Compare and Contrast, the Monsters from the Epic of Gilgamesh

With the Odyssey
Myths are powerful because what they tell us beyond the physical origins of a place or of peoples is the core and spirit of that culture itself and of its evolution from imagination to reality and how much of the elements in those stories and myths, are still a part of that present reality.

Such is the influence of such myths as the Epic of Gilgamesh and Homer’s The Odyssey. Both works which are from different cultural backgrounds and time periods actually share more commonalities than one thinks. Both myths draw on cultural, historical and religious themes to create narratives that outline the aspirations and even fears of the people who made them.

Starting with the Epic of Gilgamesh, we discover that this epic which is among the earliest known literary works from the ancient Mesopotamian region gives us the familiar story of a singular hero who battles the odds to find both truth and knowledge in the end.

This hero is a mythological king named Gilgamesh whose story is found in a series of Sumerian legends and poem which scholars believed were letter put together collectively into a single long poem, the most complete version of which is preserved in 7th century Assyrian king Ashurbanipal’s library written in twelve clay tablets. Because it was collected as such, much of the story’s flow and narrative is broken and varying in some places, but the essential story remains the same.

King Gilgamesh is the ruler of Uruk and the greatest king on earth, but he is a flawed ruler because his people complain that he is too harsh and sleeps with brides before their husbands do. To remedy the situation, the goddess of creation Aruru creates Enkidu who by all descriptions is half-man, half-beast. One can say that the first real “monster” in this epic is Enkidu who actually needed to be trained after he was created in order to be civilized. But he becomes Gilgamesh’s best friend and ally; providing the balance in a friendship that saw
Gilgamesh change his ways. Together, they set forth to battle the real monsters on a journey of adventure and discovery.

The first monster they encounter is one that Gilgamesh purposely chose to slay simply for the glory of it. But before they could battle the demon Humbaba, guardian of a great Cedar Forest, Gilgamesh had to make numerous preparations including asking for approval of what he had set out to do. Why so? If the monster was an outright abomination, they could have simply gone ahead and killed it. But the monster was a guardian and even as it was monstrous, it served a useful purpose. But before they could finally kill it, Gilgamesh and Enkidu argue and hesitate until Gilgamesh finally gives in, but not before the monster utters a curse for both of them. The next “monster” they battle is not really a monster, but the “bull of heaven”, sent as a means of revenge by the goddess Ishtar whose advances were spurned by Gilgamesh.

The slaying of this divine beast as well as the monster Humbaba convinces the gods to punish the two friends and Enkidu is struck with a fatal illness.

Stricken with grief, Gilgamesh sets out to find immortality for himself, a quest that would bring him in contact with numerous monsters, and the last of which he inadvertently slays (the stone-giants who accompanied the ferryman Urshanabi) without knowing that he would use them to cross the deadly Waters of Death.

In one version of the tablet, he fails all the tasks that would have granted him immortality; a lesson that the ancient Sumerians seem to be saying, is the reality that all men must face. In another version, Enkidu is restored to him although it doesn’t say in what form. It is clear here to us that the monsters that Gilgamesh and Enkidu battled with were creatures that were only monstrous in form.
But both served greater purposes than simply being monstrous for horror’s sake; Humbaba guarded a great Cedar forest; the “bull of heaven” was a but a “pet” of the gods and the Stone-giants were the only beings who could cross the Waters of Death without being harmed. But still, the two friends went on to slay them; an act which we now realize to be simply meaningless masculine sport. And they were punished for it; Enkidu was struck with a fatal illness and Gilgamesh had to learn the hard way that immortality can be achieved not by the slaying of monsters who didn’t actually harmed you, but through good deeds.

In Odyssey we see the same themes and narrative threads, a fact which some scholars say is due in part that this epic Greek poem by Homer may have in fact, been patterned after the Epic of Gilgamesh. The commonalities are not hard to miss; like Gilgamesh, the Greek hero Odysseus, fresh from their triumph at the fall of the city of Troy and eager to go home to his beloved island of Ithaca to be with his wife and son, blunders by way of being arrogant.

