples of a hero in American literature, but there are few who, in my opinion, rate up there with the ancients. One of these is Paul Atreides (aka Muad'dib) from the *Dune* novels, who goes out to avenge his father's death and then take over the universe some twenty millennia hence. These three men are much alike despite the different times in which their story was written. I shall analyze their stories and argue that Gilgamesh is mostly an ancient-type hero, Perseus is ancient with modern elements, and that Paul Atreides, despite the recent composition of his *mythos* and mostly modern elements, has many "ancient hero" characteristics as well.

The Mesopotamian hero-king Gilgamesh is an "ancient hero" *par excellence*. Although he only scores a 15 on Raglan's scale of heroic elements (Stoddard, CLT 3378 Lecture 8), what Gilgamesh has he has in abundance. He is all about doing mighty deeds, getting out there and "making something of himself", and achieving immortality. His goal is glorious battles, conquest, and being remembered for generations to come through retelling the stories of his many triumphs. For most of the story, he could not give a whit about whether he does good for people or evil; in fact, he begins the tale as a tyrant, murderer, and lecher. (Stoddard, CLT3378 Lecture 9) The very definition of an ancient hero is one who is "fundamentally self-centered", is greater than the common man, and has *all* characteristics of humanity in abundance, whether good or bad. (Stoddard 8) Gilgamesh is, therefore, a great example of this. He does not finally learn the error of his ways until his best friend (Enkidu) dies, he seeks the key true immortality from the only man (Utanapishtam) who has ever achieved it, and is finally put in his place by the goddess Ishtar in a disguised form. He is told something along the line of "You will not

obtain full immortality, but the best way to live on is to live a *good* life and raise a family, and it is by these descendants that your name will live on forever.” Even here the goal is continuing one’s line, but in a more subdued and less selfish way. (Stoddard 9)

The great Greek legend of Perseus is another excellent example of an ancient hero, and on the Raglan scale he is above Gilgamesh with a score of 18. Perseus, again, is seeking glory and power. He does not begin with this as Gilgamesh does, he must first survive attempts on his life as a baby (with the help of the gods), a near-anonymous exile in a far-off land, and then must start from the beginning and forge his way to the kingship. Perseus is *somewhat* less self-centered than Gilgamesh, as he works hard to save people from evil monsters and kings, even if it is so *he* can take control. He is one of the early rescuers of the proverbial “damsel in distress” (Andromeda) who is in her predicament because of the actions of her parents, thereby combining the most common reasons for the “helpless, beautiful woman” to be in dire straits. Perseus though is not content to save her, marry her, and live happily ever after, but he wants his throne and glory. Though leaving one throne and driven from another, he ends up trying again and found the great kingdom of Mycenae, whence his descendants (or at least successors) will lead the Greek armies against Troy in the future. (Stoddard 8)

Paul Atreides begins as more of a purely ancient hero. His desire is to avenge his father’s death, reclaim his father’s throne, and punish those who took those things away. Atreides (also known by his adopted name of Muad’dib) fulfills 16 of Raglan’s characteristics without dispute, and fulfills four more based on how one interprets them. Paul must face evil conspiracies against his family, an unforgiving desert world with monstrous creatures beyond anything humans have seen before, and finally his own destiny as the “chosen one” who will lead humanity into a new age. His goals change from those of a man intent on revenge and conquest to one who wants to take over and lead humanity into a golden age of peace and order. (Herbert, *passim*)

Now comes the ogre-father figure, another ever-present element in a hero myth. Gilgamesh had Enkidu, his onetime opponent and then erstwhile friend who accompanied him on his journey. Granted, Enkidu is not by any means a father, but by definition the “role of the Ogre-father is simply this: to get the hero-to-be out of his comfortable surroundings and inspire (or force) him to pursue his heroic calling.” (Stoddard, Dear

Students) Enkidu certainly qualifies for this, for he is the one who informs Gilgamesh of the location of the forest dwelling of Humbaba when Gilgamesh is pouting about not having any monuments or the like. (Sandars 70-71) Even Enkidu's death sets Gilgamesh out on his quest for eternal life. (Sandars 91ff)

Perseus' ogre-father figure is easy, for he is his maternal grandfather and is, well, something of an ogre (personality-wise at least). Acrisius, father of Perseus' mother Danae, seeks to destroy his daughter and grandson by casting them into the sea. This of course sends Perseus off to his new home, and eventually on his quest to take the throne that rightfully belongs to him. On the way he also eliminates another ogre-father, Polydectes, whose tyranny pushes him to fight to overthrow him, again pushing him to do his great and mighty deeds. (Stoddard 8)

