The Epic of Gilgamesh

INTRODUCTION

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Often known as the "cradle of civilization," Mesopotamia refers to the area between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers (in Ancient Greek, Mesopotamia means "land between rivers"), which is now split between Iraq, Syria, and Kuwait. The first evidence of agriculture and animal domestication dates back to between 10,000 and 6,800 BCE, while writing developed by the third millennium BCE (centuries earlier than the oldest known appearance of Gilgamesh in legend). Sumer, where the *Epic* was written, was a large area in southern Mesopotamia and the first known urban civilization. Uruk—the same city portrayed in the *Epic*—was for centuries the most important city in Sumer. People there spoke Sumerian, but gradually transitioned to Akkadian, the language in which the "standard version" of the *Epic* is written. Around 3,000 BCE, Uruk was the largest city in the world, with a population between fifty and eighty thousand. According to one list of Sumerian kings written in ancient times, Gilgamesh was a real king who ruled in the 27th century BCE.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The presence of a "great flood" and other similarities with the Hebrew Bible have led some to claim that the writers of the Old Testament drew on the text of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. Certain scholars have also argued that the epic poems of Homer—*The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*—were influenced by the story of Gilgamesh. In the novel *The Great American Novel*, Philip Roth created a more modern hero inspired by Gilgamesh: an All-Star pitcher named Gil Gamesh.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Epic of Gilgamesh
- **When Written:** As far back as the Third Dynasty of Ur (around 2100 BCE), stories were written about the legendary king Gilgamesh. These stories, however, were not unified into a single narrative until the 18th century BCE, in what is now known as the Old Babylonian version of the Epic. This version, however, had major gaps, which were largely filled in by what is now known as the Standard Version. The Standard Version dates from between the 10th and 13th century BCE. Still today, the text is considered incomplete.
- **Where Written:** Ancient Sumer / Mesopotamia
- **When Published:** The Epic of Gilgamesh was first discovered in 1853, and the first modern translation was published in the 1870s. Since then, various versions have been published.
- **Literary Period:** Ancient epic
- **Genre:** Epic Poem
- **Setting:** Ancient Sumer (modern-day Iraq)
- **Climax:** Enkidu's death
- **Antagonist:** Though the epic does not have a single clearly-defined antagonist, pride is Gilgamesh's main obstacle throughout.
- **Point of View:** Third-person omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

Old School. The *Epic of Gilgamesh* is the world's oldest surviving written poem.

Gilgamesh the Boss. In the *Final Fantasy* series of videogames, a character known as Gilgamesh frequently features as a boss enemy, along with his sidekick Enkidu.

PLOT SUMMARY

The story begins in Uruk, a city in Ancient Sumer (Mesopotamia) where Gilgamesh rules as king. Though Gilgamesh is known to be stronger than any other man, the people of Uruk complain that he abuses his power. The gods hear these complaints, and the god Aruru creates Enkidu, a man as strong as Gilgamesh. Aruru forms Enkidu out of **water** and clay, out in the wilderness. Enkidu lives in nature, in harmony with the wild animals.

Eventually a trapper discovers that Enkidu has been destroying his traps. The trapper describes Enkidu as the strongest man in the world. Both the trapper's father and Gilgamesh tell him that when Enkidu sleeps with a woman, the animals he lives with will reject him. The trapper then brings a temple prostitute, Shamhat, to Enkidu, and she seduces him. Afterwards, when Enkidu returns to the hills where he lives, the animals run away from him.

Enkidu eventually travels to Uruk and blocks Gilgamesh's way while walking in the city. They wrestle, but Gilgamesh beats Enkidu. They each commend each other's strength and declare themselves friends.

Because of a dream he has that Enkidu interprets, Gilgamesh realizes that he has not yet made a name for himself. He pledges to travel to the Land of Cedars and slay the giant Humbaba who guards it. With the help of Shamash, the sun god, Gilgamesh and Enkidu defeat Humbaba. Humbaba pleads for forgiveness, but Enkidu delivers the killing blow.

Ishtar, the goddess of love, invites Gilgamesh to her palace and

proposes marriage. Gilgamesh turns her down, however, because she treated her previous lovers badly, often turning them into animals. Enraged by his refusal, Ishtar threatens to smash the doors of hell and release the dead unless her father, Anu, releases the Bull of Heaven to destroy Gilgamesh. Because of her threat, Anu does so.

The Bull of Heaven wreaks havoc in Uruk, killing many, but Gilgamesh and Enkidu defeat it. The following night, Enkidu has a dream of the gods gathered together and agreeing that one of the two (Enkidu and Gilgamesh) must die for the killing of Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven. Enkidu grows increasingly sick. Gilgamesh and the people of Uruk mourn Enkidu as he dies.

Again Gilgamesh journeys out into the wilderness, now hoping to find the legendary Utnapishtim, who survived a great flood many years before and was granted immortality. After crossing a mountain range that no man has ever crossed before, Gilgamesh arrives at the Garden of the Gods. Siduri, whom Gilgamesh meets in the Garden of the Gods, warns Gilgamesh that he will not cross the sea. Gilgamesh then searches for Urshanabi the ferryman, and in his anger Gilgamesh smashes an essential piece of Urshanabi's boat. Urshanabi tells Gilgamesh to prepare 120 wooden poles for their journey, and they set off.

After crossing the sea, Gilgamesh meets Utnapishtim on an island and asks him how to seek immortal life. Utnapishtim says that Gilgamesh will not find immortality, and he tells Gilgamesh a story: Long ago, in a city called Shurrupak, the god Enlil grew sick of the city's noisiness and created a flood to destroy mankind. But one man, Utnapishtim, received instructions in a dream from the god Ea, saying to build an enormous boat. Sure enough, the flood came, and Utnapishtim, his family, his animals, and his craftsmen were safe. They all stayed at sea until a bird they released did not come back to the ship, having presumably found shore. The gods criticized Enlil for punishing mankind too harshly, and in return he granted Utnapishtim his immortality.

Utnapishtim tells Gilgamesh that he must stay awake for six days and seven nights to get the sympathy of the gods. After the time has passed, Gilgamesh believes he has stayed awake the whole time, but Utnapishtim had marked each day with a fresh loaf of bread, and now one lies moldy and uneaten, meaning that Gilgamesh slept. Utnapishtim banishes the ferryman Urshanabi from ever returning to his island and tells him to bring Gilgamesh back across the sea. Before they depart, Utnapishtim's wife says that there is a plant that grows under the sea that can restore youth. Gilgamesh ties rocks to his feet and walks along the bottom of the sea until he finds the plant.

That night, however, Gilgamesh bathes in a well, and a **serpent** jumps out of the well and snatches the plant, then disappears into the water. Gilgamesh and Urshanabi then cross the sea back to where they originally came from and travel to Uruk. There, Gilgamesh feels proud of the great walls he built, and we learn that Gilgamesh will be remembered for a long time as having brought the story of the flood (which he recorded on tablets, with the rest of his adventures) to the people of Uruk.

The last section of the Epic is titled "The Death of Gilgamesh," and looks back on his reign after he has died. The god Enlil declares that Gilgamesh will be remembered for longer than any other man. The people of Uruk mourn Gilgamesh in the streets. The epic ends with praise for Gilgamesh, proclaiming him the best of men and a faithful servant of the gods. It ends with "O Gilgamesh, lord of Kullab, great is thy praise."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Gilgamesh – Gilgamesh, king of Uruk, is rumored to be the strongest man in the world. He is at first an arrogant and harsh ruler, but his friendship with Enkidu and Enkidu's ensuing death show Gilgamesh that even the greatest heroic feats cannot transcend mortality. Throughout the story, Gilgamesh's understanding of what brings meaning to life is transformed. At first he naively seeks only fame, and pursues this with feats of strength and heroism. After Enkidu's death, however, Gilgamesh begins to question what meaning life can possibly have in the face of inevitable death. Ultimately, by finding the secret to everlasting life and then losing it, Gilgamesh comes to understand his place in the universe. There is no easy answer to what gives life "meaning," but Gilgamesh seems to find his purpose in being a just ruler and sharing through writing what he has learned on his adventures.

Enkidu – Enkidu is a bold and strong man who was made by the gods to be Gilgamesh's equal in strength. Living in the wild, Enkidu has a simple life and lives at peace with the wild animals. It's only after he sleeps with Shamhat that Enkidu becomes "civilized" and loses his innocence. Enkidu's friendship with Gilgamesh then becomes the foundation of the epic, as the two men love each other dearly with a love that seems to be based in a mutual respect for each other's strength and courage. When dying, Enkidu first curses those responsible for taking him from his simple existence in nature, but then he realizes that without civilization, he never would have had his friendship with Gilgamesh.

Ishtar – Ishtar is a god of fertility, love, sex, and beauty. Brash and proud, she is enraged when Gilgamesh rejects her marriage proposal. She threatens to release the dead into the world of the living if her father Anu does not release the Bull of Heaven—an event that ultimately leads to Enkidu's death.

Utnapishtim – Utnapishtim is a simple and devout man. He listened to the dream in which Ea told him to build a great ship before the **flood**, and spent a great deal of time and effort to

protect his family. Though now immortal, he lives a straightforward life relaxing far from civilization.

Enlil – As he is presented in the epic, Enlil is a proud and impulsive god. Irritated by the noisiness of human cities, he convinces the other gods that mankind should be destroyed by a **flood**. Only after the other gods feel regret does Enlil learn to accept his place—he is superior to mankind, but doesn't have the authority to destroy it.

Ea – Before the great **flood**, the god Ea tells Utnapishtim to build an enormous boat to preserve mankind. Ea is also the god who criticizes Enlil for sending the flood as an excessive punishment for mankind's noisy cities. Ea enforces his idea of a correct relationship between gods and men, while Enlil violates this relationship by ordering mankind's destruction.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Aruru – A goddess of fertility and creation. Aruru creates Enkidu out of **water** and clay.

The Trapper – The Trapper lives a simple life trying to capture wild animals. After finding that Enkidu has been destroying his traps, he is intrigued by such a strong and wild man.

The Trapper's Father – The trapper's father provides the Trapper with advice. He seems to understand the true relationship between civilization and nature, explaining that once Enkidu sleeps with Shamhat, the wild animals will reject Enkidu.

Shamhat – Shamhat is a temple prostitute. By sleeping with Enkidu, she begins the process of bringing him into civilization.

Ninsun – Ninsun is a goddess and Gilgamesh's mother. She helps her son and Enkidu on their quest by praying to Shamash.

Humbaba – Humbaba is an ogre-like giant assigned by Enlil to guard the Cedar Forest. Once defeated by Enkidu and Gilgamesh, Humbaba begs for his life and offers to serve them, but they kill Humbaba anyway.

Anu – Anu is the lord of the gods, and a god of the sky and heavens. He is more sensible than his daughter Ishtar, who asks him to release the Bull of Heaven, but he gives in when she threatens him.

Shamash – Shamash, the sun god, is a major alley on Gilgamesh's quest. Gilgamesh and Enkidu often pay him homage, and he appears generally as a benevolent deity.

Siduri – Siduri lives in the Garden of the Gods. She is a deity, and produces ale that is sold in the underworld. Wary of Gilgamesh's quest, she cautions him not to try to cross the **sea** to meet Utnapishtim.

Urshanabi – Urshanabi is the ferryman who takes Gilgamesh across the **sea** to visit Utnapishtim. For bringing Gilgamesh there, Utnapishtim banishes Urshanabi permanently from his land.

Utnapishtim's Wife – Along with her husband, Utnapishtim's wife survived the flood and was granted immortality. More helpful and generous than her husband, she tells Gilgamesh about the plant that restores youth growing from the bottom of the **sea**.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

CIVILIZATION AND THE FALL FROM INNOCENCE

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* portrays the idea of civilization in an ambiguous way—as something that provides protection and knowledge, but that can also be a corrupting force. It's important to keep in mind that the *Epic* was written in ancient Mesopotamia, an area that has been called the "cradle of civilization," as the first known city-states in human history began there. Thus the *Epic*'s portrayal of civilization is especially "contemporary" for its time, but also timeless in the ways it presents the positives and negatives of civilization in general.

On one level, the writers of the *Epic* show civilization as the end product of mankind's fall from innocence. Enkidu, like the Biblical Adam and Eve, is created as an innocent being in nature, living freely among the wild animals. And, like Adam and Eve, he is tempted by knowledge and sexuality. Just as Adam and Eve eat from the tree of knowledge and suddenly become aware of their own nakedness, so it is Enkidu's sexual encounter with Shamhat that symbolizes his transition from unspoiled nature into civilization.

After he sleeps with Shamhat, nature rejects Enkidu. The wild animals run from him. Soon after, Enkidu accompanies Gilgamesh on his quest to earn glory—a drastic change from Enkidu's earlier, less ambitious life. Civilization has transformed Enkidu, and he no longer lives in harmony with nature. Like Gilgamesh, he is eager to cut down the great Cedar Tree.

In Uruk, Gilgamesh and Enkidu live luxurious lives impossible in nature. Shamhat tells Enkidu that in Uruk "every day is a holiday." The *Epic* shows how civilization is both good and bad: it provides safety and community for the people of Uruk, but it also tempts them into complacency, as is best shown by Gilgamesh at the beginning of the epic. But the epic does not suggest that mankind should leave the city and return to nature. Just as the Biblical Adam and all his descendants are punished by being expelled from Paradise and having to work for their survival, in the *Epic* too it is long past mankind's chance

to remain innocent. Civilization must make do as well as it can.

Importantly, the epic ends with the proclamation that Gilgamesh's greatest achievement is bringing back the tablets with his story written on themOnly in civilization, not out in nature, is such a feat possible: writing serves to communicate knowledge. The acquisition of knowledge may have been mankind's fall from innocence, but, now that man must fend for himself, knowledge can help him.

Ultimately, the story does not take a stance on nature being "better" than civilization, or vice versa. Civilization is simply the state of mankind. Enkidu, when dying, curses Shamhat for seducing him and ultimately bringing about his death by bringing him from nature into civilization, but Shamash reminds Enkidu of all that civilization brought him—most of all, his friendship with Gilgamesh. Just before dying, Enkidu comes to terms with this, taking back what he said, and grateful for all the experiences he had as a part of human civilization.

