Throughout history, eras are defined through how generations respond to crises. For example, “The Greatest Generation” refers to the people who fought in World War II and handled The Great Depression. Their efforts have been recognized throughout history and are known to have shaped America to how it is today. Similarly, America and the other nations throughout the world are facing a similar situation in which the decisions made will mold how we will be remembered throughout history. This situation, namely, is the COVID-19 pandemic that has managed to affect almost every crevice of modern life from the labor market to the household. While many frontline workers such as first responders and nurses are doing everything they can to minimize the severity of this situation, every other individual also has a job to self-quarantine, thus mitigating the spread of the coronavirus. Despite this situation, in a literal sense, being society’s first encounter in a long time in terms of mass quarantine and hysteria, there are many texts throughout history that have illustrated everything people today have been experiencing in a deeper sense. This essay will compare texts in the past to the situation people have been experiencing today. The first text, *Gilgamesh*, will be discussed through the lens of its defining of the human condition and mankind’s nature to defy it; this characteristic can be seen through the coronavirus scare. And the last text, *Hippocratic Writings*, will be discussed in terms of Hippocrates’ description of the obligations healthcare workers and people have to take care of one another. This would mainly include maintaining self-quarantine and wearing face masks to prevent further infection of COVID-19. Reading and learning about how texts in the past still hold relevance despite how unique the situation may be can provide one with a special feeling of solace. It means that, through the history of mankind, we have dealt with similar threats and we are not alone in our fear of the future, death, and in our altruism.

*Gilgamesh* is an epic that stands to be one of the oldest texts in human history; however, despite its old age, its story is riddled with many messages that reflect life today and our human condition. The epic tells an absorbing story of the journeys of king Gilgamesh who is one-third human and two-thirds divine. Throughout the story, the reader learns about how, despite the divine nature of Gilgamesh, still display human emotions such as fear and sorrow. For example, after killing a legendary beast eventually at the cost of the life of his best friend Enkidu, Gilgamesh weeps and fears for the death of his life as well:

Gilgamesh wept over Enkidu his friend,
bitterly he wept through the wilderness.

‘Must I die too? Must I be as lifeless
as Enkidu? How can I bear this sorrow
that gnaws at my belly, this fear of death
that relentlessly drives me onward? If only
I could find the one man whom the god made immortal,
I would ask him how to overcome death.’ (Mitchell 159)

On the surface, the text shows how much Gilgamesh cares for his best friend and how he does not want to meet a similar fate. However, on a deeper level, the epic is critiquing how Gilgamesh’s mortality that encompasses one-third of himself is showing to be a flaw. Even though he is mostly divine, his human characteristic of both fear and death overcomes him. This parallels to the modern world as many people fear falling victim to the coronavirus and hope for a vaccine. In the epic, Gilgamesh sees death as a disease alike to COVID-19 and embarks on a journey for a cure. On his journey, he meets a woman named Shiduri. Upon learning the intention behind Gilgamesh’s journey, Shiduri explains to him the futility of it all:
‘Humans are born, they live, they die,  
this is the order that the gods have decreed.  
But until the end comes, enjoy your life,  
spend it in happiness, not despair.  
Savor your food, make each of your days  
a delight, bathe and anoint yourself,  
wear bright clothes that are sparkling clear,  
let music and dancing fill your house,  
love the child who holds you by the hand  
and give your wife pleasure in your embrace.  
That is the best way for a man to live.’ (Mitchell 168-9)

Shiduri’s explanation to Gilgamesh is her description of the human condition. She implies that no matter how divine one is, if there is a trace of human in someone, they are subject to die and any effort to negate the fact is pointless. This is significant to Gilgamesh’s journey and to the lives of people in today’s society because the impermanence of life is what gives it meaning and gives us reason to cherish it. Similarly, with the state of society causing panic and the mass quarantine of entire nations, many people are met with the finitude of life. Conversely, because of quarantine, one could argue that people have learned to cherish what they have left in life not because of the limited time they have, but because of how it has made people closer together. Whether the quarantine has caused people to spend more time with their family or have them worry about those close to them, the death and endangerment of the recent pandemic has created a notion of appreciation for life to some similar to the journey Gilgamesh has embarked on. Moving on with Gilgamesh’s journey, he eventually finds a plant that can grant him immortality. However, while bringing this plant back to his home, the plant is stolen by a snake and Gilgamesh is robbed of his immortality:

Gilgamesh saw a pond of cool water.  
He left the plant on the ground and bathed.  
A snake smelled its fragrance, stealthily  
it crawled up and carried the plant away.  
As it disappeared, it cast off its skin. (Mitchell 197)

Again, while above the surface, this occurrence could be accredited to an unfortunate stroke of bad luck, this could also stand to reinforce the epic’s notion of the vanity behind human beings’ attempt to cheating their condition of death. But as discussed, the human condition is a necessary barrier set by life that can have humans understand its fragility and cherish it because of the fact.

The impermanence of life mentioned in texts like Gilgamesh can act as a disconcerting condition in the lives of some, but texts like Hippocratic Writings serve to discuss the obligations not only healthcare workers have but the responsibilities everyone has especially in a situation like the coronavirus outbreak. Hippocratic Writings is a collection of texts written by Hippocrates, also known as the Father of Medicine, that discusses many topics that relate to medicine: the responsibilities and characteristics a medical provider should have, certain medical cases Hippocrates has encounter. In his Oath, he describes the many responsibilities a medical practitioner must uphold: “I will use my power to help the sick to the best of my ability and judgement; I will abstain from harming or wrong any man by it” (Hippocrates 67). In the text, Hippocrates is setting up a personal contract future doctors must verbally sign. But on a deeper
level, these personal contracts stem from the social contracts created from death and disease. It is therefore right to assume that aside from medical practitioners that swear the Hippocratic oath, members of society must bear similar obligations and promises in that oath. In comparing it to the global pandemic, citizens have a societal contract to stay at home in self-quarantine to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Similar to how it is mentioned in Hippocrates’ Oath that one must “abstain from harming or wrong any man by it,” those staying in quarantine must follow this contract too. This also relates to wearing masks that cover droplets and prevent susceptibility of people. Since this oath is derived from the inherent need of the practice of healing by society, society in turn must return the favor by doing what it can to minimize the destruction the pandemic can inflict. This is because anybody refusing to stay in quarantine put those who cannot help but go outside in danger. Also, people who do not wear masks not only can get infected, but regardless of being asymptomatic or not could spread the virus too.

A common expression used in studying history is “history repeats itself.” While this is usually said in ironic effect to describe the propagating mistakes people have made in history, it can also be used to explain how people have solved problems and felt the same emotions as those in the present day. While the recent pandemic has caused effects novel to society in recent years, its substituents are factors people have experienced in the past. In this essay, we have seen how texts despite their age can relate to much of what is happening right now. In Gilgamesh, we see that the fear of death and the actions taken to prolong or prevent it has been around since the beginning of writing. On similar note, we see that in Hippocratic Writings, the obligations written by Hippocrates have extended to modern medical practitioners. But these responsibilities do not only reach out to those is health spheres, but they include anybody who has the influence to affect the lives of others. This recent COVID-19 pandemic has given everybody the responsibility to stay inside and self-quarantine to mitigate the increasing spread of the virus. Indeed, while many structural components of society seem to be in panic as we are experiencing unprecedented shocks in our economy and social shifts, knowing that people have experienced the same things lightens the overwhelming sense of change during this crisis.
Works Cited