While just as flawed as Gilgamesh, Odysseus is nonetheless more intelligent and cunning; a trait that may have been useful in securing the fall of Troy as well as his escape from the various monsters that he encounters on his journey home, but for which also gave rise to his arrogance and pride; the very same elements that could have brought him home sooner.

The story of the Odyssey actually begins in the middle part where Odysseus is held captive in the goddess Calypso’s island where has been staying for the past 7 years. This giant daughter of the Titans has used her magic charms to make Odysseus forget his quest for home and is even considering the possibility of making him immortal to be her partner for eternity.

But the gods of Olympus intervene and Hermes is sent by Zeus to relay the sad news to Calypso that she must release Odysseus. Reluctantly, she agrees and provides him with all manner of provisions. But even as the gods had intervened to get him home, the gods also
interfere again to wreck his plans. His nemesis Poseidon throws him into a storm in which he is ship-wrecked and lands in the island of Scherie. There in the company of the islands rulers, Arete and Alcinous, he tells his tale of a journey where he had to battle gods and monsters.

First monster was the cyclop Polyphemus, a son of the sea god Poseidon who becomes Odysseus most bitter enemy when he blinds the giant’s only eye. While necessarily evil, Odysseus makes the mistake of flaunting his arrogance and identifying himself to the giant and thus earning Poseidon’s ire. After having failed to use help provided by Aeolus, master of the winds, Odysseus and his men stumble into the jaws of the Laestrygones; a tribe of giant cannibals. Only a single ship survives and Odysseus and his men stumble this time into a different kind of monster, the enchantress Circe who turns men into pigs. But through his charm, Circe falls in love with him and they are released to once more resume their journey.

Meeting some of the spirits of the underworld including his own mother, Odysseus meets as well the fallen warrior Agamemnon who auspiciously warns him about the dangers of women. One would have though of this warning as being in a physical sense, but when he and his men encounter more monsters on their way from Circe’s island, we are surprised to know that these “women” being referred to, are females in monsters forms.

First were the Sirens who were half-fish and half women who lured sailors to their deaths by singing songs in unearthly voices that made men forget everything. Wanting to hear those songs, Odysseus cleverly had himself tied up as the rest of his men plugged their ears with cotton and bees wax.

And after that, they had to pass the horribly grotesque sea monster Scylla who had six long necks tipped with wolf heads, each of which had three rows of sharp teeth. Her body consisted of twelve dog'slegs and a fish's tail. A former sea nymph transformed by the jealousy
of Circe, she was one of the children of the sea god Phorcys and either Hecate, Crataeis, Lamia or Ceto. Charybdis on the other hand was also a former sea-nymph, a naiad who was punished by Zeus for taking too much of the land to expand her father’s kingdom; she was thus turned into a monster with a huge mouth that sucked great amounts of water before spewing them out again creating dangerous whirlpools. Together with Scylla, they made sailors choose between them without the possibility of escape. But Odysseus manages to escape them and lands in Calypso’s island where he is again held captive by a female who presents him with a different kind of danger; that of forgetting his quest and his family because of feminine and sensual charms.

Compared to the monsters of Gilgamesh, the various creatures of the Odyssey remain for the most part, extensions of the Greek gods themselves who could not seem to avoid dipping their fingers into the affairs of men. Some of these monsters are not even monsters in the true sense of the word, but have been cast into their forms by the gods' propensity for assuming the most petty and superficial attributes and attitudes of men.

Some of these monsters such as the cyclop Polyphemus are offspring of the gods, as if to cast doubt on the supposed superiority of divine genes. Others such as the terrors of the deep, Scylla and Charybdis were once innocent and beautiful immortals who simply got on the wrong side of the more powerful Gods of Olympus. Beautiful and in human form, the cruelty of Circe and Calypso make them to be monsters, albeit beautiful ones. As extensions of the gods, they are used deliberately either to further the causes of the gods or of their favored mortals, or to be used to punish those who were against them. As such we have no sympathy for them and even feel pleased that they are defeated and banished forever.
http://classics.mit.edu/Homer/odyssey.html