

Gilgamesh

A Mesopotamian Epic



Like most epics, the epic of *Gilgamesh* is based on at least a grain of truth. Many scholars believe that Gilgamesh was an actual king who reigned over the city-state of Uruk, in Sumer, sometime between 2700 and 2500 B.C. Gradually, over the centuries, King Gilgamesh became a legendary figure, rather like King Arthur in the European Middle Ages. Tales of Gilgamesh's exploits grew and were probably recited in verse for centuries before they were recorded in writing. The earliest written fragments date from about 2000 B.C. Later the tale was repeated and reworked by writers from the Sumerian, Babylonian, and Assyrian cultures. Some scholars believe that the epic was finally put into its most complete form by a scribe in 1300 B.C.

The Original Epic Hero?

The Gilgamesh of the epic is a superhuman hero, two parts god and one part human. He thus possesses both supernatural powers and human weaknesses, and in many ways it is his human weaknesses that make him so interesting to us and to the ancient peoples who eagerly listened to and learned from his exploits. He is the leader of his people and the builder of a great city, yet he suffers from excessive pride. In fact, it is because he rejects the love of Ishtar, the goddess of love and war, and insults the gods that he suffers the death of his dear friend, Enkidu. Refusing to accept death—"the common lot of man"—Gilgamesh embarks on a quest for immortality. With superhuman strength, courage, and persistence, he confronts obstacles along the way, but he must ultimately contend with human limitations.

Gilgamesh may, in fact, be the original epic hero. Versions of the epic of *Gilgamesh* have been found at sites almost as far north as the Black Sea and as far south as Jerusalem and from the Mediterranean coast eastward to the Persian Gulf. The epic was so widely known that many scholars believe it served as an **archetype**, or model, for hero myths that would appear later in Greece, India, and Persia.

A New Version of the Epic

The story of *Gilgamesh* as we know it today is based on eleven clay tablets containing cuneiform (kyōō·nē'ə·fōm') script—the wedge-shaped characters used as a writing system by ancient Mesopotamians. These tablets were among 25,000 discovered in modern Iraq, at Nineveh, in the buried ruins of the library of King Assurbanipal of Assyria (669–626 B.C.). Nineveh was razed by Persian invaders in 612 B.C., and the original tablets were broken and marred. The recent discovery of older versions of the epic, however, has helped scholars clarify many parts of the story that once were missing or vague.

The epic of *Gilgamesh* reveals a great deal about the ancient Mesopotamians' sometimes pessimistic views of existence, but it also shows us the sensitivity and humanity of the ancient peoples, who are not unlike us in their joys, sorrows, and strivings.

from *Gilgamesh: A Verse Narrative*

Make the Connection

Quickwrite

Although this story is thousands of years old, its two main characters experience some of the same desires and yearnings for adventure as young people do today. They leave the safety of home together to seek adventure, and they take on challenges that will prove their worth—and, perhaps, help them establish a place in the world. Can you think of a pair of “friends to the end” in a contemporary book or movie who also share important adventures together? How does the bond of their friendship help or hinder them? Describe what happens to each character and to their friendship as a result of the challenges they face together.

Literary Focus

The Foil

Many heroes, such as Beowulf, “go it alone,” proudly seeking fame and glory entirely through their own efforts. Sometimes, however, a hero is provided with a companion who serves as his **foil**—a character who sets off the other character through strong contrast. The foil emphasizes the differences between the two characters. A famous example of a foil is Dr. Watson, the practical and down-to-earth companion who accompanies the brilliant, eccentric, and intuitive detective Sherlock Holmes. In *Gilgamesh* the foil is Enkidu, who, in contrast to Gilgamesh, represents the natural man, a pure-hearted and uncomplicated person who is innocent of the ways of civilized society.

A **foil** is a character who helps to define another character by means of contrast.

For more on Foil, see the *Handbook of Literary and Historical Terms*.

Background

Gilgamesh, who is two-thirds god and one-third human, is handsome, courageous, and strong, but he is also impulsive and willful. His people, upset with his tyrannical treatment of them, pray to the gods for relief. In response the gods send a match for Gilgamesh: the wild man Enkidu, reared by animals and unfamiliar with the ways of civilization. The two become close friends, and Enkidu joins Gilgamesh on a series of adventures. Craving an adventure that will bring them fame, they plan a journey to the cedar forest. There they will confront the monstrous guardian of the forest, the evil giant, Humbaba.

As this part of the story opens, Enkidu is terrified of meeting the monster. Gilgamesh urges him on.

