

Introduction

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* is an epic poem from Mesopotamia and is among the earliest known works of literature. Scholars believe that it originated as a series of Sumerian legends and poems about the protagonist of the story, Gilgamesh king of Uruk, which were fashioned into a longer Akkadian epic much later. The most complete version existing today is preserved on 12 clay tablets from the library collection of 7th-century BC Assyrian king Ashurbanipal. The epic was originally titled *He who Saw the Deep* (*Sha naqba īmuru*) or *Surpassing All Other Kings* (*Shūtur eli sharrī*), which are the first few words of the epic in different versions.

The story revolves around a relationship between Gilgamesh and his close male companion, Enkidu. Enkidu is a wild man created by the gods as Gilgamesh's equal to distract him from oppressing the citizens of Uruk. Together they undertake dangerous quests that incur the displeasure of the gods. Firstly, they journey to the Cedar Mountain to defeat Humbaba, its monstrous guardian. Later they kill the Bull of Heaven that the goddess Ishtar has sent to punish Gilgamesh for spurning her advances.

The latter part of the epic focuses on Gilgamesh's distressed reaction to Enkidu's death, which takes the form of a quest for immortality. Gilgamesh attempts to learn the secret of eternal life by undertaking a long and perilous journey to meet the immortal flood hero, Utnapishtim. Ultimately the poignant words addressed to Gilgamesh in the midst of his quest foreshadow the end result: "The life that you are seeking you will never find. When the gods created man they allotted to him death, but life they retained in their own keeping." Gilgamesh, however, was celebrated by posterity for his building achievements, and for bringing back long-lost cultic knowledge to Uruk as a result of his meeting with Utnapishtim. The story is widely read in translation, and the protagonist, Gilgamesh, has become an icon of popular culture.

History

Many original and distinct sources exist over a 2,000-year timeframe, but only the oldest and those from a late period have yielded significant enough finds to enable a coherent intro-translation. Therefore, the old Sumerian poems, and a later Akkadian version, which is now referred to as the standard edition, are the most frequently referenced. The standard edition is the basis of modern translations, and the old version only supplements the standard version when the lacunae — or gaps in the cuneiform tablet — are great.

Note that although revised versions based on newly discovered information have been published, the epic is not complete.^[1]

The earliest Sumerian poems are now considered to be distinct stories rather than constituting a single epic.^{[2]:45} They date from as early as the Third Dynasty of Ur (2150–2000 BC).^{[2]:41–42} The earliest Akkadian versions are dated to the early second millennium ^{[2]:45}, most likely in the eighteenth or seventeenth century BC, when one or more authors used existing literary material to form the epic of Gilgamesh.^[3] The "standard" Akkadian version,

consisting of 12 tablets, was edited by Sin-liqe-unninni sometime between 1300 and 1000 BC and was found in the library of Ashurbanipal in Nineveh.

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* was discovered by Hormuzd Rassam in 1853 and is widely known today. The first modern translation of the epic was published in the early 1870s by George Smith.^[4] More recent translations into English include one undertaken with the assistance of the American novelist John Gardner, and John Maier, published in 1984. In 2001, Benjamin Foster produced a reading in the Norton Critical Edition Series that fills in many of the blanks of the standard edition with previous material.

The most definitive ^[5] translation is contained in a two-volume critical work by Andrew George. This represents the fullest treatment of the standard edition material. George discusses at length the archaeological state of the material, provides a tablet-by-tablet exegesis, and furnishes a dual language side-by-side translation. This translation was also published in a general reader edition under the Penguin Classics imprint in 2000. In 2004, Stephen Mitchell released a controversial edition, which is his interpretation of previous scholarly translations into what he calls "a new English version", published by FreePress, a division of Simon and Schuster. The first direct Arabic translation from the original tablets was in the 1960s by the Iraqi archeologist Taha Baqir.

The discovery of artifacts (ca. 2600 BC) associated with Enmebaragesi of Kish, who is mentioned in the legends as the father of one of Gilgamesh's adversaries, has lent credibility to the historical existence of Gilgamesh.^{[2]:40-41}

Versions of the epic

Standard Akkadian version

The standard version was discovered by Austen Henry Layard in the library of Ashurbanipal in Nineveh in 1849. It was written in standard Babylonian, a dialect of Akkadian that was only used for literary purposes. This version was compiled by Sin-liqe-unninni sometime between 1300 and 1000 BC out of older legends.

The standard version and earlier old Babylonian version are differentiated based on the opening words, or incipit. The older version begins with the words "Surpassing all other kings", while the standard version's *incipit* is "He who saw the deep" (*ša nagba imuru*). The Akkadian word *nagbu*, "deep", is probably to be interpreted here as referring to "unknown mysteries".^[citation needed] However, Andrew George believes that it refers to the specific knowledge that Gilgamesh brought back from his meeting with Uta-Napishti (Utnapishtim): he gains knowledge of the realm of Ea, whose cosmic realm is seen as the fountain of wisdom.^[6] In general, interpreters feel that Gilgamesh was given knowledge of how to worship the gods, of why death was ordained for human beings, of what makes a good king, and of the true nature of how to live a good life. Utnapishtim, the hero of the flood myth, tells his story to Gilgamesh, which is related to the Babylonian Epic of Atrahasis.

The 12th tablet is appended to the epic representing a sequel to the original 11, and was most probably added at a later date. This tablet has commonly been omitted until recent years. It has the startling narrative inconsistency of

introducing Enkidu alive, and bears seemingly little relation to the well-crafted and finished 11-tablet epic; indeed, the epic is framed around a ring structure in which the beginning lines of the epic are quoted at the end of the 11th tablet to give it at the same time circularity and finality. Tablet 12 is actually a near copy of an earlier Sumerian tale, a prequel, in which Gilgamesh sends Enkidu to retrieve some objects of his from the Underworld, but Enkidu dies and returns in the form of a spirit to relate the nature of the Underworld to Gilgamesh.

Content of the standard version tablets

Tablet one

The story starts with the introduction of Gilgamesh, king of Uruk. Gilgamesh, two-thirds god and one-third man, oppresses the city's citizens who cry out to the gods for help. For the young women of Uruk this oppression takes the form of a *droit de seigneur* — or "lord's right" — to newly married brides on their wedding night. For the young men it is conjectured that Gilgamesh exhausted them through games, tests of strength, or perhaps forced labour on building projects. The gods respond to the citizens' plea for intervention by creating an equal to Gilgamesh who will distract him from these objectionable activities. They create a primitive man, Enkidu, who is covered in hair and lives in the wild with the animals. He is spotted by a trapper, as he has been uprooting traps and thus ruining the trapper's livelihood. The trapper tells Gilgamesh of the man and seduces Enkidu with a skilled harlot. His seduction by Shamhat, a temple prostitute, is the first step in his civilization, and she proposes to take him back to Uruk after making love for seven days. Gilgamesh, meanwhile, has been having dreams that relate to the imminent arrival of a new companion.

Tablet two

Shamhat brings Enkidu to the shepherds' camp where he is introduced to a human diet and becomes the camp's night watchman. Learning from a passing stranger about Gilgamesh's treatment of new brides, Enkidu is incensed and travels to Uruk to intervene at a wedding. When Gilgamesh attempts to visit the wedding chamber, Enkidu blocks his way and they fight. After a fierce battle, Enkidu acknowledges Gilgamesh's superior strength and they become friends. Gilgamesh proposes that they journey together to the Cedar Forest to slay the monstrous demi-god Humbaba, in order to gain fame and renown. Despite warnings from both Enkidu and the council of elders, Gilgamesh will not be deterred.

Tablet three

The elders give Gilgamesh advice for his journey. Gilgamesh visits his mother, the goddess Ninsun, who seeks the support and protection of the sun-god Shamash for the two adventurers. Ninsun adopts Enkidu as her son, Gilgamesh leaves instructions for governing Uruk in his absence, and they embark on their quest.

Tablet four

Gilgamesh and Enkidu journey to the Cedar Forest. Every few days they make camp on a hill or mountain to perform a dream ritual. Gilgamesh has five terrifying dreams that involve falling mountains, thunderstorms, wild bulls, and a thunderbird that breathes fire. Despite similarities between the dream figures and earlier descriptions of Humbaba, Enkidu interprets all of the dreams as good omens, denying that any of the frightening images represent the forest guardian. As they approach the cedar mountain, they hear Humbaba bellowing and have to encourage each other not to be afraid.

Tablet five

The heroes enter the cedar forest and their fears return. Humbaba, the ogre-guardian of the Cedar Forest, insults and threatens them. He accuses Enkidu of betrayal, then vows to disembowel Gilgamesh and feed his flesh to the birds. Gilgamesh is afraid, but with some encouraging words from Enkidu the battle commences. The mountains quake with the tumult and the sky turns black. The god Shamash sends his 13 winds to bind Humbaba and he is captured. The monster pleads for his life, and Gilgamesh pities him. Enkidu, however, is enraged and asks Gilgamesh to kill the beast. Humbaba curses them both and Gilgamesh dispatches him with a blow to the neck. The two heroes cut down many cedars, including a gigantic tree that Enkidu plans to fashion into a gate for the temple of Enlil. They build a raft and return home along the Euphrates with the giant tree and the head of Humbaba.

Tablet six

Gilgamesh rejects the advances of the goddess Ishtar because of her mistreatment of previous lovers like Dumuzi. Ishtar asks her father Anu to send Gugalanna the "Bull of Heaven" to avenge her. When Anu rejects her complaints, Ishtar threatens to raise the dead who will "outnumber the living" and "devour them". Anu becomes frightened and gives in. The bull of heaven is led to Uruk by Ishtar, and causes widespread devastation. It dries up the reed beds and marshes, then dramatically lowers the level of the Euphrates river. It opens up huge pits in the ground that swallow 300 men. Enkidu and Gilgamesh attack and slay the beast without any divine assistance and offer up its heart to Shamash. When Ishtar cries out in agony, Enkidu hurls one of the bull's hindquarters at her. The city of Uruk celebrates, but Enkidu has an ominous dream.

Tablet seven

In Enkidu's dream, the gods decide that one of the heroes must die for slaying the Bull of Heaven and Humbaba. Despite the protestations of Shamash, Enkidu is marked for death. Enkidu considers the great door he fashioned for Enlil's temple, and curses it. He also curses Shamhat and the trapper for removing him from the wild. Then Shamash speaks from heaven, reminding Enkidu of how Shamhat fed and clothed him, and introduced him to Gilgamesh. Gilgamesh will bestow great honors upon him at his funeral, and will later wander the wild consumed with grief. Enkidu regrets his curses and blesses Shamhat, temporarily calmed. In a second dream, however, he sees

himself being taken captive to the Netherworld by a terrifying Angel of Death. The underworld is a "house of dust" and darkness whose inhabitants eat clay and are clothed in bird feathers, supervised by terrifying beings. For twelve days, Enkidu's condition worsens. Finally, after a last lament that he could not meet a heroic death in battle, he dies.

Tablet eight

Gilgamesh delivers a long lamentation for Enkidu, in which he calls upon forests, mountains, fields, rivers, wild animals, and all of Uruk to mourn for his friend. Recalling their adventures together, Gilgamesh tears at his hair and clothes in grief. He commissions a funerary statue and provides valuable grave gifts from his treasury to ensure a favourable reception for Enkidu in the realm of the dead. A great banquet is held where the treasures are ceremonially offered to the gods of the Netherworld. There is a possible reference to the damming of a river before the text breaks off, which might suggest a riverbed burial as in the corresponding Sumerian poem, The Death of Gilgamesh.

Tablet nine

Tablet nine opens with Gilgamesh grieving for Enkidu and roaming the wild clothed in animal skins. Fearful of his own death, his object is to find the legendary Utnapishtim ("the Faraway"), and learn the secret of eternal life. Among the few survivors of the Great Flood, Utnapishtim and his wife are the only humans to have been granted immortality by the gods. Early in his travels, Gilgamesh crosses a mountain pass at night and encounters a pride of lions. He prays for protection to the moon god Sin before sleeping. Then, waking from an encouraging dream, he slays the lions and takes their skins for clothing. Eventually, after a long and perilous journey, Gilgamesh comes to the twin peaks of Mount Mashu at the ends of the earth. The entrance, which no man has ever crossed, is guarded by two terrible scorpion-men. After questioning him and recognising his semi-divine nature, they allow Gilgamesh to pass and travel through the mountains along the Road of the Sun. He follows it for twelve "double hours" in complete darkness. Managing to complete the trip before the sun catches up to him, Gilgamesh arrives in a garden paradise full of jewel-laden trees.

