

Why does Gilgamesh still matter? Why does any ancient epic hero still matter? Why does Achilles or Odysseus still matter? Why does the ancient epic still resonate and inspire people today? An epic hero is an interesting invention—he is made of usually many interesting stories that tell us about ourselves in an earlier stage of civilization—the epic hero is not just an individual. He explains to us why many things in our civilization are the way that they are. Epic heroes often work like foundation myths. They also show us how people can become greater by exemplifying some of the virtues of civilized people.

The Garden of Eden story is not an epic, but it resembles other foundation myths—it tells us that people were disobedient when they were in paradise. So that explains why life is so hard and painful now; it helps explain why people are wicked and why they do spiteful, vicious things sometimes. It also sets up a hierarchy so that the Creator is always on top, and man must obey and obey without challenging the Creator or he will suffer, and his woman will suffer even more and have to obey the Creator and the man, and so on. The story sets up an “orderly” universe where every being has a rank and a station, a place to be, even though we may not think it is fair—it is at least an explanation.

On one level, Gilgamesh explains to us how to live with loss and to overcome the fear of death, which is a journey toward wisdom, and all of us are still on that same journey because everyone has to die. One learns to accept the limits of being a human, for even kings must submit to greater powers. No human gets to literally live forever.

At the same time, Gilgamesh begins as a terrible king. So as a foundation myth he also shows us what happens to tyrants who hurt their people too much; the people pray for help, and a new hero may rise who could be equally strong, Enkidu.

The people don't get the relief they wanted in the way that they wanted it, but ultimately they do get a better, wiser king. In order for a tyrant to grow wise, his life will be hard and inconceivably painful in spite of his superhuman strength and size etc.

(Speaking of that, did you know that if a cubit is roughly 20", then Gilgamesh's foot would be five feet long? (See p. 3). Every stride would then be about ten feet long. To be in the proportions of a human, he would need to be about thirty feet tall! Does that make sense? No. But in an ancient time, size meant power, and power meant privilege and entitlement, so his gigantic size is a way of saying how he is above everyone else.)

So there is a moral that everyone can understand—even the mightiest have to fail, which seems bad. But then even the most proud can be humbled, which turns out well, in the end, after many painful twists. For he becomes mature and wise through suffering. So in the end, the people get what they need from their great hero in spite of everything that the hero wants. The people must get what they need from the epic hero because the epic belongs to the people as a whole—it is a foundation for their national identity.

There is another moral that everyone today can feel the power of—Gilgamesh, as a self-involved, self-aggrandizing, tyrant, thinks he is the greatest and takes anything he likes. But the common people close by suffer, and the wiser ones with true common sense know better. Gilgamesh's quest for glory, which he imagines will make him great, might mean little or nothing in the bigger picture. The quest to slay Humbaba, which Gilgamesh imagines will make him "a name eternal!" (20) actually shows us that wiser people around him all know this is a foolish and terrible idea, including even his own mother. For she complains to the Sun God Shamash, after learning of the quest, "Why did you afflict my son Gilgamesh with so restless a spirit?" (24). In other words, she thinks her son is a fool and she is afraid for him. The great epic hero is a tyrant to his people and a fool to his mother.

But even though this epic hero's tale has many surprises for us, he also seems strangely familiar to us. If you think about various famous celebrities or politicians in the news all the time, I bet you can think of people who are like Gilgamesh, self-involved, self-aggrandizing, thinking he is the greatest and taking anything he likes. But the common people close by him suffer, and the wiser ones with true common sense know better.

But I don't want to ruin the story for those of you who haven't read farther than p. 29.

My main point is that an epic hero establishes large patterns for all later kinds of heroes to evolve away from. Epic as a literary invention is more than just a kind of story. It is a genre that enables a certain kind of imagination. It is different from imagination in the novel and in film, today.

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In Aristotle's *Poetics*, the genres are seen as harmonious and whole and complete. Aristotle writes about tragedy in drama and the epic in poetry. These are genres characterized by a kind of finality that is antithetical to the novel. For the novel is the genre of becoming. The novel as a genre is still forming and open to and pervaded by other genres in a way that the epic and tragedy are not.

The ancient epic has at least three distinguishing features versus the novel:

(1) A national epic past, a past that belongs to a nation, a people, has a sense of absoluteness about it. The epic genre itself seems complete even if the words themselves are on clay fragments.

The national epic past is full of "firsts" and "bests" and "greatests." It has "founders," "peak times," "beginnings."

The epic past is hierarchical; gods and humans have distinct ranks and stations in the cosmos.

