Gilgamesh: Man's First Story Study Guide

Gilgamesh: Man's First Story by Bernarda Bryson Shahn

BOOKRAGS

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Overview

It could be argued that any story more than four thousand years old deserves the close attention of modern students of literature. The appeal of this epic, however, goes far beyond its literary antiquity. Gilgamesh abounds with drama, conflict, and charismatic characters, and its topics are many and varied.

These include such enduring human concerns as the fear of death, the need for true friendship, the importance of achieving great deeds and displaying virtuous traits (such as courage, loyalty, and leadership) and—perhaps most vital of all—the glory and wisdom to be found in the search for truth. On a basic human level, the narrative reveals many ways in which these ancient peoples differed from modern humans, but also points to surprising similarities. Some scholars may quarrel with Bryson's claims that this is "man's first story," but there can be no question that Gilgamesh is the world's first genuine epic hero.

A number of later epic and legendary heroes—including Odysseus, Aeneas, and Beowulf—resemble Gilgamesh, and it is thought that some of them were at least partly based on his character. Certain biblical narratives, most notably the story of Noah and the Flood, may also have been based on episodes from this epic. Scholars are not in total agreement, but there is a strong likelihood that the composers of the Old Testament were familiar either with Gilgamesh or its sources, the oldest of which probably existed in an oral tradition.

Bryson's version relates the story in a straightforward and clear manner. In her "Explanation" at the close of the text, she writes that she has not tried to retranslate the work, which has been rendered into English by several scholars, nor to compile a series of readings of the original. Rather, she has retold the story in an accessible fashion so that today's readers can appreciate it.

Several confusing and inconsistent elements of the original have simply been omitted. And in a few passages, a clarifying transition has been provided. The result is a coherent narrative that faithfully communicates the tone of the story.

Of further interest in this version are the realistic, colorful illustrations— seventy-five of them—that accompany the text. Many are based on archeological evidence and give a sense of the folkways of the people of that era and an impression of the appearances of their gods.

About the Author

Bernarda Bryson was born on March 7, 1905, in Athens, Ohio. Her father was an editor and publisher with liberal political leanings. Her mother, descended from a family who had been among the first settlers of Ohio, was a professor of Latin. Early in life, Bryson developed a deep interest in social problems. This impulse led her into a brief membership in the Communist Party in the early 1930s. She had by this time married Victor Parks in 1927 and divorced him in 1930. Bryson's other early interest was in the graphic arts. Pursuing a career in this field, she moved to New York in 1932 and met the noted artist Ben Shahn, whom she married in 1935.

The couple had three children.

Although Bryson lived somewhat in the shadow of her famous and often controversial husband, she achieved a deserved reputation as an illustrator and writer. Her considerable education—she attended Ohio University, Ohio State University, (Case) Western Reserve University, and the New School for Social Research—prepared her for the various literary and artistic projects that occupied most of her professional life. Apart from teaching etching and lithography, Bryson created print drawings for Fortune, Harper's, Scientific American, and other leading periodicals.

Bryson illustrated many other writers' books and won several awards for her efforts, but will probably best be remembered for the creations that blended both her literary and artistic talents.

Bryson preferred reading poetry to prose and was particularly fond of poetic epics, such as Gilgamesh. The high quality of her prose has been widely recognized, and excerpts from her version of Gilgamesh can be found in a number of anthologies of children's literature. Two of her books, The Twenty Miraclesof Saint Nicolas and Gilgamesh, were included among the best fifty books of their publication years by the American Institute of Graphic Arts.

Ben Shahn died in 1960. In the following years, Bryson made a penetrating study of her late husband's art, resulting in a monumental book, Ben Shahn, which was published in 1973. Bryson still resides in Roosevelt, New Jersey, where she and Shahn lived for many years.

Plot Summary

Gilgamesh begins with the life of the King in jeopardy. The elders of the city of Uruk go to the gods to complain of Gilgamesh's orders for continuous labor on the city walls. They ask the gods to create a man superior in strength and skill to the King who will ultimately prove his destruction. After some debate, the man is created and laid in the middle of a forest without human companionship of any kind. In this forest, the man, Enkidu, through his acquaintance with the gentle animals who are his only friends, learns more mercy than hostility. When Enkidu finally does emerge from the forest, with the young priestess sent in by Gilgamesh to retrieve him, the wild man does give a half-hearted attempt at destroying the King. The two do battle in front of the gate to the Temple of Ishtar, Gilgamesh proves to be a more than worthy opponent and Enkidu finds that he possesses too much respect for Gilgamesh to destroy him. The respect is reciprocated and the two men - rather than fighting to the death - become close companions.

Together they participate in many contests and feats of strength. Though Enkidu is content with this life, Gilgamesh is not. He convinces his friend that they must slay a great monster, named Humbaba. It's a monster that lives high on a mountain above the city and spits fire and ash down on the population, ruining buildings and crops. They succeed in this enterprise, and, in doing so, Gilgamesh attracts the eye of the goddess Ishtar. Gilgamesh, however, is well aware of Ishtar's propensity for taking and disposing of lovers and he refuses her advances as he and Enkidu turn back to Uruk.

The two arrive in triumph to their home city, but, as a part of the continuing vengeance of Ishtar, Enkidu dies - not as a hero or as a warrior, but as a common, ordinary man. Unable to cope with this, Gilgamesh goes on a quest to find the secret of immortality from his immortal ancestor Utnapishtim. He travels over the Mountains of Mashu, through the caverns by which the sun passes to the Eastern Garden, and across the deadly Bitter River to find Utnapishtim. After an unproductive meeting with his ancestor in which the latter reveals that he received immortality as a random gift of one of the gods, not through any grand or noble act, Gilgamesh travels instead to the gate of the underworld where he is able to speak with his friend, albeit in a changed form. With this, Gilgamesh is content and can lie down and die himself.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

The epic of *Gilgamesh* is the story of a heroic King who goes to great lengths - all the way to the underworld itself - in order to discover the secret the immortality and, thus save his departed companion.

The story of Gilgamesh begins with an account of the geography of his world. To the north of his city of Uruk, one of the seven cities of ancient Sumer, lie the mountains of Mashu, to the west is the place in which the Sun sets to descend through the underground caverns and rise again in the Eastern Garden. Encircling this arrangement is the Bitter River, the slightest touch of whose waters causes immediate death. To the north of the Bitter River are the mountains-without-end and, to the south, the sea-without-end.

The people over which Gilgamesh rules as king possess a vast pantheon of gods, but the main members are Anu, god of the skies, Ea god of the waters, Enlil, god of the earth, and his sister, Ishtar, goddess of love, the sun Shamash, Sin the moon, and Adad, voice of the thunder.

Uruk itself, a city of fine houses, magnificent temples, marketplaces, and groves of trees, is surrounded on all sides by high walls meant to protect it and its people from beasts, natural disasters, encroaching armies, and unfriendly gods. The greatest danger to Uruk, however, and the primary reason for the walls, is the monster Humbaba who rains down fire and ash constantly from his nearby mountaintop.

However, continuing to order the walls built higher and higher, the King begins to monopolize completely the time of the men of Uruk. With the mothers robbed of their sons and the young girls of their lovers, the city elders decide to complain to the gods. At first, the deities seem reluctant to intercede for various reasons. One, for instance, enjoys perching on the walls in order to watch the affairs of mortals, while Anu hesitates to take the side of the common people over the King. Ishtar, however, agrees with the elders of Uruk. With the invitation of the goddess, the elders reveal their plan to defeat the King and cease the seemingly senseless building of the city walls. Create a man, they suggest to the gods, a man even mightier than Gilgamesh, a man who will be part beast just as Gilgamesh is part god. This man, in turn, will destroy Gilgamesh.

Ishtar adopts this plan at once, signaling to Aruru - the goddess responsible for molding humans from inanimate clay - to begin her work with or without the agreement of the other gods. Eventually the other gods decide to grant Ishtar's request to follow the plan of the elders, but by this time the wild man, called Enkidu, has already been created. He is indistinguishable from Gilgamesh but for the pair of horns sprouting from his head.

Aruru places her new creation in the depths of a cedar forest where he soon wakes with no knowledge of who or where he is. Hungry and thirsty, Enkidu wanders through the forest, coming upon a spring. He crouches to drink. As Enkidu quietly watches , many forest creatures, too, come to the spring. After several animals scamper away in fear, Enkidu is finally able to befriend a gazelle who teaches him how to live in the forest, how to eat grass and flowers.

Enkidu becomes friends with all of the animals that visit the pool until the day a lion comes and attacks the wild man without provocation - this is Enkidu's first encounter with an enemy or danger of any kind. The two battle, until Enkidu gains the upper hand by wrenching the beast's back. However, seeing his foe bleeding and broken on the ground, Enkidu pities him, brings him water, washes his wounds, and cares him until he is well. From that point forward, Enkidu and the lion are friends.

Chapter 1 Analysis

The world of Gilgamesh is a sealed one, closed in by mountain ranges and swamps and surrounded by the deadly Bitter River. Further enhancing these natural limits are the high brick walls Gilgamesh has ordered to be built around the city of Uruk, the city he governs. These territorial boundaries along with the terror implicit in traveling beyond the known world illustrates clearly the confinements of the ancient world as well as setting up Gilgamesh - the fearless traveler - to be a great hero.

