

The Epic of Gilgamesh Study Guide

The Epic of Gilgamesh by Anonymous

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



Contents

The Epic of Gilgamesh Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Tablets 1-2.....	5
Tablets 3-5.....	7
Tablets 6-7.....	9
Tablets 8-9.....	11
Tablets 10-11.....	13
Characters.....	15
Symbols and Symbolism.....	18
Settings.....	20
Themes and Motifs.....	21
Styles.....	22
Quotes.....	23



Plot Summary

The Epic of Gilgamesh is a poem written on stone tablets sometime between 2700 B.C. and around 600 B.C. in Mesopotamia. Not all of the tablets survived intact, therefore scholars can only guess at what certain sections of the poem are meant to say. The poem itself is about the hero Gilgamesh, a man who is half god and half human. Gilgamesh is stronger and more powerful than the people of his village, Uruk, causing great unhappiness among the people. For this reason, they ask the gods to make another man who would rival Gilgamesh. This man is named Enkidu. Gilgamesh and Enkidu become good friends, but trouble follows them wherever they go. The Epic of Gilgamesh is one of the earliest known pieces of literature that has survived.

Gilgamesh, the king of Uruk, is stronger and more powerful than those around him. Gilgamesh likes to show off, and this causes a great deal of unhappiness for the people of his kingdom. For this reason, they pray to the gods to make a man who is Gilgamesh's equal. The gods create Enkidu and leave him in the forest. Enkidu is more beast than human at first, causing the trappers in the area a great deal of trouble. For this reason, the trappers introduce him to Shamhat, a female follower of the god of love and war, who helps to civilize Enkidu by introducing him to the ways of humans.

One day, Enkidu meets a man who is planning to attend a wedding in Uruk. The man tells Enkidu about the ritual of first night in which Gilgamesh has the right to lie down with the bride before her new husband. Enkidu finds this repulsive and goes to the bride's home to protect her from Gilgamesh. When Gilgamesh arrives, there is a violent fight. Gilgamesh wins, but Enkidu so respects his fighting skills that he quickly becomes his friend.

Gilgamesh wants to go with Enkidu to the Cedar Forest to kill the beast that lives there, Humbaba. Everyone tries to talk him out of it, including Enkidu, but Gilgamesh will not back down. On the trip to the Cedar Forest, Gilgamesh has nightmares every night. Enkidu interprets the nightmares into pleasant things, assuring Gilgamesh that everything will be alright. When they arrive to confront Humbaba, Gilgamesh changes his mind and wants to turn away. Enkidu, however, talks him into going forward with the battle.

During the fight, Humbaba does all he can to talk Gilgamesh and Enkidu out of killing him. Eventually, Gilgamesh slays him. Afterward, they cut off Humbaba's head and return to Uruk triumphantly. During the celebration, the goddess Ishtar asks Gilgamesh to make her his wife. When he refuses, Ishtar brings the Bull of Heaven to Uruk to kill Gilgamesh. However, with Enkidu's help, Gilgamesh slays the bull.

The gods are upset at Gilgamesh and Enkidu for killing Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven. For this reason, they decide one of the men must die. They choose Enkidu. In a short time, Enkidu becomes ill and dies. Gilgamesh is deeply grieved by this. Gilgamesh goes into the wilderness to find his ancestor named Utanapishtim, who can help him become immortal. After telling Gilgamesh his story, Utanapishtim challenges



Gilgamesh to prove he is worthy of immortality by staying awake for six days and seven nights. Gilgamesh fails, but Utanapishtim tells him where he can get a plant that will return him to his youth. Gilgamesh finds the plant; but, before he can eat it, a snake eats it.



Tablets 1-2

Summary

Tablet 1

Gilgamesh is the son of a goddess and a mortal king, Ninsun and Lugalbanda. For this reason, Gilgamesh is a strong man. Gilgamesh is the king of Uruk, a country which he created. Gilgamesh likes to show off and is often challenging the men of Uruk, embarrassing them and making it difficult for the women of Gilgamesh to find suitable husbands. The people of Uruk pray to the gods to make another man who could challenge Gilgamesh. The gods create a man named Enkidu. He is placed in the forest where he annoys a trapper by taking the animals from his traps. The trapper asks his father for advice. In turn, the father sends him to Gilgamesh. Gilgamesh recommends taking a woman, Shamhat, to the wild man and have them engage in intercourse. The trapper does this. After a marathon sexual encounter, Enkidu finds he cannot run as fast as before because he has been civilized. At the same time, Gilgamesh has dreams about Enkidu. After both dreams, Gilgamesh's mother tells him that it means he will soon make a friend.