The epic hero is generally two dimensional; he or she does not need to have great inner depths.

(Meanwhile, the novel is characterized by relativity rather than absoluteness. Characters are more nuanced and three-dimensional. They can be rising or falling in society; the characters are not fixed. Novel heroes and heroines are in the process of becoming.)

(2) A national tradition is the source for the epic.

Epic discourse is always handed down by tradition; the form itself is permeated by tradition. It's not about a personal point of view but a commonly held tradition. Tradition in the epic is pious, even sacred. It becomes the basis for a national identity. It excludes alternate points of view. (It resembles ancient tragedy in this way, for tragedy began as part of the religious festival to Dionysus.)

(Novels, in contrast, draw upon individual experiences. They often include conflicting views, voices, and even multiple languages. Heightening the power of the genre of the novel, the novel as a genre includes more other genres than any other previous literary genre; novels may include letters, poems, essays, plays, artworks, sketches etc. Personalities, idiosyncrasies, and the voice and tones of the author may all legitimately compete for attention within the novel.)

(3) Epic distance sets the epic world apart from the contemporary world—it is about a remote time and from a remote time where singer and audience once lived.

The epic was never about "today" even when the performers were themselves in what we call ancient times. The epic's represented world has been shifted into this kind of epic past; it was always cut off from the present. The tone is generally serious.

(In contrast, the novel is rooted in the present, so it cannot ever feel as final or finished as any epic. It is filled with things and attitudes from the present that have relative values and more ordinary characters who are closer to the readers in terms of social class. It is about "today" even if it is set in a distant historical time period. The tones can embrace pathos, satire, farce, tragedy, melodrama etc.)

With epic distance, memory is the source for the creative impulse; the tradition of the past is sacred. There is no sense of relativity of the past, yet.

Epic distance creates a powerful sense of completeness; nothing else is needed in this distanced image.

Participation in this discussion counts towards your participation grade. Before we talk as a whole class, you can work in groups of four to five people. You can pick any topic you like, but it's first come first serve. When you answer the questions, you should be able to find examples to share with the class. Make sure that you take notes for yourself! Each group should be able to talk intelligently, **citing specific passages**, to the class for **7-10 minutes**.

1. Brotherhood and friendship are themes that are important in this epic early on. What are the signs that there is a sense of friendship and/or brotherhood between Gilgamesh and Enkidu? In what ways are they alike, and in what ways are they not alike? Which one is more like an epic hero, in your opinion, and explain why one of them is better than the other.
2. What's wrong with Gilgamesh as a character and as a king? What (if anything) is missing in him? How do the people feel about him? Do they love him? Respect him? Fear him? Why does Gilgamesh have the right to deflower the virgins even when they are married? Does anyone love Gilgamesh? Who does he pay attention to, if he pays attention to anyone? Right from the beginning, what is good about Gilgamesh?
3. What's good and bad about Enkidu? Why does having sex with a prostitute change him, and how does it change him? What events and/or characters make him more and more human? Is it a good or a bad thing for him? (You can argue reasonably on both sides of this question.) How do you understand Enkidu and his relationship to nature? Does he fit a particular archetype? Why do the animals leave him after he has sex with a woman?
4. The term "Civilized" can refer to matters of social organization and/or individual behavior. In *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, who might and might not be civilized according to these two different factors? What role does skilled labor (including sex work) have as a mark of civilization? In what way or in what forms might the epic consider sex civilizing?
5. Given that the journey to wisdom is an important theme in the epic, and given that Gilgamesh is called wise in the beginning, are there any signs of wisdom in Gilgamesh in the beginning? Is Enkidu wise in any way in the beginning? What would a wise king do? What should a wise friend do for a king? Does either one seem more or less capable of learning or changing in any way?
6. Draw a graph on the board that shows the progress of the hero Gilgamesh through time (X axis) versus happiness/unhappiness (Y axis, such that above zero is happy and below zero is unhappy). Then do the same thing but this time the Y axis represents worthiness/unworthiness. Plot the major turning points or significant events so far with two separate lines. When he makes himself happier, is he more or less worthy? What can you conclude about the relationship between happiness and worthiness for Gilgamesh so far?
7. Make a list of the female characters in *Gilgamesh*. Write a brief description of each and what she does in the story. What general ideas can you infer about the roles of women in ancient Sumeria?

8. Given that situational irony means that things are not the way that they are supposed to be, what are some of the instances of situational irony in this epic so far? Is there anything situationally ironic about the dreams of Gilgamesh? Why does Gilgamesh propose the journey to confront Humbaba? What does Enkidu say in response to his suggestion? Why do the people of Uruk need to caution Gilgamesh before he sets out? What does this say about their perception of his character?