However, the substance of the story does not initially concern Gilgamesh. He is the catalyst for the story, but the creation of Enkidu momentarily supplants the larger tale of the King. This is a significant thematic device because, though this will eventually become the epic of Gilgamesh, no part of the latter plot would take place without the impetus of Enkidu.

Enkidu himself, the wild man made in the likeness of Gilgamesh but for his bestial, is an obvious symbol of Gilgamesh's primitive side. The King is two-thirds god while his adopted brother is as much animal as he is human.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Having had his traps robbed and his catch freed over and over, a young hunter finally observes the perpetrator of the damage and rushes back to the house of his father, in horror. The robber is Enkidu. Though the father, a shepherd, is skeptical of the son's description of this savage, the two head to the city of Uruk to report the matter to the King. Upon their arrival, however, the find the citizens already passing among themselves excited stories about Enkidu, his wild looks, his mighty stature, and his reign of terror in the countryside, stealing game and scattering the shepherd's flocks. Contrary to the expectation of Uruk's citizenry, the brave King Gilgamesh does not offer to fight Enkidu himself, but orders that Harim, a young priestess of the Temple of Ishtar, be sent to confront the wild man. This is not cowardice on the part of the King, but sagacity. Gilgamesh knows that the young girl's charms will prevail over Enkidu with far more facility than force.

A hunter brings Harim to the edge of the forest and leaves her to tame the wild man. Entering the forest, the young priestess is charmed by the animals and leaves and broken sunlight of the forest. Indeed, she believes it impossible that any evil thing could reside in such a place.

Enkidu soon comes upon the young girl - the first human he has ever seen - and is enchanted. As he has done with the gazelles, little horses and other animals he has tamed, he watches her quietly. However, seeing his mighty figure and his bestial horns, Harim is terrified. She stands, stock-still, unable to move for fear.

Looking beyond the savagery of his appearance to the gentleness of his nature, Harim hails the wild man with a timid "hello." Nevertheless, Enkidu, who has lived all of his life in the forest, knows no human words. His only response to Harim is a confused stare, but when she gestures to him with her hands, he comes slowly toward her and sits at her feet. As he sits, Harim continues to talk to him and ask him questions - nothing of which Enkidu can understand. Despite this, the wild man finds himself utterly content in simply sitting beside the young priestess.

Though Harim is pleased by her early success with Enkidu, the vulnerability of the wild man once he reaches the city suddenly strikes her. Her worry is that, upon arriving in Uruk, Enkidu will be treated no better than a captive animal. Thus, Harim decides to teach Enkidu, insofar as possible, the ways of civilized living. First, she teaches him to speak - including especially the many words for love. The she cuts his hair, bathes him, and makes him a tunic out of one-half of her own. To her eyes - she tells him - he looks like a god.

In return for her efforts on his behalf, Enkidu brings to Harim all the fruits of the forest - the only gift he truly has to offer, but after some time, Harim decides it is time to bring

Enkidu out among the people. Enkidu, however, is not anxious to leave the place that has been his home since he awakened into life. However, when he approaches the forest creatures, they flee at his new appearance - now he is simply another dangerous man.

Harim first leads Enkidu to the hut of the shepherd. The shepherd himself greets Enkidu respectfully, but his son runs off without a word, only to return with the news that a lion is in the sheepfold, devouring the lambs. Enkidu proceeds to the fold where he bests the lion who was once his friend. He carefully tends to the injured lambs and is befriended by both a cat and a dog. He no longer feels alienated and is once more happy.

Inside the shepherd's hut, Enkidu learns to eat and drink like a civilized man and to play the flute. Finally, he is prepared to proceed to Uruk.

Chapter 2 Analysis

This early in the tale, there is something very poignant about the wit of Gilgamesh compared to the naivety of Enkidu. Gilgamesh knows that if he enters the cedar forest in search of his simulacrum, there will be a fight to the death and there's an end to it. If, however, he sends in a young, beautiful priestess, such as Harim, her feminine wiles will naturally make Enkidu more pliable. We therefore have a picture of King Gilgamesh - with whom we have not spent much time - plotting against Enkidu - a pawn of the gods - who we have already found to be kind and gentle.

Though the two have not yet met, the opposition is a tense one with the audience sympathy - at this point - resting instinctively with Enkidu.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

Ninsun, Gilgamesh's mother, is herself a goddess possessing the gifts of prophecy and the interpretation of dreams. Therefore, when Gilgamesh himself has a disturbing dream, he goes immediately to his mother. She asks her son to describe the dream.

In his dream, Gilgamesh is walking through the streets of Uruk. As he nears the Temple of Ishtar, a double-sided axe slices by and buries itself in the pavement beside him. At that moment, he awakes.

Ninsusn explains that this is an evil portent and that, therefore, Gilgamesh should not walk the streets and should not approach the Temple of Ishtar. The double-edged axe symbolizes a dangerous man as like to Gilgamesh as a brother.

Gilgamesh, however, laughs off his mother's warning, believing that, as two parts god and only one part man, he is invincible.

Chapter 3 Analysis

So far, Gilgamesh has not portrayed himself in a particularly flattering manner. He builds great city walls seemingly for no purpose, is conniving in his capture of Enkidu, and shamefully arrogant in his interview with his mother. It will, indeed, take great exploits to make this man a hero.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

As Harim leads Enkidu into Uruk, he is besieged by curious onlookers. However, there is an important event taking place in the city that day that eclipses even the entry of the wild man. At the Temple of Ishtar, the citizens of Uruk will finally choose a bride for their king, Gilgamesh.

Harim and Enkidu proceed to the temple where the young priestess leaves Enkidu at the gate in order that she might adorn herself for the upcoming ceremony. The anticipated battle between the King and the savage takes place at that selfsame gate when Gilgamesh attempts to enter and Enkidu blocks his path.

Though the citizens are appalled and the King attempts to push aside the haughty savage, Enkidu stands firm. A tremendous confrontation ensues.

Though Enkidu eventually forces Gilgamesh into a position of vulnerability, he refuses to slay such a worthy opponent and thereafter the two are friends.

Chapter 4 Analysis

When the gods created Enkidu in order to destroy Gilgamesh, they neglected to take into account one factor - they did not expect Enkidu to develop a mind and a conscience of his own. In a way, Gilgamesh himself encourages Enkidu's noble personality. Certainly, Enkidu has a gentle start with the creatures of the forest, but had Gilgamesh sent an armed guard to capture the wild man, instead of a pretty young priestess, he no doubt would have encountered a far more hostile foe. As it is, the gods are again shown in their impotency. Though Enkidu begins the task they expect of him, he consciously does not follow through and so, what would appear to be the narrative climax - the killing of the King by Enkidu - simply melds into another storyline.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

Despite their rocky beginnings, or perhaps because of them, Gilgamesh and Enkidu grow to be more like brothers than simple friends. Even Queen Ninsun sees Enkidu almost as a son. The pair takes part in and wins various contests and feats of strength and although Enkidu is content with this way of life, Gilgamesh is not.

The King proposes an adventure: Kill the monster Humbaba. Enkidu, though he fears no mortal man, argues that Humbaba is not mortal, but Gilgamesh is unconvinced by this. The monster is an evil and must be destroyed, but Enkidu refuses to take part. Gilgamesh gathers to him an arsenal of finely wrought weaponry and lays it before his brother's feet, but still Enkidu turns away.

Finally, the city elders attempt to intervene, telling the King they once sought to destroy not to undertake something so dangerous, but instead settle down to a life of peaceful domesticity with a wife and children. Gilgamesh merely laughs them off.

With the King's mind so obviously made up, the elders go secretly to Enkidu to make a request of him: He must accompany Gilgamesh because it is well known that whoever first enters the gate that leads to Humbaba will be killed. Enkidu resolves to accompany his friend and to make the needed sacrifice.

Before they depart, pale Ninsun blesses her son and Enkidu and asks Enkidu especially to protect Gilgamesh.

Ninsun prepares herself and proceeds to the temple where she prays to the god Shamash, asking why he has made her son so restless and cursing him should Gilgamesh be killed.

In three days, Gilgamesh and Enkidu reach the massive cedar gate that leads the way to Humbaba. Here, Gilgamesh pours meal on the earth to appease the gods. As a result of this ritual, the gods will reveal their purpose in the dreams of the two men. Gilgamesh and Enkidu have three dreams. In the first Gilgamesh and his companion are standing beside a vast mountain, which collapses in front of them. Enkidu takes this to mean that Humbaba will fall before them. Gilgamesh has a second dream: The same mountain falls, trapping him until a beautiful, but anonymous person comes to pull him out. The pair puzzles vainly over the meaning of the second dream. In the third and final dream - this one a dream of Enkidu's instead of his companion - Enkidu believes a cold shower, lightning, and a rain of ashes has passed over them. Again, neither can divine the meaning of that dream.

They next morning they proceed to the cedar gate and, though Enkidu tries once more to persuade his friend to turn back, Gilgamesh is implacable. However, as per his promise to the city elders and to Ninsun, Enkidu tries first to open the gate only to have

his hand paralyzed in the process. Only when the two push on the gate together will it open.

Hearing Gilgamesh and Enkidu enter his forest, Humbaba descends upon them, lighting fires all around.

With quick moves and some cunning, Gilgamesh and Enkidu plant Gilgamesh's spear in Humbaba's throat. Seeing the monster's pain, Gilgamesh feels pity for him, and so drops his weapons. Enkidu, however, sensing the monster's plan to kill Gilgamesh with his last fiery breath, slays Humbaba with his sword.