Tablet 2

Enkidu continues to spend time with Shamhat who helps him become more civilized. Enkidu meets some shepherds. He eats and drinks with them. After a bath, he feels that he is human. Enkidu later speaks with a young man who is going to Uruk for a wedding and learns that as the king, Gilgamesh has the right to lie with the bride before her new husband. Enkidu does not like this, so he goes to the bride's house and stands guard. When Gilgamesh arrives, they fight. Gilgamesh wins, but Enkidu so respects his superiority that he forgives him, and they become good friends.

Gilgamesh suggests that he and Enkidu go to the Cedar Forest to kill Humbaba, the creature that lives. Enkidu does not think it is a good idea, but Gilgamesh promises it will bring them fame and power. Enkidu agrees, and they go to have weapons made. Gilgamesh brags to the people of the village. He is once again told that it is a bad idea.

Analysis

Gilgamesh is an epic that was written on clay tablets. Many of the tablets are broken; therefore, the poem is not complete. However, scholars can make educated guesses as to what might have been said so that the English translation is mostly whole.

Gilgamesh is a powerful man who likes to show off to those around him. He is young and lives with the mistaken belief that he is unstoppable. Since everyone is tired of his showing off, the people of Uruk ask the gods to give them a man who can stand up to Gilgamesh. This man is Enkidu. Enkidu comes to the world more beast than human



before spending time with Shamhat, a woman who worships Ishtar, the goddess of love and war. Shamhat teaches Enkidu the ways of humans, and he quickly becomes civilized. This includes a distaste for the habits of Gilgamesh. The first time Enkidu and Gilgamesh meet, they fight. However, they soon become quick friends, just as Gilgamesh's mother predicted.

Gilgamesh likes to prove himself among his fellow man. This includes starting fights with mean, powerful beasts. Many believe Gilgamesh is crazy and will one day get himself killed. However, nothing stops Gilgamesh, and Enkidu finds himself going along for the ride.

Discussion Question 1

Who is Gilgamesh? Why are the people of Uruk unhappy with his behavior?

Discussion Question 2

Who is Enkidu? Why does he relate to the animals more than humans when he first arrives in the forest? How does the trapper arrange to change that behavior?

Discussion Question 3

With whom does Gilgamesh want to pick a fight? Why? What do the wise people of Uruk say about his wish to fight?

Vocabulary

Goddess, created, cultivated, harlot, assembled, disputing, artisans, countenance, instituted, purified, continually, powerful, embracing, halting, mightily, presence, permitted, grappled, destroyed, demolished.



Tablets 3-5

Summary

Tablet 3

Before leaving to fight Humbaba, Gilgamesh goes to the temple of Ninsun, who is his mother. He asks her to ask Shamash, the god of the sun, to watch over him. Ninsun not only does this, but she also performs a ceremony making Enkidu an official companion of her son. As they leave, the wise men of Uruk tell Enkidu to take special care to watch out for Gilgamesh's safety. Enkidu tells Gilgamesh that this is a dangerous mission, and he should not go.

Tablet 4

On the journey to the Cedar Forest, Gilgamesh has many nightmares. Enkidu interprets these dreams as favorable, suggesting it is all symbolism of their win over Humbaba. However, when they arrive at the Cedar Forest, Gilgamesh is afraid to continue. Shamash, the sun god, tells Gilgamesh that they must hurry because the creature is only wearing one of its seven suits of armor. Gilgamesh decides to go on, but Enkidu hesitates. Gilgamesh convinces him that as long as they work together, they will be victorious.

Tablet 5

Gilgamesh and Enkidu face down Humbaba. Gilgamesh becomes frightened and begins to run away, but Enkidu brings him back. Shamash helps Gilgamesh and Enkidu by sending wind that keeps Humbaba from moving. However, when Gilgamesh is given the chance to kill Humbaba, he hesitates because Humbaba begs for his life. Humbaba offers to be Gilgamesh's servant. When this does not work, Gilgamesh turns to Enkidu and tells him that he works for the god named Enlil, and he is only doing his job. Enkidu encourages Gilgamesh to kill Humbaba, and he finally does. The two heroes then make a raft and sail it back to Uruk with Humbaba's head.