HEROISM IN NATURE VS. COMFORT IN THE CITY

A common form of the quest narrative involves the hero leaving their comfortable home in civilization to venture out through nature, and then returning with new knowledge. Like Bilbo Baggins in *The Hobbit* and King Arthur in the many legends of the Knights of the Round Table, leaving a comfortable home forces a character into confrontation with the more difficult questions of morality and existence.

Through the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, civilization is shown to have both positive and negative attributes. It provides the citizens of Uruk with food, water, shelter, and at least some amount of just rule. But we also see that the city corrupts: ruling from his palace, Gilgamesh is arrogant and tyrannical. His life is overfilled with luxury. We see clear indications later in the story, when he is criticized for the many animal hides he wears and his care for his hair, which is said to mask his "natural beauty." The gods seem generally to have some contempt for cities. When the gods attempted to wipe out mankind with the flood, the reason was that Enlil had complained about the city being too loud. This clearly put civilization in opposition to nature, which is a quiet place where the gods are at home.

But the comforts of the city can be a powerful temptation as well. Gilgamesh enjoys the luxuries he has and grows complacent, more concerned with making a name for himself than with being a kind and just ruler. Enkidu is drawn out from his life in the wild with food, animal hides, and luxuries that he never could have imagined.

But even for those who have embraced civilization, heroic action can only happen out in the "wild." To make a name for himself, Gilgamesh does not seek to accomplish heroic feats in Uruk; instead he travels out of the city into nature. It is far beyond the city **gates** that Gilgamesh encounters Humbaba, Utnapanishtim, the plant that restores youth, the scorpion men, and everything else that makes up his journey. At home in the city, he is complacent and inactive, but out in nature, there is the opportunity for physical feats and heroic deeds. Gilgamesh even says, "In the city man dies oppressed at heart."

There is no opportunity for heroism within the city (in the epic's world at least). So the epic teaches us that one must go out into the world (and nature) to grow and change. The comforts of the city are neither inherently good nor bad: they are simply the result of increasing human civilization. What matters, at the end of the epic, is that Gilgamesh brings back his tale written onto tablets, sharing with civilization all that he has learned out in nature.

FRIENDSHIP, LOVE, AND SEXUALITY

Love of all kinds—between friends, or between lovers—plays a central role in the *Epic*. For Enkidu, being intimate with a woman signals his joining human civilization. When Gilgamesh rejects Ishtar's advances, she grows angry, and this leads eventually to Enkidu's death. But the most important love in the epic is certainly between Gilgamesh and Enkidu. The *Epic* celebrates this friendship, and how it transforms both men for the better. Only through his friendship with Enkidu does Gilgamesh come to first recognize his own mortality, and finally accept it. Thus, in the *Epic*, the love of friendship is often stronger than that of romance.

Enkidu was born in the wilderness, and until Gilgamesh intervenes, he is accepted among the wild animals. Repeatedly, it is said that if Enkidu sleeps with a woman, he will be rejected by nature. Indeed, after he sleeps with Shamhat, the animals reject him. The act of sex takes on symbolic meaning for his entrance to human society: its consummation is what makes him human. Thus, the *Epic* regards sex as in part a corrupting force: through sex Enkidu loses his innocence and his life in the wild.

Gilgamesh's rejection of the goddess Ishtar's advances offers another negative perspective on sex and romantic love: Gilgamesh "sins" by turning down the goddess of love and fertility, which provokes her wrath. Importantly, his reason for rejecting Ishtar is that she has been cruel to all of her past lovers. Ishtar, the goddess of love, treats her lovers badly: this shows that the *Epic* regards romantic love as often harsh and punishing. Ishtar lives up to this view by demanding that Anu release the Bull of Heaven in revenge, which eventually leads to Enkidu's death.

Ultimately the love that comes with friendship is seen as both more powerful and more positive than romantic love in the *Epic*. Before he meets Enkidu, Gilgamesh is an arrogant leader, oblivious to his own limitations and mortality, and hated by the people of his city because he sleeps with brides the night before their marriage. But Gilgamesh's friendship with Enkidu

and Enkidu's death lead Gilgamesh on a quest for everlasting life, and then to accept his own mortality. It is his the happiness and fulfillment he finds in his friendship with Enkidu, then, that ultimately allows Gilgamesh to find meaning even in his finite existence.

MORTALITY AND MEANING

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* confronts a number of important themes, but none is more prominent than that of confronting one's mortality. As is famously portrayed in Percy Shelly's poem *Ozymandias*, even the works of great kings and heroes turn eventually turn to dust.

At the beginning of the epic, Gilgamesh seeks to make a name for himself: he wants to accomplish heroic feats so that he will be remembered forever. This drives him, but ultimately leads to Enkidu's death as punishment for his hubris.

Importantly, it is Enkidu's death that makes Gilgamesh face his own mortality. The epic shows that through our relationships with others, we can wake up to life as it really is, as opposed to being deluded in thinking that our accomplishments will last forever. At first, Enkidu's death causes Gilgamesh to become obsessed with overcoming his own mortality. This motivates his search for the secret to everlasting life. After he loses the plant that restores youth, though, he comes to accept that he will remain mortal and the best he can hope for is to do good deeds and share what he's learned with the people of Uruk. This realization is a direct result of his friendship with Enkidu, which teaches him that there is more to life than heroic accomplishments or achieving physical immortality.

On his return to Uruk, Gilgamesh accepts his mortality; his name may not live on forever, but his feats and story will inspire the people of Uruk (and, ironically, in accepting this Gilgamesh's name *has* lived on—his epic is the oldest written story known to humankind). The *Epic* does not provide clear answers on how himans can create meaning in the face of death. Rather, it wrestles with the question, looking at it from all sides, challenging the reader to reconsider whatever it is they believe.

PRIDE AND THE GODS

In The *Epic of Gilgamesh*, men and gods each have their place in a clearly-defined hierarchy. To overstep the bounds of that position is to be proud, something the gods punish harshly, even among themselves. Gilgamesh's quest is first motivated by pride, and in Enkidu's death he pays an enormous price. Likewise, among the gods, Enlil is humbled after ordering mankind destroyed by a flood, because it was not his place to make such a prideful decision. By the end of the epic, however, Gilgamesh has learned to be more humble, and this "moral" of accepting one's place in the hierarchy of the universe is one of the story's main lessons.

When Gilgamesh rejects Ishtar's offer of marriage, she is insulted that he, a mortal, turns her down, even though he has good reason to: she has treated her past lovers poorly. Ishtar lashes out at what she sees as his "hubris" (excessive pride) by threatening to release the dead into the world of the living unless Anu sends the Bull of Heaven to avenge her. We can interpret all this conflict arising from Gilgamesh's failure to accept his place, and from Ishtar's own sense of superiority to mortals. Though the Bull of Heaven is sent to punish Gilgamesh for hubris, he and Enkidu kill it, showing again that Gilgamesh is too proud to obey the will of the gods. The punishment for this is Enkidu's death. This lesson is similar to one contained in the Bible: that pride comes before the fall. Gilgamesh's pride has brought him great glory in battle, but it also leads to the death of his closest friend.

We also see in the epic that characters may grow more humble and abandon their pride. Gilgamesh, after the death of Enkidu and the failure of his own quest for immortality, comes to realize that he cannot defy the gods by acquiring the secret to everlasting life. As soon as he seems to achieve it, it is stolen away. He returns to Uruk more humble, accepting his place in the hierarchy of gods and men. Similarly, the gods disapprove of Enlil for his prideful decision to flood the earth, and so Enlil grants Utnapishtim and his wife eternal life as penance. Even the gods are eventually humbled into accepting their limits.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

GATES AND DOORS

In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, gates and doors serve not just as physical entrances to new spaces, but also as spiritual ones. Enkidu's entrance into Uruk through the city's gates symbolizes his complete transition to civilized life, and after chopping down the great cedar tree, Enkidu suggests that they build a door with its wood. Similarly, Gilgamesh encounters the Scorpion-Men guarding a great gate at the beginning of his most difficult quest. The Scorpion-Men are intimidating, and they warn Gilgamesh of what lies beyond—his subsequent passage through the gate then represents his willingness and desperation to carry on with his quest, regardless of the risks. The image then comes up again as Ishtar threatens to "break in the doors of hell and smash the bolts" when her father Anu refuses to send the Bull of Heaven to attack Gilgamesh. Throughout the story, spiritual divisions between places that are fundamentally different—Uruk and nature, wild nature and the area guarded by Humbaba, the wilderness Gilgamesh knows and the mountains along the Road of the Sun where no man has ever travelled—are made

literal by the presence of a gate or door.

WATER

Water is a source of both rejuvenation and destruction in the *Epic*. It is neither good nor evil, but simply a force and representation of the gods' will and the cycle of birth and death inherent to all life. Notably, after every important event in the *Epic*, Gilgamesh (and Enkidu if he is with Gilgamesh) bathes himself. After slaying Humbaba, when Enkidu leaves the wilderness, and after every other crucial action in the epic, there is always a bath. In practical purposes, the bath cleans and rejuvenates the heroes after their adventures, but it also seems to have ritual purpose—a spiritual as well as a physical cleansing. Spiritual cleansing through bathing has similarities to the significance of baptism in Christian practice, in which water is a means of absolution and conversion. Each time Gilgamesh and Enkidu bathe, then, we can interpret them as being rejuvenated and as reaffirming their connection to the gods.

While bathing is mostly a symbolic cleansing and rejuvenation, the other main water motif in the *Epic*—the flood that drowns most of mankind—is presented as a literal death and rebirth on a massive scale. As Utnapishtim tells Gilgamesh, the flood was sent by the god Enlil because Enlil was tired of hearing the noises of the city, and only Utnapishtim, his animals, and a few others survived the deluge. In bathing, the "old self" symbolically dies and a new self is reborn, but in Enlil's flood mankind as a whole was destroyed and then reborn. The destruction is inseparable from the rebirth. Ultimately, then, water is a complex symbol encompassing the ideas of physical cleansing, spiritual rejuvenation, and the cycle of destruction and rebirth. This cycle is a crucial aspect of many ancient cultures, and in the Sumerian *Epic* it mostly takes form through the symbol of water—a manifestation of the gods' divine will.

THE SNAKE

As in the Biblical story of Adam and Eve, the snake in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is a symbol of trickery and deception. Near the end of his long journeys, Gilgamesh has finally acquired the secret to everlasting life (a plant that restores youth). But almost as soon as Gilgamesh has the plant, a snake steals it while he's bathing and sneaks off with it into the **water**. Like in the Hebrew Bible, the serpent is a kind of "trickster figure," and an obstacle between humanity and its prideful desire for everlasting life (which, like Gilgamesh, Adam and Eve lose after contact with a snake).

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin Classics edition of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* published in 1960.

Prologue Quotes

❝ When the gods created Gilgamesh they gave him a perfect body. Shamash the glorious sun endowed him with beauty, Adad the god of the storm endowed him with courage, the great gods made his beauty perfect, surpassing all others, terrifying like a great wild bull. Two thirds they made him god and one third man.

Related Characters: Shamash, Gilgamesh

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 61

Explanation and Analysis

The prologue is recounted by an unknown speaker who praises Gilgamesh for his wisdom and strength, as well as his contributions to civilization. These lines focus on his physical prowess and establish Gilgamesh's partial divinity.

That Gilgamesh was "created" by the gods instead of being born to humans might seem like a casual turn of the phrase. But it actually has an important basis in mythology: In the Babylonian tradition, the god Aruru is said to have made the first men out of clay, and later in the epic, Aruru will forge the character Enkidu to rival Gilgamesh. This early reference that humans are directly crafted by gods establishes the close interworking of the divine and human realms.

The emphasis in this passage on beauty perplexes some readers and has led to interpretations of Gilgamesh and Enkidu's relationship as homoerotic. These points are certainly valid, but the more overt role of the prologue is to legitimize Gilgamesh's rule by establishing his personal power and divine heritage. (His mother Ninsun is herself a goddess.) Thus Gilgamesh's later conquests are not framed as the result of a resourceful human, but rather can as the result of gods having bestowed on him partial divinity. Gilgamesh's strength, however, is tempered by his remaining "one third man," a deficiency that hints at his quest to achieve immortality.

Part 1 Quotes

Gilgamesh sounds the tocsin for his amusement, his arrogance has no bounds by day or night. No son is left with his father, for Gilgamesh takes them all, even the children; yet the king should be a shepherd to his people. His lust leaves no virgin to her lover, neither the warrior's daughter nor the wife of the noble; yet this is the shepherd of the city, wise, comely, and resolute.

Related Characters: Gilgamesh

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 62

Explanation and Analysis

After the laudatory prologue, the text quickly changes tones to criticize Gilgamesh for his treatment of the people of Uruk. The speaker first recounts Gilgamesh's misdeeds, and they are then echoed by the gods who condemn him for malpractice.

Whereas before Gilgamesh's strength was presented in only positive terms, here it is seen as "arrogance." In particular, the gods focus on his selfish behaviors that deny the autonomy of other humans: the way he takes sons and daughters away from their parents. They contrast this despotism with the type of leader he should be: "a shepherd." This image repeats throughout the text and shows that Uruk society values a combination of strength and compassion. The gods choose to model their ideal leader not on a bull or warrior, but rather on one who can guide the gentle flock of people.

That Gilgamesh has overstepped these bounds presents his journey less as a series of heroic deeds and more as a tale of moral development. On that journey, we are told early on, Gilgamesh must recognize how to be a better "shepherd" and how to temper his arrogance. This emphasis on humility should be kept in mind when interpreting the relative value of his later accomplishments.

He was innocent of mankind; he knew nothing of the cultivated land.

Related Characters: Enkidu

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 63

Explanation and Analysis

In response to Gilgamesh's arrogance, the god Aruru creates Enkidu as Gilgamesh's equal. Here, the speaker reflects on Enkidu's toughness and vigor—and the way his living in nature sets him apart from society.

The lines set up a striking binary between Gilgamesh and Enkidu. Whereas the first is, despite his despotic behavior, presumed to represent civilization, Enkidu is equated with the wilderness. Yet this division is not the result of Enkidu's rejection of humanity, but rather the fact he has not yet come into contact with mankind and thus remains "innocent." This line, then, presents civilization as something that can be taught or applied to humans who have previously lived only in nature. The text is thus subtly setting the stage for Enkidu's assimilation into society, even as it describes him as fully apart from civilization.