Chapter 5 Analysis

Having seen the cunning with which he thinks he will initially capture Enkidu, the audience may not expect to see the pity that wells up in Gilgamesh for Humbaba and, having seen several acts of mercy on the part of Enkidu, the audience may be equally surprised to see him finish the monster now. This, like their equal but opposite bestial and beatific qualities of godly crowns and animal's horns, shows Gilgamesh to be not just friends or even brothers, but true complements.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

Watching the battle between Humbaba and the two friends, the goddess Ishtar is moved from enraged to enamored. Seeing his bravery and his skill in battle, she falls in love with Gilgamesh.

After watching the two victors for a time as they bathe and rest after destroying the monster, she approaches Gilgamesh and threatens great punishment for the death of Humbaba unless he agrees to be her husband. Gilgamesh refuses repeatedly, driving Ishtar to tears. He reminds her that every lover she has ever taken has been destroyed, when she eventually and inevitably tires of him. In return for this mortal's insolence, Ishtar calls the gods to battle against Gilgamesh and Enkidu, but the pair ignores her and set off for Uruk.

With the return of the two heroes, a holiday is declared in Uruk and, as singers make up songs about the adventure, scribes engrave the stories onto stone or press the letters into wet clay.

Gilgamesh is welcomed by his mother, but Enkidu - hurrying to the Temple of Ishtar to look for Harim - finds the courtyard empty and the gates locked.

Chapter 6 Analysis

The destruction of Humbaba again shows humanity in a more flattering light than it does humanity's gods. Not only is Ishtar fickle, but Gilgamesh is well aware of that fickleness, treating the goddess as if she were a petulant child.

There is a further significant feature of this particular episode of *Gilgamesh*: This adventure is recorded in stone and clay for all time. The cult of Ishtar may be long dead, but the epic of Gilgamesh has survived for more than five-thousand years. It would seem, then, that the hero was right to dismiss the goddess so readily.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

Ishtar gathers together all the gods from all parts of heaven and pleads with them to aid her in vengeance against Gilgamesh and Enkidu - Gilgamesh, in particular, for his rejection of her love. She asks her father Anu to create a Bull of Heaven that will destroy Uruk and kill Gilgamesh. Anu, however, initially refuses her request and the god Shamash declares that Humbaba was a monster, harming Earth and humankind, and that he himself had called for the death.

Enlil, brother of Ishtar, and one-time destroyer of humanity, is enraged by Shamash's pity for mankind and suggests sneeringly that if he is so fond of man perhaps he should leave heaven and live on earth.

Finally, Ishtar threatens her father: If he does not create the Bull of Heaven, she will open the doors of the underworld to let the dead rise and outnumber the living. With this, Anu creates the Bull.

According to Ishtar's wishes, the Bull cuts a swathe of death and destruction through the streets of Uruk. Nevertheless, Enkidu, along with three hundred armed warriors, comes out to meet the beast. For a while, Enkidu is able to hold back the animal with his own horns, but is eventually overcome. Luckily, at this moment, Gilgamesh throws his spear straight into the throat of the Bull.

Though temporarily stunned, the Bull is by no means finished and the two companions grapple with it for hours until finally Enkidu thrusts his sword into the nape of its neck and kills it. Once more, the goddess Ishtar is beside herself with rage, but defiant Enkidu tears off the beast's right leg and hurls it angrily at the cruel goddess.

The carcass of the Bull is divided among the city's tradesman, but the entrails are burnt as an offering to the god Shamash who is Gilgamesh's constant patron.

Chapter 7 Analysis

Unlike the humans in the Gilgamesh tale who, though a little misguided at times, are mainly peaceable, the gods - particularly the nominal goddess of love, Ishtar - are a cruel and unpredictable lot. In addition to being a plot device, this fact may also reflect the multitude of anxieties over weather, crop production, livestock, diseases, etc. that must have plagued this ancient people. Indeed, at times, natural disasters must have taken on the imaginary qualities of a divine bull, smashing and destroying without discretion. Gilgamesh and Enkidu, then, act as a narrative wish fulfillment - sure protection against anything the gods can dish out.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

Immediately following the slaying of the Bull of Heaven, Enkidu begins having dreams full of ominous portents. Gilgamesh begs his friend to relate the dreams so that he can tell them to his mother, the prophetess Ninsun.

In Enkidu's dream, Ishtar and her priestesses are all gathered on top of the city wall, wailing in grief over the Bull's leg Enkidu had thrown up to Ishtar as a sarcastic offering. This itself does not bother Enkidu, but then he hears the angry voices of the other gods with father Anu calling for the death of one of the companions. It is Enlil who answers, "Enkidu must die." Though Shamash argues for Enkidu's life, the gods are resigned. Enkidu must die. Gilgamesh, though upset, reasons that, because they committed all their acts together, they cannot die separately. Enkidu, however, contracts a fever and his dreams grow more intense.

Gilgamesh assures his friend that, if he goes to the underworld, Gilgamesh will wait at the gate until they let Enkidu out again. Still, Enkidu's fevered dreams continue. He curses the tall cedar gate, he curses the hunters who trap the woodland creatures who were once his friends, and, finally he curses Harim who took him out of the forest, and out of his peaceful and happy life, forever.

Disturbed by the curses of the sleeping Enkidu, the god Shamash scolds the sleeping man for speaking ill of the woman who taught him so much. When he wakes, Enkidu turns to praising and blessing Harim.

For twelve days, Enkidu lies dreaming until, on the thirteenth day, he dies. Gilgamesh is insane with grief and goes to great length to revive his friend. All naturally fails.

Unable to revive his friend, Gilgamesh goes to his goddess-mother to question his own mortality. Though he is two-thirds god, yes, she tells him, he will die.

In desperation, Gilgamesh decides to search out his immortal ancestor Utnapishtim - crossing the lethal Bitter River, in the process - in order to learn the secret of life and death and so save, not just his friend, but himself as well.

Chapter 8 Analysis

Though Gilgamesh is two-thirds god, he is inescapably mortal. He is a hero - above the run of ordinary men - nevertheless he will die. This serves to further the hypothesis that, though the gods continue to produce offspring with god-like qualities, such as bravery, strength, leadership, etc., they cannot confer onto those offspring immortality. The gods are a finite population while humankind, with its unending cycle of living and dying, is dynamic.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

Chapter Nine begins the second episode of the epic of Gilgamesh: Gilgamesh's search for the secret of life and death. For many days and nights, Gilgamesh wanders on foot until he reaches the Mountains of Mashu. Looking up at the towering peaks, Gilgamesh wonders if he has truly reached the mountains, whose peaks touch the heavens, and whose foundations reach into the bowels of the earth: the home of the scorpion-people. One of the said scorpion-men, looking down from his high promontory, sees Gilgamesh and asks his identity. The scorpion man's wife replies that the stranger is two-thirds god and one-third man. The scorpion-man asks Gilgamesh how he has come to be there and Gilgamesh responds that he has come to seek his ancestor Utnapishtim who knows the secret of life and death and can, therefore, tell Gilgamesh where his friend Enkidu has gone and whether or not Gilgamesh himself must die.

In order to reach Utnapishtim, Gilgamesh must traverse the deep caverns beneath the Mountains of Mashu - those caverns traveled by Shamash, the sun, as he makes his way to the Eastern Garden every morning. The scorpion-man describes to Gilgamesh the perils of passing through the caverns - madness, searing cold followed by intolerable heat. The scorpion-man urges Gilgamesh to give up his quest, but, when the hero insists, the scorpion-man opens to him the entrance to the cavern and asks that he may be blessed in his impossible journey.

Just as the scorpion-man warned, the underground journey is excruciating for Gilgamesh, but finally after eleven days and nights, he sees a trace of light. A day and a night later, he emerges into the Eastern Garden. Through the trees, he sees the great, bright face of Shamash, the sun.

Shamash asks his child how he came to be here in the garden, so gaunt and disheveled. Gilgamesh explains that he is in search of his immortal ancestor, in order to discover the secret of life and death and, thus, be able to preserve life.

At first Shamash, like Ninsun, encourages Gilgamesh to settle down to a normal family existence, but, seeing that line of argument has no effect, he offers the hero eternal bliss in the Eastern Garden, but Gilgamesh is stubborn. Finally, Shamash directs Gilgamesh to Sabitu, the wine maiden, who will show him the way to go. Shamash offers one last caution, however - what Gilgamesh attempts has never been achieved before.

Chapter 9 Analysis

It is clear from his rejection of Shamash's offer of life in the Eastern Garden, that Gilgamesh seeks something other than simple, eternal pleasures. Nor is he searching

for an end to the grief caused him by the death of his friend Enkidu. Shamash offers such and Gilgamesh refuses.

Just as the King Gilgamesh turns away from the ease and domestic pleasures afforded him by his position, so he leaves behind this uncomplicated paradise to continue his heroic journey. Gilgamesh, though inescapably mortal, possesses the strengths and the impulses of the gods as a result of his parentage and so simply cannot be content as an average man.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

At first, the wine maiden Sabitu is frightened by Gilgamesh's wild and unkempt looks and so she runs into her house and bolts the door, but Gilgamesh pleads that he is the king of Uruk and requires information of her. Still suspicious, Sabitu asks Gilgamesh why he is dressed in animal skins and why his skin appears as if it is badly burnt.