Analysis

Gilgamesh wants to prove what a powerful guy he is by fighting the creature Humbaba in the Cedar Forest. However, the journey is filled with bad dreams that indicate a losing battle. Gilgamesh grows afraid, showing the reader that he is flawed despite his glowing introduction by the narrator. Enkidu, trying to be a good friend, puts a positive spin on all the bad dreams and encourages Gilgamesh to continue.

When they arrive at the Cedar Forest and engage in battle with Humbaba, Gilgamesh continues to be frightened and tries to back down several times. If not for Enkidu, Gilgamesh more than likely would not have made the kill. This is an interesting point



because Enkidu was created to give Gilgamesh a worthy opponent, but it appears that Gilgamesh could have been defeated by his own fears.

Discussion Question 1

Who is Shamash? Why does Gilgamesh pray to him for good dreams? Does he have good dreams?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Gilgamesh become frightened of Humbaba when they meet face to face? What happened to all of Gilgamesh's big talk?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Humbaba think Enkidu would understand the claim that Humbaba is only doing his job? Does Enkidu understand?

Vocabulary

Demolished, spoke, javelin, reposed, decreed, tablet, exalted, endeavor, goddess, god, hurled, assembled, visage, astounded, likeness, behold, heroes, carried, interpreting, heavens, wandered, omens, lusty, summoned.



Tablets 6-7

Summary

Tablet 6

While celebrating his victory over Humbaba, the god Ishtar asks Gilgamesh to become her husband. Gilgamesh turns her down. Humiliated, Ishtar goes to her father, the god Anu, and asks for the Bull of Heaven to kill Gilgamesh. After some discussion, Anu agrees. Ishtar releases the bull on Uruk where it begins to do extensive damage. Enkidu grabs the bull by the horns, and Gilgamesh stabs it in the neck. When Ishtar arrives, she is angry that they have ruined her plans. Enkidu throws the bull's leg at her. Gilgamesh marches through the village celebrating.

Tablet 7

Enkidu has a dream that the gods Shamash, Enlil, and Anu are discussing Gilgamesh and Enkidu. They think one of the two men should die for the deaths of the Bull of Heaven and Humbaba, as well as the cutting down of the largest cedar tree in the forest. The gods, despite Shamash's words in support of the two boys, decide Enkidu should die. When Enkidu tells this to Gilgamesh, Gilgamesh promises to build a gold statue in his likeness. However, Enkidu is frightened, and he begins to curse Shamhat and the trapper who first met him in the forest. Shamash comes to Enkidu and reminds him of all Shamhat did to help him, so Enkidu stops cursing her and prays for good things to happen to her instead. Enkidu tells Gilgamesh about another dream in which he is taken to the underworld where there are people who were once great rulers, but they are now servants to the gods. A short time later, Enkidu becomes ill and dies.

Analysis

Gilgamesh humiliates a goddess by refusing to marry her. This causes the goddess to send the Bull of Heaven to destroy Uruk and kill Gilgamesh, but she underestimates Enkidu. Enkidu holds down the bull while Gilgamesh kills it. Full of pride, Gilgamesh brags, causing the gods to become angry. They decide one of them needs to die. Enkidu is the one who is chosen to die.

Gilgamesh adores his friend, who is the first person he has known that he can consider an equal. When Gilgamesh learns that Enkidu is dying, he becomes very upset. If not for Enkidu, Gilgamesh might not have killed Humbaba or been able to kill the Bull of Heaven. For this reason, the reader wonders what will happen to Gilgamesh once Enkidu is gone.



Discussion Question 1

Who is Ishtar? Why does she want to marry Gilgamesh? Why does he refuse her?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Ishtar send the Bull of Heaven to Uruk? What does she expect it to do? What happens?

Discussion Question 3

Why do the gods want either Gilgamesh or Enkidu to die? Whom do they choose? For what reason?

Vocabulary

Raged, fury, stupid, heavenly, downpour, intoned, rested, morsel, intervals, acceptance, interpreting, offered, counsel, surge, nightly, beauty, auspicious, depths, destroy, courage, perish, endure.