Tablet ten

Gilgamesh meets the alewife Siduri, who first believes Gilgamesh is a murderer from his dishevelled appearance, and tells her the purpose of his journey. Siduri attempts to dissuade him from his quest but sends him to Urshanabi, the ferryman, to help him cross the sea to Utnapishtim. Urshanabi is in the company of stone-giants. Gilgamesh considers them hostile and kills them. When he tells Urshanabi his story and asks for help, he is told that he just killed the only creatures able to cross the Waters of Death. The Waters of Death or Hubur, analogous to the River Styx of Greek mythology, are deadly to the touch, so Urshanabi asks him to cut 300 trees and fashion them into punting poles. Finally, they reach the island of Utnapishtim. Utnapishtim sees that there is someone else

in the boat and asks Gilgamesh who he is. Gilgamesh tells him his story and asks for help, but Utnapishtim reprimands him because fighting the common fate of humans is futile and diminishes life's joys.

Tablet eleven

Gilgamesh observes that Utnapishtim seems no different from himself, and asks him how he obtained immortality. Utnapishtim tells an ancient story of how the gods decide to send a great flood. The god Ea, however, warns him to build a boat and save himself. Precise dimensions are given, and it is sealed with pitch and bitumen. Utnapishtim's family go aboard, along with his craftsmen and 'all the animals of the field'. Next, a violent storm arises that causes the terrified gods to retreat to the heavens. Ishtar laments the wholesale destruction of humanity and the other gods weep beside her. The storm lasts six days and seven nights, after which 'all the human beings [have] turned to clay'. Utnapishtim, looking out, also weeps in response to the overwhelming destruction. The boat lodges on a mountain and, after seven more days, he releases a dove, a swallow, and a raven. When the latter fails to return, he opens the ark and releases its inhabitants. Utnapishtim offers sacrifice to the gods who smell the sweet savor and gather around. Belitili vows that, just as she will never forget the brilliant necklace that hangs around her neck, she will always remember this time. After she condemns the chief god Enlil for instigating the flood without thinking, he suddenly arrives, angry that anyone has survived. Then Ea speaks up and castigates him for sending a disproportionate punishment. Enlil, apparently contrite, blesses Utnapishtim and his wife, and rewards them with eternal life. This story is based on the flood myth that concludes the Epic of Atrahasis (see also Gilgamesh flood myth).

The main point seems to be that Utnapishtim was granted eternal life in unique, never to be repeated circumstances. As if to demonstrate this point, Utnapishtim challenges Gilgamesh to stay awake for six days and seven nights. However, as soon as Utnapishtim finishes speaking Gilgamesh falls asleep. Utnapishtim instructs his wife to bake a loaf of bread for every day he is asleep so that Gilgamesh cannot deny his failure. Gilgamesh, who wants to overcome death, cannot even conquer sleep! After instructing his ferryman to wash Gilgamesh and clothe him in royal robes, Utnapishtim sends the pair back to Uruk.

As they are leaving, Utnapishtim's wife asks her husband to offer a parting gift. Utnapishtim tells Gilgamesh of a boxthorn-like plant at the very bottom of the ocean that will make him young again. Gilgamesh obtains the plant by binding stones to his feet so he can walk on the bottom of the sea. He recovers the plant and plans to test it on an old man when he returns to Uruk. Unfortunately, when Gilgamesh stops to bathe it is stolen by a serpent that sheds its skin as it departs. Gilgamesh weeps at the futility of his efforts, having now lost all chance of immortality. He then returns to Uruk, where the sight of its massive walls prompts him to praise this enduring work to Urshanabi.

Tablet twelve

This tablet is to a large extent an Akkadian translation of an earlier Sumerian poem, Gilgamesh and the Netherworld (also known as "Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Netherworld" and variants), although it has been suggested that it is based on an unknown version of that story.^{[2]:42} The contents of this last tablet are inconsistent with previous ones: Enkidu is still alive, despite having been killed off earlier in the epic. Because of this, its lack of integration with the other tablets, and the fact that it is almost a copy of an earlier version, it has been referred to as an 'inorganic appendage' to the epic.^[7] Alternatively, it has been suggested that "its purpose, though crudely handled, is to explain to Gilgamesh (and the reader) the various fates of the dead in the Afterlife" as "an awkward attempt to bring closure",^[8] a connection between the Gilgamesh in the epic and the Gilgamesh as King of the Netherworld in Mesopotamian religion,^[9] or even "a dramatic capstone whereby the twelve-tablet epic ends on one and the same theme, that of "seeing" (= understanding, discovery, etc.), with which it began."^[10]

Gilgamesh complains to Enkidu that various objects he possessed (the tablet is unclear exactly what — different translations include a drum and a ball) fell into the underworld. Enkidu offers to bring them back. Delighted, Gilgamesh tells Enkidu what he must and must not do in the underworld in order to come back. Enkidu does everything he was told not to do. The underworld keeps him. Gilgamesh prays to the gods to give him his friend back. Enlil and Suen don't bother to reply but Ea and Shamash decide to help. Shamash cracks a hole in the earth and Enkidu's ghost jumps out of it. The tablet ends with Gilgamesh questioning Enkidu about what he has seen in the underworld.

Old-Babylonian versions

All tablets except for the second and third are from different origins than the above, so this summary is made up out of different versions.

Tablet missing

Gilgamesh tells his mother Ninsun about two dreams he had. His mother explains that they mean that a new companion will soon arrive at Uruk. In the meanwhile Enkidu and the harlot (here called Shamkatum) are making love. She civilizes him in company of the shepherds by offering him bread and beer. Enkidu helps the shepherds by guarding the sheep. They travel to Uruk where Gilgamesh and Enkidu finally meet. Enkidu and Gilgamesh battle but Gilgamesh breaks off the fight. Enkidu praises Gilgamesh as a special person.

The tablet is broken here but it seems that Gilgamesh has offered the plan to go the Pine Forest to cut trees and kill Humbaba (known here as Huwawa). Enkidu protests, he knows Humwawa and is aware of his power. Gilgamesh talks Enkidu into it with some words of encouragement but Enkidu remains reluctant. They start preparation and call for the elders. The elders also protest but after Gilgamesh talks to them they wish him good luck.

1(?) tablet missing

Fragments from two different versions/tablets tell how Enkidu encourages Gilgamesh to slay Humwawa. Notable here is mention of Huwawa's "seven auras" that are not referred to in the standard version. When Gilgamesh slays Huwawa they cut part of the forest. Enkidu cuts a door of wood for Enlil and lets it float down the Euphrates.

Tablets missing

Gilgamesh argues with Shamash the futility of his quest. The tablet is damaged. We then find Gilgamesh talking with Siduri about his quest and his journey to meet Ut-Napishtim (here called Uta-na'ishtim). Siduri also questions his goals. Gilgamesh smashes the stone creatures and talks to the ferryman Urshanabi (here called Sur-sunabu). After a short discussion Sur-sunabu asks Gilgamesh to cut 300 oars so that they may cross the waters of death without the crew of stone creatures. The rest of the tablet is damaged.

Tablet(s)

The Sumerian poems

There are five extant Gilgamesh poems in Sumerian. These probably circulated independently, rather than in the form of a unified epic. Note that the names of some of the main characters in these poems differ slightly from later Akkadian names, and that there are some significant differences in the underlying stories (e.g. in Sumerian, Enkidu is simply Gilgamesh's servant):

Gilgamesh and Humbaba (corresponds to the Cedar Forest episode (tablets 3-5) in the Akkadian version).

Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven (corresponds to the Bull of Heaven episode (tablet 6) in the Akkadian version. The Bull's voracious appetite causes drought and hardship in the land).

Gilgamesh and Aga (Gilgamesh vs. Aga of Kish, no corresponding episode in the epic, but the themes of whether to show mercy to captives, and cautious counsel from the city elders reoccur in the standard version of the Humbaba story).

Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld (corresponds to tablet 12 in the Akkadian version).

The Death of Gilgamesh (this is the story of Gilgamesh's, rather than Enkidu's, death).

Relationship to the Bible

Further information: Panbabylonism

Various themes, plot elements, and characters in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* can also be found in the Hebrew Bible in the stories of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (both stories involve a serpent) and the story of Noah and the Flood.

Citing the similarities between the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and the Hebrew Bible's Flood story, some scholars have argued that the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is proof that the stories found in the Hebrew Bible are true because the Babylonians must have copied the Hebrew Bible's account of the Flood story. However, as Michael Coogan points out, "theoretically the Babylonians could have known of Genesis, [but] other versions of the tale were written many centuries before biblical Israel existed." Most scholars, consequently, accept the priority of the Mesopotamian flood story. Andrew R. George, known for his translations of the epic, notes that "...the Flood episode in Gen. 6-8 matches the older Babylonian myth so well in plot, and particularly, in details, few doubt that Noah's story is descended from a Mesopotamian account".^[11] What is particularly noticeable, according to another scholar, is the way the Genesis flood story follows the Gilgamesh flood tale "point by point and in the same order", even when the logic of the story permits other alternatives.^[12]

Other parallels

Matthias Henze suggests that the story of Nebuchadnezzar's madness in the biblical book of Daniel draws on the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. He argues that the author of Daniel uses elements from the description of primitive, uncivilized Enkidu to paint a sarcastic and mocking portrait of the king of Babylon.^[13]

A number of scholars also propose influence on the book of Ecclesiastes.^[14] The speech of Sidhuri in an old Babylonian version of the epic is so similar to Ecclesiastes 9:7-10 that direct literary influence is a genuine possibility. A similar case involves a saying about the strength of a triple stranded rope, apparently unique to Gilgamesh and Ecclesiastes (4:12).

Influence on later literature

According to the Greek scholar Ioannis Kakridis, there are a large number of parallel verses as well as themes or episodes which indicate a substantial influence of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* on the *Odyssey*, the Greek epic poem ascribed to Homer.^[15]

The Alexander the Great myth in Islamic and Syrian cultures is also considered to be influenced by the Gilgamesh story.^{[16][17]} Alexander wanders through a region of darkness and terror in search of the water of life. He faces strange encounters, reaches the water but, like Gilgamesh, fails to become immortal. He also comes to the spot at which the sun rises from the Earth.

In popular culture

Main article: Gilgamesh in popular culture

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* and its characters have been featured in popular culture across all media.

In a Star Trek: the Next Generation episode called "Darmok", Picard uses the Epic of Gilgamesh in an attempt to communicate with an alien race who communicate using metaphorical stories.

The Epic of Gilgamesh Summary

[Gilgamesh](#) is the Priest-King of the city of Uruk. He is a tyrannical king who works his people to death and takes what he wants from them. He kills the young men at will and uses the women as he pleases. The people of Uruk cry out to the gods for help so that they can have peace.

The gods hear them and instruct [Anu](#), the goddess of creation, to make a twin for Gilgamesh, someone who is strong enough to stand up to him and who will ultimately save him. Anu makes [Enkidu](#), a hairy wild man who lives in the wilderness with the animals.

One day a trapper sees Enkidu by a water hole and is frightened. He tells his father of the wild man he saw. His father tells the trapper to go to see Gilgamesh. He tells his son to ask the king for a temple prostitute to bring back with him to seduce Enkidu. The trapper returns with [Shamhat](#), a temple prostitute from the temple of Ishtar, the goddess of love and war. They wait for Enkidu to reappear by the watering hole.

Enkidu returns and Shamhat reveals herself to him. They copulate for six days and seven nights. When Enkidu is satisfied, he finds that the animals no longer accept him. Shamhat tells him to come back with her to Uruk. Upon hearing of Gilgamesh, Enkidu decides he wishes to meet him. The two set out for Uruk, making a stop at a shepherd's camp. There Enkidu learns that Gilgamesh will sleep with a newly married bride on her wedding night, before her husband sleeps with her. He is outraged and decides he must stop Gilgamesh. Meanwhile, Gilgamesh has several dreams foretelling the arrival of Enkidu.

The two meet in the streets of Uruk and a great fight breaks out between them. Gilgamesh is triumphant but his encounter with Enkidu changes him. They become companions. Enkidu tells Gilgamesh of Humbaba, a terrible monster who guards the Cedar Forest. Gilgamesh decides the two of them should journey there and defeat the monster.

They make preparations and head to the Cedar Forest. They encounter Humbaba and with the help of [Shamash](#), the sun god, defeat him. They return to Uruk carrying his head. After a celebration, Gilgamesh bathes himself and catches the eye of Ishtar. She tells him to become her lover, promising great riches and rewards in return. Gilgamesh rejects Ishtar, telling her he is aware of her reputation as a scornful lover.

Ishtar is outraged and convinces her father, Anu, to release the Bull of Heaven to punish Gilgamesh. [The Bull of Heaven](#) descends on Uruk, killing hundreds of men. Enkidu seizes the animal and Gilgamesh kills it with a sword. Ishtar appears and threatens the heroes. Enkidu tears off one of the Bull's haunches and throws it at Ishtar. Later that night, Enkidu has a dream that the gods are meeting in council.