Gilgamesh explains to the young maiden his grief over Enkidu and the terrible journey it has compelled him to make. Finally moved to pity, Sabitu exits her house and offers Gilgamesh food and wine and a place to sit. She asks the King what he seeks and when he responds, as he always has, that he seeks his ancestor Utnapishtim, who knows the secret of life and death, Sabitu tells him - as all others have told him - that what he attempts is impossible.

She reminds him of the deadly Bitter River that he must cross to reach his ancestor and asks, reasonably, what he will do when he reaches its shore. Mortality is natural to man, Sabitu tells the stubborn Gilgamesh. He should remain and seek out the domestic pleasures of a wife and family.

However, Gilgamesh is steadfast. He thanks Sabitu and she points him toward the Bitter River. On the shore, she explains, he will find a boat and a boat pilot named Urshanabi who alone can take him across the river. However, she cautions, no living man has ever sat beside the boatman before.

Chapter 10 Analysis

At every point along his journey, Gilgamesh is, not only warned of its dangers, but urged to take up the life of an average man with a wife and children. This fact has a dual purpose within the framework of the story. First, it serves to emphasize just how great a hero Gilgamesh is and why he should be celebrated interminably. Secondly, however, it acts almost as propaganda, encouraging large families and strong familial bonds among the story's primary audience. The typical listener knows that he cannot compete with Gilgamesh in any respect, but he can do the next best thing: he can provide good, strong citizens for the next generation.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

Gilgamesh arrives at the shore of the Bitter River without incident and, though he spots the boat that is to carry him across, he waits for untold days and nights for Urshanabi, the boatman, to arrive. Unable to control his impatient anger, he lifts a stone and throws it down onto the boat, smashing the oarlocks, and is prevented from doing any further damage by the sound of the boatman's voice demanding to know who dares to damage the boat of Utnapishtim.

Hearing his ancestor's name, Gilgamesh immediately repents and begs the boatman to take him across the river. The boatman reiterates what everyone has told Gilgamesh from the beginning of his quest: No mortal has ever crossed the Bitter River. Besides, he adds, Gilgamesh has made travel in the boat impossible by breaking the oarlocks.

Feeling pity for Gilgamesh in his shame and desperation, Urshanabi offers another option: Gilgamesh must cut down one hundred and ten straight poles from a nearby forest and, with these, the pair will pole their way across the river.

Chapter 11 Analysis

In this episode, Gilgamesh demonstrates both why he is a hero and why he will ultimately fail in his quest. He has traversed many miles and survived a multitude of challenges to make his way to the shore of the Bitter River, but, once there, emotion takes over and he ruins his primary means of passage. Looked at objectively, this entire journey of Gilgamesh has been based on nothing more than compulsion, an emotion - grief for his lost friend Enkidu. Without more than this to sustain him, he cannot be successful in gaining eternal life.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

Lying in his hammock on the further shore of the Bitter River, Utnapishtim spots Urshanabi along with an unknown personage. The wife of Utnapishtim reports that it is a young man, thin and haggard, but otherwise like to she and her husband - a similarity Gilgamesh attempts to play on when he finally crawls ashore, but he is rebuked by the haughty Utnapishtim who expresses disgust at the traveler's ragged clothes and degraded appearance. He demands to know the stranger's identity and how he came to be there.

Gilgamesh explains that he is King of Uruk who has traveled a vast distance to ask Utnapishtim, his ancestor, a question. Utnapishtim is displeased - he promises to punish the boatman who aided Gilgamesh on his journey.

Gilgamesh explains his situation to his ancestor - the loss of his friend Enkidu, his quest for the secret of life and death - but Utnapishtim answers in much the same way Gilgamesh has been answered all along: Man is not meant to be immortal. How, then, wonders Gilgamesh, did Utnapishtim come to be immortal. Utnapishtim agrees to tell him the story even if he does not necessarily agree to aid Gilgamesh in his impossible mission.

Chapter 12 Analysis

Two aspects of this twelfth part of *Gilgamesh* stand out. First, the tense changes from past to present, as if the simple presence of an immortal man takes that corner of the world out of time. Second, however, Utnapishtim is married and sent off on the ark with his family. Once again, the point is emphasized that for a human man to be unmarried and lack a family is unnatural.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary

Utnapishtim begins the story of how he gained his immortality: Years earlier he had lived in the hedonistic city of Shuruppak, the constant noise from which eventually angered the god Enlil who decided to send down a hurricane and so destroy the city and all of its inhabitants. Though the other gods disagreed, Enlil was set in his plan.

Utnapishtim, at this time, was a carpenter. So, the god Ea, under the pretense of speaking, not to the human, but to a reed hut, warned Utnapishtim of the coming storm. Ea supplied him with the specifications by which he could construct an ark that would house himself, his family, and a pair of all of the living things on earth.

Utnapishtim does as he has been told by Ea while the other citizens of Shuruppak go about their daily business, until the storm comes upon them. The storm lasted for six days and six nights and, at the end of it, nothing was left alive on earth. The water has receded enough by the seventh day, however, that the ark itself is caught and held fast by the top of a mountain. Utnapishtim releases a dove, but the bird returns, having found no place to land. Then he sends out a swallow to the same effect. Finally, he sends out a crow, which finds food and does not return to the boat. In gratitude for his deliverance, Utnapishtim pours wine on the mountaintop.

Utnapishtim prepares a feast for the gods, which they willingly consume - all but Enlil, who is angered that someone has survived his flood. The other gods, however, chastise Enlil, asking again how he could wish such large-scale destruction. With this, Enlil blesses Utnapishtim and his wife, making them immortal.

It is a god, then, who must grant immortality - it cannot be gotten by feats of daring alone. Utnapishtim tells Gilgamesh that gods never sleep and, thus, challenges him to stay awake for seven days and seven nights, which, naturally the exhausted man is unable to do. Ultimately, Gilgamesh gains information but receives very little pity from his ancestor.

Chapter 13 Analysis

If Gilgamesh has ever had a cause to give up his search for the secret of life and death, or immortality, it is this conversation with his ancestor, Utnapishtim. The secret is, in fact, no secret at all. The gods either grant a man immortality or they do not. He cannot win it; he cannot run it down or capture it. It is a gift, plain and simple. However, in one sense, Gilgamesh has already been granted this gift. Even if his body has departed, his story has already lasted for thousands of years and will probably last for thousands more. It is not the immortality our hero seeks, but it is what he receives.

Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary

Finally realizing that his quest is, indeed, hopeless, Gilgamesh laments to Utnapishtim, wondering where his steps must lead him now. At first Utnapishtim will speak only to Urshanabi. He orders the boatman to take Gilgamesh to a place where he can wash and change into more clothing appropriate for his journey home than the torn animal skins he is currently wearing. Urshanabi, for helping Gilgamesh in the first place, is banished from the place for all time.

Gilgamesh and his new companion set out, but not before the wife of Utnapishtim urges her husband to give him something that will allow him to return to Uruk honorably. In response, Utnapishtim tells Gilgamesh of a magic weed that grows at the bottom of the Bitter River that, if eaten, will renew youth. Gilgamesh resolves to gather some of this weed. The difficulty will be in getting the weed before the waters of the river kill him.

Diving into the dark, briny water, Gilgamesh searches for and finds the thorny-stemmed weed, gathering some into his hand before the water itself spits him onto the opposing shore. Gilgamesh and Urshanabi each take a morsel of the plant and suddenly feel all heaviness drop from their limbs. Eventually finding a spot with a fresh spring, the two decide to rest and sleep. As Gilgamesh bathes, he leaves the magic plant on the shore where it is quickly absconded with by a snake. Though Gilgamesh pursues the animal, the magic weed is gone.

Finally, Urshanabi and Gilgamesh reach Uruk. Staring over a high promontory, the King praises his great city with its temples and markets and houses to the newly arrived boatman.

Chapter 14 Analysis

Interestingly at this late juncture in the story, there turns out to be a manner in which to preserve youth and life: the magic weed. It is nearly impossible to procure, but Gilgamesh has already achieved the impossible. However, fate now, in the form of a snake, robs the King again of the thing he seeks most passionately. His immortality is not meant to be. It is unnatural, as he is told by every god, wise man, and citizen at every turn. It is finally time to give up the search for the secret of life and death and to cheat Gilgamesh's own mortality.

Chapter 15

Chapter 15 Summary

Gilgamesh and Urshanabi are greeted back to Uruk with great celebration and curiosity as to the wonders they had seen and what glorious deeds their King had accomplished. Asked by Ninsun, though, if he has finally found the thing he sought and can now rest, Gilgamesh responds as he has always responded: He must find Enkidu. When her pleas have no effect on her hardheaded son, Ninsun does as Gilgamesh requests and asks the god Shamash how her son might find Enkidu.

There are several steps Gilgamesh must undertake before he can enter the underworld: first, he must not wear clean garments lest he arouse the jealousy of the dead; second, he must not wear sandals and so disrupt those who are sleeping; finally, he cannot carry a spear or a staff in respect to those who feared those weapons in life.

Knowing only the ways of light, however, Shamash does not know the way to the underworld and advises Gilgamesh to ask some other god. He asks Enlil and receives no reply. The same occurs with the god, Sin. Ea, however, orders the gatekeeper to open the door to the underworld for Gilgamesh and then points the King toward the Western Field where he will find the entrance.