Tablets 8-9

Summary

Tablet 8

This tablet is heavily damaged. What there is of the tablet talks about Gilgamesh's deep grief for his friend and his creation of a statue to honor his friend.

Tablet 9

Gilgamesh is obsessed with death after Enkidu's death, leading him to seek out Utanapishtim, an ancestor of his who has been granted immortality by the gods. When Gilgamesh reaches Mount Mashu at the very eastern end of the world, he comes face to face with a couple of scorpions. The scorpions tell him he cannot go to where Utanapishtim is because no mortal can walk the path the sun rises fast enough to keep from being burned. However, Gilgamesh manages to make it just in time and finds himself in a garden where precious stones grow on the trees instead of fruit.

Analysis

Gilgamesh is deeply disturbed about Enkidu's death, but the reader soon begins to wonder if it is the loss of Enkidu that upsets him or the possibility of his own death one day. Gilgamesh has begun wandering in the wilderness. He decides to go speak to an ancestor of his who has been granted immortality by the gods. The reader is unclear what Gilgamesh hopes to get from this information, perhaps a way to avoid his own death. However, whatever it is that Gilgamesh wants, he proves he is determined by walking the path of the sun to reach his ancestor.

Discussion Question 1

How does Enkidu die? How does Gilgamesh respond to this death? Why?

Discussion Question 2

Where does Gilgamesh go after Enkidu's death? For what purpose?

Discussion Question 3

How does Gilgamesh walk the path of the sun without getting burned? What does this suggest about Gilgamesh's humanity?

Vocabulary

Captured, leash, toward, companion, begat, uttered, bosom, distinctions, finished, bundled, crown, slightly, accompanied, quarrel, slaying, foremost, wrath, shepherd, speedily, approach, maim.



Tablets 10-11

Summary

Tablet 10

Gilgamesh sees a tavern on the edge of the garden and tries to go inside. However, Siduri, the owner, will not allow him to come in because he is dirty. Gilgamesh tells Siduri his story, and she tells him that all humans must die and that only gods can be immortal. Gilgamesh refuses to accept that and insists on knowing where he can find Utanapishtim. Siduri gives him instructions, telling him he must travel over the Waters of Death with the ferryman, Urshanabi. When Gilgamesh finds Urshanabi, he instructs him to make three hundred punting poles. No one can touch the Waters of Death, or they will die; therefore, they need the poles to make it across. Unfortunately, they run out of poles before reaching the other shore. So, Gilgamesh uses his cloak as a sail. When he arrives at the far shore, he finds Utanapishtim. Utanapishtim tells him that he has wasted his time because all humans die, the only question being when.

Tablet 11

Gilgamesh asks Utanapishtim how he became immortal. Utanapishtim tells the story of how Ea came to his village and said that Enlil was going to destroy humanity. Ea said someone should build a ship. Utanapishtim built the ship with help from workmen in the village. When the flood was over, there was arguing between the gods. To deflect the accusation that he was trying to destroy humanity, Enlil gave Utanapishtim and his wife immortality. Utanapishtim tells Gilgamesh that he cannot be immortal because he cannot stay awake for six days and seven nights as Utanapishtim and his wife did. Gilgamesh says he can, but he promptly falls asleep. Utanapishtim has his wife bake a loaf of bread each day Gilgamesh is asleep to prove he slept. When Gilgamesh wakes, he is disappointed and turns to go with nothing. However, Utanapishtim's wife insists they should give Gilgamesh something. For this reason, Utanapishtim tells Gilgamesh about a plant that will make him young again.

Gilgamesh finds the plant and heads for home. Gilgamesh stops to take a bath. While he is gone, a snake slips into his camp and eats the plant. Gilgamesh is upset, but he continues home, arriving triumphantly telling the virtues of Uruk.

Analysis

Gilgamesh is worried about death coming for him. So, he has gone in search of someone he knows is immortal to find out how he might achieve immortality. However, Gilgamesh is told repeatedly that immortality is only for gods. When Gilgamesh finally finds his immortal ancestor, Utanapishtim, he learns his story. Utanapishtim's story strongly resembles that of Noah from the Christian Bible. Utanapishtim had advance warning that the gods were going to flood the world to rid it of the bad humans.