Paul Atreides' chief ogre-father figure is the evil Baron Vladimir Harkonnen, whose house has been enemy to the noble Atreides for centuries and who seeks to destroy his enemy and his house once and for all. Of course, the head of the house of Duke Leto and his son is Paul, so they must be put out of the way. Baron Harkonnen forces the Duke's physician, Dr. Yueh, to betray him, and is backed up by the troops of Shaddam IV, Padishah-Emperor of the Known Universe. (Herbert, 13ff) Shaddam himself is something of a lesser ogre-father, due to his conspiracy with Baron Harkonnen (which he did so not out of animosity but "necessity"), (Herbert 203) but also for his attempt later in the book to subdue the planet Arrakis when Paul (now named Muad'dib by his new Fremen family) is on the verge of taking over. (Herbert 456-60) Both of these men, whose conspiracy against Paul's father was inspired by genuine hatred (Harkonnen) or by convenience (the Emperor), force Paul into the desert where he becomes something greater than either of them can dream, and becomes a virtual Messiah to the Fremen people, with abilities that no man has ever had before as the promised *Kwizatz-Haderach*: the Bene Gesserit monastic order's messiah for whom they had been selectively breeding for some ninety generations. (Herbert 424-9, 443-4, 477-8)

Now on to the general themes of these stories. For Gilgamesh, the main theme is obtaining immortality in any fashion or by any means possible. Every monster he slays, every journey he goes on, and every person he meets are to him steps on the path to becoming immortal through a change of nature or through monuments and shrines. When

the story ends, he learns that a “regular life”, descendants, and wise rule and legacy as king are the means by which he can come as close as possible to his unattainable goal. In keeping with a common hero myth, Gilgamesh is also the son of a god.(Stoddard 9)

Perseus starts off his heroic career as a proverbial “baby in a box” as his grandfather tries to dispose of him. For Perseus, the theme is doing great deeds for their own sake, but this is used in many cases to right the wrongs of the world. Though he is an ancient hero *par excellence*, he also has some modernistic elements in his fighting to save people from monsters and evil rulers. He becomes something of an avenger and the gods’ instrument of justice against some wicked personages, such as Acrisius, and the savior of those in distress, such as the Princess Andromeda. Though Perseus is by no means a saint, he is still perhaps a more admirable man and hero than Gilgamesh or Herakles, for instance. He goes on to take a throne of his own, marry the daughter of a king, and then to establish his own kingdom. (Stoddard 8)

Dune also sees many “ancient-hero” type themes. Much of Paul’s destiny as the *Kwizatz-Haderach* is to bring a new order and a new way of life to the human race spread throughout the galaxy. He is the aforementioned one who can go beyond normal human limits and can also see the future. (Herbert 193ff) (This qualifies as a fantastic journey indeed!) When Paul takes the Water of Life (which no male and few females can drink and survive), this becomes his journey to the land of the dead, as he teeters on the edge of death for days on end. During that time his visions become greater and greater, and when he awakes he has conquered death, so to speak, and proven himself as the chosen one. (Herbert 437ff) Finally, the end of the book sees Muad’dib and his Fremen forces virtually take control of nature itself (Herbert 447-455) to overcome the armies of not only Baron Harkonnen (who is killed by Paul’s sister Alia), but of Emperor Shaddam himself. (Herbert 466-469) Paul himself destroys the house of the ogre-father entirely when he defeats Feyd-Rautha, the Baron’s nephew, in a fight to the death. (Herbert 480-6) In the end, the Emperor must turn not only his throne over to the new *Emperor* Paul Atreides, but also gives his eldest daughter in marriage to seal and legitimize the deal. (Herbert 487-9).

After having analyzed the hero myths of old and the stories of heroes today, one cannot help but be challenged in his view of what a hero is. In a way, the common view

today is not all that different from the ancient view; though we do not call a modern hero a god or demigod, and while we consider any bad actions by the hero at best a liability and at worst a disqualification, we still consider many of our “heroes” to be so much greater than we are that we might as well be offering sacrifices and hymns to them. All the time one sees athletes, soldiers, actors, and the like fawned over like an ancient would fawn over a god.

In my own feeling, a hero is someone who is first of all fully human. If one is a god, demon, or angel, their deeds are not as great. Humans have weaknesses, and a hero is one who overcomes these to do great things for the general good. A true hero recognizes his weaknesses and troubles and seeks to overcome them rather than to ignore them. A hero is willing to put his life on the line for a greater purpose. Finally, a hero is something we can all ascribe to, not based on birthright, but on dedication and will.

As one sees in studying mythology and carrying on what he has learned into other fields, the hero mythos is common to all humanity, no matter the age, culture, religion, race, etc. Each author or culture may make the hero myth their own with distinctive, but the story (or a real person on whom the story is based) is judge based on several preconceived notions. As we have seen, Gilgamesh based what he did on becoming immortal by bringing glory and praise to himself. Perseus is similar, although he is often used in a more modern sense to fight tyrants and save people. Paul Atreides seeks to make humanity better and develop it further, yet again he has many elements of the ancient hero that go with him on his quest. All taken together, one sees that whether one is a hero in 2500 BC or in 10191 AG (about 20000 AD), that hero will be part of something that has been with humanity since before recorded history and will continue to be with us as long as the human race itself.

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