Once Gilgamesh reaches the entrance, a figure made of vines and flowers and other plants emerges. This strange figure is Enkidu. The two embrace and recount everything they have seen and learned in their time apart. In the underworld, according to Enkidu, kings hold the rank of slaves, the most unfortunate of men is he without a son and the most fortunate man is he with many sons.

Gilgamesh turns to Nergal, the gatekeeper of the underworld, and begs him to release Enkidu who did not die in any honorable fashion, but in the way of ordinary men. Nevertheless, Nergal reminds Gilgamesh that he came to the gate in a clean tunic, with sandals on his feet, along with a spear and a staff - disobeying all the commands given him by Enkidu - and therefore, his request cannot be answered.

After such a long search and so much genuine affection, Gilgamesh is uncertain that he can leave Enkidu there in the underworld. Instead of leaving his friend, Gilgamesh chooses to die.

Chapter 15 Analysis

Once again - and this comes on the authority of someone who has passed through life into death - the audience is told that to have a family and many children is preferable to any other lifestyle. Gilgamesh's heroic deeds, however, though they eventually cause his death and his lack of heirs do grant him literary and cultural immortality. The relative qualities of each are a matter for debate.

Characters

Gilgamesh

Gilgamesh, King of Uruk, incites the events of this epic by insisting that the walls of his city be built higher and higher. In recompense for the years of unceasing labor, the citizens of beg the gods to construct Enkidu - a mighty man who is meant to be the downfall of Gilgamesh.

Anu

Anu is the god of the skies, seeming to occupy a slighter higher esteem than the other gods.

Ea

Ea is the god of the deep waters.

Enlil

Enlil rules over the earth and has little pity for humankind.

Ishtar

Ishtar, the sister of Enlil, is the goddess of love but prone to violent mood swings and ruthless toward her enemies.

The Village Elders

The village elders are chosen by the citizenry to complain to the gods about Gilgamesh. It is their idea that the gods create a man to destroy their King.

Humbaba

Humbaba is a monster who lives on a mountain near Uruk and rains fire and soot down constantly on the city.

Aruru

Aruru is the goddess responsible for making human forms. She is the goddess who creates Enkidu.

Enkidu

Enkidu is the wild man created, at the will of the people of Uruk, to destroy Gilgamesh. Enkidu is created in the exact image of Gilgamesh but for the pair of horns atop his head.

Harim

Harim is a young priestess at the Temple of Ishtar. She is sent into the cedar forest to communicate with Enkidu. Through her patience and her kindness, she teaches him to speak and to live in the world of men.

Nninsun

Ninsun is the pale-complexioned mother of Gilgamesh. She is a skilled interpreter of dreams and takes on Enkidu as a kind of foster son.

Shamash

Shamash is the sun god to whom Ninsun appeals for blessings at the departure of Enkidu and Gilgamesh.

The Bull of Heaven

This Bull, built by the god Anu, is meant to destroy Gilgamesh and the city of Uruk to revenge Gilgamesh's insult to Ishtar. Though the Bull wreaks some havoc in the city, it is eventually killed by Gilgamesh and Enkidu.

Utnapishtin

Utnapishtin is Gilgamesh's ancestor who has discovered the secret of eternal life.

Sabitu

Sabitu is a maiden Gilgamesh encounters on his journey to find Enkidu. She shows him the way to the Bitter River.

Urshanabi

Urshanabi is the boatman at the Bitter River.

Nergal

Nergal is the gatekeeper to the Underworld.

Objects/Places

Uruk

Uruk, most magnificent of the seven cities of Sumer, is the place where the hero Gilgamesh reigns as King. Uruk is surrounded on all sides by towering brick walls meant to protect the city from invading armies, natural disasters, etc. It is these walls that are the catalyst for the story of Gilgamesh. His insistence that they be built ever higher angers the citizens and provokes them to seek their King's death.

Mountains of Mashu

The Mountains of Mashu, dwelling of the scorpion men, form the northern border of Gilgamesh's world. They are believed to constitute the border between night and day.

The Great Salt Swamp

The Great Salt Swamp forms the southern border of the known world of Gilgamesh.

The Eastern Garden

The Eastern Garden is the home of the Sun from which he rises each morning after descending into the western void and through the connecting underground caverns. In the Eastern Garden, there is no care and no grief, but Gilgamesh leaves it to continue his search for Enkidu.

The Bitter River

The Bitter River is encircles the whole world of Gilgamesh. Though the barest touch of its waters is lethal, Gilgamesh must cross it if he is to reach his immortal ancestor, Utnapishtin, in order to find the secret of life and death and thus restore his friend Enkidu.

Shuruppak

Shuruppak was the city in which Utnapishtin originally lived. The god Enlil sent a hurricane to destroy the city and all of its inhabitants due to the vice and debauchery that had grown up in it.

The Ark of Utnapishtin

This ark, the dimensions of which were revealed to Gilgamesh'e ancestor by the god Ea, saved Utnapishtin and his family from the devastating hurricane sent by Enlil to destroy mankind. Along with his family, Utnapishtin took with him in the ark a representative of every living thing in order to re-populate the earth when the floodwaters receded.

The Magic Weed

The magic weed is a plant found growing at the bottom of the Bitter River. It has the power to restore youth to any mortal who eats it - thus it is called by Gilgamesh "The-Old-Become-Young-Again." Though Gilgamesh is able to dive to the bottom of the River and acquire some of the weed, he unfortunately loses it on his return trip to Uruk.

Ekur

Ekur is the house of the god Enlil to whom Gilgamesh appeals for helping finding Enkidu in the Underworld, but Enlil gives response.

Eabsu

At Eabsu, the dwelling of the god Ea, Gilgamesh finally receives directions to the entrance of the Underworld, located in the Western Field.

Setting

The first evidence that the epic of Gilgamesh existed came to light when English archeologists in the nineteenth century discovered an archive of ancient clay tablets in the Middle East. In subsequent years, more tablets were found at other archeological sites in the region.

The inscriptions on these tablets were written in cuneiform, an early form of writing that inscribed wedge-shaped characters into soft clay. The clay was often baked into tablets, just like pottery, to make a permanent record, and many of these have survived for thousands of years.

Cuneiform writing was used by the ancient Sumerian, Akkadian, Assyrian, and Babylonian peoples, and their strange and difficult languages resisted translation for many years. What finally emerged after years of diligent research was the fragmentary narrative of Gilgamesh, a legendary king of the great city of Uruk, which is mentioned in the Bible as Erech. Archeologists have located the site of this city near the present-day village of Warka in southern Iraq. The city of Uruk stood at the center of the kingdom of Sumer, which flourished around 3000 B.C. in the area of southern Mesopotamia.

The epic's geographic setting is real, and some of the characters may also have been real. Gilgamesh himself is probably based on a historical figure, whose life was later embellished with myth and legend. The time of the story is impossible to fix exactly, since there are so many versions and translations of the various texts. Bryson's interpretation is simply placed in and around Uruk on the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in very ancient times.

Some locations mentioned in the text, while probably based on places in the actual world, are presented as the Mesopotamian and Sumerian imagination pictured them. Many can now be tentatively identified with real places.

For example, the "Bitter River" which Gilgamesh crosses late in the narrative is probably the Persian Gulf.

Social Sensitivity

Each of the principal gods of Gilgamesh represents an aspect or force of nature, and such pantheism is not unusual in old myths. Although a modern reader might be tempted to label the religion of the Mesopotamians as mere "superstition," the text repeatedly demonstrates that these people took their deities seriously. The reader must accept the fact that the persons in the tale have a close relationship with their gods, which are assigned human traits as well as supernatural powers. What is striking is the erratic behavior of the deities. Even Anu, the chief of the gods, argues in an almost perverse human manner with the elders when they propose the creation of Enkidu. He likes Gilgamesh and enjoys the high walls that he has built simply because he likes to sit on them and watch the activities of the humans in the city.

An unsettling aspect of religion in the epic is its grim vision of the afterlife. The souls of the dead descend to the Underworld, where they are judged and then treated according to their deeds. The picture of Enkidu's body turning into moss, weeds, and roots is chilling. On his deathbed, Enkidu dreams of the awful Zu, a great bird that will peck at him and tear his body apart. In an earlier passage, Ishtar frightens the other gods by threatening to open the gates of the Underworld. Once released, the dead would fill the earth, eat all the food, and cause a great famine. The intimidation works well. The gods turn away in fear and allow Ishtar to form the Bull of Heaven to punish Gilgamesh and Enkidu.

In his report to Gilgamesh on the conditions of the dead, Enkidu says that they are rewarded not on the basis of their temporal position on earth (kings or servants) but on the basis of the number of sons they have produced. The implied prejudice against the female gender was an element of many ancient societies and should be viewed in cultural context.

Literary Qualities

While much of the appeal of the story derives from the essential qualities of the original narrative, Bryson's skillful use of language and the coherence of her characters adds considerably to the reader's enjoyment. Because of the episodic structure of the narrative, Bryson must quickly and concisely reveal the nature of her characters. She accomplishes this primarily through believable dialogue. For example, when Enkidu laments his loss of natural purity after the wild animals turn away from him, the reader is sympathetic with the pain he expresses. Both Enkidu and Gilgamesh are unquestionably brave.

Yet both have moments of fear and selfdoubt, making them seem well-rounded and human.