Utanapishtim built a boat to save those that he could. When the flood is over, the gods fight over whose fault it is and the guilty party, Enlil, gives Utanapishtim and his wife immortality to prove he never meant harm to humans.

Gilgamesh, who has always been stronger and faster than everyone else, insists that he is strong enough to be immortal. However, when Utanapishtim challenges him to stay awake for six days and seven nights, Gilgamesh fails. For this reason, Gilgamesh must leave empty handed. However, Utanapishtim's wife has pity on him and makes her husband give Gilgamesh a consolation prize. Gilgamesh has impressed Utanapishtim's wife with the dangers he faced to find Utanapishtim. The reader must note that although Gilgamesh became frightened in the fight with Humbaba and had to be encouraged by Enkidu through the whole thing, he has shown a great amount of courage since Enkidu's death. So Gilgamesh gets a plant that will make him young again, but he promptly loses it.

The ending of this poem closely resembles the beginning in which the narrator extols the virtues of Uruk. This brings the narration full circle, returning Gilgamesh to basically the same place he was when the poem began.

Discussion Question 1

Why is Gilgamesh suddenly afraid for his life? What brought this fear to the surface?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Gilgamesh want to find Utanapishtim? What will this provide for him?

Discussion Question 3

How does Gilgamesh lose the plant that is supposed to make him young? Why did he not eat it?

Vocabulary

Midway, thrones, dumbfounded, confusion, heeded, vanish, fragment, appeasement, reference, conquered, barbarity, subdued, seared, terrifying, seize, palace, servant, brought, roar, glory, exalted.



Characters

Gilgamesh

Gilgamesh is strong and powerful. He is half god and half human. Gilgamesh likes to show off, and this causes a great deal of trouble for the people of his kingdom. For this reason they pray to the gods to make a man who will rival Gilgamesh. This man is Enkidu. Gilgamesh has dreams of the man and asks his mother about the dreams. Gilgamesh's mother tells him that Enkidu is destined to be his friend.

Gilgamesh and Enkidu do become friends and go off on an adventure together. However, when the gods decide that Enkidu must die, Gilgamesh is devastated. At first, Gilgamesh's grief appears to be for his friend, but later it becomes clear that Enkidu's death has caused Gilgamesh to become more aware of his own mortality. This leads Gilgamesh to seek out immortality. When this fails, Gilgamesh finds a plant that will allow him to return to youth. Unfortunately, Gilgamesh loses this plant, and he must return to his kingdom the same as when he left it.

Enkidu

Enkidu is a man who was created by the gods to be a rival for Gilgamesh. When Enkidu is first placed on the earth, he is more beast than man. However, after introducing him to the woman, Shamhat, Enkidu becomes more civilized.

When Enkidu meets Gilgamesh for the first time, they fight. Enkidu is so impressed with Gilgamesh's fighting ability that he immediately becomes his friend. Together, Enkidu and Gilgamesh slay the creature Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven. However, when the gods become unhappy for all this slaying, they sentence Enkidu to death. Enkidu immediately curses those he credits with civilizing him. However, after a talk with Shamash, he changes his tune and faces death with courage. It is Enkidu's death that causes Gilgamesh to begin thinking of his own mortality.

Shamhat

Shamhat is a woman who follows the teachings of Ishtar. For this reason, Shamhat is not above using her feminine wiles to seduce man for purposes other than love. When the trappers are having trouble with Enkidu removing the animals from their traps, they have Shamhat seduce him. Being with Shamhat causes Enkidu to become more civilized, especially when she introduces him to food, drink, and clothing. Later, Enkidu curses Shamhat for civilizing him and placing him in a position to become a target of punishment by the gods. After a scolding from changes Enkidu, he prays for only good things for Shamhat.



Shamash

Shamash is the god of the sun. Shamash comes to Gilgamesh and Enkidu's aid when they go to kill Humbaba, using the power of the winds to restrain Humbaba long enough for Gilgamesh to get in the killing blow. Later, when the gods are angry with Gilgamesh and Enkidu for killing both Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven, Shamash is the only god to come down on their side. However, Shamash's arguments are not strong enough, and Enkidu dies.