The reference to "cultivated land" should not be glossed over. Agriculture, after all, was one of the foundational hallmarks of civilization, for it allowed cultures to remain in single locations and construct stable populations. The epic thus reveals a historical awareness of what specific knowledge granted man civilization, and it sets a high stock on the transmission of that knowledge to others.

When next he comes down to drink at the wells she will be there, stripped naked; and when he sees her beckoning him he will embrace her, and then the wild beasts will reject him.

Related Characters: The Trapper's Father (speaker), Shamhat, Enkidu, The Trapper

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 64

Explanation and Analysis

Enkidu is first spotted by a trapper who strikes up a conversation with his father about how to approach this beast. The trapper's father recommends, here, that the trapper bring an Uruk temple prostitute on behalf of Gilgamesh, for once Enkidu has been with a woman, he will no longer be able to connect with the wilderness and the wild animals.

What is striking about these lines is that the trapper's father recommends civilizing Enkidu instead of killing him. After all, we might expect in an epic that any beast would be treated with violence, especially considering that Enkidu is a

test from Aruru of Gilgamesh's brute strength. Yet instead, they seek to bring Enkidu into the fold of society through sexual attraction. Again, it is stressed that to be human is not to automatically be a part of civilization; rather, one must come into certain forces and social organizations that cause that assimilation.

That this assimilation will take place specifically through human sexuality sets a high stake on romantic interaction—implying that this was seen as a central facet of civilized human identity. It also can also be seen as a parallel to the Bible's Garden of Eden story, in which Adam and Eve leave the state of blissful nature to enter sinful human society after becoming aware of their sexuality. But whereas the tale is presented as a negative fall from grace in the Old Testament, here it is seen as a more ambiguous entrance into Uruk civilization.

> And now the wild creatures had all fled away; Enkidu was grown weak, for wisdom was in him, and the thoughts of man were in his heart.

Related Characters: Enkidu (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 65

Explanation and Analysis

After Enkidu sleeps with Shamhat, the animals leave just as the trapper's father and Gilgamesh expected. As a result, Enkidu attains knowledge of civilization, but also becomes physically weaker.

That the speaker equates being "weak" and acquiring "wisdom" is provocative considering the earlier references to Gilgamesh's impressive strength. Once more, the text asserts that pure power is not entirely desirable in human civilization. Indeed, that it equates "the thought of man" to weakness seems to imply that humanity itself is predicated on a certain type of physical frailty. The connection foreshadows the way Gilgamesh himself will have to learn the value of mortality—instead of relying arrogantly on his strength. In this way, we can see Enkidu as a foil for the more aggressive side to Gilgamesh's personality, and his early conversion to humanity offers a model for Gilgamesh's own personal development.

At the same time, there is a tragic element to this scene—Enkidu has lost his state of blissful innocence, and though he has gained all the advantages of human society and civilization, he has also gained their negative aspects, and has lost his companionship with the wild animals and his own wild strength. The gaining of knowledge as a kind of "fall from grace" again parallels the Old Testament's Adam and Eve story. Adam and Eve are banished from the Garden of Eden after eating of the Tree of Knowledge—and it is their new wisdom, as much as their disobedience, that requires they be expelled from paradise.

> O Enkidu, there all the people are dressed in their gorgeous robes, every day is a Holiday, the young men and the girls are wonderful to see. How sweet they smell!

Related Characters: Shamhat (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 65

Explanation and Analysis

After Shamhat sleeps with Enkidu and converts him from wild beast into civilized human, she convinces him to go to Uruk. To do so, she offers this vibrant description of the city.

These praising lines contrast notably with the earlier descriptions of Gilgamesh's despotism. Though we have been told that no child is safe from the ruler of Uruk, here the youth "are wonderful to see," as well as to "smell." Their freedom and vibrance is stressed, as is the leisureliness of the civilization, for every day is a Holiday. Uruk represents both the splendor and attraction of humanity, but also its vices and follies. Shamhat thus reaffirms the sharp division between wilderness and city, in which the second is marked by physical beauty and pleasure. Her language operates as a second form of seduction after the first sexual form, for it attracts Enkidu to leave his state of nature and enter into the social codes of men.

> When Enkidu was thrown he said to Gilgamesh, 'There is not another like you in the world. Ninsun, who is as strong as a wild ox in the byre, she was the mother who bore you, and now you are raised above all men, and Enlil has given you the kingship, for your strength surpasses the strength of men'. So Enkidu and Gilgamesh embraced and their friendship was sealed.

Related Characters: Enkidu (speaker), Enlil, Ninsun, Gilgamesh

Related Themes:

Page Number: 69

Explanation and Analysis

After much foreshadowing and prophecy, Enkidu and Gilgamesh's friendship finally begins in this scene. Enkidu had originally entered Uruk to challenge Gilgamesh's tyranny, but after being defeated in the fight, he is awed by Gilgamesh's strength and thus wishes to be his comrade rather than his enemy.

What is particularly poignant about this scene is the unusual way that Enkidu sanctions their friendship. It is marked first by being overpowered or "thrown," which seems to imply that battle and a test of strength is a prerequisite to their comradeship. Then, Enkidu cites Gilgamesh's uniqueness and his divine lineage. These lines do not only give a justification for Gilgamesh's power, but also sanctify his position as ruler, for he is be "raised above all men."

The scene also reaffirms how Gilgamesh's strength is such that he can at times overpower even the wishes of a god: Remember that Anunu had originally created Enkidu in order to defeat Gilgamesh, but due to a mixture of cunning and power Gilgamesh foils that plan and instead adopts Enkidu as a friend. This first tale in the epic, then, does not yet teach Gilgamesh humility or wisdom. Instead it reaffirms his personal fortitude. Enkidu, however, will become a source of notable emotional investment for Gilgamesh, and their friendship is critical to his moral development.

Part 2 Quotes

❝ The meaning of the dream is this. The father of the gods has given you kingship, such is your destiny, everlasting life is not your destiny. Because of this do not be sad at heart, do not be grieved or oppressed. He has given you power to bind and to loose, to be the darkness and light of mankind.

Related Characters: Enkidu (speaker), Gilgamesh

Related Themes:

Page Number: 70

Explanation and Analysis

Enkidu functions, here, as an oracle for Gilgamesh, using the dream to make sense of the the will of the gods. Here, he interprets the visions Gilgamesh had the night before as a sign of Gilgamesh's mortality.

To explain the dream, Enkidu contrasts the gift Gilgamesh has been given to rule—"kingship"—with what has been withheld: "everlasting life." Despite the power he has from being two-thirds divine, Gilgamesh remains one-third human and thus will die like all mortals do. Yet Enkidu cautions Gilgamesh not to be distraught at this realization, for he still maintains impressive abilities. "To bind and to loose" points to his dominion over other humans, whereas "to be the darkness and light of mankind" stresses the way he can be a symbolic leader—an inspiration for how other men should live. Note that Enkidu stresses both the positive and the negative sides of Gilgamesh's power: "bind" is balanced by "loose," "darkness" is contrasted by "light." At this point in the story, Gilgamesh seems to have largely employed the harmful sides of his power, and Enkidu subtly points out that his mortality offers him a choice of how he will use these precious years and how he will be remembered.

Dreams are an important motif throughout this epic. They offer a way for the gods to connect directly to the characters, and they foreshadow events that are to pass. But they can also, we should note, function as plot devices that drive—instead of just narrating or foreshadowing—the action of the events. Here, Gilgamesh is impelled, because of the dream, to leave the city of Uruk and make a name for himself.

❝ Gilgamesh replied: 'Where is the man who can clamber to heaven? Only the gods live for ever with glorious Shamash, but as for us men, our days are numbered, our occupations are a breath of wind. How is this, already you are afraid!'

Related Characters: Gilgamesh (speaker), Shamash, Enkidu

Related Themes:

Page Number: 71

Explanation and Analysis

To rally Enkidu to hunt the giant Humbaba with him, Gilgamesh offers this inspiring speech on human mortality. He takes their eventual death as a justification for not fearing death due to any particular cause.

Gilgamesh here responds explicitly to the way that Enkidu differentiated him from an immortal god. He asks rhetorically if any man can "clamber to heaven"—that is, whether a mortal could somehow become equal to the gods. But he quickly answers his own question, vanquishing

any potential for men to gain immortality. These observations could easily lead him to a state of hopelessness (as in fact they will later in the Epic), but a striking turn comes with the phrase "our occupations are a breath of wind."

In that line, human endeavors are trivialized due to their transitory and small-scale nature. And in triviality, Gilgamesh finds solace rather than panic. The giant Humbaba need not be feared, because the fight against him is just a breath of wind, and even if Gilgamesh and Enkidu do die, they will have simply hurried an already eventual fate. The passage also foreshadows the importance of accomplishing deeds that will be repeated for future generations and written down: to have a historical legacy, Gilgamesh implies, would be one way to escape being just a breath of wind.

> Here in the city man dies oppressed at heart.

Related Characters: Gilgamesh (speaker), Enkidu

Related Themes:

Page Number: 72

Explanation and Analysis

Gilgamesh responds here to the god Shamash, who questions him on his motivation for leaving Uruk to seek adventure in the wilderness. His justification is that nature will provide a source of strength and adventure otherwise sapped by the leisure of the city.

This line further complicates the binary of city and nature that is at the heart of the epic. Earlier, Enkidu's assimilation into the city was marked by wisdom and a new humanity in his heart—but also by physical weakness and a loss of innocence. Gilgamesh extrapolates that case and makes a universal claim on the way civilization subdues people. The wilderness, then, is not just a state from which man begins before graduating to superior civilization. Rather it remains an important developmental space particularly for heroes: a domain to reinvigorate the heart with hardship and power beyond the confines of civilization.

That Gilgamesh speaks explicitly on how a man "dies" as opposed to "lives" or "is" links his statement with the earlier discussion on immortality. The implication is that his fixation on death has brought new urgency to his need to leave Uruk. It's worth mentioning that the line also all but inaugurates a literary tradition: characters who leave home in order to seek fortune in distant lands and who then return as wiser and more capable versions of themselves.

> O my lord, you do not know this monster and that is the reason you are not afraid. I who know him, I am terrified. His teeth are dragon's fangs, his countenance is like a lion, his charge is the rushing of the flood, with his look he crushes alike the trees of the forest and reeds in the swamp. O my Lord, you may go on if you choose into this land, but I will go back to the city. I will tell the lady your mother all your glorious deeds till she shouts for joy: and then I will tell the death that followed till she weeps for bitterness.

Related Characters: Enkidu (speaker), Ninsun, Humbaba, Gilgamesh

Related Themes:

Page Number: 80

Explanation and Analysis

Having finally arrived close to Humbaba's lair, Enkidu and Gilgamesh are both beset by fear of the giant. Yet while Gilgamesh rouses himself and ignores these instincts, Enkidu gives in and expresses his wish to return to civilization.

This speech represents an important turn in the relationship of Enkidu and Gilgamesh. Before, Gilgamesh's bravery was represented in purely positive terms, for it allowed him to overcome the fear of mortality and to journey into the wilderness. Yet here, Enkidu implies that his bravery may be the result of ignorance rather than wisdom: he claims that Gilgamesh is only "not afraid" because he does "not know this monster." Enkidu, who had intimate access to the wilderness and can recount specific physical details and actions of Humbaba, seems more qualified to speak on the relative danger. Perhaps, the text implies, Gilgamesh's hubris will lead to his downfall.

Enkidu's lines also give great import to the act of storytelling. He becomes here an emissary for and proponent of Gilgamesh's deeds by promising to tell of both his triumphs and his death. This pledge reiterates how Gilgamesh's legacy will be marked not by the acts themselves, but rather by the way they carve out a place for him in history.

Part 3 Quotes

Which of your lovers did you ever love for ever? What shepherd of yours has pleased you for all time?

Related Characters: Gilgamesh (speaker), Ishtar

Related Themes:

Page Number: 86

Explanation and Analysis

After defeating Humbaba, Gilgamesh is approached by the goddess Ishtar, who proposes marriage. The arrogant Gilgamesh, however, rejects her offer and chastises her (albeit rather justly) for how she has previously taken and rejected many lovers before him.

These questions show the increasingly brazen way that Gilgamesh interacts with the gods. Though he had previously shown a considerable ego, he was always certain to ask for divine aid and pray appropriately. The killing of Humbaba marked an indirect affront to the gods, but here the provocation is entirely direct. Gilgamesh's tone is mocking, and he chides Ishtar for promising what she will not keep. Of course, this is a rather ironic challenge considering Gilgamesh's own licentious behavior. Perhaps, he is articulating a sexist viewpoint in which men can move quickly between many lovers whereas women should not. Or perhaps he is simply trying to defend his own right to be with many women by avoiding marriage—even with a goddess. (At the same time, he is partially justified in criticizing Ishtar, who was famous for her fickle nature and transient lust for mortals.)

The image of the shepherd also recalls the earlier reference to how the ruler of Uruk should be a shepherd. Gilgamesh juxtaposes the role of human ruler with Ishtar's divinity and points out, presumably accurately, that she will soon tire of him. Despite all his brashness, Gilgamesh does seem aware that there is a fundamental difference between gods and humans, and that the immortality of the first will make any marriage a transitory affair.

My father, give me the Bull of Heaven to destroy Gilgamesh. Fill Gilgamesh, I say, with arrogance to his destruction; but if you refuse to give me the Bull of Heaven I will break in the doors of hell and smash the bolts; there will be confusion of people, those above with those from the lower depths. I shall bring up the dead to eat food like the living; and the hosts of dead will outnumber the living.

Related Characters: Ishtar (speaker), Gilgamesh, Anu

Related Themes:

Page Number: 87

Explanation and Analysis

After being spurned by Gilgamesh, Ishtar is infuriated and seeks revenge by appealing to her father, Anu. She requests that he unleash a divine bull to destroy Gilgamesh, and that he also weaken Gilgamesh by rendering him even more arrogant.

These lines offer good insight into the inter-workings of the gods in this text. Rather like humans, they quarrel and threaten each other. Ishtar cannot attack Gilgamesh directly, it seems, so instead she must ask her father to do so—and she must leverage the danger of unleashing the underworld to blackmail him into doing so. Her threat also builds on the theme of human mortality, for opening the underworld would upset the natural order of human death and life. That allowing the dead to resurface would be taken as a dire action indicates the importance of this equilibrium.