Through focused description, Bryson provides added touches of realism to the people and events. When Ninsun prays to Shamash for help, she first ascends to the roof so that her words can more easily reach the heavens. After her opening appeal, she waits a few moments to give the phrases time to rise to the god's ears. This passage not only suggests a sensible reverence for the deity but also enforces the presence of Nunsun as an experienced and devout priestess. Pertinent figures of speech also enliven the story, as when Humbaba's enormous moving arms are compared to the masts of a ship.

Bryson's text supplies a useful introduction of the gods and a helpful map of the territory of the story. Some of the places, such as the city of Uruk, are real.

Other places are imaginary, such as the tunnel under the earth that connects night and day; or Dilmun, the Mesopotamian equivalent of the Garden of Eden. Authentic cuneiform quotations are sprinkled throughout the pages of the book, giving a sense of the ancient language in which the original was written.

Bryson has blended the very old and complicated set of fragments of an absorbing myth in her retelling so that modern readers may not only enjoy it but also ponder its mysteries. One may never know why Gilgamesh does not immediately eat the magic plant of eternal life when he has gotten it from the depths of the Bitter River—but, one might surmise that he wishes to take most of it home to help his people. Such open-ended matters remain a subject for lively speculation.

Themes

God vs. Man

The opening pages of *Gilgamesh* reveal the multiplicity of gods in the Sumerian world. There are, of course, the primary gods - Anu, Ea, Enlil, Ishtar, and Aruru - but there are others, minor deities that can also affect the course of a man's - or an entire city's - fate. The presumption, then, would be that this world is an orderly one controlled by sensible, rational beings. It does not, however, take long to see that this is an entirely erroneous expectation. The gods have greater than human powers, but their ethics are no better formed. In fact, it sometimes seems as if the gods are more ill behaved than the creatures over which they rule.

Anu, Ea, Enlil, and the rest of the gods, by definition, possess powers and abilities far superior to their human worshippers. However, they employ these powers with a capriciousness that does not speak to their responsibilities as deities. The most obvious instance of this is the very fount of the epic itself: the plot against Gilgamesh. The citizens of Uruk approach the gods with a complaint against their King and his constant enforced labor and a single remedy - that he be killed. Anu offers some objection to such severity and another unnamed god adds, rather irrelevantly, that he likes the walls Gilgamesh has ordered be built, otherwise no real objection is offered to this proposed regicide. Eventually, the complaint of the city elders is accepted and a plan to destroy Gilgamesh is put into effect. In this decision - with its relative thoughtlessness - the gods show themselves to have no more thorough sense of justice than their human counterparts.

The gods are not only unjust when faced with the problems of humankind, they are terrifyingly prone to venting their spleen on the earth. The first indication we get of this is the reaction of Ishtar to the request of the elders of Uruk for the death of Gilgamesh. Without a second thought, the goddess of love takes up the battle cry of the citizens: Gilgamesh must die. There is no talk of a less radical procedure. The gods do gather to discuss the problem briefly, but by the time they have made up their minds that Gilgamesh should indeed die in the manner suggested by the elders, Ishtar has already called for the creation of Enkidu and the plot has been set in motion. At another point in the story, Ishtar - having been spurned by him - cries out to all the major and minor gods to turn against the King. In both instances, Ishtar shows - not a godlike forbearance - but a greater than human impulsiveness.

Even more lethally impulsive than Ishtar is her brother, Enlil. Utnapishtin, Gilgamesh's immortal ancestor, tells the wandering King the story of a city called Shuruppak. Shuruppak, granted, is said to have been a city full of vice. However, instead of entertaining the idea of reform, Enlil - because the noise of the city is disturbing his sleep - destroys it in a great hurricane. The god Ea, out of sympathy or some other noble compulsion, contrives a way to preserve Utnapishtin, his family, and representatives from every species on earth. Ultimately the gods are like children -

emotional, self-centered, and impulsive - risen to the state of deities due to their arsenal of deadly power and never-ending life.

As Gilgamesh reminds us several times throughout his story, he is two-thirds god and only one-third human and, indeed, this seems to have some bearing on his situation. He is socially exalted - king of the greatest of the known cities - and he is exceedingly heroic, both in physical stature and in mental fortitude. Even the man, Enkidu, created by the gods specifically to destroy Gilgamesh is unable to complete his task, due to the King's might. In the end, however, even Gilgamesh's greater proportion of immortal blood cannot overwhelm his mortal third. Mortality, then, meaning humanity seems to possess an advantage of potency over immortality - or godliness. In other words, mortal humanity is the normal state of a being while godliness is not only extraordinary but incapable of passing on its primary trait (i.e. immortality) to a younger generation.

Finally, there is also the issue of the proximity of man and god. This fact serves to emphasize their difference by a show of men directly pleading with the gods for help, but also demonstrates the near equality of their positions simply by placing them so close together. One unnamed god even professes that he enjoys perching on the high walls of Uruk in order to watch humanity as it goes about its business. Ishtar's reaction to the coldness of Gilgamesh is so violent because she requires his adoration. The gods are dependent on humanity for more than simply entertainment: They need to be worshipped. If they are not, they cease to be gods.

Mankind vs. Animals

Because Enkidu - Gilgamesh's potential nemesis and eventually his supreme ally - is an animalized version of the King, the relationship of man and animal in *Gilgamesh* is pushed immediately to the forefront. The village elders, as well as the gods, assume that because Enkidu is more savage than Gilgamesh he will be able to defeat him. The animal is assumed to be physically superior. Instead, it seems, that when the two finally do meet in combat, they are well matched.

Moreover, because Enkidu is so supposedly bestial, he should be more ruthless in his aggression - not giving in until his foe is vanquished, but from the first it should be clear that there is a sensitivity inherent in Enkidu that will severely mitigate his abilities as a ruthless killer. Placed in the cedar forest, on his own and without instruction of any kind, Enkidu befriends the animals one by one in an affectingly gentle manner. When he is finally attacked by a lion, he fights back, out of instinct. However, seeing the beast's suffering, he is unable to kill it. Instead, he heals it. The lion, in turn, becomes Enkidu's friend. Perhaps, then, it can be said that Enkidu does represent what an animal is without the interference of humankind. He does not fight without reason; he does not kill for sport, and he prefers amity over enmity.

Under the tutelage of Harim, however, Enkidu becomes human. He learns to speak; he learns to behave as a civilized man, and his first action in this new guise is to pick a meaningless fight with the king of the city into which he has been welcomed. However,

some remnant of Enkidu's better nature remains. When he realizes that Gilgamesh is a worthy opponent, he stops the battle and offers friendship. This may be Enkidu's forest training coming through, but Gilgamesh accepts the truce, revealing that humankind, too, can rise above its baser instincts.

Worldly Success

Throughout his story, Gilgamesh is told over and over to stop his "running hither and thither," to take a wife, and have a child and live out his life as any other man would. However, Gilgamesh is a great hero and can conceive of no such mediocrity for himself. The towering walls he builds around Uruk are an outgrowth of this need for grand demonstration. Even when the walls have presumably passed the point where they can give any more protection to the city, the King insists they be built taller. They are now a conduit for his own pride. Moreover, in an interesting parallel, as Gilgamesh forces the men of the city to build unceasingly, thereby preventing the young women from finding lovers and marriages from subsequently taking place, he is condemning his city to a life as sterile as his own.

Enkidu, Gilgamesh's more animal brother, attempts to convince the King to settle down, as well, but is as unsuccessful as everyone else. It seems that Gilgamesh's godly-part prevents him from behaving as an average man, even though it does not grant him the power or the immortality of the deities.

When Gilgamesh has finally traveled through all the known - and some of the unknown - world, and is able to speak to the deceased Enkidu, he is given indisputable proof that the man who marries and has children is preferred to the man who dies with no sons. The man who dies with no sons, lies unburied with only crusts of bread for his food, while the man who has many sons lives in a fine house and daily receives gifts and tributes. Gilgamesh hears this from the mouth of his departed brother, but seems not to take it in. He certainly does nothing to remedy his own childless state.

Gilgamesh is given an ultimate comfort, however, that may or may not serve as a substitute for home and family. He is immortalized in stories. This is presented as neither objectively better nor worse than any other fate, but it does provide Gilgamesh - the two-thirds god - with the immortality he so craved.

Themes/Characters

As is usual of epics, there are three types of characters in Gilgamesh—the human, the divine, and those who partake in the natures of both. The hero Gilgamesh is two-thirds god and onethird man, a fact that has special significance during his final quest.

The main "human" characters are Ninsun, a skilled interpreter of dreams; Sabitu, the sensible wine maiden; Utnapishtim, who escapes the destruction of a great flood like the biblical Noah; Harim, the temple priestess; and Enkidu, the friend and companion of Gilgamesh. Enkidu was "created" out of clay by one of the gods and is, therefore, reminiscent of the biblical Adam.

Of greater interest to many readers are the gods and goddesses, who are led by Anu, the Lord of the Skies. The god Ea rules the "deep waters," and Enlil is ruler over the earth. In the plot of the story, the two most active deities are the benevolent Shamash, god of the sun, and Ishtar, goddess of love. Ishtar is unreliable and often painfully willful and eccentric. These traits bring about the death of Gilgamesh's companion, Enkidu.