Ishtar

Ishtar is the goddess of love and war. Ishtar is present at Gilgamesh's celebration after the death of Humbaba. Ishtar is so impressed with Gilgamesh that she asks to become his wife. However, Gilgamesh does not want to marry her because she has a reputation of abandoning and killing her former lovers. Angry at Gilgamesh's refusal, Ishtar takes the Bull of Heaven and places it in Uruk in hopes that it will destroy Gilgamesh and his kingdom. Instead, Gilgamesh kills the bull, bringing the wrath of other gods down on him and Enkidu.

Enlil

Enlil is the god of storms. When Gilgamesh goes to kill Humbaba, the creature claims that Enlil put him there to protect the forest. This appears to be true when Enlil later becomes angry that Gilgamesh and Enkidu have killed not only the Bull of Heaven, but Humbaba too. They have also cut down one of the most ancient cedar trees. Enlil is one of the gods who demands that Enkidu be put to death for what Gilgamesh and Enkidu have done. It is later revealed that Enlil was the god who flooded the earth in an attempt to get rid of some of the humans who were not following the rules properly. When faced with this accusation, Enlil offers Utanapishtim and his wife immortality to prove he likes humans.

Ea

Ea is the god of water. When Ea learned that Enlil planned to flood the earth, he gave warning to Utanapishtim to make a boat that would help as many as possible survive. Utanapishtim does this, staying up for six days and seven nights to navigate the boat through the flood waters. When the flood is over, Ea and Enlil argue over who caused the flood and why. When it looks like Enlil is going to take all the blame, Enlil gives Utanapishtim and his wife immortality.



Utanapishtim

Utanapishtim is an ancestor of Gilgamesh's. Many years ago, Utanapishtim learns that the gods are going to flood the world in order to destroy the humans. Utanapishtim builds a boat to save as many people as he can, staying awake for six days and seven nights in order to sail the ship through the flood waters. When the flood ends, the gods begin pointing fingers at each other, finally accusing Enlil of trying to destroy the humans. To prove he likes humans, Enlil gives Utanapishtim and his wife immortality. After Enkidu's death, Gilgamesh goes to Utanapishtim to get immortality for himself, but Utanapishtim decides Gilgamesh is not worthy. Instead, he offers Gilgamesh a plant that will restore his youth, but Gilgamesh quickly loses the plant.

Humbaba

Humbaba is a great beast who lives in the Cedar Forest. This beast is very frightening, so Gilgamesh thinks it might make he and Enkidu famous if they kill it. When they confront the beast, it taunts them and tries to frighten them. When this does not work, Humbaba promises to be Gilgamesh's servant if he will spare its life. When this does not work, Humbaba asks Enkidu to understand that he has been placed in the forest by the god, Enlil, and he is only doing what he has been told to do. None of these arguments work for Humbaba and Gilgamesh kills it. Later, however, upset about Humbaba's death, the gods ask for revenge by taking Enkidu's life.

Bull of Heaven

The Bull of Heaven is a giant bull who can bring overwhelming destruction on the human world. After Gilgamesh turns Ishtar's marriage proposal down, she brings the Bull of Heaven to Uruk so that it might destroy Gilgamesh. Although the bull does cause a great deal of damage, and death, Enkidu manages to grab hold of it long enough for Gilgamesh to kill it. Later, Enkidu throws the back leg of the beast at Ishtar for complaining about her defeat.



Symbols and Symbolism

Weapons

Gilgamesh has special weapons made for his trip to the Cedar Forest to kill Humbaba.

Humbaba's Head

Gilgamesh cuts off Humbaba's head and takes it triumphantly back to Uruk.

Cedar Door

Enkidu cuts down the biggest, most ancient cedar tree in the forest to build a huge door for Nippur, the city sacred to Enlil.

Punting Poles

Gilgamesh makes three hundred punting poles to help him cross the Waters of Death, but they do not get him all the way to the other side.

Shamhat's Robes

To help civilize Enkidu, Shamhat gives him her robes to wear.

Gilgamesh's Cloak

Gilgamesh uses his cloak to act as a sail in order to help him cross the Waters of Death.

Ferryman's Stones

Gilgamesh destroys all of the ferryman's stones before asking the ferryman to help him cross the Waters of Death.

Gold Statue

When Gilgamesh learns that Enkidu is going to die, he has a gold statue created in his likeness to honor him.



Wall of Reeds

Ea tells a wall made of reeds to make a cube shaped boat because Enlil is about to flood the world. Utanapishtim happens to be standing behind the wall and hears the warning.