Ishtar's request that Anu fill Gilgamesh "with arrogance" casts Gilgamesh's relative confidence as not the result of his personal mental state but rather as the result of specific actions from the gods. Furthermore, it indicates that bravery should be a weakness when he fights the Bull, whereas it was notably useful when he defeated Humbaba. Ishtar thus reiterates the folly of arrogance, for the same quality that caused Gilgamesh to defy her will supposedly lead to his demise.

'Who is there in strong-walled Uruk who has wisdom like this? Strange things have been spoken, but why does your heart speak strangely? The dream was marvelous but the terror was great; we must treasure the dream whatever the terror; for the dream has shown that misery comes at last to the healthy man, the end of life is sorrow.' And Gilgamesh lamented, 'Now I will pray to the great gods, for my friend had an ominous dream.'

Related Characters: Gilgamesh (speaker), Enkidu

Related Themes:

Page Number: 93

Explanation and Analysis

Enkidu has just told Gilgamesh about a recent horrifying dream, which he has interpreted as his own impending

death at the hands of the gods. Gilgamesh is deeply moved by the tale, and reflects on the terror of what it professes—but also on the value of that terror.

Gilgamesh's response shows a striking shift in his character away from arrogance and toward personal reflection. He puts emphasis on the "wisdom" that comes from the dream by implying that it is poignant beyond the comprehension of those others in Uruk. There is an inherent strangeness to the dream that defies his understanding, and thus makes him humble enough to "pray to the great gods" to render the situation more coherent. The tone of Gilgamesh's speech also focuses on his compassion as opposed to his previous bravado, demonstrating that his deep friendship with Enkidu is what has led him to be more reflective.

The exact content of that reflection also bears some consideration. When Gilgamesh claims that "we must treasure the dream whatever the terror," he implies that negative, even deathly, consequences are not to be hated or feared. Rather, there is a poetic and philosophical significance that can be extracted from mortality, and thus an indication of that significance should be treasured. Here, the lesson is to reiterate the "misery" that comes even to the most vibrant man or warrior. And Gilgamesh's response has notably shifted from taking mortality as the impetus to accomplish great deeds to instead reflecting on how it equates all men.

Part 4 Quotes

❝ How can I rest, how can I be at peace? Despair is in my heart. What my brother is now, that shall I be when I am dead.

Related Characters: Gilgamesh (speaker), Enkidu

Related Themes:

Page Number: 97

Explanation and Analysis

After Enkidu's death and funeral, Gilgamesh enters the wilderness. There, he once more becomes consumed by grief and the fear of his own mortality.

Gilgamesh's return to the wilderness represents a rejection of the artifice of human civilization, and also renders him closer to Enkidu's original state in nature. Yet having already experienced the human revelation of mortality, Gilgamesh can find no "peace" in the wilderness. The "despair" cannot be removed by changing his physical environment because it is lodged in his "heart." Again, the text stresses the importance of the friendship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu. Whereas Gilgamesh responded bravely, even brashly, to his mortality before, watching Enkidu helplessly die has made him entirely shift his perspective. These lines show that it is the identification between the two men that is the main source of his anxiety: the fact that Gilgamesh will be "what my brother is now." Thus the text presents Gilgamesh's ensuing quest to pursue immortality less as an arrogant search for self-empowerment, but rather as a response to a personal tragedy.

❝ Now that I have toiled and strayed so far over the wilderness, am I to sleep, and let the earth cover my head for ever? Let my eyes see the sun until they are dazzled with looking. Although I am no better than a dead man, still let me see the light of the sun.

Related Characters: Gilgamesh (speaker), Shamash

Related Themes:

Page Number: 100

Explanation and Analysis

Having traveled through twelve leagues of darkness, Gilgamesh arrives at the sea that borders the garden of the gods. Though he is told by Shamash that his quest for immortality is foolhardy, Gilgamesh refuses to give up. Instead, he expresses this striking desire to continue regardless of whether or not the quest itself is successful.

Gilgamesh juxtaposes the darkness of the "wilderness" he has experienced thus far with the divine light he sees upon approaching the garden. Though the gods caution him to avoid the light, Gilgamesh presents abstention as cowardly and akin to death. To avoid the light would mean being covered by the earth and forgotten by history. Instead, Gilgamesh values the overwhelming power of the sun, even if he is "dazzled with looking." This image marks a subtle shift in the tone of Gilgamesh's quest. He no longer claims to be able to conquer the sun, a symbol for Shamash. Instead, he values the mere experience of its splendor even if he is bested by that splendor in the end. His rationale rephrases his earlier fatalistic reflections, for Gilgamesh points out that he may as well "see the light of the sun" even if it will kill him. That is to say, if he fails in the quest for immortality, he will die anyway: Every man, as we know by now, is a "dead man" eventually.

She answered, 'Gilgamesh, where are you hurrying to? You will never find that life for which you are looking. When the gods created man they allotted to him death, but life they retained in their own keeping. As for you, Gilgamesh, fill your belly with good things; day and night, night and day, dance and be merry, feast and rejoice. Let your clothes be fresh, bathe yourself in water, cherish the little child that holds your hand, and make your wife happy in your embrace; for this too is the lot of man.'

Related Characters: Siduri (speaker), Gilgamesh

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 102

Explanation and Analysis

These lines are spoken by a god of wine, Siduri, whom Gilgamesh meets as he approaches the sea. As others have before, Siduri tells Gilgamesh to abandon his quest, recommending instead that he experience the mortal leisures available and appropriate to humans.

Beneath these relatively straightforward images lies a strong philosophical contention with Gilgamesh's quest. Siduri explains that "death" is destined for mortals, while "life" remains in the grasp of the gods. She presents immortality, then, as a possession, an object that could potentially be distributed to men but that has not been released. (It is exactly such an object that Gilgamesh is seeking and will temporarily find.) Siduri thus presents a fatalistic, hierarchical view of the world in which certain experiences are appropriate for certain beings, and in which Gilgamesh has overstepped the limits of his identity as a mortal.

Mortals, she explains, should instead immerse themselves in momentary pleasures. The "lot of man" is distilled to: food, dance, and festival—to proper maintenance of clothes, the body, future generations, and one's beloved. Gilgamesh, up to this point, has scorned such mortal pursuits: he avoids monogamy and rejects the leisurely city for heroic adventures to kill divine beings and pursue immortality. Siduri represents, then, a voice of hedonism: her character grants humans only the pursuits of momentary pleasures that Gilgamesh rejected earlier as a "breath of wind."

There is no permanence. Do we build a house to stand for ever, do we seal a contract to hold for all time? Do brothers divide an inheritance to keep forever, does the flood-time of rivers endure? It is only the nymph of the dragon-fly who sheds her larva and sees the sun in his glory. From the days of old there is no permanence. The sleeping and the dead, how alike they are, they are like a painted death.

Related Characters: Utnapishtim (speaker), Gilgamesh

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 106

Explanation and Analysis

Having finally arrived at Utnapishtim's island, Gilgamesh questions him on the significance of and route to immortality. Yet instead of offering the secret, Utnapishtim gives this heady speech on how all things in life are ephemeral.

Whereas other characters have cautioned Gilgamesh based on the pragmatics of succeeding on his quest, Utnapishtim opts for a more philosophical explanation. He begins with his thesis statement—not specifically on human life but on the stability of any type of existence. Then he follows with four compelling rhetorical questions on transience, drawing examples from both human and natural realms. A legal contract, he explains, will eventually disappear in just the same way as a river flood. In contrast, he offers the "nymph of the dragon-fly," who, we imagine, becomes immortal by fully experiencing the divine sun. But even that image is tinged with mortality, for the nymph "sheds her larva" and thus herself undergoes a process of change. Utnapishtim then calls attention to the fact that impermanence is itself an ancient quality, for the world has been this way since "the days of old."

This is a moving explanation, for it takes the existential despair that has preoccupied Gilgamesh and transmutes it into a beautiful transience of human life. Utnapishtim's final image, in particular, relativizes the horror of death by rendering it similar to "sleeping." He does not command Gilgamesh to abandon his quest, but rather offers a voice of serenity and reason that instructs him on the need to accept one's place in the universe.

I look at you now, Utnapishtim, and your appearance is no different from mine; there is nothing strange in your features. I thought I should find you like a hero prepared for battle, but you lie here taking your ease on your back. Tell me truly, how was it that you came to enter the company of the gods and to possess everlasting life?

Related Characters: Gilgamesh (speaker), Utnapishtim

Related Themes:

Page Number: 107

Explanation and Analysis

Here Gilgamesh is perturbed by Utnapishtim's appearance and demeanor. He reveals that he had expected Utnapishtim's immortality to be accompanied by physical vigor and a martial nature, and is surprised to find the opposite.

The first observation on their physical similarity expresses Gilgamesh's frustration that immortality was bestowed on Utnapishtim and not on him. To Gilgamesh's eyes, there is no significant difference between the two, and thus Utnapishtim has no greater right to live forever. Recall how frequently the text has focused on descriptions of Gilgamesh's physical stature and beauty as an indication of his divine power: He has likely come to equate external appearance with internal wisdom and longevity. But Utnapishtim's character teaches that the two should not be associated so quickly.

Gilgamesh's second contention reveals a similar prejudice. He assumed that Utnapishtim would be a strong warrior ready to battle. Presumably, Gilgamesh thought he could prove his claim to immortality by besting someone in combat. This line reiterates the way Gilgamesh presumes his physical strength will allow him to overcome any obstacle—a belief that, after all, has allowed him to overcome the gods several times in the epic. Yet here that confidence has broken down: Gilgamesh seems confused as to how one could "enter the company of the gods" if not through brute strength. His conversation with Utnapishtim, then, marks his realization that physical prowess is not the sole metric by which to assess a human's worth.

Part 5 Quotes

❝ In those days the world teemed, the people multiplied, the world bellowed like a wild bull, and the great god was aroused by the clamour. Enlil heard the clamour and he said to the gods in council, "The uproar of mankind is intolerable and sleep is no longer possible by reason of the babel." So the gods agreed to exterminate mankind.

Related Characters: Utnapishtim (speaker), Gilgamesh, Enlil

Related Themes:

Page Number: 108

Explanation and Analysis

Utnapishtim concedes to tell Gilgamesh how he acquired immortality, and he begins to recount a story from the days of old. This tale, we should note, is the one that Gilgamesh will transmit back to Uruk, so it is considered to hold deep significance for future generations. It also bears many similarities to the Biblical story of Noah's Ark, indicating that one may have stemmed from the other, or that they came from a common historical source.

Utnapishtim's opening description of the old Mesopotamian society stresses the hubris and grandeur of human civilization. Not only are the people numerous in quantity, but they are also distinctly loud—loud enough to frustrate the god Enlil. This "clamour" can be taken as a broader metaphor for human activity and the way it became an affront to the gods. Thus Utnapishtim's tale intersects closely with Gilgamesh's own opening adventures, in which his arrogance caused the gods to send first Enkidu and then the Bull of Heaven to quiet him. Yet in this ancient story, the gods' reaction is far more dire, for they decide not just to kill one man, but rather to end civilization altogether. So the story opens with a warning against not just Gilgamesh's pride, but a more general pride of mankind. The implication is that Gilgamesh must bring back the story in order to teach the people of Uruk humility so that they do not create a "babel" that would anger the gods again.

❝ 'Alas the days of old are turned to dust because I commanded evil; why did I command this evil in the council of all the gods? I commanded wars to destroy the people, but are they not my people, for I brought them forth? Now like the spawn of fish they float in the ocean.' The great gods of heaven and hell wept, they covered their mouths.

Related Characters: Ishtar, Utnapishtim (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 110

Explanation and Analysis

As she watches the flood destroy mankind, Ishtar laments her own actions. The other gods follow in turn, saddened

that they have slaughtered the very humans they brought forth into the world.

This passage shows a surprising affection from the gods toward humans. Though Enlil may have acted originally out of anger, others such as Ea did not agree with his actions—and still others resent it once they observe the consequences. When Ishtar says, "but are they not my people" she shows that the gods' pity stems from a paternal ownership over humans. Like children, humans were brought forth by the gods, so for them to be mere dead floating "fish" causes an expected emotional pain. Utnapishtim's story thus reiterates the fact that gods are privy to rash action as well as regret—and it shows them to be less antagonistic toward humans than Gilgamesh's own narrative might imply.

Ishtar's prominent role here is far from accidental, considering it was her marriage proposal that Gilgamesh spurned earlier in the text. Utnapishtim's tale implies that her anger is mixed with a generous and loving nature. So it instructs Gilgamesh that if he were to treat her and the other gods with more courtesy, he might receive better treatment in turn.

Part 6 Quotes

❝ Go now, banished from the shore. But this man before whom you walked, bringing him here, whose body is covered with foulness and the grace of whose limbs has been spoiled by wild skins, take him to the washing-place. There he shall wash his long hair clean as snow in the water, he shall throw off his skins and let the sea carry them away, and the beauty of his body shall be shown, the fillet on his forehead shall be renewed, and he shall be given clothes to cover his nakedness.

Related Characters: Utnapishtim (speaker), Urshanabi, Gilgamesh

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 115

Explanation and Analysis

After Gilgamesh fails the test to stay awake for seven nights, Utnapishtim sends him back with the now-banished ferryman Urshanabi. Utnapishtim instructs Urshanabi to wash Gilgamesh and offers these specifications on the way he should return to human civilization.

This description focuses on the water imagery that plays a key role throughout the epic. Gilgamesh has previously engaged in cleansing rituals, and Utnapishtim's tale on the flood presented water as a way to cleanse humanity of its hubris (and its life). Here, water is used to extract the "foulness" from Gilgamesh and specifically to the "wild skins" that he has donned throughout the travels. These skins are apparently an indication of his arrogance, for they represent his hunting prowess, and they are a mark of civilization, with all its "sins" of fashion, adornment, and luxury. In contrast to the attire of an extravagant king, Utnapishtim prescribes that Gilgamesh present himself in his natural state: His hair should be "clean" and his body should reveal its inherent "beauty."

Utnapishtim's request offers some insight into what Gilgamesh must take away from his epic journey. He should abandon both his decadent life as a ruler and his dreams of immortality and return to the purity and simplicity of humanity. Furthermore, he must serve as a cleansed emissary back to the people of Uruk and carry Utnapishtim's lessons on water and the flood.