The dream proves true. The gods decide that one of the heroes must die for their behavior. They choose Enkidu. Enkidu falls ill and suffers for twelve days before finally dying. Gilgamesh is shattered. He mourns for days and tears his hair and clothes. He adorns filthy animal skins and journeys into the forest and mountains. He has witnessed death and is now terrified of his own mortality. He seeks to escape it.

Gilgamesh decides to seek out [Utnapishtim](#), the one being granted immortality by the gods. He travels to Mount Mashu, a twin-peaked mountain that marks an entrance to a world in which mortals cannot venture. He convinces the guards of the mountain, two Scorpion-man beings, to allow him to enter a long passage under the mountain. He endures this terrible darkness for a full day.

When he emerges on the other side, he is in a wondrous paradise. He sees a tavern by the sea and approaches it, frightening its owner, [Siduri](#), with his appearance. Siduri allows him to enter the tavern after he explains his story and his intention to find Utnapishtim. Siduri tells Gilgamesh of [Urshanabi](#), the boatman, who can ferry Gilgamesh across the Waters of Death to where Utnapishtim resides.

Gilgamesh finds Urshanabi and the two set out to find Utnapishtim. They reach a shore and Gilgamesh meets an old man. Gilgamesh explains that he wishes to attain immortality. The old man is Utnapishtim, who tells Gilgamesh that immortality is for the gods alone. Mortals must learn to accept death. He tells Gilgamesh the story of how he was granted immortality by the gods. He asks Gilgamesh what he has done to deserve this same gift.

Gilgamesh finally leaves with Urshanabi to return to Uruk. Utnapishtim tells Gilgamesh of a magical plant at the bottom of the sea that can restore one's youth. Gilgamesh descends into the waters and retrieves the plant.

On his way back to Uruk, Gilgamesh stops to bathe in a spring, leaving the plant by the water. A serpent appears and steals the plant, leaving Gilgamesh weeping by the water's edge. He returns to Uruk with Urshanabi. Upon seeing the great city, Gilgamesh understands that it is his legacy, and that if he rules well, it will be his greatest legacy. Gilgamesh comes to understand that the most important thing in life is to have lived and loved well.

About The Epic of Gilgamesh

[*The Epic of Gilgamesh*](#) is an ancient epic poem from Mesopotamia dating back to roughly 2000 BCE. It is believed to be one of the earliest works of literature in human history. Scholars believe that its origins were in ancient Sumerian poems that were later collected into an Akkadian epic in the 18th or 17th century BCE. Hormuzd Rassam, an Assyrian archaeologist, first discovered the clay tablets that record the epic in 1853, in modern-day Iraq. They were first translated by George Smith, a British Assyriologist, and were first published in the early 1870s.

Eleven tablets make up the main body of the poem. A twelfth tablet was likely added later, but it is not clear why. The twelfth tablet uses similar imagery and concepts but is not sequential to the other eleven. This last tablet is sometimes omitted from translations for this reason.

Character List

Gilgamesh

The protagonist of the story and the King of Uruk. He is credited with having built the city walls of Uruk to protect its people. In most translations, he is described as being one-third man and two-thirds god. His mother is Ninsun, a goddess. His father is Lugalbanda, a past King of Uruk.

Enkidu

A wild man who becomes Gilgamesh's best friend. After being visited by Shamhat, the prostitute, Enkidu is civilized and leaves the animal world behind to journey with Shamhat to Uruk. Enkidu accompanies Gilgamesh to defeat Humbaba before he passes away. Gilgamesh journeys to the Underworld to try to bring Enkidu back to life.

Shamhat

A temple prostitute sent by Gilgamesh to civilize Enkidu. Shamhat seduces Enkidu and he sleeps with her for six days and seven nights. She brings him back to Uruk with her where he first encounters Gilgamesh.

Ninsun

Gilgamesh's mother and a goddess. She prays for Gilgamesh and Enkidu before they embark to fight Humbaba in the cedar forest.

Humbaba/Huwawa

The Guardian of the cedar forest. Humbaba is defeated and killed by Gilgamesh and Enkidu.

Ishtar/Irinni

Goddess of Love, Fertility, and War, and daughter of Anu. Ishtar sends the Bull of Heaven to attack Gilgamesh after he spurns her advances.

Anu

The father of the Sumerian Gods. Ishtar appeals to him for help after Gilgamesh spurns her advances.

Urshanabi

The boatman who takes Gilgamesh over the waters of the dead to see Utnapishtim.

Utnapishtim

Instructed by Ea to build a boat before the flood that destroyed the city of Shurruk. Utnapishtim is granted immortality for his role. Gilgamesh seeks him out after Enkidu's death. Utnapishtim tells Gilgamesh of the flood and tells him where to find a magic plant that can grant immortality.

The Bull of Heaven

Referred to in some translations as "Gugalanna," the Bull of Heaven was sent to punish Gilgamesh for rejecting Ishtar's sexual advances. Gilgamesh and Enkidu slay the Bull of Heaven and insult Ishtar.

Siduri

A barmaid and alewife that Gilgamesh encounters on his journey into the Underworld. Siduri resides in a cottage by the sea. She discourages Gilgamesh on his pursuit for immortality but ultimately directs him to the boatman Urshanabi.

Enlil

The storm god, wind god, and god of destiny.

Lugalbanda

The father of Gilgamesh, a great hero king of Uruk.

Aruru/Mammetum

The mother goddess who established life and death.

Nergal

Lord of the underworld.

Ninurta

The god of war, chaos, and silence.

Shamash

The god of light and the sun, he aids Enkidu and Gilgamesh in their fight with Humbaba.

Sin

The god of the moon.

Sumuqan

The god of cattle.

Glossary of Terms

Akkadian

A Semitic language, it is the source language for most versions of Gilgamesh read today.

Apsu

The great abyss of waters beneath the earth.

Bitumen

A thick tarlike substance used for waterproofing and as an adhesive.

Carnelian

A semi-precious reddish-brown mineral used for gemstones.

Cedar Forest

A sacred forest, home of Humbaba/Huwawa, who is its guardian.

Cuneiform

Meaning "wedge-shaped," it is the script used to record languages such as Sumerian and Akkadian. Cuneiform was written by pressing a reed stylus into a clay tablet.

Euphrates River

One of the two great rivers of Mesopotamia, the other being the Tigris. Uruk is situated upon the Euphrates.

Harlot

A priestess or servant in the Temple of Ishtar. Shamhat is one of these prostitutes.

How-the-Old-Man-Once-Again-Becomes-A-Young-Man

A magic plant that Utnapishtim tells Gilgamesh can restore one's youth. Utnapishtim tells Gilgamesh that the plant can be found at the bottom of the sea.

King Ashurbanipal

An Assyrian king who was the last great king of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. His court library, excavated at Nineveh, contained a good deal of Mesopotamian literature, including the tablets on which the Epic of Gilgamesh was inscribed.

Lapis lazuli

A semi-precious stone prized for its deep blue color. It is mentioned several times in the story, most notably because Gilgamesh's story is said to be recorded on tablets made of it.

League

A unit of measurement equal to about a mile and a half.

Mashu

A mountain with twin peaks at the edge of the underworld. The sun is said to rise at the eastern peak and make its way down through the western peak.

Nisir

The name of the mountain where Utnapishtim's boat came to land.

Priest-king

Gilgamesh is the priest-king of Uruk, the spiritual and political leader of the city.

Seven Sages

Said to have laid the foundation of Uruk, they were instructed in the arts of civilization by the gods who gave them the plans for the city.

Shuruppak

An ancient city destroyed by the Flood during the leadership of Utnapishtim.

Sin-Leqi-Unninni

Possibly a priest, he is believed to have lived in Uruk during the Middle Babylonian period. He appears to have produced the most recent version of the epic that is read today.

The Flood

An event that was already ancient by Gilgamesh's time, the Flood was brought by the gods for unclear reasons against the city of Shuruppak, thereby destroying all living things.

Uruk

Erech in the Bible, Uruk was the great walled city ruled by Gilgamesh.

Ziggurat

A stepped tower atop which sacrifices were made to appease the gods.

Major Themes

Love and Friendship

When we first meet Gilgamesh, he is a tyrant king who terrifies the people of Uruk. Only after meeting Enkidu and becoming his friend does Gilgamesh transform into a hero worthy of memory. This transformative effect is also exacted on Enkidu, who Gilgamesh helps move beyond his fears. The platonic love the two have for each other helps Gilgamesh become a better leader to his people by allowing him to better understand and identify with them. When considered in tandem with the theme of death in the poem, love and friendship can be viewed not only as a part of life, but as a necessary component to give existence meaning.

Death

The major theme of the poem is that of mortality. Gilgamesh must learn the difficult lesson that, even as a king, he too must face the reality of his own death. On their way to the Cedar Forest to face Humbaba, Enkidu expresses his concerns about death, which Gilgamesh laughs off, telling Enkidu that no one lives forever and that life is short. However, when Enkidu dies, Gilgamesh is so distraught that he seeks out Utnapishtim to learn the secret of immortality. Despite his hopes, Utnapishtim tells Gilgamesh the story of the flood. He explains to Gilgamesh that the quest for immortality is a futile one, as creation itself also contains the seed of death, making it inescapable. The Gods, he explains, intentionally did this. Gilgamesh returns to Uruk having learned that the quality of one's life is measured not by wealth or fame, but by the quality of the time he spent while alive and the people with which he surrounded himself.

The Hero's Journey or Quest

A common theme in mythology and ancient stories, Gilgamesh's story is no exception. The hero must embark on a journey or quest in order to discover who he is. Initially, Enkidu travels from the wilderness with Shamhat to civilization to meet Gilgamesh. Gilgamesh begins his quest with Enkidu by traveling to the Cedar Forest to defeat Humbaba. After Enkidu's death, Gilgamesh's personal journey begins. He seeks out Utnapishtim to learn the secret of immortality. His journey concludes with his return to Uruk. In this case, Gilgamesh's journey is a direct reflection of his internal struggle and "journey" to become a better, selfless leader.

The Wrath of the Gods

Gilgamesh expresses his jealousy towards the gods and the immortality they enjoy. He and Enkidu learn firsthand that incurring the wrath of the gods can have disastrous consequences. Rather than wise, omniscient beings, the gods in Gilgamesh are vengeful and easily angered. Gilgamesh and Enkidu first encounter this wrath after Gilgamesh rejects Ishtar's advances. Ishtar immediately turns to her father, Anu, to send the Bull of Heaven to punish Gilgamesh. At first, Anu rejects Ishtar's request but she threatens to raise the dead to devour the living. Anu is frightened by Ishtar's threat and releases the Bull of Heaven to appease her. When Gilgamesh and Enkidu slay the Bull of Heaven, they further insult Ishtar by throwing the Bull's hindquarters at her face. Enkidu later dreams that the gods have decided that he must die for these transgressions. After twelve days of suffering, he dies a painful death.

Utnapishtim also tells Gilgamesh the story of a great flood exacted on the people of Shurruk. Ea informs Utnapishtim of the coming flood and instructs him to build a great boat and to stock that boat with all the creatures of the land. It is important to note that when Utnapishtim asks Ea about why the flood is coming and about what he should tell the people of Shurruk, Ea has no specific answer for him, stating only that Enlil is angry. This suggests that the wrath of the gods can also be incurred without any obvious insult or explanation.

Gateways

Gateways and doors by their very nature symbolize separation, but also transition. Although a physical doorway is not present in the beginning, Enkidu must transition from the wilderness to civilization. In this sense, Shamhat herself represents a gateway. Enkidu then enters Uruk with Shamhat, passing through the city's great walls. Enkidu and Gilgamesh later discuss Enkidu's fear at the gate to the Cedar Forest. They cut down the tallest tree in the forest to make into a gate for Uruk. On his journey to find Utnapishtim, Gilgamesh must pass through the gate of Mashu, guarded by the Scorpion men. At each point when a gateway is encountered, a decision must be made by Gilgamesh or Enkidu as to whether they will continue or turn back. Utilized in this manner, gateways also serve as an effective literary device to force characters to make decisions that affect the overall narrative.

Baptism or Ritual Cleansing

Water is continually used by characters in Gilgamesh at key points in the story to wash themselves but also marks an important point of transition. In this way, water is used in a baptismal manner. Enkidu washes himself after meeting Shamhat, marking his transition from the wilderness to civilization. Gilgamesh and Enkidu wash themselves after slaying the Bull of Heaven. Gilgamesh bathes himself after acquiring the magic plant to achieve immortality. In each case, a ritual cleansing marks an important moment in the story. Enkidu is transformed, leaving behind the world of animals and nature and entering the world of humans. Gilgamesh loses the magic plant but transitions to accepting his mortality.