Plant

Utanapishtim tells Gilgamesh about a plant that will return him to his youth. Gilgamesh loses this plant when it is eaten by a snake.



Settings

Mesopotamia

The poem is set mainly in Mesopotamia, where modern day Iraq is today. The story is set in ancient times, most like around 2700-600 BC, which is when scholars believe it was originally written. The setting is a time when people believe gods ruled the world and often got involved in the lives of mortals.

Uruk

Uruk is the kingdom where Gilgamesh rules. Uruk is also where the people grow so tired of Gilgamesh always outshining the men of the kingdom that they ask the gods to make a man who can rival Gilgamesh.

Cedar Forest

The Cedar Forest is where Humbaba lives. This is where Gilgamesh and Enkidu go to kill the creature and make a name for themselves. The battle is hard fought and Enkidu has to constantly talk Gilgamesh into fighting. It ends with Humbaba's death. Afterward, Enkidu cuts down the oldest tree in the forest to make a door for Enlil's city of Nippur.

Water of Death

The Water of Death is a body of water Gilgamesh must cross to find Utanapishtim.



Themes and Motifs

Friendship

Before he ever meets Enkidu, Gilgamesh has dreams about him. When Gilgamesh tells his mother about these dreams, she suggests that Gilgamesh is meant to be friends with Enkidu. Gilgamesh is excited about this idea because he does not have many friends since he is stronger and does everything better than everyone else. However, the first time Gilgamesh and Enkidu meet, they fight.

Enkidu admires Gilgamesh for his fighting ability and quickly becomes his friend. The two go on an adventure together, growing closer as they journey and fight side by side. It is a friendship that inspires both men to be better and it distracts Gilgamesh from having to prove himself to everyone else. This friendship propels the plot of the poem by motivating the main character over and over again.

Death

When Enkidu dies, Gilgamesh finds himself obsessed with the idea of his own mortality. Gilgamesh does not want to die, so he goes in search of his ancestor Utanapishtim. He wants to find out how he can become immortal. All along the way, Gilgamesh is told over and over again that mortality is something humans just have to accept, and the trick is to learn to enjoy every moment of life. This is not good enough for Gilgamesh.

When Gilgamesh finally finds Utanapishtim, he challenged to prove that he is strong enough to be immortal. This is one of the first tests that Gilgamesh fails. Gilgamesh cannot stay awake for six days and seven nights, but instead sleeps for that amount of time. This leaves Gilgamesh unworthy of immortality. Instead, Gilgamesh is given a plant that will restore his youth, giving him more years to live. This makes Gilgamesh happy, until he loses the plant.

Wrath of Gods

The gods are a vengeful people. When they see what Gilgamesh and Enkidu are doing in killing all their creatures, they decide that one of them must die for their crimes. They choose Enkidu. Gilgamesh tries to assure Enkidu that the gods would not do such a thing, but within a few weeks, Enkidu is dead.

Gilgamesh later learns there are other times in which the gods were vengeful as well. Enlil, the god of storms, flooded the earth many years before to rid it of unpleasant humans. This left the world purified, but it also created immortals of Utanapishtim and his wife when Enlil found himself in a position to prove he was not completely vengeful.

Styles

Point of View

The point of view is third person. The story is told mostly from Gilgamesh's viewpoint, with the final tablet being told through Utanapishtim's point of view. Although the viewpoint is through Gilgamesh's eyes, there is also a separate voice of an unnamed narrator who offers information that Gilgamesh might not have had access to in order to tell his story.

The point of view works well with this poem because the story is ultimately about Gilgamesh, the hero of the epic, therefore it should be told mostly from his point of view. In this way the reader is able to follow the story as it unfolds rather than hear about it later.

Language and Meaning

The original manuscript is written in cuneiform script, therefore the text has been translated multiple times since the first tablets were found. The scholars attempt to keep the language close to the original intent, but there are great differences in the languages that might have altered the original intent to some extent. To add to the problems with translation, many of the original tablets were damaged and broken, leaving great spaces of the poem missing. This also leads to possible errors as scholars use the available information and educated guesses to fill in the missing pieces.

The language of the poem is a little archaic in some places. However, through the many translations over the years, the poem has taken on a more modern sound that allows for modern readers to understand it without too much difficulty. Some of the references in the text are very old, perhaps using language that is unfamiliar or used differently than the modern reader might expect, but overall, the language is appropriate to the setting and characters.