The lesser gods are still impressive— the fearsome Anunnaki, the demons of the Underworld with. their "torches of lightning"; Aruru, who creates Enkidu simply by scooping up a handful of clay and shaping it into the desired form; and the quasi-divine monster Humbaba, thought by some scholars to be a precursor of the fire-breathing dragons found in many tales and legends. Humbaba, who has enormous strength, is the divinely appointed guardian of the cedar forests. The episode in which Gilgamesh and Enkidu vanquish Humbaba contains some of the liveliest action in the epic.

Bryson has helpfully divided the text into two parts, aptly titled 'The Temper of the Gods" and "The Wanderings of Gilgamesh." Each of these two sections is further divided into episodes, and the titles of these short chapters suggest the movement of the story. Although the narrative is episodic, the incidents are connected by their focus on the hero and by the story's underlying themes.

Several themes are typical of ancient tales in general and of epics in particular. Perhaps the most popular of these is the quest motif. Human life seems to have appeared to the ancients as a never-ending quest for some valued treasure, whether material or symbolic.

From the very start, where the elders of the city undertake a kind of verbal quest to persuade the gods to create a mighty foe to oppose their overactive king, to Gilgamesh's final journey to discover the secret of eternal life, each incident can be interpreted as a search for an important element of truth or a precious goal.

A second theme appears at the heart of the chapter entitled "The Terrible Battle between Gilgamesh and Enkidu."

During this violent combat, much is made of points of honor involving noninterference and the refusal to take unfair advantage of an opponent. For example, the elders order the citizens of Uruk not to intercede even when Gilgamesh appears to be losing. Because Enkidu is unarmed, Gilgamesh refuses to resort to his axe or spear, which would clinch the victory but cost him honor.

Because he has been such a worthy and honorable opponent, the struggle ends with Enkidu embracing Gilgamesh as a new-found comrade, praising him instead of killing him. Honor and "fairness" are essential traits for a worthy hero.

Other themes recur forcefully, such as the need for sleep. During Gilgamesh's quest for eternal life, which is a characteristic only of divinities, his "ancestor" Utnapishtim tells him that the gods do not need sleep. Gilgamesh struggles to remain awake, but soon falls into a sound slumber. This causes Utnapishtim to remark that unless Gilgamesh rids himself of this weakness he will not be able to attain eternal life.

Closely related to the need for sleep are repeated references to dreams and their significance. The principal activity of Ninsun is interpreting dreams, although Gilgamesh and Enkidu both practice the art when the need arises. For example, when they approach the domain of Humbaba, Gilgamesh proposes that they sleep, dream, and then try to understand the meaning of their dreams.

Clearly, as is true of many other societies, the Mesopotamians took dreams very seriously and believed that they conveyed significant information about the future and the plans of the gods.

Readers may more readily grasp the epic's emphasis on material objects and physical achievements. This stress emerges first in the tendency towards exaggeration. Gilgamesh and Enkidu are presented as about twelve feet tall, and their deeds require superhuman abilities. Gilgamesh earns the reputation of being a great builder by erecting the astoundingly high walls of Uruk, and he takes considerable pride in his skills. At the end of the story after he has failed in his quest, he returns to be comforted by the magnificence of the city he has built.

At different points in the story, both Ninsun and Gilgamesh accuse Shamash of instilling the hero with lofty and dangerous ambitions that lead to perilous exploits. This indicates a recurring literary theme that emerges in later epics, such as Homer's Odyssey and Vergil's Aeneid. How much free will can be attributed to even the greatest of heroes as opposed to some degree of control by fate, destiny, or the gods?

If one were to summarize the central theme of this epic, it might be that life is given meaning by the pursuit of worthy, honorable, and virtuous activities, not of unrealistic goals nor vain glory. This is movingly depicted at the epic's climax when Gilgamesh renounces his worldly power and possessions and joins Enkidu in death.

Style

Point of View

The point of view of Gilgamesh is third person omniscient - the voice of one accustomed to telling tales of monsters and heroes before a gathered audience. The story is told in the past tense, as myths generally are, until the point at which Gilgamesh meets his ancestor Utnapishtin, when it abruptly switches to the present. This tense is maintained throughout the early part of Gilgamesh's association with Utnapishtin, though the ancestor's tale of the destruction of Shuruppak changes again to the past tense, which continues through Utnapishtin's explanation of the Magic Weed to the conclusion of the story.

The fluidity of time in *Gilgamesh* reflects Gilgamesh's desire to eradicate, or at least blur, the line between mortality and immortality. With the departure into Utnapishtin's story, the typical constraints no longer apply. Utnapishtin is spoken of, by the third person narrator, in the present tense - Utnapishtin is immortal, after all, but when the man himself speaks of other events and other people - the chronologically transient, in other words - he speaks in the past tense. Depending, then, upon the time-space inhabited by the character spoken of, the narrator alters the tense in which he tells his story.

Setting

The primary setting of *Gilgamesh* is the city of Uruk - the most splendid of the seven cities of Sumer at or before the year 3000bC. The magnificent temples, fine homes, and busy marketplaces of Uruk are surrounded on all sides by high brick walls, protecting the city from invading armies, natural disasters, unfriendly gods, and the like. They are also a symbol of the narrow, insular experience of the citizens of Uruk as well as a kind of reverse foreshadowing of the wide world into which Gilgamesh will be forced to journey.

Also significant about the city of Uruk is its proximity to the dwelling place of the gods. This enables the citizens of Uruk direct access to the denizens of Heaven and the denizens of Heaven great facility in venting their feelings on Earth.

The walls of Uruk are indeed impressive, but outside the walls of the city is a still greater boundary: The Bitter River. It is thought that beyond the Bitter River to the north lay the Mountains-Without-End and to the south the Sea-Without-End. This is all speculation, however, as it is impossible to cross the Bitter River. One touch of its waters means death. Of course, Gilgamesh the great hero, does manage to cross this river where he finds his immortal ancestor Utnapishtin living in eternal ease, but Utnapishtin's fate cannot be won by any other man. The Bitter River does not simply cause death, it is

synonymous with death itself because to cross it is to be reminded of one's own inescapable mortality.

Another feature of Gilgamesh's world are the underground caverns through which the Sun must pass on its daily journey from the Eastern Garden to the western void and back again. In addition to giving the world of Gilgamesh another dimension - by adding another plane on which action occurs - it links the land of humanity to the land of the more supernatural - the Eastern Garden, after all, is a land of eternal youth and joy.

Finally there is the Underworld where Gilgamesh finally meets Enkidu. More significant than the geography of the Underworld is, first, the hardships Gilgamesh must undergo do arrive there, second, the rules a mortal man must follow in order to enter the Underworld, and, third, the information provided by Enkidu about the various fates of all manner of mortals.

Language and Meaning

Because *Gilgamesh* was written down in cuneiform - no doubt from a long oral tradition - over three thousand years BC, by the Sumerians and has been subsequently been translated and re-translated before finally coming to us, it is difficult to comment on the manipulation of the language. Not only is there no consistency over the millennia, but this is not a story treasured and preserved for its style. It is - as it need be - simple, straightforward, and descriptive enough to maintain the attention of a listening audience.

Bernarda Bryson's particular translation of *Gilgamesh* holds to these stripped down standards, though she admits in her final "Explanation" that she has cobbled this version of the legend from various sources to form something that is, at once, simplified and comprehensive.

Structure

Gilgamesh is divided into two main parts: Part I *The Temper of the Gods* and Part II *The Wanderings of Gilgamesh*. Each part is then divided into several chapters each of which follows a clear, almost self-contained storyline which is part of a contiguous whole. This, again, attests to the oral tradition from which *Gilgamesh* sprung. Every chapter can easily be imagined as a single night's tale, or one digestible portion of a much larger myth. This organization is also a result of the translator's desire to make the story as clear and as orderly as possible.

Quotes

"The world of Gilgamesh was hemmed in by the mighty mountains of Mashu that were the edge between day and night. It was circled by the Bitter River that flowed round and round it unceasingly... No one knew what lay beyond the river, since the very touch of its waters was death." Chapter 1, pg. 11

"The city of Gilgamesh was Uruk-of-the-Walls. This was the most splendid of all the seven cities of Sumer and Gilgamesh was its king. Uruk was a city of many-colored temples, of brick houses, marketplaces, and open groves of trees. Its towering walls protected it from all sorts of evil... but most of all they protected it from the monster Humbaba who lived on a nearby mountain and who constantly breathed fire and smoke and soot into the sky." Chapter 1, pg. 12

"It was with the walls of Uruk that our story begins." Chapter 1, pg. 12

"Mothers no longer see their sons, nor fathers either, for that matter. Our girls languish without lovers; marriages have ceased. We do nothing but build, build, build!" Chapter 1, pg. 14

"We want you to create a man... A man taller even than Gilgamesh...And more powerful...A wild beast of a man... who will come to the earth, to the city here, and attack the King... And destroy him!" Chapter 1, pg. 15

"Aruru made the clay into the form of a man, one so like Gilgamesh that he could have been his brother. But this man was unkempt and savage in his looks, and from his head there arose two majestic horns like those of some wild beast." Chapter 1, pg. 15

"By the time Father Anu had given in to the elders and the pleas of Ishtar, the form of the man was complete. Aruru then carried him in her arms into the depths of a cedar forest and laid him on the earth. And this was Enkidu." Chapter 1, pg. 15

"He stared at the animals, touched them, tamed them one by one." Chapter 1, pg 17

"Enkidu stood in his path. Enkidu placed his foot across the opening. He barred the entranceway to Gilgamesh the King!" Chapter 4, pg. 33