❝ Gilgamesh spoke to him, to Urshanabi the ferryman, 'Urshanabi, climb up on to the wall of Uruk, inspect its foundation terrace, and examine well the brickwork; see if it is not of burnt bricks; and did not the seven wise men lay these foundations? One third of the whole is city, one is garden, and one third is field, with the precinct of the goddess Ishtar. These parts and the precinct are all Uruk.'

Related Characters: Gilgamesh (speaker), Ishtar, Urshanabi

Related Themes:

Page Number: 117

Explanation and Analysis

Gilgamesh and Urshanabi have arrived empty-handed in Uruk, but the narrative suddenly shifts to a more hopeful tone. Here, the speaker recounts how Gilgamesh explained to Urshanabi the wonder of the city walls he had built.

The text shows, then, a striking character shift in Gilgamesh. Having abandoned his previous quest for immortality, the hero can return to Uruk with fresh eyes and notice his true accomplishment: the way he has built a civilization that will endure long beyond his death. These walls are not an indication of his personal strength or of any triumph against

the gods. Rather they reveal a strong work ethic, a wish to empower the people of Uruk, and an ability to cooperate with deities. Indeed, the fact that Gilgamesh cites Ishtar shows just how deeply Utnapishtim's tale has touched him: he no longer scorns the goddess, but rather recognizes her as an important supporter of Uruk's livelihood.

In a way, then, Gilgamesh has acquired immortality—not through his physical or heroic deeds, but rather through cooperation and social betterment. As Enkidu said far earlier, Gilgamesh's status as two-thirds god could allow him to be either light or darkness for humankind. And the text implies, here, that his journey has not given him everlasting life, but rather the moral wisdom to play the role of the light.

❝ This too was the work of Gilgamesh, the king, who knew the countries of the world. He was wise, he saw mysteries and knew secret things, he brought us a tale of the days before the flood. He went a long journey, was weary, worn with labour, and returning engraved on a stone the whole story.

Related Characters: Gilgamesh

Related Themes:

Page Number: 117

Explanation and Analysis

Having established Gilgamesh's longevity through the legacy of the walls of Uruk, the speaker now references a second way he will endure beyond death: through the myth of the flood he has brought back, and the stone tablets he has engraved with stories.

The language used to describe Gilgamesh has shifted from references to physical power to instead praise of his knowledge and wisdom. His adventures are valued not for specific acts of heroisms, but rather the "mysteries" and "secret things" that are transmitted back to humanity and that can serve as lessons for people in the future. Most notable, though, is not the tale of Gilgamesh's journey, but rather the tale he hears on that journey: "of the days before the flood." This story is given great import, presumably, because of the lessons it teaches on how humans should interact with the gods: It reminds them not to be too arrogant, and suggest that if they are loyal, the gods will treat them with kindness and care.

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of passage, though, is the sudden reference to the "stone" on which Utnapishtim's story has been "engraved." Gilgamesh's great triumph is to bring back not only oral history, but a recorded textual history, for this will allow it, like the walls of Uruk, to live on past his death. Immortality is ultimately bestowed on Gilgamesh through literature—and the epic was remarkably prophetic in this statement. After all, though the walls of Uruk have long fallen, the metaphorical stone that Gilgamesh brought back has carried him almost five millennia in the future to readers today.

Part 7 Quotes

❝ In those days the lord Gilgamesh departed, the son of Ninsun, the king, peerless, without an equal among men, who did not neglect Enlil his master. O Gilgamesh, lord of Kullab, great is thy praise.

Related Characters: Enlil, Ninsun, Gilgamesh

Related Themes:

Page Number: 119

Explanation and Analysis

These final lines of the epic come after Gilgamesh has died and been honored by gods and men alike. They return to the laudatory tone of the opening, but shift the emphasis from Gilgamesh's physical prowess to his comportment toward others.

Many of the features of the opening are repeated here. We are told once more of Gilgamesh's divine heritage through Ninsun, as well as his complete uniqueness within humanity. Yet it is also noted that he "did not neglect Enlil his master," indicating that Gilgamesh has learned the lesson on how to respect the gods. In particular, Enlil was the god in Utnapishtim's tale who found the humans too raucous and thus sentenced them to death. The fact that Gilgamesh has learned to pay heed to this master in particular demonstrates that he has both controlled his own hubris and ensured that the events before the flood will not be repeated. For by inscribing them in stone, Gilgamesh has ensured that other humans will have access to his wisdom and not make similar mistakes. Gilgamesh's "praise" as an epic hero and lord is thus ultimately earned by humility and wisdom—as well as by the way he can transmit these qualities to future generations.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PROLOGUE: GILGAMESH KING IN URUK

The epic begins with the words "I will proclaim to the world the deeds of Gilgamesh." The narrator tells of Gilgamesh's wide experience of the world and of his returning from a long and tiring quest with the story written on tablets.

Like many epics and quest narratives, the outside world, beyond the city, is where true challenges and transformations take place. The ultimate meaning of the quest is in bringing back what was learned to share with civilization.

Gilgamesh was created by the gods with strength, beauty, and courage. He was two-thirds god, and only one-third man. As ruler of Uruk, he built the city's great walls and temples. The narrator praises the walls.

By revealing that Gilgamesh is part man and part god, the epic introduces us to Gilgamesh's unwillingness to accept his place in the universe as a mortal, while also building up arguably the first "epic hero" in history.

PART 1: THE COMING OF ENKIDU

Gilgamesh has travelled the world and ended up in the Sumerian city of Uruk, where he is now king. The locals criticize his arrogance, however: he takes sons from their fathers and sleeps with all the women he pleases.

From its first lines, the Epic describes Gilgamesh's arrogance and associates it with his position as ruler of a city. Though he is a strong king, the people criticize him for abusing his power.

The gods hear the people of Uruk's complaints and repeat them to Anu, the god of Uruk. After Anu has heard them, the gods next plea to Aruru, the goddess of creation, asking her to create someone to be Gilgamesh's equal in strength.

The gods in Sumerian mythology are often involved in human affairs: they can even hear what the people of Uruk say.

The goddess Aruru, using **water** and clay, creates the man Enkidu in the wilderness. Within Enkidu is the spirit of the god of war, Ninurta. Enkidu has long hair and a hairy body, and he is described as "Innocent of mankind." Having grown up in nature, he knows nothing of civilization.

Enkidu is Gilgamesh's counterpart in several ways: Gilgamesh rules the city, but Enkidu lives in nature; Gilgamesh lives luxuriously in Uruk, but Enkidu grows his hair long and lives like a wild animal. This immediately sets up the conflict between civilization and nature as also being a divide between innocence and knowledge.

Enkidu lives with wild beasts, eating grass and drinking from watering holes. For three days in a row, however, Enkidu comes face-to-face with a human trapper who is hunting for wild game. The trapper tells his father about Enkidu, describing him as "The strongest in the world, he is like an immortal from heaven." The trapper's father advises the trapper to tell Gilgamesh about Enkidu's strength. He also says to ask Gilgamesh for a temple prostitute to bring with him to seduce Enkidu. The trapper's father says that when Enkidu is drawn to the woman's naked body, the wild beasts will reject him.

The trapper's father understands that sexual knowledge and experience will make "nature" reject Enkidu, because he will fully become a human (and thus be divided from nature). In this first part of the epic, nature is primarily associated with innocence, and civilization with corruption. This is another parallel to the Biblical Adam and Eve story, in which they lose their innocence when they gain knowledge that they are naked.

The trapper travels to see Gilgamesh and tells him about Enkidu's life with the wild beasts, destroying the trapper's traps, and filling in his holes. Gilgamesh tells the trapper to take a prostitute back with him to tempt Enkidu. He says (as the trapper's father did) that when Enkidu is drawn to the naked woman, wild animals will reject him.

Upon hearing of a man as strong as himself, Gilgamesh needs to meet and challenge him—he has a strong sense of pride and desire to prove himself through great deeds. It's also telling that he comes to the same conclusion as the trapper's father—sex and humanity will bring a separation from nature.

The trapper travels back for three days with a temple prostitute named Shamhat. They then wait three days for the herds to come. Enkidu joins the wild animals in drinking from the watering hole. The trapper tells the prostitute to approach Enkidu and seduce him. Shamhat immediately strips and approaches him naked, and Enkidu embraces her. They spend seven days and six nights together, and then Enkidu returns to the hills where the wild beasts live. But now the animals run away from him, and when Enkidu tries to chase after them, his knees buckle and he is not as fast as he used to be. Having been transformed by his encounter with the prostitute, "Enkidu was grown weak, for wisdom was in him, and the thoughts of a man were in his heart."

We see that his sexual relationship with Shamhat completely changes Enkidu. Not only do the animals reject him, but also he becomes physically slower—less of a wild animal himself. The Epic specifically states that his new weakness is directly a result of gaining wisdom and human consciousness. This continues the tension between the "innocence" of nature and the burden (but also blessing) of knowledge and civilization.

Enkidu accepts Shamhat's invitation to come to Uruk, and she tells him that Gilgamesh has never met a man stronger than himself. Shamhat tells Enkidu of the riches of Uruk, where "every day is a holiday" and where people smell "sweet." Finally, she tells Enkidu that "Gilgamesh will know in his dreams that you are coming."

Pride and a desire for luxury drive Enkidu to Uruk. Hearing of Gilgamesh's strength, Enkidu wants to test his own—he has a similar sense of pride to Gilgamesh. Shamhat also lures him to Uruk with promises of an easy life full of luxury. This is another example of how civilization and the city are presented as sources of comfort, but also of idleness and corruption.

Indeed, Gilgamesh has had a dream, and he describes it to Ninsun, his mother (a goddess). Gilgamesh tells Ninsun that he dreamed of "young heroes" gathered together, and of a meteor falling from the sky that Gilgamesh could not lift. Finally, the citizens of Uruk came to see the meteor and helped Gilgamesh: he was able to raise the meteor, and when he brought it to his mother, she "pronounced it my brother." Ninsun, tells Gilgamesh that she made the meteor for him, "a goad and spur," and that in the meteor Gilgamesh will find a friend.

Dreams reveal lots of information in the Epic, and they are often prophetic. This makes sense, as this is a world where the gods interact closely in most human affairs. The fact that Gilgamesh dreams of Enkidu's coming tells us that this is an important event. The nature of the dream (the Enkidu is presented as Gilgamesh's "brother") also highlights how the two men are bound together—indeed, Enkidu was only created to be a counterpoint to Gilgamesh.

Gilgamesh tells his mother of a second dream. In it, Gilgamesh found an axe in the streets of Uruk and began to carry it with him. Ninsun interprets the dream: she says that the axe represents Gilgamesh's new companion, who will guard and rescue him when needed. Gilgamesh then tells his dreams to a counselor, and they are then relayed to the prostitute Shamhat, who retells them to Enkidu. Shamhat asks Enkidu why he wants to live in the hills with wild beasts. She clothes him and herself and leads him into the shepherds' tents, where the shepherds offer him bread. This confuses Enkidu, because previously he fed only on the milk of wild animals. He does not know how to eat bread or drink wine, but Shamhat teaches him. Enkidu gets drunk and rubs his hair and skin with oil. To protect the shepherds, Enkidu hunts and kills lions and wolves.

Again, Gilgamesh's dream reinforces the importance of his relationship with Enkidu. Enkidu is brought more fully into civilization by his time with the shepherds. The drinking of wine and application of oils signify his introduction to civilized life—he is now wholly divided from nature, and is being seduced by the comforts civilization. Shamhat plays an important role in the Epic, and it's also important to note that "temple prostitutes" were, in many ways, holy figures at the time—earthly representations of fertility.

Living with the shepherds, Enkidu is happy. One day, a mysterious man appears and tells Enkidu that Gilgamesh has shut himself in "the marriage-house" and has been acting strangely. Gilgamesh is to be married to the Queen of Love, but he still demands protection of his right as king to sleep with any bride before her husband can. This tradition is seen as tyrannical by the people of Uruk. Enkidu declares that he will fight Gilgamesh because of this. With Shamhat behind him, he travels to Uruk and enters the city.

Gilgamesh's demands to sleep with the bride before her husband is allowed to demonstrate his arrogance and abuse of power as king of Uruk. This is presented as another example of how the city can provide comfort and luxury, but that comfort also leads to idleness, and idleness breeds corruption. Gilgamesh can only redeem himself as a hero by leaving the city and testing his strength out in nature.

All the townspeople admire Enkidu when he enters Uruk. That night, Gilgamesh is on his way to meet his bride, but Enkidu meets him at the city **gate** and blocks his way in the street. The two wrestle, smashing doorposts and shaking the walls. Gilgamesh throws Enkidu to the ground, and then the two stop being angry. Enkidu tells Gilgamesh "There is not another like you in the world," and he declares that Gilgamesh has earned his friendship. The two embrace.

As an "epic," the Epic appropriately highlights the importance of strength and heroic deeds. Here, the nearly even matchup between Gilgamesh and Enkidu leads not to a rivalry, but to a close friendship. They recognize that they are very similar in being the two strongest men in the world, and so this mutual respect translates itself into friendship. It's also worth noting that this crucial fight takes place at the city gate. Throughout the epic, gates and doorways act as physical places of entry, but also as symbols of spiritual transition.

PART 2: THE FOREST JOURNEY

The father of the Gods, "Enlil of the mountain," is responsible for Gilgamesh's fate. Gilgamesh has a dream, and Enkidu interprets it: he says that though Gilgamesh is a king, he is not fated to be immortal. Enkidu tells Gilgamesh not to despair over his mortality. He says that Gilgamesh has been given immense power and strength, and he should not abuse his power. As Enkidu tells Gilgamesh this, Enkidu begins to cry. Enkidu explains that "idleness" has weakened him. Gilgamesh likewise says that he has not "established my name stamped on bricks as my destiny decreed." He decides to travel to the "Land of Cedars" to make a name for himself and raise monuments to the gods. Together, with Enkidu, Gilgamesh will travel to the forest, where an evil giant named Humbaba lives and guards the cedars.