Structure

The poem was originally written on eleven tablets. Some of the tablets are broken, therefore important pieces of some of the poem are missing. The poem is written in a linear time line in lyrical phrases that are designed to both tell a story and entertain the reader.

The poem contains one main plot and several subplots. The main plot follows the exploits of Gilgamesh as he first tries to prove himself superior to all other humans and later searches for immortality. One subplot follows the creation and life of Enkidu. Another subplot follows the actions of several gods who watch over Gilgamesh and his people. All the plots come to a satisfying conclusion at the end of the poem.



Quotes

He who has seen the history of Gilgamesh, he who knows all together that has happened to him together, he who has seen all kinds of wisdom and knows the mysteries and has seen what is hidden, he bringeth news dating farther back than the deluge.

-- Narrator (Tablet 1 paragraph Lines 1-6)

Importance: These are the beginning lines in the poem that introduces Gilgamesh to the story.

Not does Gilgamesh leave the son to his father, nor the maiden to the warrior, nor the wife to her husband.

-- Narrator (Tablet 2 paragraph Line 1-2)

Importance: This quote tells the reader that Gilgamesh keeps challenging all these men to fights and wins, killing them or humiliating them, either way leaving their families without them. This is why the people ask the gods to make a man who rivals Gilgamesh.

Create now a rival to him, for the time when his heart shall be---, Let them fight together and Uruk [shall be the spectator]!

-- Gods of heaven (Tablet 2 paragraph Lines 15-16)

Importance: This is the conversation the gods have in response to the request of the people to make a rival for Gilgamesh.

He will place thee upon a couch, a seat to the left. The kinds of the earth shall kiss thy feet, The people of Uruk shall whine before thee---and the nations shall work for thee.

-- Gilgamesh (Tablet 3 paragraph 15)

Importance: This is Gilgamesh trying to convince Enkidu that if they kill Humbaba, they will be famous.

The roaring of Humbaba was like that of a storm cyclone; his mouth was [full of] blasphemy, his breath [killing] like hot wind.

-- Gilgamesh (Tablet 4 paragraph 12)

Importance: This is a description of Humbaba from a dream Gilgamesh had on his journey to the Cedar Forest.

There they stood, lofty arose the forest, and [astonished] they gazed at the height of the cedars and at the entrance of the cedar wood, where Humbaba was wont to walk with lofty steps.

-- Narrator (Tablet 5 paragraph Line 1)



Importance: This quote describes what Gilgamesh and Enkidu see when they arrive at the Cedar Forest.

Be thou my husband, let me be thy wife, and I will set thee in a chariot [embossed] with precious stones and gold, with wheels made of gold, and shafts of sapphires.

-- Ishtar (Tablet 6 paragraph Line 9)

Importance: This is Ishtar's proposal of marriage to Gilgamesh that leads to so much trouble when he turns her down.

In good health I went forth, my friend. But the dream which I dreamed has been fulfilled.

-- Enkidu (Tablet 7 paragraph Line 4)

Importance: This is Enkidu telling Gilgamesh that he is dying.

Earth has snatched him away.

-- Gilgamesh (Tablet 8 paragraph Line 1)

Importance: This is Gilgamesh's grief over the death of his friend.

I will not die like Enkidu, But weeping has entered into my heart;

-- Gilgamesh (Tablet 9 paragraph Line 1)

Importance: This illustrates Gilgamesh's sudden fear of death as he grieves for his departed friend.

Gilgamesh, there has never been a crossing [here], and no one since eternal days has ever crossed the sea. Shamash, the hero, crosses it; but besides Shamash who can cross it?

-- Sirudi (Tablet 10 paragraph Line 15)

Importance: These are Sirudi's words to Gilgamesh as she tries to warn him of the perils of crossing the Waters of Death.

When the seventh day drew nigh the tempest, the storm, the battle which they had waged like a great host began to moderate.

-- Narrator (Tablet 11 paragraph Line 68)

Importance: This quote describes the end of the great flood on the seventh day. This flood was caused by the gods because they were unhappy with the behavior of some of the mortals. Enlil is blamed, so he gives immortal life to Utanapishtim and his wife to prove he likes humans.