Responsibility

Gilgamesh is introduced to us as a tyrant king who does as he pleases and has little regard for his subjects. Aruru creates Enkidu to strike a balance against Gilgamesh's tyrannical ways. His purpose in the story is to help Gilgamesh become the king he needs to be and to teach him about what is most valuable in life. Through this ordeal, Gilgamesh loses his best friend and must face reality. The recklessness with which he previously had lived his life is evidently unsustainable. Gilgamesh learns that just as he will not live forever, he will age, and with that age must come maturity and wisdom if he is to live a life worth living.

Tablet I

Summary

The story begins with a prologue introducing us to the main character, [Gilgamesh](#), the Priest-King of Uruk. Gilgamesh's mother is [Ninsun](#), sometimes referred to as the Lady Wildcow Ninsun. She was a goddess, endowing Gilgamesh with a semi-divine nature. Lugulbanda, a priest, was his father. Gilgamesh constructed the great city of Uruk along the Euphrates River in Mesopotamia, and surrounded it intricately decorated walls. He also built a temple for the goddess Ishtar, the goddess of love, and her father [Anu](#), the father of the gods. Gilgamesh is credited with opening passages through the mountains. He traveled to the Nether World and beyond it, where he met [Utnapishtim](#), the sole survivor of the great flood that almost ended the world, the one who had been given immortality. When he returned to Uruk, he wrote everything down on a tablet of lapis lazuli and locked it in a copper chest.

As the story begins, Gilgamesh is a tyrannical leader who shows little regard for his people. He takes what he wants from them and works them to death constructing the walls of Uruk. He sleeps with brides on their wedding night, before their husbands. It is said that no one can resist his power. The old men of Uruk complain and appeal to the gods for help. The gods hear their cries and instruct Aruru, the goddess of creation, to make someone strong enough to act as a counterforce to Gilgamesh.

Aruru takes some clay, moistens it with her spit, and forms another man, named [Enkidu](#). Enkidu resides in the wilderness with the animals, knowing nothing of the civilized world. He lives as one of the animals, running with them and eating what they eat. One day a trapper sees Enkidu at a watering hole. His appearance is frightening as he is huge and covered in hair. The trapper suspects that Enkidu is the one who has been un-setting his traps and filling the pits he uses to catch animals. The trapper returns home and tells his father he has seen a frightening wild man.

The trapper's father advises him to go to Uruk and ask Gilgamesh to lend him a prostitute from the temple of Ishtar to tame Enkidu. After doing so, the trapper returns with [Shamhat](#), the prostitute, and they wait by the watering hole for three days.

When Enkidu does appear again, the trapper tells Shamhat to lie down on a blanket and show Enkidu her breasts and her body. Enkidu is enchanted by Shamhat and lies upon her and they copulate for six days and seven nights. After Enkidu is finally satisfied, he leaves Shamhat and attempts to return to the animals, but they no longer regard him as one of them and run away from him.

Enkidu finds he has become weaker and can no longer run with the animals as he did before. His mind has been awakened. Troubled by this new self-awareness, he asks Shamhat for help. She tells him about life in Uruk and its king, Gilgamesh. As Enkidu hears more about Gilgamesh from Shamhat, he begins to feel a need for a companion and decides he wants to meet Gilgamesh.

Meanwhile, Gilgamesh has two dreams that trouble him. In the first dream, a meteor lands in a field outside Uruk. Gilgamesh is drawn to the rock "as if it were a woman." After lifting it, he carries it to his mother, Ninsun. In the second dream, Gilgamesh finds an axe lying in the street. A crowd of people stands around it, admiring it. Gilgamesh is also drawn to the axe, as if it were his wife. He carries it to his mother and lays it at her feet. He tells Ninsun of these dreams. She interprets them to mean that he will soon meet a man, a man who will become his friend and greatest companion.

Analysis

The narrator introduces Gilgamesh in the past tense—the high walls of the city he built are already ancient. At the same time, he suggests that the story is in Gilgamesh's own words, and that the legendary king himself wrote it down. Gilgamesh's story commemorates historical people and deeds, and at the same time, Gilgamesh's passage through heroism, grief, and wisdom is a perpetual, universal process. The story of Gilgamesh is both timeless and immediate.

Though Gilgamesh's mother Ninsun plays a significant role in the early parts of the story, we learn very little about his father. The [Sin-Leqi-Unninni](#) version of Gilgamesh says his father is Ninsun's husband, Lugulbanda, but it is not clear if Lugulbanda is actually Gilgamesh's biological father. Some versions of the poem declare that Gilgamesh's father is a priest, while others call him a "fool." Like Gilgamesh, Lugulbanda was a genuine historical figure. He precedes Gilgamesh on Uruk's king list by two, and he would have more likely been his grandfather, considering the lengths of the recorded reigns. Like Gilgamesh, people worshipped him as a god after his death.

Although Gilgamesh is a king and his story has become legend, the author also includes examples of Gilgamesh's tyrannical behavior. He has no equal, and no one can stand up to him. Gilgamesh's lineage establishes him as one-third mortal and two-thirds a god. Therefore, it is appropriate that the people of Uruk appeal to the gods for help.

Enkidu is described as terrifying in appearance, covered in hair and living with the animals. He is also huge and very strong, characteristics that otherwise are only attributed to Gilgamesh. Enkidu is the untamed wild itself. As Gilgamesh represents civilization and the dominion of man over all, Enkidu is the natural counterweight. It is also notable that despite his great strength, Enkidu is helpless in the face of a woman's sexuality. Shamhat's power

civilizes and tames Enkidu to prepare him for his journey to Uruk and ultimately to Gilgamesh. This speaks to a different view of a prostitute in Gilgamesh's time. Rather than being seen as a criminal act, Shamhat's role is revered, even sacred. It is possible that a woman's sexuality was seen as a necessity to tame a man and make him suitable for civilized life, supporting a family, or raising children. Shamhat's taming of Enkidu also foreshadows Enkidu's role in taming Gilgamesh. Shamhat awakens Enkidu. Similarly, Enkidu must awaken Gilgamesh.

Many scholars have seen Biblical parallels in the Epic of Gilgamesh. Enkidu has been compared to Esau and Ishmael, who both exhibited animal-like characteristics, but his story also reflects the civilizing of humankind. As a species, we have moved from a more primal, animal-like existence to one of culture. We educate ourselves and gain insight into our world and ourselves. The biblical motif of Adam and Eve also mirrors Enkidu's story. Their fall from innocence is a result of becoming aware of their sexuality. After that, they are cast out of Eden and must find their own way in the world, just as Enkidu does.

Though sexuality is presented as an important transformational force, the theme of platonic friendship and love ultimately is the more profound one in the story. Some scholars have seen homoerotic qualities in Gilgamesh and Enkidu's relationship, and others feel there is no direct evidence of this in the text. Their relationship is based on a very close friendship and it is this type of relationship that the story presents as the most vital. Enkidu and Gilgamesh balance each other and help each other find inner harmony.

Tablet II and Tablet III

Summary

[Shamhat](#) divides her robes and uses them to clothe [Enkidu](#). These are the first clothes he has ever worn. She leads him by hand, as if he was a child, and they begin their journey. On their way to Uruk, they stop at a shepherd's camp, where the herdsman is astonished by Enkidu's size, strength, and beauty. They serve him plates of cooked food, and jugs filled with beer. Enkidu does not even recognize these items as food. Until now, he has eaten only grass and sucked the milk of wild animals. Shamhat encourages him to eat and drink. He drinks seven jugs of beer, and begins singing and dancing. He bathes and anoints himself with oil and dresses in fine new clothes. Shamhat shaves the hair from his body. Enkidu then offers to stand guard over the shepherds and their flocks, protecting them from the wolves and lions that normally threaten their safety.

One day a stranger comes into the camp carrying a highly decorated platter. Enkidu asks Shamhat to find out who he is and where he is going. The man tells them that he is going to a wedding ceremony in Uruk. [Gilgamesh](#) will be there and as the King, he will sleep with the bride before her husband does. Whatever Gilgamesh desires, the man explains, he takes—no one can withstand his power. Enkidu finds this to be unacceptable and decides to go to Uruk to challenge Gilgamesh, because he feels sure that he can defeat him. When he arrives in Uruk, the people of the city are amazed to see a man who is as strong and powerful in appearance as Gilgamesh. They crowd

around him and hail him as their champion and savior. Enkidu stands on the threshold of the bride's bedchamber and blocks Gilgamesh's path.

The two men begin to wrestle in the street, and the city shakes as they do so. Gilgamesh eventually wrestles Enkidu to the ground and is victorious. Enkidu concedes his defeat and says that Gilgamesh is the rightful king of Uruk. [Ninsun](#) tells Gilgamesh that Enkidu has no family, that he has lived his whole life on the plains with the animals. She tells Gilgamesh that Enkidu is loyal and will not abandon his side. Both men forget their anger and declare their loyalty to each other. They kiss and embrace.

Shortly after, the two friends begin looking for a challenge to take on together. Enkidu tells Gilgamesh about a monster named Humbaba, sometimes called Huwawa. He is the guardian of the Cedar Forest, a place forbidden to mortals. Humbaba serves [Enlil](#), who made Humbaba a terrible being whose mouth is fire, his roar is the floodwater, and his breath is death. Gilgamesh is intrigued by this creature and decides that he and Enkidu should meet Humbaba in battle.

Enkidu is frightened at first, telling Gilgamesh that Humbaba cannot be beaten. Gilgamesh dismisses Enkidu's concerns, saying he has no fear of death, so long as he is able to gain fame. The two heroes go to the armor makers of Uruk and obtain axes and swords for the battle. Gilgamesh tells Enkidu that they can both cement their fame by defeating Humbaba.

The elders of Uruk echo Enkidu's concerns. They advise Gilgamesh to let Enkidu lead the way, as Enkidu has knowledge of the wilderness. They also advise Gilgamesh to make an offering to [Shamash](#) before embarking. Enkidu tells Gilgamesh that he has his loyalty and that he will lead Gilgamesh through the wilderness to the Cedar Forest.

Upon hearing of Gilgamesh's plans, Ninsun is distraught. She weeps and fears for her son's life. She bathes and dons robes before ascending to the ziggurat, where she makes an offering to Shamash as well. Ninsun prays to Shamash to help and protect Gilgamesh. Finally, she places a sacred pendant around Enkidu's neck and adopts Enkidu as her own son.

Analysis

Please note that of the majority of Tablet II is missing in the [Sin-Leqi-Unninni](#) version, so translators have had to fill in the blanks with older versions of the story.

Enkidu's transformation continues in this tablet as Shamhat clothes him, giving him the first garments he has ever worn. She introduces him to cooked food and to alcohol, uniquely human creations. Enkidu sings and dances after becoming drunk, also something that only humans do. That these events take place at a shepherd's camp is not without relevance. The shepherd's camp is the first sign of civilization that Shamhat and Enkidu encounter on their way to Uruk. As Enkidu is drawn physically closer to Uruk, he is increasingly civilized. The shepherd's camp

represents a sort of hybrid of the city and the wilderness. It is neither a city, nor the forest or the plains, but it embodies elements of both. Enkidu takes up weapons to protect the shepherds from the wild animals around them. This action demonstrates his new allegiance to humanity. He has turned away from the natural world he was once a part of it and now greets it with hostility and the threat of violence.

Enkidu is outraged when he hears about how Gilgamesh will sleep with a newly married woman on her wedding night, before her husband does. Despite having no knowledge of the human custom of marriage, Enkidu's sense of justice becomes apparent. He sees Gilgamesh's behavior as fundamentally wrong and immediately decides that he must be the one to right it.

The two giant men wrestle in the streets of Uruk, shaking the city. Though Gilgamesh wins the fight, he is changed because of it. He sees Enkidu not as an opponent but as a worthy companion. Essentially Enkidu tames him, just as Shamhat tamed Enkidu. This idea feeds theories among some scholars that Enkidu and Gilgamesh have more than a platonic relationship. Regardless, Gilgamesh, bolstered by the presence of his new friend, decides he wishes to move beyond Uruk and make his mark on the world.

Humbaba, or Huwawa in some translations, is a vague but terrifying enemy, presented differently depending on the translation. Most translations present him as a terrible monster who personifies evil. Enkidu describes him as a force of nature itself, with a "mouth of fire". Some scholars feel that Humbaba is a personification of an erupting volcano. Volcanoes may have been active in the Mesopotamia region during Gilgamesh's time. The cedar trees guarded by Humbaba would have been very valuable in the relatively treeless region of Mesopotamia where Uruk is located. In any case, Humbaba is something to be feared, a creature of great strength. Despite concerns on the part of the Elders as well as Enkidu's own warnings, Gilgamesh decides he wants to meet Humbaba in battle. He explains that death is not something he fears, as long as he is able to leave behind his mark on the world. This is a markedly different attitude towards death that will change over the course of the poem. Death becomes the predominant theme in the story from here onward.