Here the Epic has its first discussion of its central theme: finding meaning in life in the face of mortality. We see that Gilgamesh's understanding of his own mortality is almost dismissive: he argues that since all men die anyway, they might as well risk their lives to make a name for themselves. At this point in the story, Gilgamesh does not question the value of "making a name for himself" in a world where all great heroes are eventually forgotten—it is enough to use his allotted years to achieve fame and glory. It's also notable that such glory can only be achieved by leaving the city and going out into nature. The Epic first presented nature as a place of innocence, but now it becomes more of a "wilderness" where heroes can prove themselves. Enkidu also notes that the comforts of the city have made him weak.

Gilgamesh rouses Enkidu with a speech, saying that since all men must die eventually, he should have no fear of death when facing Humbaba. Gilgamesh says, "Our days are numbered, our occupations are a breath of wind." Even if Enkidu dies, Gilgamesh says, his name will be remembered for his fight with Humbaba. Enkidu insists that, before entering the Land of Cedars, Gilgamesh should tell the sun god, Shamash, that he is going there, because the Land of Cedars belongs to Shamash.

Gilgamesh repeats his argument that since life is fleeting, they might as well go on a quest, and he presents it in poetic language that makes the idea universal—even now, thousands of years later, we are no closer to discovering how to find true meaning in the face of our inevitable mortality. Unlike Gilgamesh, Enkidu does not give much significance to the idea of making a name for himself. At this point, Enkidu also shows more respect for the gods—the Land of Cedars is not only a place representing nature and the wild, but also a place holy to a god, and so Enkidu is wary of being too prideful and angering the gods.

Gilgamesh takes up two goats in his arms and speaks to Shamash, asking for the god's permission and that he might return to Uruk. "Gilgamesh, you are strong," Shamash replies, "but what is the Country of the Living to you?" Gilgamesh says that "In the city man dies oppressed at heart." In a **river**, Gilgamesh sees bodies float by, and he knows that this will be his fate as well. He says that he wishes to enter the Land of the Cedars because his name will not yet be remembered forever, "as my destiny decreed." Gilgamesh begins to cry. He asks Shamash why, if he is not meant to defeat Humbaba, "Why did you move me, Shamash, with the restless desire to perform it?" Gilgamesh promises that if he dies in the Land of the Cedars it will be without anger, but that if he returns he will bring "gifts and . . . praise to Shamash."

The phrase "In the city man dies oppressed at heart" gives us the clearest sense yet of the relationship between city and nature in the Epic. Even as they enjoyed the benefits of living in the city, Gilgamesh and Enkidu are also aware that their spirit grows idle and weak there. To live freely and meaningfully, they feel they must go out into the more dangerous world and accomplish something heroic. For Gilgamesh and Enkidu this means leaving the city and going into the wilderness, but the more general idea of leaving one's home and experiencing the wider world (whether in nature or civilization) is one that has endured in stories for thousands of years.

Shamash accepts "the sacrifice of [Gilgamesh's] tears." In addition, Shamash appoints the winds to help Gilgamesh on his quest. Shamash orders blacksmiths to make enormous axes and swords. For Gilgamesh they craft an axe called "Might of Heroes" and "the bow of Anshan."

Gilgamesh pays respects to the gods, and is rewarded in turn. At this point in the Epic he understands his place in the hierarchy of the universe. He accepts that he is mortal, and thus subordinate to the gods.

The people of Uruk assemble in the street to listen to Gilgamesh speak. He declares his mission to "climb the mountain, to cut down the cedar, and leave behind an enduring name." The "counselors of Uruk" tell Gilgamesh that he is young and arrogant to think that he can defeat Humbaba. They say that Humbaba is immortal and possesses powerful weapons. Gilgamesh laughs and asks Enkidu, "How shall I answer them; shall I say I am afraid of Humbaba, I will sit at home all the rest of my days?" He asks Enkidu to go with him to the Great Palace in Egalmah and ask Ninsun, Gilgamesh's mother, for advice.

The counselors of Uruk voice the Epic's own caution against Gilgamesh's arrogance, warning him that he will not defeat Humbaba, and that pursuing heroic deeds for their own sake is overly prideful. Again, Gilgamesh argues that because life is fleeting and life in the city has no heroic value, he must try to defeat Humbaba anyway. It is especially telling that part of Gilgamesh's idea of heroism involves "cutting down the cedar"—overcoming nature and "the wild."

Having arrived at Egalmah, Gilgamesh asks Ninsun to pray to Shamash on his behalf while he goes on his journey. Ninsun dresses in her room, putting on jewels and a tiara, then goes to the altar of the Sun and speaks to Shamash, asking why he had to give Gilgamesh such great ambitions. She asks Shamash not to forget Gilgamesh while he goes on the journey. She then says to Enkidu that he is like an adopted son to her. She asks him to serve Gilgamesh well, and gives him an amulet that he wears around his neck. She tells him, "I entrust my son to you; bring him back to me safely."

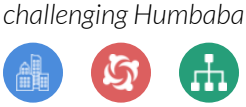
Again, by paying respect to the gods, Gilgamesh is awarded their protection. The gods of the Epic of Gilgamesh *share many characteristics with the gods of later epics (like Homer's* Iliad *and* Odyssey*) in that they basically act like powerful, spoiled humans—jealous and easily susceptible to flattery and praise. Shamash is presented as one of the least petty of the gods, however, and he consistently acts as a guardian to Gilgamesh, despite Gilgamesh's pride.*

Gilgamesh and Enkidu prepare to leave for the Land of Cedars. They arm themselves. The people ask when they will return, and the counselors tell Gilgamesh not to be arrogant and to be cautious when fighting Humbaba. They also tell him to let Enkidu lead the way, because he knows the forest well and has seen Humbaba before. The counselors wish Gilgamesh good luck in his quest.

Though the counselors' warnings are repeating what was said before, an important change happens here in the relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu: here we see that Enkidu will take the lead in their quest. Because he grew up in the wilderness, he has more knowledge and experience there than the "civilized" Gilgamesh does.

Enkidu tells Gilgamesh to follow him—Enkidu knows the way—and not to be afraid. In three days, they walk the distance of "a journey of a month and two weeks," crossing seven mountains before arriving at the forest. Enkidu says that when he opened the **gate** to the forest before, his hand became weak. Gilgamesh tells Enkidu to "not speak like a coward." Gilgamesh assures Enkidu not to be afraid and to "roused by the battle to come." They travel into the forest and to the green mountain. They are stunned by the forest, by the height of the trees and the trail where Humbaba typically walked. Gilgamesh digs a **well** and makes an offering on top of the mountain, asking the mountain to give him a "favourable dream."

The Epic's exaggerated distances (or underreported travel times) highlight the larger-than-life aspects of its heroes and also the mythical significance of their quest. They do not merely exit the city and fight a monster: they also travel more than a month's journey in just three days to fight a monster who is believed to be immortal. The gate to the Cedar Forest is also an important symbol of transition here. Enkidu wishes to turn back, but Gilgamesh convinces him to go through. This signifies a point of no return in their journey: by travelling through the gate, they are committing to challenging Humbaba (and thereby possibly offending the gods).



They sleep, and at midnight Gilgamesh wakes up from a dream. He tells Enkidu of his dream: it was terrifying and confusing. Gilgamesh dreamed that he took hold of a wild bull that bit and attacked him. In the dream, the bull threw him back, and then a man offered him **water** from a water-skin. Enkidu offers his interpretation of the dream: the man is Shamash, and when they are in danger Shamash will lift the two of them up and offer them help.

Dreams often communicate the intentions of the gods, and predict the future the gods have decreed. This one promises Gilgamesh Shamash's support. Water is also an important symbol in the epic (particularly later). The water offered here is a symbol for more general restoration and rejuvenation.

Gilgamesh tells Enkidu of another dream he had. In a deep swamp, the two of them stood next to each other as the mountain above them fell toward them. The falling mountain caught Gilgamesh's legs. Then he saw an incredible and beautiful light. The light pulled Gilgamesh out from under the mountain and lifted him up to stand solid-footed on the ground. Enkidu says that the mountain represents Humbaba, and just as the mountain fell, so Humbaba's body will fall to the ground.

Gilgamesh has another prophetic dream about their quest. We can likely interpret the light as representing Shamash, the sun god, who has pledged to help Gilgamesh because of Gilgamesh's offerings and prayers.

They travel another day and dig a **well** before the sun has set. Gilgamesh climbs up the mountain, sets an offering of food on the ground, and prays to the mountain to send Enkidu an auspicious dream. Enkidu dreams of cold rain coming down on him. When Enkidu wakes up at midnight, he asks Gilgamesh if he woke Enkidu up. Enkidu says that he is scared. He tells Gilgamesh that he saw another dream: the earth fell dark, lightning struck, fires raged, and the clouds "rained down death." Then, in the dream, the light disappeared, the fires went out, and all that was left was ash.

Enkidu's dream gives us the first glimpse of a possible tragedy at the end of their quest. The disappearance of light may represent the absence of Shamash's protection, and even the end of life itself. It's telling that all the frightening images in the dream are representative of dangerous, uncontrollable nature—storms, fire, and darkness. The wilderness is presented as frightening, and thus as the best place for heroism.

After descending the mountain, Gilgamesh uses his axe to start chopping down the cedars. From afar, Humbaba hears the noise and shouts, "Who is this that has violated my woods and cut down my cedar?" From heaven, Shamash speaks to Gilgamesh, telling him not to fear. But Gilgamesh is very afraid, and is overcome by weakness and sleep. He lies on the ground "as though in a dream." Enkidu tries to wake him, but cannot. Eventually Gilgamesh hears Enkidu's pleas and wakes up, armoring himself. Gilgamesh prays to "live to be the wonder of my mother" and not to return to the city until he has fought Humbaba. Enkidu tells Gilgamesh that the only reason Gilgamesh is not afraid is because he does not know Humbaba. Enkidu himself is terrified. Enkidu tells Gilgamesh about Humbaba. He tells Gilgamesh to go on if he likes, but that he himself is going to return to the city.

By overcoming his fear of fighting Humbaba, Gilgamesh shows that he is more concerned with heroic feats than in preserving his own life. Enkidu, however, offers another perspective: he believes that Gilgamesh's lack of fear comes from ignorance. Just as Gilgamesh does not yet appreciate (or even seem to accept) the true finality of death, he does not understand just how dangerous his fight with Humbaba will be. Gilgamesh's friendship with Enkidu gives him access to a view of the world that is more realistic about mortality, but at this point in the story Gilgamesh still rejects it—he is too proud.

Gilgamesh says that he will not die or be mourned. He asks Enkidu to help him in the fight against Humbaba. He tells Enkidu that since all men must die anyway, they should bravely fight Humbaba. Anyone who does not finish a fight, Gilgamesh says, "is not at peace." Humbaba then comes out from his house of cedar. Enkidu tells Gilgamesh to remember his arrogance back in Uruk, and to attack Humbaba without fear. He tells Gilgamesh not to let Humbaba escape into the woods. Enkidu suggests that they trap Humbaba before he can arm himself. Humbaba comes out from his house and stares down Gilgamesh. Gilgamesh prays to Shamash for help, and Shamash commands the eight winds to attack Humbaba, blinding him and preventing him from moving.

Gilgamesh's certainty that he will not die reveals his still-arrogant understanding of mortality. Gilgamesh is the hero, but Enkidu is the one whose plan of attack allows them to succeed, and when the two men need help from the gods, Shamash aids them. In all, there's little real fighting on Gilgamesh's part—what seems to be most important is that he overcome his fear of Humbaba.

Gilgamesh cuts down the first cedar and cuts the branches off, laying them down at the bottom of the mountain. He and Enkidu then cut down seven more cedars and assemble the branches at the bottom of the mountain. Seven times Humbaba "blazed out" at Gilgamesh and Enkidu, whenever they chop down a cedar. Humbaba begins to cry as he speaks to Gilgamesh, saying that he never had a mother or father, and that if Gilgamesh lets him go free, he will serve Gilgamesh and the mountain will belong to him. Humbaba says that he will cut down the trees and build Gilgamesh a palace. Humbaba leads Gilgamesh to his house, and Gilgamesh feels compassion for him. But Enkidu warns him that Humbaba will take advantage of Gilgamesh's generosity and prevent him from returning home.

Again, it is Enkidu who ensures the pair's success. This is an interesting section, as it's unclear what the writer is actually describing. Humbaba seems to be closely connected to the cedars he guards, so much so that he is wounded when they are chopped down. Humbaba "blazing out" is probably a reference to other legends about the giant in Mesopotamian mythology. Humbaba was said to have seven "radiances" or "auras," and in taking these from him Gilgamesh and Enkidu seem to rob him of his power. In a telling shift, Enkidu—who was once an "innocent" creature living in nature—now chops down the tall, beautiful cedars.

Humbaba says that Enkidu speaks out of jealousy and terror. Enkidu again tells Gilgamesh to slay Humbaba and his servants. Gilgamesh listens to Enkidu and strikes Humbaba with his sword. Then Enkidu strikes Humbaba. The third blow, also by Enkidu, kills Humbaba. The cedars "shiver" when Humbaba falls. Gilgamesh and Enkidu then advance into the forest to the "sacred dwellings of the Anunnaki." Gilgamesh cuts down the first trees of the forest and Enkidu clears their roots. They lay down Humbaba's body as an offering and kiss the ground. But when he sees Humbaba's head, Enlil is angry. He curses them, declaring "may the fire be on your faces, may it eat the bread that you eat, may it drink where you drink."

The probable historical basis for this adventure was an expedition to chop down cedars and bring them back to Sumer (where there was little timber), as the Epic presents the felling of trees as an essential part of the battle with Humbaba. Importantly, it is Enkidu who strikes the killing below, and Enkidu whom the gods will blame for the death of Humbaba. Humbaba doesn't seem like much of a villain in the end, and Gilgamesh seems especially proud and merciless in killing the giant simply to gain glory for himself. Enlil is the god who had appointed Humbaba to guard the cedars, so when Gilgamesh and Enkidu kill Humbaba it is a direct affront to the supremacy of the gods—an act of hubris that will lead to tragedy.