Last *Gilgamesh* Study Guide Questions pp. 30-100

Participation is based upon your small group work, your freewritings around topics, and your participation in the full class discussion. We will not have time to cover all of these topics today. So pick just one that really interests you, one that you can write your HW log about (250-350 typed double-spaced pages = 10 pts). Important: use evidence and cite page numbers for quotes to support whatever points you want to make. These hard copies are due next Thurs. We can talk about other points, themes, and try to answer any other questions also.

9. In what ways do the gods act like people, and when do they seem most “human”? When do they seem to care about humans, and when do they seem to not care? In what ways do we see people paying respect to the gods, and how well does this work, if it works at all? For example, what is the significance of Gilgamesh and Enkidu’s actions upon slaying Humbaba (pp. 46-47)? See also Tablet VI, when Gilgamesh rejects Ishtar’s advances and she takes her revenge.... Try to think of other examples....

10. What potentially foolhardy actions does Gilgamesh take in the epic? What potentially foolhardy actions does Enkidu take? Why is it that when one of the two must die that the gods decide that Enkidu must die? Is that fair? How does each respect or disrespect the gods?

11. In Tablet VII, how does Gilgamesh try to comfort Enkidu? What is the significance of the curses Enkidu sets upon the hunter and Shamhat? Do these curses demonstrate anything about gender roles and expectations of the time? How does Shamash calm Enkidu (pp. 58-59)? How does Shamash help Enkidu to accept his fate? How is life after death depicted in Enkidu’s dream?

12. When Enkidu dies, Gilgamesh nearly goes mad with grief. He sits by the body until it begins to decay, he puts on the skins of animals, and he searches the wilderness and the underworld for the secret of immortality. Is this because of his love for Enkidu and his desire to bring him back, or is it because Gilgamesh has finally recognized his own mortality and is terrified? Can you think of other epic heroes who visit the lands of the dead? What would it represent to you?

13. In Tablet IX, why does Gilgamesh set out to find Uta-Napishti? How does this quest relate to his quest to slay Humbaba? Are these quests similar or very different? How wise or unwise does Gilgamesh seem now compared to how he was at the start? (p. 70) Is it wise to be afraid of death? What does Shamash have to say in relation to Gilgamesh’s undertaking?

14. In Tablet X, what is Gilgamesh’s strategy upon approaching the tavern-keeper, Shiduri, and Ur-shanabi, the boatman of Uta-napishti? What does his strategy say about his character? Is his strategy successful? What other approaches might he have taken? How do you visualize the scene that presents itself to Gilgamesh as he wanders past the end of the world?

15. Also in Tablet X, Gilgamesh sees his goal as overcoming sorrow, but Uta-Napishti accuses him of chasing sorrow. Explain what each means. How, in the eyes of Uta-Napishti, has Gilgamesh made himself the fool rather than the king? Uta-Napishti explains that human lives do not go on forever. What does he say is eternally true?

16. In Tablet XI, why is Gilgamesh unwilling to fight Uta-Napishti when he finally confronts him? What is Gilgamesh's response to the knowledge that he was unable to resist sleeping? Why does he have this response? Why does Gilgamesh have Ur-Shanabi walk the walls of his city? Have these walls been given special significance as a result of Gilgamesh's journey?

17. In Tablet XI, Uta-napishti tells of the great Deluge. What similarities and differences do you see between the flood story here and the biblical flood story? Why does Ea reprimand Enlil (95)? What specifically is Ea angry with Enlil for, and what would he rather have Enlil done? (95)? What does Gilgamesh learn from this story about the nature of human beings and of the gods? Do you think there is a sense of divine justice for human beings here?

18. At the end of the Standard Version, Gilgamesh appears to have come full circle, walking again the walls of his city and speaking of their origin. In what ways has he changed? How much wiser is he, if he is wiser? What messages or morals do you take from the epic. How could this epic help people to understand their own civilization? What kinds of values does it explore? What would this epic inspire people to do, if anything?

19. Looking over the whole epic, draw a graph on the board that shows the progress of the hero Gilgamesh through time (X axis, such that further to the right means further through time) versus happiness/unhappiness (Y axis, such that above zero is happy and below zero is unhappy). Then do the same thing but this time the Y axis represents worthiness/unworthiness. Plot just the major turning points or significant events so far with two separate lines. When he makes himself happier, is he more or less worthy? Is there a relationship between happiness and worthiness? What can you conclude about the progress of Gilgamesh when you see the whole picture?