Although Enkidu's civilization is now complete, the Elders still recognize his wild roots. They see that Enkidu still has knowledge of that world that Gilgamesh does not. Enkidu remains true to his word and tells Gilgamesh that he will not forsake him but will lead him into the wilderness, towards Humbaba. Tablet III ends with Enkidu's adoption by Ninsun, which makes him and Gilgamesh brothers. Ninsun prays for their safe return. This gesture demonstrates that Enkidu's appeal extends to all those he has met in Uruk, not just Gilgamesh. Though they are not blood relatives, they appear as if they are twins. Enkidu's adoption allows him to have a family, a human family that accepts him. When Gilgamesh first met Enkidu, he had no one "to cut his hair." Now, he has a brother whom he will follow into the most dangerous battles.

Tablet IV and Tablet V

Summary

The two men, now heavily armed, step outside the seven-bolt gate of Uruk and set off for the Cedar Forest. They do not stop to eat until they have walked twenty leagues. In three days, they cover a distance it would take an ordinary man three weeks to cover. They dig a well and make an offering to the god [Shamash](#), then continue on their journey. As they walk, they encourage one another to offset the fear that begins to grow in them. Each doubts their ability to defeat Humbaba, and in each case, the other reassures them that they will be victorious.

The two heroes stand before the forest's gate, and they see that Humbaba's footsteps have cut clear paths through the woods, indicating his size and might. That night [Gilgamesh](#) makes another offering to Shamash the sun god. He prays that Shamash will visit him in a dream and grant him a favorable omen. Gilgamesh and [Enkidu](#) construct a shelter against the wind and, huddling together for warmth, lie down, and sleep. At midnight, Gilgamesh wakes from a dream and asks if Enkidu called out to him.

Gilgamesh details the dream to Enkidu: They were walking through a valley when a huge mountain fell on top of them. Enkidu interprets the dream and says that the mountain is Humbaba, and that he and Gilgamesh will topple Humbaba and his dead body will lie like a mountain. The two companions continue their journey through the forest.

After a few days, Gilgamesh makes another offering to Shamash. After falling asleep together, Gilgamesh wakes up again from another dream. He is frightened and asks Enkidu if he touched him. Then he tells Enkidu about this latest dream. In it, Gilgamesh is attacked by a wild bull and pinned to the ground. He is completely trapped when suddenly someone offers him water. Again, Enkidu interprets the dream as fortunate. He says that the bull is not Humbaba, but Shamash, who has blessed Gilgamesh by fighting with him. The one who brought water, Enkidu says, is Gilgamesh's father, Lugulbanda.

As they continue their travels, Gilgamesh makes yet another offering to Shamash and has a third dream. This time he dreams that the earth is shaking and fire and ashes fall from the sky. Gilgamesh tells Enkidu they should reconsider this quest. Once again, Enkidu says the dream is fortunate. Even so, Gilgamesh is filled with fear and doubt. He prays to Shamash again, asking for his protection. Shamash answers and explains that Humbaba has seven garments, each of which spreads terror. Shamash tells Gilgamesh that Humbaba is wearing only one of them now, but warns him that if Humbaba wears all seven, Gilgamesh will be unable to defeat him. The heroes must hurry.

The companions reach the Cedar Forest and begin to chop down trees. Upon doing so they can hear Humbaba roaring. The noise of weapons clashing surrounds them, and Gilgamesh and Enkidu are terrified. They call to each other, reminding each other to be strong and to remember that they can prevail against any odds because of their companionship.

In the heat of the battle, Gilgamesh pleads for help from Shamash. Shamash hears him and unleashes thirteen storms against Humbaba. Humbaba is subdued by this divine onslaught, and Gilgamesh is able to overtake him. Humbaba pleads for mercy and says he knows Gilgamesh is [Ninsun's](#) son. He pledges to become his servant if Gilgamesh will only spare his life. Gilgamesh considers this, but Enkidu shouts out and tells Gilgamesh to kill Humbaba quickly.

Humbaba curses Enkidu for this. He suggests that Enkidu is jealous and fearful that Humbaba will supplant him in Gilgamesh's affections. Humbaba reminds them that he is the servant of [Enlil](#), the god of earth, wind, and air—a greater divinity by far than Shamash. If Gilgamesh kills him, he will bring a curse down upon himself. Enkidu ignores these warnings and tells Gilgamesh to hurry up and kill Humbaba before Enlil finds out what they are up to and tries to stop them. Only by killing Humbaba and stealing his cedars can they guarantee their fame. Thus, Humbaba dies.

Gilgamesh cuts down the tallest tree in the forest and uses it to build a new gate for Uruk as a testament to their great adventure. The companions cut down more trees and make a raft, which they use to return to Uruk. On the raft, they carry the gate and the head of Humbaba.

Analysis

The extent of Shamash's importance and influence is a major factor in this tablet. Shamash is the sun god, associated with light and wisdom. Humbaba is associated with darkness and evil. Gilgamesh and Enkidu do not seek only to glorify their own names. In seeking to kill Humbaba, Gilgamesh and Enkidu are doing a god's work, even if it will anger another god.

It is remarkable that little detail is provided regarding Gilgamesh and Enkidu's battle with Humbaba. The heroes arrive with weapons forged by artisans in Uruk, but there is little mention of how they are used in the fight. Instead, the narrative focuses more on the fear and terror both characters feel in the face of Humbaba. This may be because little of tablets IV and V exist in the [Sin-Leqi-Unnini](#) edition.

Besides evil and darkness, Humbaba also seems to embody fear and the unknown. Enkidu tells Gilgamesh about Humbaba before they arrive at the gate to the Cedar Forest, offering up a truly monstrous description. Before they engage him in battle, Humbaba can be heard roaring in the forest. Huge paths of forest have been cleared by his presence. There is evidence of his size and strength all around them. This is reminiscent of a seldom-seen monster in a horror film. Gilgamesh and Enkidu are like the audience, projecting their fear onto this currently unknown adversary. Shamash even tells Enkidu and Gilgamesh that once Humbaba has adorned his seven 'terrors' he is unbeatable. Humbaba's very essence is fear.

Once they do come face to face with Humbaba, Gilgamesh again appeals to Shamash for assistance. Gilgamesh's plea for help undercuts his heroic bravado and boasting prior to arriving at the Cedar Forest, suggesting a possible naiveté on his part. However, Gilgamesh also knows that Humbaba is no friend of Shamash, and this insight allows

him to appeal to Shamash with more gravitas. He essentially is performing a divine job or favor for Shamash. While Gilgamesh and Enkidu are ultimately held responsible for Humbaba's death, it benefits Shamash as well.

Finally, with Humbaba subdued with Shamash's help, Gilgamesh is prepared to dispatch the monster. Humbaba pleads for his life, promising to become Gilgamesh's servant. Enkidu sees this and tells Gilgamesh not to listen, to kill Humbaba. Humbaba accuses Enkidu of jealousy, perhaps seeking to divide the two heroes by attacking their relationship. Gilgamesh then kills Humbaba, although it is not clear in some translations how he does this. Some versions have him beheading Humbaba, while some focus on other methods. In other versions of the story, Enkidu kills Humbaba himself.

Companionship and cooperation are important themes in this tablet. Enkidu and Gilgamesh steel themselves for the task by reminding each other that together, they can accomplish anything. This concept, that no one who has a friend is truly alone, is mirrored cruelly in later tablets when Gilgamesh finds himself alone without Enkidu. With him at his side, fear and doubt can be pushed to the farthest reaches of his mind.

This confidence becomes arrogance at times, too. Gilgamesh and Enkidu decide to enter a sacred forest, forbidden to mortals, to begin cutting down trees. They wish to build monuments out of these trees, monuments to memorialize themselves and their adventures. This hubris does not go unpunished, as Enkidu soon will learn. Humbaba, facing death, curses Enkidu and warns both heroes that their transgressions will not go unnoticed by the gods.

Tablet VI and Tablet VII

Summary

Upon his return to Uruk [Gilgamesh](#) bathes his body and dons a clean robe and cloak, and anoints himself with oil. His appearance is so attractive that Ishtar, the goddess of love and war, is overcome with lust. She pleads with Gilgamesh to be her husband. She promises him vast riches if he impregnates her. She tells him they will live together in a house made of cedar, and that she will give him a lapis lazuli chariot with golden wheels.

Gilgamesh pointedly refuses her advances. He says he has nothing to offer her, since, as a goddess, she has everything she could ever want. He tells her he knows of the fate of her other human lovers, and is aware of how fickle her love can be. Gilgamesh recounts the story of Tammuz, the shepherd, who was a captive in the underworld and is mourned in festivals every year. Another shepherd she loved became a bird with broken wings, unable to fly. A goat-herder who loved her was turned into a wolf. When her father's gardener, Ishullanu, rejected her advances, she turned him into a frog. Gilgamesh asks why he should expect to be treated any better.

Ishtar is furious. She goes to her father, [Anu](#), and mother, Antum, and demands that they let her use the Bull of Heaven to punish Gilgamesh. Her father refuses, stating that what Gilgamesh said was true. Ishtar is only further enraged. She threatens to free the dead from the underworld so they can feast on the living. Anu warns her that

the bull will also bring a famine. Ishtar assures him that she has made provisions for the people and the flocks of Uruk, and he gives in.

Ishtar unleashes the Bull of Heaven. The city of Uruk trembles as, bellowing and snorting, it comes down from the sky. A crack opens up in the earth, and one hundred men fall into it and die. Again the bull bellows and again the ground cracks open. One hundred more men are swallowed up. The third time this happens, [Enkidu](#) attacks the bull. The bull slobbers all over him and whips him with its tail, coated in excrement. Enkidu grabs it by its horns and wrestles with it. He calls out to Gilgamesh, who joins him, and they fight the bull together. At last, Enkidu seizes its filthy tail and holds the monster still so that Gilgamesh can thrust his sword between its shoulders and kill it. The heroes then cut out its heart and offer it as a sacrifice to [Shamash](#) the sun god.

Ishtar appears on the walls of the city and curses the two friends. Enkidu picks up one of the bull's bloody haunches and hurls it at her. He threatens that if she were closer, he would do the same to her. While Ishtar and her followers, the temple prostitutes, mourn the bull, Gilgamesh gathers his craftsmen and shows them how beautifully the gods had made the creature, how thickly its horns were coated with lapis lazuli. Gilgamesh removes the horns and fills them with oil, which he offers in sacrifice to his father, Lugulbanda. Then he hangs them on the wall of his palace as a trophy.

Gilgamesh and Enkidu again bathe and wash the bull's blood from their bodies in the Euphrates. That night, Enkidu has a dream that the gods are meeting in council. He awakens suddenly and asks Gilgamesh why the gods would do this.

Tablet VII introduces more details regarding Enkidu's dream. In it, the gods are angry with him and Gilgamesh and they meet to decide what should be done with them. Anu, Ishtar's father, decrees that someone must be punished for killing Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven. Only one of the companions, however, must die. [Enlil](#), Humbaba's master and the god of earth, wind, and air, feels that Enkidu should be the one to die. Shamash, the sun god, defends the heroes, saying that he had influenced their actions in the Cedar Forest. Enlil is angered and accuses Shamash of taking their side and behaving like a mortal instead of a god. Therefore, it is decided that Enkidu must die.

Soon thereafter, Enkidu becomes ill, proving the dream true. Burdened with regret, Enkidu curses [Shamhat](#) for civilizing him. He curses the cedar gate that he and Gilgamesh brought back from the Cedar Forest. He states that he would have cut it to pieces with an axe if he had known this would happen. Gilgamesh promises his friend that he will build him an even greater monument than the cedar gate. He will erect an enormous statue of Enkidu, made entirely of gold.

Enkidu curses the trapper who first spotted him at the watering hole and says he hopes his hunting pits are filled in and his traps are unset. Shamash, hearing Enkidu's cries, finally answers. He asks why Enkidu curses the harlot, since if it had not been for her, Enkidu would have never tasted the rich foods of the palace, never worn beautiful

clothes, and never known Gilgamesh's friendship. Shamash tells Enkidu that when he dies, Gilgamesh will wander the earth, undone by grief. Enkidu is comforted by Shamash's words and retracts his curse, offering a blessing instead for Shamhat.