PART 3: ISHTAR AND GILGAMESH, AND THE DEATH OF ENKIDU

Gilgamesh **washes** his hair, cleans his weapons, and puts on his royal robes. Once he puts on his crown, the goddess Ishtar speaks to Gilgamesh: she tells him to come to her and be her husband. She offers him a gift of a lavish chariot and a beautiful home. Gilgamesh refuses to marry her, however, claiming that she has always been available to many lovers and has eventually fallen out of love with them. He tells the story of Tammuz, "the lover of your youth," whom she loved and showered with gifts. Tammuz fed Ishtar and hunted for her, and then she turned him into a wolf. Then Gilgamesh says, "Did you not love Isullanu . . . ?" Isullanu too brought Ishtar gifts, but refused to sleep with her, and so Ishtar turned him into a mole. Gilgamesh asks why he should believe he would be treated any differently.

Gilgamesh's rejection of Ishtar's proposal marks a major shift in his relation to the gods. Whereas on their quest to defeat Humbaba, he paid homage to Shamash, here he violates the will of Ishtar, a goddess. Though he has good reason to reject her (she has treated past lovers cruelly), to Ishtar it is a grave offense that he would even dare to do so. To the gods, it is simply not a mortal's place to deny them.

Gilgamesh's speech enrages Ishtar. She tells her mother and father, Antum and Anu, that Gilgamesh has insulted her. Ishtar asks that Anu release the Bull of Heaven to destroy Gilgamesh. She asks her father to make Gilgamesh so arrogant that he brings about his own destruction. Ishtar threatens to "break in the **doors** of hell and . . . bring up the dead to eat food like the living" if he does not comply. Anu tells Ishtar that if he does as she asks Uruk will experience seven years of drought—he asks if she has stockpiled enough grain to last seven years of drought. She says that she has.

It is Ishtar's offended pride that continues the chain of events leading to Enkidu's death. Her father, Anu, even points out that Gilgamesh had good reason to reject her, but her pride overrules her rational thinking and she basically throws a tantrum. The gods are often portrayed as petty, jealous figures who seem to have far more power than they know how to responsibly use, and humans must remain humble and pious to survive their whims.

Anu grants Ishtar the Bull of Heaven. She leads it to Uruk, where the Bull goes to the **river**. Its "snort" creates fissures in the Earth, into which two hundred people fall and die. Enkidu leaps onto the bull and grabs its horns. Gilgamesh grabs the Bull's tail and stabs it, killing the Bull. Then they cut out the Bull's heart and give it to Shamash. Ishtar appears in a tower on the wall of Uruk, and she curses Gilgamesh for killing the Bull of Heaven. Enkidu tears out the Bull's thigh and tosses it at Ishtar, saying that he wishes he could do to her what he did to the Bull. Ishtar assembles her people, dancers and singers, prostitutes of the temple, and courtesans to mourn the Bull.

Though they simply mean to protect the people of Uruk (and earn more glory in battle), Gilgamesh and Enkidu's killing of the Bull of Heaven is the offense to the gods that then leads to Enkidu's death. Critically, it is Enkidu who says he wishes he could kill Ishtar like he did the bull. The heroes immediately make an offering to Shamash, but then they turn around and scorn and insult Ishtar. Clearly not all the gods are equal in their eyes.

Gilgamesh presents Uruk's smiths and armorers with the Bull's enormous horns plated with decorative rock. Inside the horns hold "six measures" of oil, which Gilgamesh presents to his guardian god, Lugulbanda. The horns themselves he hangs on the wall of his palace. Then he and Enkidu drive through Uruk, asking the people, "Who is most glorious of the heroes . . . ? Gilgamesh is the most glorious of heroes." Feasts and celebrations are held in his honor until he and Enkidu go to sleep.

Despite having incurred the wrath of the gods, Gilgamesh maintains his naïve sense of pride. He even takes credit for what was just as much Enkidu's victory as his own. Still, at this point in the story, Gilgamesh does not think of his own mortality—he aims only to be remembered for heroic feats, and assumes that nothing can defeat him.

The next morning, Enkidu tells Gilgamesh of a dream he had: the gods gathered together and Anu said that because of the deaths of Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven, one of the two (Enkidu and Gilgamesh) must die. Shamash argues with the others, saying that Enlil ordered them to kill the Bull of Heaven and Humbaba, so there is no reason for anyone to die. Telling Gilgamesh of this dream, Enkidu cries and tells Gilgamesh that the gods will "take me from you." Enkidu rages at the **gate** to Uruk, which is built from cedar, saying that if he had known what was to come, he would have smashed the **gate** apart. At dawn, Enkidu weeps and curses the trapper and Shamhat for bringing him out of the wild and to Uruk.

Even though Ishtar chose to send the Bull of Heaven to attack Gilgamesh and Enkidu, the gods are offended by its death. To them, it is not the place of mortals to defy the gods, even if their lives and people are in jeopardy. Importantly, Enkidu directs his rage at the gate of Uruk: it symbolized his entrance to civilization, which eventually led to his doom. He wishes he could undo the symbolic decision he made when he passed through the gate.

Shamash speaks to Enkidu, asking why he curses this woman who brought him into a lavish life with Gilgamesh as his companion. Shamash reminds Enkidu that Gilgamesh has given him much, and that when Enkidu dies Gilgamesh will mourn him. Enkidu takes back his curse, praying that Shamhat will be sought after by many men and become rich.

Enkidu experiences a major change in how he thinks about his own mortality: at first he lashed out at Shamhat and civilization for leading him to death, but Shamash convinces him to instead appreciate all the experience his path led him to, particularly his friendship with Gilgamesh. This is important because it shows that civilization isn't only a negative, corrupting force—becoming civilized may mean the loss of one's "innocence," but it also means the gain of knowledge, experience, and human relationships.

Enkidu complains bitterly to Gilgamesh: "It was I who cut down the cedar, I who leveled the forest, I who slew Humbaba and now see what has become of me." He tells Gilgamesh of his most recent dream: Enkidu, between heaven and Earth, faced a terrifying "bird-man" with a "vampire face," "lion's foot," and "eagle's talon.' The bird-man held Enkidu and transformed Enkidu's arms into feathers, then led him to the "house from which none who enters ever returns." He speaks of hell, describing it as dark, with dust and clay for food. In the "house of dust" Enkidu saw famed kings and princes of the past working as servants.

Facing his own death, Enkidu forces Gilgamesh to face his own mortality. Enkidu lists his feats and asks Gilgamesh what it all means now that he's dying anyway, and Gilgamesh has no answer. The Epic now turns more exclusively to its central theme: the fact that everyone will die eventually, and the question of how to find meaning in the face of this inevitability. The grotesque imagery here only emphasizes how existentially frightening this ageless question still is.

Gilgamesh cries while hearing Enkidu's dream. He says that Enkidu's dream is both awe-inspiring and grim, and declares that he will pray to the gods for Enkidu. At the end of the day, Enkidu's sickness grows. He resents Gilgamesh for bringing him out from the wilderness. The next day, the sickness gets even worse. On the third day, again it worsens and "his eyes were blind with weeping." Twelve more days he lies in bed, suffering more and more. Enkidu laments that he could not die in battle, and is ashamed to die sick in bed. At dawn, Gilgamesh cries out to the counselors of Uruk. His lamentation is then presented in its entirety.

Enkidu again feels resentful for being taken away from nature and brought into civilization (although not even remaining "innocent" could have spared him from eventually dying). As he dies, he wishes that he could have died in battle—he feels his death is less meaningful in a sick bed in the city than out in the wild, performing heroic acts.

In his lamentation, Gilgamesh says that he weeps for Enkidu as "the axe at my side." He says that the wild animals that raised Enkidu weep too, as well as the people of Uruk, and "all the paths where we talked together," all the animals they hunted, the **rivers**, the mountains, all the people of Eridu, and all those who fed and cared for Enkidu. He ends his speech with "What is this sleep which holds you now? You are lost in the dark and cannot hear me."

On Enkidu's deathbed we see the true strength of his relationship with Gilgamesh. Gilgamesh weeps for his friend and raises a lamentation among the people of Uruk, the wild animals that raised Enkidu, and all of nature. The fierceness of Gilgamesh's grief shows just how much the two men loved each other, and cements their friendship as the central relationship of the epic.

Enkidu has died, and Gilgamesh lays a veil over him. Then Gilgamesh rages, tearing out his hair and throwing down his lavish robes. At dawn, he speaks of how well Enkidu served and accompanied him. He says that the people will weep, and "the joyful people will stoop with sorry." Gilgamesh says that he will grow his hair long and travel through the wilderness in a lion's skin. For seven days, Gilgamesh mourns Enkidu. But Enkidu's body begins to rot, so he is buried. Gilgamesh assembles various smiths and stone-workers to make a statue of Enkidu with gold and ornamental rock. Finally, Gilgamesh makes an offering to the sun, and his tears stop flowing.

Gilgamesh's excessive expression of grief isn't seen as weak or "unmanly," but as the proper feeling for a larger-than-life figure with larger-than-life emotions. Such overwhelming displays of grief and emotion are common to heroes of other epics as well, like Achilles mourning Patroclus in the Iliad.

PART 4: THE SEARCH FOR EVERLASTING LIFE

Gilgamesh wanders the wilderness, grieving for Enkidu. He declares that because he fears his own death, he will travel to find Utnapishtim, who survived a great **flood** and was granted everlasting life, allowing him to live in Dilmun, "in the garden of the sun."

Having been transformed by Enkidu's death, Gilgamesh now becomes obsessed with his own mortality. The "great flood" of the past parallels other mythical floods from cultures of the region—most famously, the flood of Noah in the Bible.

In his sleep, Gilgamesh dreams of the same lions he saw long ago in those same mountains. In the dream, Gilgamesh kills the lion with his axe and sword. After the dream, and after a long journey, Gilgamesh arrives at Mashtu, a mountain range that guards the rising and setting sun. Guards known as "Scorpions" guard its **gate**. They are half-man, half-dragon. One of the Scorpions says that Gilgamesh must be a god. The other responds, "Two thirds is god but one third is man." Gilgamesh says he has travelled for Enkidu, to ask Utnapishtim about life and death. The Scorpion warns Gilgamesh that no mortal has ever travelled through the mountains, and that if Gilgamesh dares to, he will be in complete darkness for twelve leagues. He opens the gate for Gilgamesh and wishes him luck in his journey.

Driven to find immortality, Gilgamesh's feats grow even more heroic. No man has ever passed through the mountains, but Gilgamesh's fear of his own mortality is so strong that he risks death in order to find a way to overcome that mortality. This scene also shows another symbolic gate, a place where Gilgamesh must make a conscious decision to continue on his quest and transition from the world he knows to the dangerous mountains no mortal has ever passed through.

Gilgamesh soon finds himself in a darkness that becomes more and more complete as he travels, until he cannot see anything in front of or behind him. After eleven leagues, he begins to see light again, and after the twelfth league the sun reappears. He has arrived at the garden of the gods, where gems grow on plants and precious rocks and metal grow as fruit, thorns, and thistles. Shamash sees Gilgamesh approaching the **sea** in the garden of the gods, and warns Gilgamesh that no mortal has ever crossed the sea, and no mortal ever will. Shamash tells Gilgamesh that he will not find the secret to everlasting life. Gilgamesh says that, "Although I am no better than a dead man, still let me see the light of the sun."

Gilgamesh's travel through the darkness in part represents his separation from his divine protector: Shamash, the sun god. In this quest for immortality Gilgamesh is more alone than ever. Many powerful figures tell Gilgamesh that he cannot achieve immortality—that no matter what, he is destined to die someday—but he refuses to believe them, and continues on in the hope that some action of his can overcome destiny and the will of the gods. Gilgamesh is the strongest man on earth, but as this section of the epic shows, not even heroic deeds and great strength can overcome death.

Near the sea lives Siduri, who rules over the vines and makes wine. Seeing Gilgamesh, who is weary from travelling, she determines that he must be a criminal, and she bolts the **door** to her home shut. Gilgamesh shouts through the door, asking why she bolted it, and he threatens to smash through it if she does not open it. Siduri is suspicious: if he truly is the famous and strong Gilgamesh, then why does he look so gaunt despairing? Gilgamesh says that of course he looks gaunt and in despair, for he has made a long journey and his companion, Enkidu, has died. Siduri tells Gilgamesh that the gods will not allow him to achieve immortality, but that he should enjoy himself with the life that he does have, eating well, dancing, and raising a family.

Siduri's question of why such a strong and famous king should look so mournful indicates the change that has occurred in Gilgamesh. At the story's beginning, he cared only about heroism and fame. But the loss of Enkidu has saddened him and even affected him physically, and now he is concerned with death itself more than making a "name" for himself. Siduri urges him to take satisfaction in his mortal life as it is, but Gilgamesh is determined to continue on his quest. This is essentially a kind of hubris: refusing to accept his place as a mortal man.

But Gilgamesh refuses to comply. He demands that Siduri tell him how to get to Utnapishtim. Siduri tells him that crossing the **sea** is impossible and nobody has ever done it. Only Shamash, the sun, may cross it. Siduri tells Gilgamesh that deep in the forest he may find Urshanabi, "the ferryman of Utnapishtim." She says it is possible the ferryman will take Gilgamesh across the water.

Gilgamesh is so driven to become immortal that he does not accept his own limits. He is explicitly told that only Shamash, a god, can cross the sea, but ignores this information. He believes himself capable of more than other mere mortals are.

Gilgamesh goes to find Urshanabi in the woods. In his anger, Gilgamesh smashes Urshanabi's boat's tackle. Urshanabi asks Gilgamesh he looks so gaunt and in despair, and Gilgamesh (again) asks why should he not, for his companion has died and now he fears death. Urshanabi tells Gilgamesh that because he destroyed the tackle of the boat, it is no longer safe to cross the **water**. Urshanabi tells Gilgamesh to cut him one hundred and twenty poles of wood, to coat them in bitumen (a crude asphalt), cap them with metal, and bring them back to him. Gilgamesh does what Urshanabi asks and they set off in the boat.

Fixated on finding immortality, Gilgamesh recklessly destroys the tackle of Urshanabi's boat. Clearly he is not thinking straight, or practically, and this random act of destruction again shows Gilgamesh as a flawed hero. He is an epic hero not because he always does the right thing, but because he is so physically strong and he performs such heroic deeds.

For three days they travel and then arrive at the **waters** of death. Urshanabi tells Gilgamesh to use the poles to thrust into the water and move the boat along. He warns Gilgamesh not to let his hands touch the water. Gilgamesh thrusts each of the one hundred and twenty poles into the water behind them. Gilgamesh then strips himself and stands up, holding his clothing out to the side, using it as a sail to move the boat forward.