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Vocabulary Development

austere (ô·stir') *adj.*: restrained; spare; very plain.

decreed (dē·krēd') *v.*: ordered; commanded.

contortion (kən·tôr'shən) *n.*: twisted shape or motion.

squall (skwôl) *n.*: violent storm that doesn't last very long.



from **Gilgamesh** A Verse Narrative

retold by Herbert Mason

Why are you worried about death?
Only the gods are immortal anyway,
Sighed Gilgamesh.
What men do is nothing, so fear is never

5 Justified. What happened to your power
That once could challenge and equal mine?
I will go ahead of you, and if I die
I will at least have the reward
Of having people say: He died in war

10 Against Humbaba. You cannot discourage me
With fears and hesitations.
I will fight Humbaba,
I will cut down his cedars.
Tell the armorers to build us two-edged swords

15 And double shields and tell them
I am impatient and cannot wait long.

Thus Gilgamesh and Enkidu went
Together to the marketplace

20 To notify the Elders of Uruk
Who were meeting in their senate.
They too were talking of Humbaba,
As they often did,
Edging always in their thoughts
Toward the forbidden.

25 The one you speak of, Gilgamesh addressed them,
I now must meet. I want to prove
Him not the awesome thing we think he is
And that the boundaries set up by gods
Are not unbreakable. I will defeat him
30 In his cedar forest. The youth of Uruk
Need this fight. They have grown soft
And restless.

The old men leaned a little forward
Remembering old wars. A flush burned on



Gilgamesh holding a lion. Relief from the palace of Sargon II (8th century B.C.), Khorsabad, Iraq. Louvre, Paris.

(Top left) detail of mosaic from the Turkish palace of Attalos II (3rd century B.C.). Pergamon Museum, Berlin. The Bridgeman Art Library.



35 Their cheeks. It seemed a little dangerous
 And yet they saw their king
 Was seized with passion for this fight.
 Their voices gave the confidence his friend
 Had failed to give; some even said

40 Enkidu's wisdom was a sign of cowardice.
 You see, my friend, laughed Gilgamesh,
 The wise of Uruk have outnumbered you.

Amidst the speeches in the hall
 That called upon the gods for their protection,
 45 Gilgamesh saw in his friend that pain
 He had seen before and asked him what it was
 That troubled him.

Enkidu could not speak. He held his tears
 Back. Barely audibly he said:
 50 It is a road which you have never traveled.

The armorers brought to Gilgamesh his weapons
 And put them in his hand. He took his quiver,
 Bow and ax, and two-edged sword,
 And they began to march.

55 The Elders gave their austere blessing
 And the people shouted: Let Enkidu lead,
 Don't trust your strength, he knows the forests,
 The one who goes ahead will save his friend.
 May Shamash^o bring you victory. . . .

60 After three days they reached the edge
 Of the forest where Humbaba's watchman stood.
 Suddenly it was Gilgamesh who was afraid,
 Enkidu who reminded him to be fearless.
 The watchman sounded his warning to Humbaba.

65 The two friends moved slowly toward the forest gate.

When Enkidu touched the gate his hand felt numb,
 He could not move his fingers or his wrist,
 His face turned pale like someone's witnessing
 a death,

70 He tried to ask his friend for help
 Whom he had just encouraged to move on,



Gilgamesh between two demigods supporting the sun. Detail from a stone monument (9th century B.C.), Tell Halaf, Syria.

Archaeological Museum, Aleppo, Syria/Dagli Orti. The Art Archive.

59. Shamash (shā'māsh): god associated with the sun and human laws.

Vocabulary

austere (ô·stir') *adj.*: restrained; spare; very plain.



But he could only stutter and hold out
His paralyzed hand.
It will pass, said Gilgamesh.
Would you want to stay behind because of that?
75 We must go down into the forest together.
Forget your fear of death. I will go before you
And protect you. Enkidu followed close behind
So filled with fear he could not think or speak.
Soon they reached the high cedars.

80 They stood in awe at the foot
Of the green mountain. Pleasure
Seemed to grow from fear of Gilgamesh.
As when one comes upon a path in woods
Unvisited by men, one is drawn near
85 The lost and undiscovered in himself;
He was revitalized by danger.
They knew it was the path Humbaba made.
Some called the forest "Hell," and others "Paradise";
What difference does it make? said Gilgamesh.

90 But night was falling quickly
And they had no time to call it names,
Except perhaps "The Dark,"
Before they found a place at the edge of the forest
To serve as shelter for their sleep.

95 It was a restless night for both. One snatched
At sleep and sprang awake from dreams. The other
Could not rest because of pain that spread
Throughout his side. Enkidu was alone
With sights he saw brought on by pain
100 And fear, as one in deep despair
May lie beside his love who sleeps
And seems so unafraid, absorbing in himself the phantoms
That she cannot see—phantoms diminished for one
When two can see and stay awake to talk of them

105 And search out a solution to despair,
Or lie together in each other's arms,
Or weep and in exhaustion from their tears
Perhaps find laughter for their fears.
But alone and awake the size and nature
110 Of the creatures in his mind grow monstrous,
Beyond resemblance to the creatures he had known
Before the prostitute had come into his life.