The next morning, lying on his deathbed, Enkidu tells Gilgamesh of another terrible dream. In the dream, he was all alone on a dark plain, and a man with a lion's head and an eagle's talons seized him. He fought this creature, but it overpowered him and changed him into a birdlike creature. Then he was dragged down to the underworld. There he saw kings, gods, and priests, all of them dressed in feathers. All of them were living in total darkness. They ate dirt instead of food. Queen Ereshkigal, the ruler of the underworld, sat on her throne, and Belit-Seri, the scribe of the gods, whose tablet tells everyone's fate, knelt before her. Enkidu says the queen looked at them and asked who led them there. Enkidu tells Gilgamesh that he would have been blessed if he had died in battle, because those who die in battle die a glorious death. Enkidu's condition slowly worsens and he suffers for twelve days before he dies.

Analysis

Tablet VI reveals a great deal about the importance of Ishtar, the goddess of love, and her mortal lovers. In response to Ishtar's advances, Gilgamesh explains he knows all about her past human lovers who became animals—a shepherd who was changed into a broken-winged bird, a goat herder who became a wolf, a gardener who became a frog. In particular, Gilgamesh mentions Tammuz, a mortal shepherd who becomes a god after his relationship with Ishtar. After his death, he goes to the underworld. Reasons for his death vary from translation to translation, but Ishtar is generally at fault in most traditions.

Gilgamesh's rejection of Ishtar is infuriating to her but also embarrassing. He states aloud the truth about her reputation. Ishtar appears to be more insulted by the revelation of this information than she is by Gilgamesh's initial rejection. When Anu, her father, comments that everything Gilgamesh asserted is true, Ishtar's reaction betrays her feelings. She is, after all, the goddess of love. To have her divine reputation questioned in this manner is extremely insulting but also threatening.

Gilgamesh's list of Ishtar's ex-lovers suggests that Ishtar knows little of love, and perhaps that she should not be worshipped as she currently is. This is no small matter considering that Uruk holds a temple for Ishtar at its very center. Gilgamesh is taking a grave risk by speaking this way to Ishtar. He is challenging the authority of the gods and questioning their very place in a power structure he has heretofore helped to maintain.

[The Bull of Heaven](#) is sometimes also called Gugalanna. Gugalanna was the first husband of Ereshkigal, the Goddess of the Netherworld. Ishtar's emotionally charged decision to use the Bull of Heaven to punish Gilgamesh is met with skepticism by Anu, her father. He agrees with Gilgamesh's assessment of Ishtar's reputation, further enraging her. She counters with a serious threat: to release the dead into the land of the living. Anu relents but is concerned about the destruction the Bull will bring. Ishtar tells him she has made provisions to see the people

through a period of drought. The distinction that the responsible party should be punished, rather than innocent bystanders, for his insults is revisited in [Utnapishtim](#)'s story of the flood in a later tablet. Although Anu and Ishtar are engaged in a heated conversation, both are aware of their responsibilities as gods and the power that they can wield.

After Gilgamesh and Enkidu defeat the Bull of Heaven, Ishtar curses them from the walls of the city. Enkidu tears of a haunch of the Bull and throws it at her, telling her he would do the same to her if he could. This compounds their insult against Ishtar and more directly implicates Enkidu's involvement. Gilgamesh takes the Bull's horns to the craftsmen of Uruk. They marvel at how they were made and at how beautiful they are. He hangs them as a trophy for his chambers. His pride over his accomplishments can be interpreted as a certain lack of respect towards the divine. The Bull of Heaven is a divine instrument, but Gilgamesh slays it and dismantles the body. Both heroes seem to have forgotten their place.

Enkidu and Gilgamesh return to bathe in the Euphrates after their victory. The people of Uruk celebrate their conquests and Gilgamesh boasts that he and Enkidu are best. This final bit of hubris is soon met with a foreboding dream that Enkidu has. In it the gods are meeting together in council. Enkidu awakens and asks Gilgamesh why they would be doing this. Enkidu seems to have suddenly realized the possibility of severe repercussions for their actions. It is notable that Gilgamesh, who has had many dreams of events to come, does not dream of this event. His ignorance on this matter foreshadows how shaken he will be by Enkidu's death. It is also the first dream that either hero has that is not metaphorical in nature. As Tablet VII will show, the gods do actually convene to discuss the actions of the two heroes.

The decision by the gods to punish Enkidu introduces another theme in the epic: the gods can and will act without explanation or reason. Some translations state that Gilgamesh's semi-divine nature is a factor in their decision to spare him and select Enkidu for death. This theme is visited again when Utnapishtim tells Gilgamesh of the Flood brought upon humanity without explanation. The irony of this behavior is that the gods punish the heroes for their behavior while rarely justifying their own. Ishtar becomes jealous and vengeful and releases the Bull of Heaven. Her target is Gilgamesh but hundreds die before Enkidu is able to subdue the Bull, yet there are no repercussions for Ishtar's decisions and she does not exhibit remorse for the men that died. The gods answer only to one another, not to another higher being, so their power is largely unchecked.

Enkidu curses his predicament by blaming Shamhat and the trapper. Because of them, he contends, he was removed from the wilderness where he was content and put on a path leading to his eventual downfall. The knowledge he has gained through his civilization has augmented his suffering rather than helped subdue it. It is possible that the authors were using this as an analogy about what was then modern urban life. The life of animals may have appeared to be far less complex and more easily enjoyed. It also again reflects the Biblical metaphor of Eden. Had humanity been able to stay in Eden, none of us would have to know suffering.

Shamash hears Enkidu's cries and comforts him by reminding Enkidu that if not for Shamhat and the trapper, Enkidu would not have tasted the best that civilization has to offer. He would also never have met his friend Gilgamesh. He tells Enkidu, essentially, that he is beloved by Gilgamesh and that when he passes away Gilgamesh will be full of sorrow. Although Enkidu's demise is still imminent, he is comforted by Shamash's words. He realizes that he has enjoyed some of the most important things in life, namely love and friendship. He recants his curse and offers a blessing instead for Shamhat. This suggests that curses and blessings carried great weight in the ancient Mesopotamian world. Such words were not invoked lightly, and, if uttered, were believed to have consequences. Finally, having attained some sense of peace, Enkidu passes away, leaving Gilgamesh alone. The lesson now imparted to Gilgamesh is that despite his great strength and reputation, death is inescapable.

Tablet VIII and Tablet IX

Summary

[Gilgamesh](#) is crushed by [Enkidu's](#) death. He rips his clothes and tears his hair. He circles Enkidu's body restlessly and proclaims his sadness. He touches his friend's heart and feels nothing. Gilgamesh calls on the animals, [Shamhat](#), and the elders of the city to all mourn the loss of Enkidu. The rivers, the forests, and the farmers all mourn Enkidu's death.

Gilgamesh then summons the artisans of Uruk together. He instructs them to build a statue of gold to commemorate Enkidu. He eulogizes Enkidu with kind words and remains by Enkidu's body until he sees a worm crawl out of its nose. He tears off his royal garb garments with anger and dons filthy animal skins. He pours honey into a carnelian bowl, places some butter in a bowl of lapis lazuli, and makes an offering to [Shamash](#).

Soon thereafter Gilgamesh journeys into the wilderness, just as Shamash had told Enkidu he would. He wanders alone aimlessly in anguish until he formulates a new plan. Gilgamesh decides to seek out [Utnapishtim](#), a legendary figure who survived the flood that almost ended life on Earth. Utnapishtim was granted immortality by the gods. Gilgamesh wishes to learn this secret too. Utnapishtim lives a far-off place forbidden to mortal beings. Gilgamesh's journey there will be dangerous.

On his way to find Utnapishtim, Gilgamesh enters a mountain pass at night. The moon lights the path, and Gilgamesh sees lions circling about. Afraid, he appeals to [Sin](#), the Moon god, for protection. He descends on the lions and kills them with a violent passion. In some versions, he dreams of a vague battle with an enemy who stands over him. It is unclear who this figure is or who wins the battle.

Gilgamesh arrives at Mount Mashu, the twin-peaked mountain. One peak faces west, toward the setting of the sun, and the other faces east toward its rising point. Two monsters, a Scorpion-man and his wife, guard the gates to a passage that runs under Mashu. The male monster tells his wife that any person who dares to come here must be a god. His wife senses that Gilgamesh is two-thirds a god and one-third mortal. The male monster asks Gilgamesh to identify himself and explain why he has traveled to Mashu.

Gilgamesh tells the monsters his story and his desire to see Utnapishtim. The Scorpion-man informs him that Utnapishtim lives on the other side of the mountain. To get there, Gilgamesh must use a passage that runs through the mountain. Shamash uses this same passage each night to travel back to the point where the sun rises every morning. Gilgamesh must travel the entire length of the passage in complete darkness. It will take him an entire day to do (Twelve "double-hours"). The Scorpion-man warns Gilgamesh that the way is treacherous and that no mortal has ever attempted it. Gilgamesh will be the first. He tells Gilgamesh that he must endure the tests of this long passage and lets him pass.

Gilgamesh walks through the mountain in absolute darkness. He cannot see in front of him or behind him. He walks the first, second, and third double hour in total blackness and struggles to breathe in the hot darkness. He walks four, five, and six double hours with the north wind blowing in his face. As the eleventh double hour approaches, the darkness begins to fade. At the end of the twelfth double hour, Gilgamesh emerges from the tunnel into the sunlight, breathing fresh air. He sees a beautiful garden filled with flowers of all colors. Beyond the garden, he sees the sea.

Analysis

As Gilgamesh mourns for Enkidu, he undergoes a physical transformation that makes his appearance similar to that of Enkidu's. Gilgamesh tears his hair and clothes and eventually puts on filthy animal skins. Whereas Enkidu's civilization made his appearance more like Gilgamesh's, here the process is exactly the opposite. Gilgamesh reverts to a more savage state. His appearance suggests that he is trying to keep Enkidu alive in his own mind by becoming him.

Gilgamesh's language while memorializing his friend also directly correlates to Enkidu's wilderness roots. He deliberately invokes visions of the meadows and plains and the animals that inhabit them. These verses simultaneously speak to Enkidu's innocence and his humanity. Enkidu was new to the ways of man when he met his demise but he was beloved by all that knew him in that short time. While he may have died a man, he is mourned by both the civilized and natural worlds.

Gilgamesh struggles to accept Enkidu's death but is also in denial of death itself. When Gilgamesh sees a worm emerge from Enkidu's nose, he can no longer deny what is happening: his friend is dead. He sees that one day he too will die. This drives him to seek a way out, to cheat death itself. Therefore, Gilgamesh decides to find Utnapishtim and makes his way to Mashu. On his way, he encounters lions, and asks Sin, the god of the moon, to protect him. In some translations, this occurs in a dream while in others it is an actual event. In some versions of the dream, Gilgamesh is frightened but it is unclear whom he faces.

Upon reaching Mashu and entering the mountain passage, he endures a suffocating darkness. This is a common archetypal feature in many hero myths or stories. Gilgamesh's initial quest against Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven has proven his heroic abilities, but now he is truly tested in a terrifying experience. The hero generally must

face this challenge alone, and Gilgamesh is no exception. He is surrounded by darkness, and he cannot see behind him or in front of him. His solitude is inescapable. There is literally nowhere else to go, or anyone else to turn to for aid. The darkness becomes a literal symbolization of his solitude.

Having endured this, Gilgamesh reaches the other side of the mountain passage and finds a beautiful garden filled with fruit and flowers of bright colors. Beyond it, he can see the sea. Gilgamesh has entered a new world. His passage through the dark passage mimics the birth process itself and his emergence on the other side is a symbolic rebirth. While Gilgamesh still mourns for Enkidu's loss, he is ultimately seeking out his own salvation. He may believe that immortality is the answer to his problems but he will find that salvation takes on another form.

Tablet X

Summary

[Siduri](#), a barmaid, keeps a tavern overlooking the sea. In the distance, she sees [Gilgamesh](#) coming toward her. His appearance frightens her. He is wearing animal skins, and his face is weathered. Siduri barricades herself inside the tavern. Gilgamesh pounds on the door and threatens to kick it down. He tells Siduri who he is and Siduri asks him why he looks the way he does if he is indeed the great Gilgamesh. Gilgamesh tells her that he is grieving for the loss of his friend, [Enkidu](#), with whom he slayed the demon Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven. He says that Enkidu has been overtaken by the fate that awaits all humankind—he is turned to clay. Gilgamesh asks Siduri if that is what must happen to him as well.

Siduri opens the tavern door and invites him in, telling him that only the gods live forever. She invites him to clean up and to eat and drink. Gilgamesh instead says he wants to find [Utnapishtim](#) and asks Siduri where he can find him. Siduri tells Gilgamesh that [Shamash](#) the sun god crosses the sea every day, but no mortal has ever been able to follow him. Siduri says that even if he miraculously survived the crossing, he would then face the poisonous Waters of Death, which only [Urshanabi](#), Utnapishtim's boatman, can cross.