Gilgamesh may be acting recklessly, but he is still strong and courageous. He uses his body as a sail to move the boat forward, something that a lesser man could not do. Indeed, Gilgamesh has several times proved the gods wrong by now, and has done things they declared to be impossible. It makes sense that he's still unwilling to give up on his goal of immortality, as thus far his strength has always been sufficient to get him what he wants.

Utnapishtim sees the boat in the distance and wonders how the boat has sailed there without its tackle or mast, "why are the sacred stones destroyed," and why someone other than Urshanabi is sailing the boat. He asks Gilgamesh who he is and why he has come. Gilgamesh introduces himself. Again, with the same words used by Siduri and Urshanabi, Utnapishtim asks why Gilgamesh looks so gaunt and in despair, and Gilgamesh, again using the same words, asks why should he not look gaunt and in despair, for he has made a long journey and his companion has died.

From his first sight of Gilgamesh approaching, Utnapishtim regards his quest as futile and strange. The repetition of questions and answers is a familiar trope in many fables and archetypal stories.

Gilgamesh tells Utnapishtim that he has made the journey to see him. He asks Utnapishtim if he can ask him about life and death, and how to find the secret to eternal life. Utnapishtim replies: "There is no permanence. Do we build a house to stand for ever, do we seal a contract to hold for all time?" He tells Gilgamesh that divine judges and "the mother of destinies" come together to determine the fates of men. Gilgamesh tells Utnapishtim that "your appearance is no different than mine," and that he is disappointed to find Utnapishtim, who he believed would be a great warrior, lying down and relaxed. He asks Utnapishtim how he became a god, and how he achieved immortality.

Once again, Gilgamesh is advised to accept his place in the universe as a mortal. But he cannot accept that his life will end and that all his deeds will be forgotten—he has seen this happen to his friend Enkidu, and cannot allow it to happen to himself. Urshanabi explains that the power to determine men's fates lies with gods, not with men, but Gilgamesh refuses to accept this as well.

PART 5: THE STORY OF THE FLOOD

This chapter consists of the story that Utnapishtim tells Gilgamesh. It begins in Shurrupak, a city built along the Euphrates **river**. The city was growing quickly. The god Enlil hears the sounds of the city and complains that it's impossible to sleep because of all the noise. The gods agree to wipe out all the mortals. Enlil attempts to do so, but the god Ea appears in Utnapishtim's dream and warns him to take apart his house and build a boat of specific dimensions.

This story has many similarities to the Biblical tale of Noah and the Flood, suggesting that the Biblical writer may have drawn on the myth of Gilgamesh, or that both stories are based on a real flood that occurred in ancient Mesopotamia. To Enlil, it seems that mankind has overstepped its place in the universe by building such loud cities. This offends his pride—his sense that those below him have not accepted their place—and also sets up another connection between civilization and a kind of corruption or fall from grace.

Utnapishtim agrees to do what Ea told him in the dream. He asks how he will explain himself to others, and Ea tells him to say that Enlil was angry with him, so that he may no longer live on land or in the city. With his children and hired men, Utnapishtim builds the enormous boat with seven decks, packing it with supplies. He is generous to the boat's builders, killing sheep for them to eat every night and granting them endless supplies of wine.

Utnapishtim, who plays a very similar role to Noah in the Bible, receives a prophetic dream from a different god—one who clearly doesn't agree with Enlil's spiteful plan to destroy all of humanity.

The boat is launched into the **water**, loaded with Utnapishtim's gold, his children and wife, other relatives, animals, and craftsmen. Shamash warns Utnapishtim to "batten . . . down" the boat that evening in preparation for rain, and the weather does indeed turn awful. At dawn, a black cloud is seen on the horizon, "thundering within where Adad, lord of the storm was riding." The heralds of the storm, Shullat and Hanish, approach from land. The "gods of the abyss" also approach from the sea: Nergal, Ninurta, and the Annunaki. The storm god, Adad, turns day into night, and a tempest comes that is so terrible even the gods fear it. Then Ishtar, the Queen of Heaven, asks herself why she had commanded that mankind be destroyed, for now all her people are "turned to dust." All the gods weep.

The parallels continue between Noah in the Hebrew Bible and Utnapishtim in the Epic. Water is most important as a symbol in this story of the flood, a force representing both destruction and rebirth. Previously Gilgamesh has bathed after all his major actions (a sign of physical and spiritual rejuvenation), and the flood takes this idea to a much larger scale. The earth is essentially being "cleansed" of humanity, and then humanity is reborn anew. Once again the most frightening images in the Epic are of wild, uncontrollable nature, usually embodied as storms or natural disasters.

For six days and nights, the storm rages on. At dawn of the seventh day, the storm ends and the **sea** becomes calm. Utnapishtim opens the hatch of his boat and sees an endless sea around him. But he also sees a mountain rising out of the water fourteen leagues away. For six days and six nights the boat sails toward the mountain, and on the seventh dawn Utnapishtim releases a dove into the air. The dove returns, having not found a place to land. Then Utnapishtim releases a swallow, and it too returns. But then Utnapishtim releases a raven that eats and keeps flying, and does not come back. Utnapishtim then opens all the hatches and makes an offering of cane, cedar, and myrtle on a mountaintop in a heated cauldron. The gods "gathered like flies over the sacrifice." Finally, Ishtar comes.

The details again resemble those of the story of Noah. Like Noah with the dove, Utnapishtim sends out birds to figure out whether there is land nearby. Ishtar was a destructive, petty goddess in dealing with Gilgamesh, but here she appears as a friend to mankind.

Ishtar swears that she will remember the **flood** and all that happened. She tells all the gods but Enlil, who was responsible for the flood, to gather around the offering. When Enlil does arrive, he's enraged to find that Utnapishtim and his companions have survived. Ea then criticizes Enlil for trying to destroy mankind.

Now Enlil has overstepped his bounds. Though as a god he is more powerful than mere mortals, the other gods judged that he did not respect his place in the universe, which is to be involved in human affairs but not presume to destroy all of mankind.

The chapter then relays Ea's words. Ea says "Lay upon the sinner his sin," and he speaks of transgressions and punishment. He then wishes that a lion, or wolf, or famine had destroyed mankind, rather than the **flood**.

Ea is ashamed of Enlil's actions. The gods' sense of place in the universe has been tested by Enlil.

Ea says that he was not the one who told Utnapishtim how to avoid his fate; Utnapishtim learned it from a dream. Then Enlil enters the boat and takes Utnapishtim and his wife below-deck, and he makes them kneel down. Enlil blesses Utnapishtim and his wife, saying "In time past Utnapishtim was a mortal man; henceforth he and his wife shall live in the distance at the mouth of the **rivers**." And so Utnapishtim is placed far away, at the mouth of the rivers, to live and be immortal.

Importantly, as Utnapishtim and his wife are granted immortality, they kneel before the gods and pay respect. By listening to the gods' advice in a dream to build the boat, and bowing down now, they receive gifts of the gods' benevolence. It's also telling that immortality comes with conditions—Utnapishtim and his wife must live apart from the rest of humanity, as they are now no longer truly human.

PART 6: THE RETURN

To get the sympathy and attention of the gods, Utnapishtim tells Gilgamesh that he must stay awake for six days and seven nights. As Gilgamesh sits and waits, he is tempted by sleep. Utnapishtim discusses Gilgamesh's challenge with his wife, who is skeptical that Gilgamesh will stay awake. Utnapishtim tells his wife to bake bread, and to each day place a loaf by Gilgamesh's head, and to make marks on the wall to count how many days he has stayed awake. On the seventh day, Utnapishtim wakes Gilgamesh, who says he hardly slept. But Utnapishtim tells Gilgamesh to look at the loaves of bread beside him, which are either tough, soggy, mildew-infested, or moldy—Gilgamesh has been asleep. Only the most recent loaf is fresh. Gilgamesh asks Utnapishtim what he should do to overcome his fear of death.

Unlike Gilgamesh's previous challenges out in nature, the one Utnapishtim suggests has nothing to do with physical strength. Instead, it focuses on a unique need of mortals: necessity of sleep. No matter how much Gilgamesh has trained or fought or practiced, it is unlikely that any man could make himself stay awake for seven days. It is precisely his humanity that makes him fail the test.

Utnapishtim banishes Urshanabi from ever returning to his shores, and orders Urshanabi to take Gilgamesh, "whose body is covered with foulness and the grace of whose limbs has been spoiled by wild skins" and to bring him to the "washing-place." There, Utnapishtim says, Gilgamesh will **wash** his hair and throw away his animal skins in order to reveal his natural beauty. Then Gilgamesh will be given new clothes to wear which will never tatter or age until he arrives to Uruk.

Utnapishtim tells Gilgamesh to take on a less luxurious, simpler appearance—essentially to distance himself from the comforts and fashions of the city. He believes that Gilgamesh has lost his sense of place in nature. Utnapishtim's banishment of Urshanabi is unclear in its significance, but may be punishment for bringing a mortal to Utnapishtim's shores.

Urshanabi takes Gilgamesh to the **washing-place**, where Gilgamesh washes his hair and throws away his skins. He is then given the clothing that will not age until he arrives back in Uruk. As Gilgamesh and Urshanabi set off in the boat, Utnapishtim's wife tells Gilgamesh that if he finds and takes a special prickly plant that grows underwater, that plant can restore youth. Gilgamesh weighs himself down with rocks and walks along the riverbed underwater. He sees the plant growing, and though it pricks him, he takes it and cuts the rocks from his feet. The sea takes him back to shore.

It is no coincidence that the plant that restores youth grows on the seafloor. In the Epic, water is often a symbol of rejuvenation, and here we see that the secret to everlasting youth grows in the water. It seems that at last Gilgamesh has found a way to achieve immortality through some heroic action of his own.

Gilgamesh tells Urshanabi that the plant he has can restore youth, and that he will take it back to Uruk for the elderly to eat. They set out in the boat and travel back across the **sea**, and then journey together towards Uruk. On the first night, Gilgamesh finds a cool well and bathes in it. There is a **serpent** there who can sense the presence of the plant. The serpent jumps out of the water to snatch the plant away, and then it sheds its skin and goes back in the well. Gilgamesh laments to Urshanabi, asking why he has endured so much only to have the plant taken from him. The stream, he believes, must have already taken the plant far away.

Again, it is significant that the serpent comes from the water to steal the plant: the plant grew underwater, and there it is meant to return. A stream then carries it away. In the Epic, water comes to serve as a symbol of the impersonal will of nature: Gilgamesh can, fleetingly, possess the plant of youth, but ultimately his possession of it is out of his control—no action of his, no matter how heroic, can overcome the inevitability of his death. It's also telling that the serpent is the creature who robs Gilgamesh of eternal life—just like in the Bible, where the snake tempts Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruit.

In three days, the two reach Uruk. Gilgamesh tells Urshanabi about the city and asks him to climb up on the walls and inspect it for himself. Much of the construction was Gilgamesh's doing, and Gilgamesh is proud of it. The narrator then tells us that Gilgamesh is long remembered for revealing the story of the days before the **flood**, and for returning from his journey with an engraved stone telling of everything that had happened.

With some finality we come to understand how Gilgamesh has arrived at peace with his own mortality. Whereas at the beginning of the story he aimed only to make a name for himself, now he is proud of the great walls he built (which protect the people of Uruk, and again show the benefits of civilization) and for sharing his story through writing (which provides wisdom to the people of Uruk—and even to readers thousands of years later). Instead of being famed only for selfish deeds, he will be long remembered for the good he did, even if eventually he will be forgotten like any other mortal.

PART 7: THE DEATH OF GILGAMESH

Enlil speaks of his destiny for Gilgamesh, which has now been fulfilled: "in nether-earth the darkness will show him a light," and he will be remembered longer than any other men. His destiny was not immortality, but to be king and an inspiration to the world. Gilgamesh should not despair, Enlil says, because has fulfilled the opportunity "to be the darkness and the light of mankind," inspiring them with his victories. Finally, Enlil tells Gilgamesh to use his power wisely and to be just with his servants in the eye of the Sun.

Gilgamesh has been fully transformed by his journeys. At first, he thought nothing of mortality and death. Then, after Enkidu's death, he became fixated on his own impermanence, which led him on an obsessive quest for immortality. Having lost the secret to immortality, though, he accepts his mortality and finds value in being a good king and an inspiration to the common people. He has essentially accepted his place in the universe, while still seeking to be as glorious and virtuous as possible within his role as mortal and king. Enlil's prophecy is oddly prescient as well, as Gilgamesh's name has been remembered longer than almost any other in all of human history.

The story briefly transitions into verse: Gilgamesh the king has died, and will not rise again. Though he was wise and handsome, he will not come back to life.

No matter his qualities in life, like all men Gilgamesh had to eventually die. The Epic offers no easy answers to the question of mortality and meaning, but ultimately just resigns itself to the inevitability of death.

The people of the city lament Gilgamesh's death loudly. Gilgamesh's wife, son, concubine, and all the entertainers and servants of his household all arrange offerings for Gilgamesh, as well as to Ereshkigal, the Queen of Death. They make offerings to a variety of other gods. In his tomb, Gilgamesh receives the bread and pours out the offered wine.

Gilgamesh has died, but his legacy is honored and he is cared for in the afterlife. Even though the name he made for himself will eventually be forgotten, there is value in having been appreciated and mourned, and his friendship with Enkidu, above all, had meaning in itself.

The epic ends with praise for Gilgamesh, proclaiming him the best of men and a faithful servant of the gods. It ends with "O Gilgamesh, lord of Kullab, great is thy praise."

The Epic comes full circle from its first introduction of Gilgamesh as a strong but arrogant king. In his journeys, he not only gained strength and courage, but also respect for the gods and acceptance of his place in the universe. It is these qualities, the Epic seems to declare, that make a man good and worthy of praise.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Glasserman, Ethan. "*The Epic of Gilgamesh*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 9 May 2016. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Glasserman, Ethan. "*The Epic of Gilgamesh*." LitCharts LLC, May 9, 2016. Retrieved April 21, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-epic-of-gilgamesh.

To cite any of the quotes from *The Epic of Gilgamesh* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Anonymous. The Epic of Gilgamesh. Penguin Classics. 1960.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Anonymous. The Epic of Gilgamesh. New York: Penguin Classics. 1960.