Comparative Themes in the Epic of Gilgamesh and Sappho

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Introduction

The stories of Gilgamesh and Sappho are both part of the forgotten literature. The pieces of their stories were mostly lost; however, some of the poems of Sappho and Gilgamesh were discovered lately. Gilgamesh is the central part of the Akkadian poem “Epic of Gilgamesh.” He was a demigod who was a defender of the city of Uruk and who, after the death of his friend Enkidu, traveled to meet Utnapishtim, the builder of the giant ark, to survive the world-destroying flood. He is also considered a king, part man, part God, who reigned between 2800 and 2500 BC in the city of Sumer (Mason, The Epic of Gilgamesh). The Greek poet Sappho was known for her lyrical poetry. Most of her poetry was lost, but one of her poems, “Ode to Aphrodite,” was found in full form. She belonged to a wealthy family of Lesbos and was exiled to Sicily in 600 BC. Her poems discuss her love for a man, Phaon, whose death devastated Sappho. This essay aims to compare the story of Gilgamesh with Sappho and will discuss how they are similar and different from each other.

Discussion

Gilgamesh and Sappho differ in their behavior of kindness. Gilgamesh’s character was that of a protector and caretaker of the city. He was also ruthless and harsh toward those who disobeyed him. He built walls, temples, and towers in the city to protect it from outsiders and cultivated lands with orchards and fields. He was known for his cruelty and punishing his prisoners. He also raped his prisoners and exploited their poverty. He forced his people to build temples and towers and punished them. In contrast, Sappho’s character was loving, and she was liked on the island of Lesbos. She believed being good can bring peace to the world: “What is beautiful is good, and who is good will soon be beautiful.” (Sappho). She was endowed with the gift of love and poetry. When she left her home island, she brought back an amazing man named Phaon. Sappho was treated like a queen on the Island.

Both Gilgamesh and Sappho were given the gift of love by the Gods. When the Gods heard the plea of his poor subjects, They made a man named Enkidu and sent him to Gilgamesh. Enkidu was an amazing man like Gilgamesh, and he became Gilgamesh’s friend. The poem mentions what he thought about love, “I learned that love is wrung from our inmost heart until only the loved one is and

we are not.” (Gilgamesh). Enkidu was an important character in Gilgamesh’s story. He lived with the animals, and animals adored him. Enkidu betrayed Gilgamesh’s friendship when God sent a prostitute to him in the woods, and he slept with her. The goddess of love, Ishtar, also offered herself to Gilgamesh, but he rejected her, and she asked her father to punish him. Sappho received the love of Phaon, an amazing young man and an admirer of Sappho’s poems. Her loving self is reflected in her poetry. “Love shook my heart, like the wind on the mountain, rushing over the oak trees.” “Love is a cunning weaver of fantasies and fables.” (Sappho). Sappho and Phaon met when Phaon visited Olympia to take part in the games, and they fell in love.

Gilgamesh and Sappho were betrayed by their lovers. Gilgamesh, who considered Enkidu a partner and a good friend, was punished by God due to his cruelty. They sent to Enkidu a beautiful prostitute who filled Enkidu’s heart with lust and offered to sleep with him. Enkidu spoke to the harlot: “Come, Shamhat, take me away with you” (Gilgamesh). Enkidu betrays Gilgamesh when he learns the true meaning of being a man from the prostitute and understands his relationship with Gilgamesh. Sappho, on the other hand, was fair and loyal in her relationship, but she was also betrayed by her lover Phaon, who secretly loved a slave, Mellita. Sappho found out about the betrayal when Phaon once murmured Mellita’s name in his sleep. The betrayal shook her, and this can be seen in her lyrical poem, “Love Shook My Heart” (Sappho).

The difference between Gilgamesh and Sappho lies in the fact that they had different concepts about being old and dying. Gilgamesh hated being old and found aging to be an end to life. He traveled the world to find a cure for aging and went to find Utnapishtim, who survived the flood destroying humankind. Gilgamesh wanted to find a method to stay immortal and young forever. Utnapishtim did not tell him the secret of staying immortal. It is mentioned in the poem “Gilgamesh, where are you hurrying to? You will never find that life for which you are looking…” (Gilgamesh). In contrast, when Sappho discovered she was old, she accepted the fact and accepted it as a process of life. Gilgamesh was selfish in looking for a way to immortality, and Sappho, in contrast, wanted to understand the process of life, and this helped her accept death more easily. She wrote in one of her poems, “Death is ill; ’tis thus the Gods decide: For had death been a boon, the Gods had died.” (Sappho).

Conclusion

Gilgamesh and Sappho were similar in various ways. They both were amazingly beautiful and were endowed with the gift of love from the Gods. They both got betrayed by their lovers, and the deaths of their lovers left them broken. Gilgamesh and Sappho were different in their kindness level. Gilgamesh ruled over his people with cruelty and savagery, but Sappho was loved and treated as a queen by the people of her island. They also differ in their concepts about aging and mortality. Whereas Gilgamesh hated death and traveled to find a way to stay immortal, Sappho accepted death and considered it a process of life, and she was happy at the end of her life. Gilgamesh understood at the end of his life that he built a magnificent city and considered this achievement the closest thing to immortality.

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