Urshanabi lives on an island somewhere on these waters where he guards the Urnu-snakes and the Stone Things. She urges him to abandon this quest, telling him that immortality was never meant for anyone but the gods. However, Gilgamesh cannot be convinced otherwise. Finally, Siduri gives him directions to the island where Urshanabi lives and tells him that perhaps he will take Gilgamesh across the waters to see Utnapishtim upon seeing Gilgamesh's face. If he refuses, she says, Gilgamesh must abandon this quest.

Gilgamesh sets off to find Urshanabi. When he arrives near the place where the Urnu-snakes and the Stone Things reside, he attacks them with his axe and dagger, destroying them. He then battles a winged creature but manages to defeat it as well. The sounds of battle garner Urshanabi's attention and he follows them to their source.

Gilgamesh introduces himself to Urshanabi. Urshanabi studies Gilgamesh's face and questions him about his appearance. Gilgamesh tells him about Enkidu, his grief, his fear of death, and his desire to find Utnapishtim.

Urshanabi says he will take Gilgamesh to Utnapishtim, but that Gilgamesh has made the task much more difficult because he has destroyed the Stone Things and the Urnu-snakes, which propelled and protected his boat. Instead, Urshanabi says, Gilgamesh must go into the forest and fashion hundreds of poles. Each pole must be exactly sixty cubits in length (approximately ninety feet). Urshanabi instructs him to fit the poles with rings and cover them with pitch, and then they will attempt the voyage.

Gilgamesh cuts the poles, and they sail off together across the perilous sea. In three days, they sail as far as an ordinary boat would have sailed in two months. When they arrive at the Waters of Death, the boatman tells Gilgamesh to use the punting poles but to be sure that his hands do not touch the water. Gilgamesh steers the boat through the Waters of Death. His great strength causes him to break all of the poles. In some translations, the poles disintegrate in the Waters of Death. When the last pole is ruined, he takes off the animal skin he wears and holds it up as a sail.

In the distance, they can see a shore. An old man stands on the shore, watching the boat approach. The old man wonders who the stranger is with Urshanabi. When they get out of the boat, the old man asks Gilgamesh to identify himself. Gilgamesh tells the old man his story as well. The old man asks Gilgamesh why he grieves over mortality—nothing lives forever. He explains that the gods established that humanity would suffer death, and that when the gods give life, they decide the day of death. He says that death is our inescapable destiny, even if we do not know when it will happen.

Analysis

Siduri the veiled barmaid is a traditional figure in Mesopotamian mythology and poetry, and in the Hurrian language, her name means “young woman.” The goddess of winemaking and beer brewing, she is usually considered a manifestation of Ishtar. Her warmth and kindness to Gilgamesh throughout this episode are remarkable considering how Gilgamesh treated Ishtar prior to Enkidu’s death.

Scholars have not been able to determine what the Stone Things and the Urnu-snakes mentioned in this tablet are exactly or why Gilgamesh destroys them. Some translations suggest the Stone Things were actual stones that were used to construct a bridge. Others suggest they were magnetite. The tablets are incomplete on this topic. The Winged creature that Gilgamesh encounters is Utnapishtim in some versions of the story.

Both Siduri and Urshanabi have no idea who Gilgamesh is when they see him, suggesting his appearance is truly repulsive. Even after explaining his story to them, they both independently tell him that his quest is pointless and that he should turn back. When Gilgamesh finally reaches the old man, he tells Gilgamesh that death is inescapable.

As we will learn in the next tablet, the old man is in fact Utnapishtim. Even though Utnapishtim has been granted immortality himself, he advises Gilgamesh against seeking it out. This suggests that Utnapishtim’s experience with immortality has not been completely positive. Immortality itself robs life of urgency and meaning. Utnapishtim will

live forever, but this limits his personal ambition greatly. He has no endpoint in his life to fear, but he also has no motivations. There is no deadline.

In a way, death gives meaning to life. Without it, we have little reason to consider how our lives are lived and how we will be remembered. Utnapishtim may also realize that immortality will not allow Gilgamesh to become the king he is meant to be. Utnapishtim has escaped death, but he will not help Gilgamesh to do the same. Utnapishtim says that Gilgamesh inherited his father's mortality and, like everything else in the mortal world, he is subject to death. Gilgamesh must continue to live as a mortal and accept death as a part of life.

Tablet XI

Summary

[Gilgamesh](#) soon realizes that the old man he has been speaking to is in fact [Utnapishtim](#). He is surprised that Utnapishtim appears as just another man, whereas Gilgamesh had expected to face a terrible demon. Gilgamesh asks Utnapishtim to explain how it came to be that he was allowed to live as an immortal, and how Gilgamesh can do the same.

Utnapishtim explains that long ago he was once the king of city called Shuruppak, a city that was situated on the Euphrates. The gods [Anu](#), [Enlil](#), Ninerta, Ea, and Ennugi met in council and decided to bring a flood to destroy the city. Ea whispers to Utnapishtim through his house walls to abandon his belongings and instead build a boat. Ea gave him dimensions for this boat. It would have six decks and be of an enormous size, about 180 feet high. On this boat, Ea said, Utnapishtim should bring his family and the seed of every species.

Utnapishtim asked Ea what he should tell the people of Shuruppak, since he needs help to construct the boat, and people would naturally have questions as to his intent. Ea told Utnapishtim to tell the people that he must leave the city because Enlil is angry with him and that he must find a new home and a new divine protector. Ea says to tell the people that he will be Utnapishtim's patron and that Utnapishtim will travel to Apsu, the abyss. Ea also instructed Utnapishtim to tell the people of Shuruppak that a flood of bounty and good fortune would greet the city upon Utnapishtim's departure. Food and drink would be plentiful with more than enough bread and fish for everyone.

The people of Shuruppak, young and old, came out to help with the construction of the boat. Each day Utnapishtim would sacrifice a bull or lamb and beer and wine were in great supply for a great feast. Each day ended with a festival-like celebration. In just seven days, the boat was complete. Utnapishtim loaded all his belongings on to the vessel and after some difficulty was able to cast off.

Storm clouds gathered as Utnapishtim set the boat adrift. Utnapishtim shields himself inside the boat with the help of Puzuramurri, the caulker. He gives the caulker his home as thanks and settles in while the storm rages outside.

Utnapishtim describes a terrible storm that lasts for seven days. The storm is so thick that the gods cannot even see the earth from the heavens. Ishtar cries out in anguish over the loss of humanity.

When the storm finally subsides, Utnapishtim looked out but saw nothing moving. There were no signs of life anywhere but he sees something in the distance that may be an island. He tries to steer the boat in that direction but finds that the boat is caught on the peak of Mount Nisir. After being stuck there for seven days Utnapishtim releases a dove into the air to see if it can find a place to land. It returns to the boat. Utnapishtim next frees a swallow into the air but it too returns to the boat. Finally, Utnapishtim releases a raven and the bird does not return this time. After that, Utnapishtim released all the birds.

Upon reaching shore, Utnapishtim prepares a sacrifice and offers libations to the gods. The gods descend and gather around the altar. Ishtar tells Utnapishtim that she will never forget the flood and its terrible price. She says that Enlil is forbidden from attending this ceremony. Enlil does appear, however, and upon seeing the boat and Utnapishtim becomes enraged, demanding to know how one man was able to survive. [Ninurta](#) tells Enlil that Ea has the answer.

Ea reprimands Enlil for inflicting a punishment on all of humanity for what one man may have done to upset him. Ea states that the punishment does not fit the crime. Ea says that he did not tell Utnapishtim of the gods' plan, but that Utnapishtim guessed it and acted wisely. Ea suggest a reward is in order for Utnapishtim. Enlil then took Utnapishtim and his wife aboard the boat and made them kneel before him. He touches their foreheads and decrees that their mortality has ended and that they are admitted into the company of the gods, to live forever. He tells them they will now journey to the Faraway, a place beyond the world of mortals, where all the rivers originate, and reside there.

Utnapishtim then asks Gilgamesh what *he* has done that would require the gods to convene and grant him immortality. He challenges Gilgamesh to stay awake for six days and seven nights. Gilgamesh accepts and seats himself, ready to take the test. As soon as he does, an ocean mist comes over him from the shore and he falls asleep. Utnapishtim remarks to his wife that the hero who seeks eternal life now sleeps. She asks him to wake Gilgamesh and tell him to return to his home. Instead, Utnapishtim tells her to bake a loaf of bread each day and lay it next to Gilgamesh for each day that he sleeps, as proof that he has been asleep. She also marks the wall to record each day. Gilgamesh sleeps for seven days and when he awakes finds seven loaves of bread by his head but denies having slept at all. Utnapishtim directs his attention to the loaves of bread. The first is crusty and stale, while the most recent is fresh. Gilgamesh is demoralized again and asks Utnapishtim what he should do.

Utnapishtim tells [Urshanabi](#) the boatman that he is now forbidden from this shore. He must never return. Instead, he says, he tells Urshanabi to take Gilgamesh to bathe and dress himself appropriately before accompanying him back to the city of Uruk. As Gilgamesh and Urshanabi begin their journey back, Utnapishtim's wife implores her husband to give Gilgamesh something to take back with him, considering the long journey he has made to get there. Utnapishtim agrees and tells Gilgamesh of a magic plant called How-the-Old-Man-Once-Again-Becomes-A-

Young-Man that will restore Gilgamesh to his youth. Utnapishtim says this plant can be found at the bottom of the sea.

Gilgamesh ties heavy stones to his feet and descends into the waters. He locates the plant and pulls it out. He cuts the stones from his feet and surfaces with the plant. He tells Urshanabi that he will take the plant to the elders of Uruk and use its rejuvenating powers on them. Then he will partake and once again be strongest and youngest.

The two men begin their journey to Uruk. On their way, they come across a spring and Gilgamesh decides to bathe in its waters. He leaves the magic plant on shore where a serpent comes by and takes the plant, shedding its skin as it does so. When Gilgamesh returns from bathing, he is heartbroken to find that the plant is missing. He cries to Urshanabi that his efforts have been in vain.

Finally, the two men continue and reach Uruk. As they enter the city, Gilgamesh shows Urshanabi the walls of the city and the temple of Ishtar. He shows him the fields and orchards. He speaks with pride of Uruk, the city of Gilgamesh.

Analysis

There is an obvious parallel between Utnapishtim's story and the account of the flood in the Bible. It should be noted that some scholars also believe that an editor added the flood story, based on the Epic of Atrahasis, to Tablet XI. In both Utnapishtim's story and the Bible account, a large boat is constructed and filled with all the living beings on earth. In both stories, the boat comes to rest or is caught on a mountain peak. However, God chose Noah because of Noah's exemplary righteousness. The rest of humanity is punished in the Bible for behaving wickedly. In Utnapishtim's story, the gods give no reason for the flood. The decision appears to be arbitrary. In some older versions of the story, Enlil complains that humanity is too noisy and prevents him from sleeping. This appears to be a character trait of Enlil as he also decides that [Enkidu](#) must be the one to die, also without a concrete reason. Utnapishtim also does not ask the gods why the flood is coming.

Following the flood, all the gods display regret over their actions except for Enlil, who is angry that anyone has survived. He is quickly reprimanded by Ea. Ea's cleverness is on show in this tablet, as it is he who gives Utnapishtim knowledge of the flood to come and instructs him to build a boat, complete with the dimensions necessary. Ea even provides Utnapishtim with an excuse in case anyone asks why the boat is being built. Linguistic scholars have noted that when Utnapishtim tells the people of Shuruppak that they will enjoy a great harvest of wheat and bread, he uses a pun that almost serves as a clue. The word for "bread" in Akkadian is very similar to the word for "darkness" and the word for "wheat" very similar to the word for "misfortune."

Utnapishtim's story illustrates that humanity perseveres. Even if each of us is to meet our own end eventually, the human cycle of life continues indefinitely. Although Enlil is initially upset that Utnapishtim has survived, the other gods are thankful that humanity has not been destroyed. For this, Enlil rewards Utnapishtim and his wife with the gift of immortality. This suggests a relationship between humankind and the gods that was mutually beneficial.

Without the devotion of their human subjects, the gods of ancient Mesopotamia seemed to be without power. Some translations of the story state that the gods descend on Utnapishtim's sacrifice offering not having eaten for days because no offerings had been made to them. The people, in turn, rely on the gods for assistance and protection. Both need the other to survive and prosper.

Gilgamesh now has to understand that death is a necessity, another part of life. Utnapishtim challenges Gilgamesh to stay awake for six days and seven nights (some translations state that he simply says for seven days). This challenge illustrates Utnapishtim's point poetically. Sleep is similar to death: a prostrate body could be a sleeping person or one who is dead. It is metaphorically close to death, but also a necessary part of life. Utnapishtim's analogy is that one cannot live without sleep, just as one cannot live without death. However, Utnapishtim knows he will need proof to demonstrate that Gilgamesh has failed the test. When Gilgamesh sees the loaves of bread left out for him, he is distraught.