"He knelt helpless, his breast exposed to the fury of the wild man, when strangely enough, Enkidu lifted him to his feet. They clasped hands, they embraced." Chapter 4, pg. 35

"My head is bowed, O King. I am your brother and your servant; wherever you go, I will go." Chapter 5, pg. 38

"Ishtar prepared to call together the gods for a battle. But first she stood for a while to watch the terrible fracas... Thus standing quietly, she saw the destruction of Humbaba. And at the same time she fell in love with Gilgamesh." Chapter 6, pg. 45

"I know about your love, mighty Ishtar. Whomever you love, you soon tire of and destroy." Chapter 6, pg. 47

"Singers immediately made up long songs about the adventure; and scribes laboriously engraved it on stone, or pressed the words and letters into tablets of wet clay. Runners carried the clay tablets from city to city." Chapter 6, pg. 48

"Father Anu, create the Bull of Heaven! Otherwise I will smash down the doors of the underworld. I will let them stand open so that the dead will rise up and join the living. They will be more numerous; they will eat up all the food of the living so that there will be famine on the earth!" Chapter 7, pg. 52

"The gods turned away their faces in dread, and Anu created the Bull of Heaven." Chapter 7, pg. 52

"But now Gilgamesh danced before the animal luring it with his tunic and bright weapons. Enkidu thrust his sword deep between the nape of the neck and the horns and killed it." Chapter 7, pg. 54

"[Father Anu] asked the gods to decide which one of us should die and Enlil answered, 'Enkidu shall die!'" Chapter 8, pg. 57

"Mother, will I too die... who am two-parts god?"/ "One part of you is man, O Gilgamesh!" Chapter 8, pg.61

"Ah, whither do you run, Gilgamesh? The life you seek you will never find!" Chapter 10, pg. 72

"Then tell me, Utnapishtin, what secret do you know? In what way did you come to be placed among the immortals?" Chapter 12, pg. 77

"O, Enlil, how could you willfully do this thing? You might have punished those who did wrong... you might have wiped out some of the people; but why should you want to destroy mankind?" Chapter 13, pg. 85

"O, Gilgamesh, cease your running hither and thither! Stay in Uruk, my son; take a wife. Have a child that you can lead by the hand. Such is the conformity of life!" Chapter 15, pg. 93

"And what of the man who had no son; have you seen him?"/ "I have seen him; he lies unburied at the foot of the wall and cast-off crusts of bread are his portion!" Chapter 15, pg. 100

"It is decreed, O Gilgamesh, that the dead may not join the living; the living may only join the dead!" Chapter 15, pg. 102

"Like a worm he lay on his face for seven days and seven nights while Enkidu knelt beside him. He was dead, and the earth reached up and swallowed him." Chapter 15, pg. 104

Topics for Discussion

1. Old epics are noted for being highly imaginative. They often possess, however, a considerable proportion of realism. Which episodes in Gilgamesh seem the most realistic, especially in terms of the credibility of the motivation behind important actions?

2. Which of the characters appears to be the most sympathetic and most deserving of the reader's concern? What are the best reasons for this choice?

3. Why does Gilgamesh persist in his quest for eternal life despite all the hardships and words of discouragement? Is his search justified in light of the events and people he encounters?

4. Why does Gilgamesh not immediately consume the "magic weed" so as to regain his youth? Are his motives selfless, or does he hope to gain even more fame and glory when he returns to Uruk?

5. What purposes are served by the dreams that appear in the narrative? Are they merely devices to arouse or maintain reader interest, or do they serve as psychological and thematic elements in the tale?

6. Serpents have often been used as representations of evil. What does the snake that steals the magic weed symbolize? Could it stand for some weakness in Gilgamesh's nature or perhaps in the larger forces of wickedness in the world? Are there parallels with the biblical story of the Garden of Eden?

7. Some readers believe that Enkidu represents the innocence and purity of unspoiled nature, which becomes corrupted when Harim takes him to Uruk and thus the "civilized" world. Is this claim supported by the text? If so, how?

8. What lesson seems to be indicated in the passage in "The Wooing of Ishtar" in which Gilgamesh and Ishtar engage in their heated discussion of the goddess's proposal? Does the episode suggest anything about the ancient attitude toward supernatural beings?

9. What is the significance of the death of Enkidu, both in terms of the events that precede it and those which follow?

Is this character made into a kind of special sacrifice? Does the judgment on him seem fair?

10. In what ways do the illustrations contribute to the tone and atmosphere of the narrative?

Essay Topics

How do the events in *Gilgamesh* compare with other ancient myths? Are there obvious similarities? Differences?

What is the significance of the many seemingly impassable boundaries surrounding the world of Gilgamesh? Do they have a historical, as well as a symbolic impact?

By building the walls of Uruk higher and higher, thus preventing young women from taking lovers and subsequently starting families, what is Gilgamesh effectively doing to his city?

What truly separates gods and men in the world of Gilgamesh? Is it simply power or is there a definite moral disparity? Are these differences true of all the gods?

Why do the elders call for a "wild beast of a man" to face Gilgamesh?

What does it say about Enkidu that he is so compassionate to the animals in the cedar forest?

Why does Gilgamesh himself not travel into the forest to confront Enkidu? Is this cowardice on his part or sagacity?

What is the effect of having Gilgamesh's fate foretold in dreams? Is it simply a structural device or is there a deeper meaning?

Why do Enkidu and Gilgamesh pledge eternal friendship? What is their one major point of disagreement?

Does Gilgamesh truly gain anything from his visit to Utnapishtin or is it simply a mistake?

How do the other gods react to Enlil's wanton destruction of humanity?

According to Enkidu, in the underworld, which man enjoys the kindest fate? Why?

Though he dies childless, what is the legacy of Gilgamesh?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. How does the story line of Gilgamesh compare with those of later heroic tales such as the Iliad, the Odyssey, and the Aeneid? Can at least some of the roots of the classical myths be detected in this epic?

2. Bryson calls Gilgamesh "man's first story." Which of the standard elements of fiction (theme, plot, and characterization) appear most strongly in this text? Can they be evaluated usefully?

For example, is the plot clear? Is the characterization realistic? Does the setting seem genuine?

3. Compare the myths and stories found in Gilgamesh with stories in the Bible. How similar is the tale of Utnapishtim to that of Noah and the Flood? Both Enkidu and Adam were formed from clay by a deity. Are there other similarities between the two texts?

4. Many readers have pointed out that the fears, hopes, and attitudes seen in Gilgamesh are still present in the world today. Is this true? If so, which appear to be the most prevalent?

5. Tragedy is usually defined as the fall of a great hero who endures his fate courageously and nobly. Is this true of Gilgamesh? Can he be compared with Hamlet or Oedipus? In what ways?

6. The story has been pieced together from many different fragments and tablets, and the episodes may not be in the original order. Do the incidents in this text seem to be in the most logical order? How could they be rearranged?

7. Research the archeological background of the Sumerian people. How have archeological excavations helped broaden our understanding of the people, places, and events found in Gilgamesh?

8. One theory about myths is that they help the people in a given community to come to terms with their world more easily. Can any of the lessons in Gilgamesh still be studied with an eye to improving a person's way of dealing with life?

9. A symbol can be defined as any article, force, or even being that stands for some abstract element or agency.

What symbols can be seen in Gilgamesh? Which seem most effective in conveying its message?

10. In Gilgamesh, Vergil's Aeneid, and Dante's Inferno, heroes descend into the Underworld. How do these three visions of the world of the dead compare or contrast with one another? What motivates these humans to undertake their dangerous and harrowing descents?

Further Study

Heidel, Alexander. The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949.

This scholarly book provides a tabletby-tablet translation, with variants, of the epic; there is also a study of parallels between Gilgamesh and the Old Testament.

Kirk, G. S. The Nature of the Greek Myths. Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1974. Kirk discusses the parallels between Gilgamesh and the Greek myths.

Leaning, David Adams. Mythology: The Voyage of the Hero. New York: J. B. Lippincott, 1973. This volume examines major themes of world myths, and includes several passages about Gilgamesh.

Mason, Herbert. Gilgamesh: A Verse Narrative. New York: New American Library, 1970. This verse edition of the epic supplies some interesting and revealing interpretations. It also contains a useful listing of names and places that appear in the story, and a note about the background and themes. An afterword by John H. Marks discusses the history of the texts and several of the many versions of the epic.

Rodman, Selden. Portrait of the Artist as an American. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951. This biography of Ben Shahn provides some interesting and informative background on Bryson.

Sandars, N. K. The Epic of Gilgamesh.

Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1972. This is probably the most readable of the scholarly prose editions of the epic. It includes a detailed and fairly readable introduction, a glossary of names, and a useful map of the ancient Middle East.

Steinberg, S. K., ed. Cassell's Encyclopedia of World Literature. New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1953. The first volume of this reference work contains short but informative articles on Sumerian literature and on Gilgamesh.

Tomlin, E. W. F. The Oriental Philosophers. New York: Harper & Row, 1963. In the chapter on Babylonian philosophy, the author discusses the historical accuracy of the Gilgamesh story and examines several of its themes.

Wolff, Hope Nash. A Study in the Narrative Structure of the Three Epic Poems: "Gilgamesh," "The Odyssey," and "Beowulf." New York: Garland Publishing, 1987. A scholarly study that examines structural similarities among these epics.

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