Figure of a man from the
Square Temple at Tell Asmar
(c. 2750–2600 B.C.), Iraq
National Museum, Damascus
© Giraudon/Art Resource, New York



Gilgamesh (center) depicted on a Chaldean seal.
Bettmann/CORBIS.

115 He cried aloud for them to stop appearing over him
Emerging from behind the trees with phosphorescent^o eyes
Brought on by rain. He could not hear his voice
But knew he screamed and could not move his arms
But thought they tried to move
As if a heavy weight he could raise
Or wriggle out from underneath
120 Had settled on his chest,
Like a turtle trapped beneath a fallen branch,
Each effort only added to paralysis.
He could not make his friend, his one companion, hear.

125 Gilgamesh awoke but could not hear
His friend in agony, he still was captive to his dreams
Which he would tell aloud to exorcise:^o
I saw us standing in a mountain gorge,
A rockslide fell on us, we seemed no more
Than insects under it. And then
130 A solitary graceful man appeared
And pulled me out from under the mountain.
He gave me water and I felt released.

135 Tomorrow you will be victorious,
Enkidu said, to whom the dream brought chills
(For only one of them, he knew, would be released)
Which Gilgamesh could not perceive in the darkness
For he went back to sleep without responding
To his friend's interpretation of his dream.

114. phosphorescent
(fās'fə-res'ənt) *adj.*: giving
off light after being exposed
to heat.

126. exorcise *v.*: to drive out.



- 140 Did you call me? Gilgamesh sat up again.
Why did I wake again? I thought you touched me.
Why am I afraid? I felt my limbs grow numb
As if some god passed over us drawing out our life.
I had another dream:
This time the heavens were alive with fire, but soon
- 145 The clouds began to thicken, death rained down on us,
The lightning flashes stopped, and everything
Which rained down turned to ashes.
What does this mean, Enkidu?
- That you will be victorious against Humbaba,
150 Enkidu said, or someone said through him
Because he could not hear his voice
Or move his limbs although he thought he spoke,
And soon he saw his friend asleep beside him.
- At dawn Gilgamesh raised his ax
155 And struck at the great cedar.
When Humbaba heard the sound of falling trees,
He hurried down the path that they had seen
But only he had traveled. Gilgamesh felt weak
At the sound of Humbaba's footsteps and called to Shamash
- 160 Saying, I have followed you in the way decreed;
Why am I abandoned now? Suddenly the winds
Sprang up. They saw the great head of Humbaba
Like a water buffalo's bellowing down the path,
His huge and clumsy legs, his flailing arms
- 165 Thrashing at phantoms in his precious trees.
His single stroke could cut a cedar down
And leave no mark on him. His shoulders,
Like a porter's^o under building stones,
Were permanently bent by what he bore;
- 170 He was the slave who did the work for gods
But whom the gods would never notice.
Monstrous in his contortion, he aroused
The two almost to pity.
But pity was the thing that might have killed.
- 175 It made them pause just long enough to show
How pitiless he was to them. Gilgamesh in horror saw
Him strike the back of Enkidu and beat him to the ground
Until he thought his friend was crushed to death.
He stood still watching as the monster leaned to make



Man carrying a goat, from a Sam'al
basalt bas-relief (c. 730 B.C.).

Pergamon Museum, Berlin. The Bridgeman
Art Library.

168. porter *n.*: person who
carries things for other people.

Vocabulary


decreed (dē•krēd') *v.*: ordered; commanded.

contortion (kən•tōr•shən)

180 His final strike against his friend, unable
To move to help him, and then Enkidu slid
Along the ground like a ram making its final lunge
On wounded knees. Humbaba fell and seemed
To crack the ground itself in two, and Gilgamesh,
85 As if this fall had snapped him from his daze,
Returned to life
And stood over Humbaba with his ax
Raised high above his head watching the monster plead
In strangled sobs and desperate appeals
10 The way the sea contorts under a violent squall.
I'll serve you as I served the gods, Humbaba said;
I'll build you houses from their sacred trees.

Enkidu feared his friend was weakening
And called out: Gilgamesh! Don't trust him!
As if there were some hunger in himself
That Gilgamesh was feeling
That turned him momentarily to yearn
For someone who would serve, he paused;
And then he raised his ax up higher
And swung it in a perfect arc
Into Humbaba's neck. He reached out
To touch the wounded shoulder of his friend,

And late that night he reached again
To see if he was yet asleep, but there was only
Quiet breathing. The stars against the midnight sky
Were sparkling like mica° in a riverbed.
In the slight breeze
The head of Humbaba was swinging from a tree.


Babylonian sculpture
of head of Humbaba
carved to resemble
intestines
(c. 1800–1600 B.C.).
British Museum, London.
The Bridgeman Art
Library.



206. **mica** *n.*: kind of thin, crystalline mineral.