After obtaining the magic plant, Gilgamesh tells Urshanabi that he wants to take it to the elders of Uruk to restore their youth. This signals a change in Gilgamesh. It is the first time he mentions doing something for the benefit of others. While his motives are still selfish, to restore his own youth, he does not mean to keep the plant to himself. He may be able to save others from death and reduce the suffering of others around him.

The serpent that steals the plant as Gilgamesh bathes again conjures up a Biblical allegory, but there is a difference. The serpent in the Bible uses forbidden fruit to tempt Eve, eventually leading to Adam and Eve's ejection from Eden. The serpent in Gilgamesh's story steals the plant from Gilgamesh, who now has no choice but to face his fate. Rather than presenting a challenge to Gilgamesh, the serpent's actions allow Gilgamesh to free himself of his attachment to immortality. His transformation is almost complete. The serpent sheds its skin as it takes the plant, attaining its own youth. This shedding may also reflect Gilgamesh's need to shed his old ways and become a better king.

Upon returning to Uruk Gilgamesh looks upon the city with new eyes. He sees the city walls and its temples and realizes that it is his home, a testament to humanity, but also to him if he can rule it well. Most translations of the epic mention the temple of Ishtar specifically, suggesting that Gilgamesh has made peace with the goddess after his previous transgressions. It also suggests that the story is emphasizing the importance of women in human society. Two women, [Siduri](#) and Utnapishtim's wife, take pity on Gilgamesh when he is at his lowest and offer their kindness as he tries to come to terms with his predicament. Women give birth to and nurture the young, allowing the all-important cycle of life to renew.

Tablet XII

Summary

A twelfth tablet exists that is not part of the main body of the epic and is not included in some translations and versions. [Sin](#)-Leqi-Unnini added the tablet to the poem, but it is unclear why. It does not correspond to the rest of the poem and contradicts some of the events outlined in it.

[Gilgamesh](#) drops a drumstick through a hole in the floor of a carpenter's home and it falls into the Nether World. [Enkidu](#), who is still alive in this tablet, offers to venture down and retrieve it. Gilgamesh warns Enkidu that if he goes to the Nether World he must not do anything to attract the attention of anyone, or the dead will overtake him. Enkidu enters the Nether World but does not heed any of Gilgamesh's advice, doing exactly the opposite. Ereshkigal, the Queen of the Nether World, seizes him with the Cry of the Dead. Some translations suggest that Ereshkigal exposes her breasts and forces Enkidu to make love to her.

Gilgamesh grieves the loss of Enkidu and approaches [Enlil](#) for aid. Enlil refuses and Gilgamesh makes his way to Sin, the moon god for help. Sin ignores his cries for help. Finally, Gilgamesh goes to Ea for help. Ea intercedes and allows Enkidu's spirit to rise up and escape the Nether World. Gilgamesh inquires about the Nether World. Enkidu tells him that it is terrible and that if he tells Gilgamesh, Gilgamesh will sit down and weep. Gilgamesh implores Enkidu to tell him anyway. Enkidu says that vermin eat at his body. Gilgamesh sits down and weeps.

After a while, Gilgamesh inquires about the fate of different people: the man with no children, the man with one son, the man with six sons, the man who died in battle, and a man who left no one behind to remember him. Enkidu tells him the fate of each, explaining that the man with no sons is miserable, the man with six sons is happy, and that the man who left no one behind eats garbage. No dog would eat what he eats.

Analysis

As in the main story, Enkidu finds himself in the Nether World by upsetting mystical forces. Instead of angering Ishtar, he pays no attention to Gilgamesh's warning, and he is taken by the Cry of the Dead. The carpenter's home and drumstick in the beginning of this tablet do not have a clear interpretation. It is not explained why the heroes are there or what significance the drum takes. The fact that the use of these objects opens a hole into the Nether World suggests that the drum could have been used in a ceremony to speak to the dead as one would in a séance or shamanistic tradition.

Once Enkidu is taken by the Cry of the Dead, it is again Ea that helps him and Gilgamesh. This allows Gilgamesh to learn about the fate of those in the Nether World and imparts the same core lesson to him as the main body of the epic. Enkidu's tale about those he has seen in the Nether World emphasizes the importance of relationships in the living world. Those who leave a family behind fare far better than those who have no one to remember them.

They feed on garbage and are regarded as lower than dogs. Enkidu's example does not speak of individuals who have attained happiness through great wealth.

The Epic of Atrahasis

The Flood story recounted to [Gilgamesh](#) by [Utnapishtim](#) is markedly similar to the account of the flood in the Bible. However, an Akkadian epic dating back to the 18th Century BCE features a nearly identical flood story involving a character named Atrahasis. Although the *Epic of Atrahasis* is fragmentary in much the same way the Gilgamesh epic is, there are three tablets which comprise the most complete version of the story.

Atrahasis was a Sumerian King of Shuruppak before the flood. The first tablet of the epic is a creation story, explaining the origin of humankind. The goddess Mami creates humanity out of clay to do the work that lesser gods refuse to do. Tablet II deals with overpopulation, as [Enlil](#) uses alternating periods of drought and famine to reduce the population and keep it under control. Enlil eventually decides to destroy humanity with a flood.

Tablet III features an account of the flood, which was likely adapted for the Epic of Gilgamesh. In it, Enki, the god of water, warns Atrahasis of the coming flood. He does this in exactly the same manner that Ea warns Utnapishtim, by speaking to him through the reed walls of his house. He instructs Atrahasis to tear down his home and build a boat. Enki tells Atrahasis that the boat will need multiple decks and must be of great size.

When the boat is complete, Atrahasis boards it with his family and animals. The storm begins and then rages for seven days. When it ends, Atrahasis goes ashore and makes a sacrifice to the gods, again, just as Utnapishtim did. In this version, Enlil is angry with Enki for sharing the secret of the flood with Atrahasis. Enki argues that he has done what was necessary to preserve life. The two gods agree that they must develop another method to control the population, but in this version, they do have a reason for bringing the flood. Utnapishtim's account offers no explanation from the gods for the extermination of humanity.

The similarities are obvious when one compares the contents of Tablet III to that of Tablet XI in Gilgamesh's story. However, Atrahasis's story has no mention of a reward from the gods. This may be because Enki takes the lion's share of the credit for saving humanity, whereas Ea denied telling Utnapishtim anything directly. Regardless, Atrahasis is not granted immortality in the most complete version of the epic.

Many scholars believe this story was directly adapted for use in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, arguing that the names Atrahasis and Utnapishtim may have even referred to the same individual. Ea addresses Utnapishtim as the "son of Ubartutu," and Atrahasis is also said to be the son of Ubartutu. This strengthens the argument that the flood story in Gilgamesh comes directly from the *Epic of Atrahasis*, but there is still debate among scholars.

Suggested Essay Questions

Enkidu is civilized through his encounter with Shamhat, a prostitute. As opposed to our own society, what does this say about views toward sexuality and femininity in ancient Mesopotamia?

Rather than being seen as a negative attribute, Shamhat's sexuality and its ties to the temple cement her importance in Mesopotamian society. She is a means to tame Enkidu as opposed to a means for him to behave like an animal. Throughout the poem, the role of women is unavoidable and important. Although Enkidu and Gilgamesh insult Ishtar, Gilgamesh specifically points out her temple to Urshanabi.

Compare and contrast the role of the serpent and the flood in the Bible and the Epic of Gilgamesh. What similarities and differences can be found?

In both books the serpent is presented negatively; a force that deprives humanity of some pleasure or immortality. In the Bible, the serpent is a deliberate force of temptation, and Adam and Eve are cast out as sinners. It is clearly depicted as an evil presence. In Gilgamesh, Gilgamesh's own carelessness deprives him of immortality. In his case, the role of the serpent is necessary for him to move past his feelings toward life and death and become a better king, making this serpent less of a villain and more a catalyst for change.

The flood stories in both texts are very similar, and some scholars believe that they refer to a singular event. However, there are differences between the accounts.

What does Gilgamesh's and Enkidu's constant struggle and defiance of the gods tell us about how the gods were viewed in Gilgamesh's time? Are the consequences that both characters face worth the risk each takes?

The gods as depicted in Gilgamesh's story, as well as Utnapishtim's, are presented as being easily angered and vengeful. Part of Gilgamesh's heroic pedigree is inherent in being two-thirds a god himself, but his acts of defiance also speak to a possibly resentful view of the gods among ancient Mesopotamians. The gods are depicted as being difficult to please, sometimes punishing without explanation or meting out punishments that seem far out of proportion to the original offense, as in Utnapishtim's story. Both characters take on large risks by insulting Ishtar, but Gilgamesh is able to face his own mortality and Enkidu is able to learn of the world of humans and of the value of life. Both also come to understand the importance of friendship in life.

What does Humbaba/Huwawa represent? Use examples from the story to support your position.

Humbaba represents fear and the unknown. Both Enkidu and Gilgamesh experience great fear in the cedar forest when they are about to face Humbaba. They support one another with encouraging words when the other is frightened. One can also argue that Humbaba represents nature itself. As guardian of the Cedar Forest, he has a

duty to protect it from harm. Gilgamesh and Enkidu together represent civilization. They seek to tame the natural world for their own purposes.

At various points in the story, dreams foretell events to come. What do these passages reveal about how dreams were valued in Mesopotamian culture? What do they tell us about the dreamer's state of mind?

It is obvious from the text that dreams were regarded as important markers that should be interpreted. It seems fair to say that the ancient Mesopotamians lent a good deal of credibility to them in their day-to-day lives. As Gilgamesh dreams of the meteor and the axe in anticipation of his meeting with Enkidu, he turns to his mother for an interpretation of his dreams. While she informs him of the imminent arrival of Enkidu, it could also be that Gilgamesh is lonely and looking for a companion. Enkidu dreams of the gods deciding his death and of what the underworld will be like. His state of mind is one of absolute fear of his defiance of the gods.

Although Gilgamesh faces his own mortality upon Enkidu's death, he also must now face a life without his friend. Why is this also of importance? What does it teach Gilgamesh about life and the spirit of endurance?

Beyond teaching Gilgamesh that his own life must end, Enkidu's death also forces Gilgamesh to continue living the life he still has left. He is initially so distraught over Enkidu's death that he more or less abandons his kingly duties. Utnapishtim teaches him that life must end, but Gilgamesh also must return to Uruk with the full understanding that his own life must continue if it is to have meaning.

What is the significance of the darkness that Gilgamesh encounters in the passage beneath Mount Mashu on his way to seek Utnapishtim?

The text repeatedly mentions how Gilgamesh is alone at this point in the story. With nothing else visible around him, Gilgamesh is truly on his own on this quest. He is also completely lost, without obvious direction, fumbling in the dark. This metaphor reiterates Gilgamesh's struggle with the loss of Enkidu. He is suddenly finding himself unsure of how to proceed in life.

Repetition is a frequent technique the author(s) used in the Epic of Gilgamesh, as is the theme of duality. Enkidu and Gilgamesh are near mirrors of each other, for example. They undertake two quests: one against Humbaba, the other against the Bull of Heaven. Discuss other examples of duality and repetition in the story. Why does the epic contain these elements?

Repetition reinforces themes present in the story, or attributes of a character. Sometimes repetition can also draw contrasts between different events or characters. Besides reinforcing elements in the story, repetition also suggests that these stories may have had a strong oral tradition and were largely passed down in this manner before being committed to these tablets.

Duality also draws comparisons between characters and again reinforces one of the themes of the story: companionship. Enkidu and Gilgamesh are near mirrors of each other. Gilgamesh and Utnapishtim also share some

characteristics, not in appearance, but in the knowledge that they both have gained. Enkidu and Gilgamesh embark on two quests. Gilgamesh's journey to the underworld mirrors his quest with Enkidu.

The story begins and ends with a description of the city of Uruk and its walls and other features? What does this signify?

For Gilgamesh it signals reconciliation with the finite nature of life. He is able to return to where he began and see it, almost with new eyes, and a new appreciation. He accepts his place. It also brings the story full-circle, perhaps an aesthetic choice to mirror the cyclical nature of life.

Comment on Gilgamesh and Enkidu's relationship. Is their love of a sexual nature or a more platonic one? The text describes them as being very close. Why do you think that is?

Although there is language in the text suggestive of a relationship beyond friendship between the two, there is no direct evidence of a sexual relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu. At the same time, Gilgamesh declares a love for Enkidu greater than that for any woman. However, Gilgamesh's sexual appetite for women is established early on in the text, where it is written that he sleeps with newly married brides before their husbands do. It is more likely that as the gods created Enkidu to be a counterweight to Gilgamesh, the characters are able to find in each other an understanding that no one else can provide. Only they are able to comprehend what it is like to be the other.