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The Legacy of Gilgamesh

The ancient Sumerian poem *The Epic of Gilgamesh* is an exceptional work in the world of literature. It is practically unrivaled as a masterpiece, if only for that fact that even in the current day, its startling insights are as relevant as they were thousands of years ago, when the tales of the title character and real-life Mesopotamian ruler were first recorded. Wisdom and tragedy are woven together throughout *Gilgamesh* with fascinating mythological accounts of his travels and adventures. In the stories, Gilgamesh starts out as a leader chastised by the people of his city, Uruk, for his arrogance and restless ways. He has been endowed by the gods with strength, beauty, and other attributes of which he is keenly aware, and his citizens start to complain about him. The gods respond to their outcries by creating Enkidu, a man born a savage who becomes a great friend to Gilgamesh and is accepted by him as his equal. The pair set out on a few misadventures hoping to become famous heroes and, in doing so, to make themselves known to future generations. Unfortunately, tragedy strikes, Enkidu dies, and the reeling Gilgamesh redirects himself on a futile quest for immortality. *The Epic of Gilgamesh* is ripe with humanity and stunning observations that reveal themselves further with every reading. However, there are three prominent commentaries found throughout the piece that are particularly extraordinary. These commentaries center on the fear of death, on dissatisfaction, and on the gifts of being human.

In *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, the title character's fear of death shows from the very beginning, and this thematic aspect colors everything that he does. At first, Gilgamesh fixates on leaving a legacy as a hero and adventurer. He sets out to kill the forest guardian Humbaba so that he can leave "an enduring name," one that will be remembered by his children and for every generation thereafter. Though Gilgamesh and his companion Enkidu speak about not acting "foolhardy," their adventures are tainted with misguided ambition. Of the Humbaba incident, the textbook notes that "their victory is not a simple, glorious triumph," and "its meaning is unclear." The second major event, in which the pair is forced by circumstances involving Gilgamesh to destroy the Bull of Heaven, is deemed "another ambiguous success." Neither Gilgamesh nor Enkidu reap any great personal reward from their actions; in fact, their confrontation with the Bull leads to Enkidu's death. Gilgamesh's preoccupation with his legacy, combined with his "stormy heart" and restless nature, suggest that he feared death long before his fear became apparent to him. He is human, a mortal, yet he rages endlessly against his inevitable death by attempting to make himself forever beloved and, later on, by searching for the key to eternal life. The outcomes of his actions lead the reader to draw some vital conclusions. One is that, in the face of death, lists of accomplishments often lose their importance, and thus it can be determined that there are other aspects of life more valuable than achievements. Another conclusion is that a person's level of death acceptance impacts how they live and how they inventory their life's worth. What would have happened to Gilgamesh if he had been more accepting of his and his friend's mortality? Perhaps his various quests would not have been necessary; maybe Enkidu's death would have been an event he could overcome. *The Epic of Gilgamesh* gives its readers cause to think about what is important to them and how they will live in light of their eventual

deaths. As the character Utnapishtim tells Gilgamesh, "There is no permanence," and it is a theme for all to heed.

In addition to the fear of death, a subject frequently visited in *The Epic of Gilgamesh* is dissatisfaction. Gilgamesh is the ruler of a vast city, has all the qualities a person could find useful, and maintains a good relationship with the gods thanks to his status as predominantly divine. Yet in his life Gilgamesh is always searching for something, and even in finding a rare and true friend like Enkidu, he is not at peace. Enkidu, too, is in want of something beyond his reach: Born among animals, he becomes civilized but then yearns for the life he cannot return to. It was a simpler existence, emptier perhaps, but more satisfying in the end. His experience resembles that of humankind as a whole, which was not content with feral living and so shifted from the woods into cities and societies. But this was not a complete solution, as Gilgamesh laments: "Here in the city man dies oppressed at heart, man perishes with despair in his heart." Gilgamesh is described by the textbook as "a mixture of human and divine," while Enkidu is "a blend of human and wild animal"; it is apparently their common thread of humanity that sentences them both to restlessness. Gilgamesh's existential dissatisfaction is not only stirred up by his natural versus civilized and human versus divine dilemmas—he is also upset by common, everyday disappointments, such as love that proves fleeting (as his harsh reaction to Ishtar's proposal illustrates). His general dissatisfaction leads Gilgamesh to devalue life at the same time that he fears death, and when he finds himself displeased by mortality, he looks for the secret to eternal life. But as the character Siduri tells him, "You will never find the life for which you are looking." What *The Epic of Gilgamesh* expresses so expertly is that all people, no matter their walk of life or the myriad blessings they have received, can be bogged down by simple restlessness and disappointment. There is much about life that seems unjust or insufficient, but as

it was for Gilgamesh, having unrealistic expectations causes unhappiness that could be cured by acceptance and a change of perspective. Gilgamesh never seems especially grateful for all that he has, be it his divine heritage, his position as the ruler of Uruk, or the fact that he had, for some time anyway, a friend as true as Enkidu to call his own. Instead he searches for things that cannot be found, dwelling on his worries rather than considering his good fortune and leaving little room for his wants to be sated. The *Epic* gives its readers good reason reevaluate what they have and view life with realistic eyes.

After the fear of death and feelings of dissatisfaction, a third focal point of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* is human life and the pleasures that make it worthwhile. The most obvious necessities for Gilgamesh and Enkidu are companionship. Clearly the two are friends until the end, cherishing one another as though they are brothers. Each had been lonely before they met, and each finds healing through their mutual devotion. The depth of Gilgamesh's feeling for Enkidu is most evident after the latter's death: Gilgamesh gives a speech to the counselors of Uruk naming all of the many people who will mourn Enkidu, then sets out on a great journey to find Utnapishtim in light of it. It is sadly apparent from Gilgamesh's example that nothing is worth more than the people you love, and nothing can replace them once they are gone. Enkidu also acknowledges the value of companionship as he lies dying and thinks back on his old life, saying, "I too once in the wilderness with my wife had all the treasure I wished." Other simple pleasures can make life meaningful as well. The wise Siduri faces a weary Gilgamesh and tries to impress upon him the beauty of being human. She acknowledges its tragic element first, saying, "When the gods created man they allotted to him death, but life they retained for their own keeping." In other words, how long a person has on earth is not up to them but rather in the will of higher powers, and there is something sorrowful and perhaps unfair about that lack of

control. But as Siduri knows, there are experiences specific to human existence that can bring immense joy. She advises Gilgamesh, “Fill your belly with good things; day and night, night and day, dance and be merry, feast and rejoice. Let your clothes be fresh, bathe yourself in water, cherish the little child that holds your hand, and make your wife happy in your embrace; for this too is the lot of man.” In spite of the tragic elements, there is profound beauty evident in human life. *The Epic of Gilgamesh* shows that the littlest wonders in life, those that are obtainable for all, are the only ones that truly matter.

There is a beautiful irony in *The Epic of Gilgamesh* that explains part of the stories' monumental splendor. The real-life Gilgamesh was a ruler whose life was on display to all of his people; he sought adventure and found only "ambiguous" success, then sought immortality and failed in his quest. If the stories are founded in reality, it could be said that the great leader might have lost sense of the meaning of his life as it drew to a close. Yet just as his literary alter ego was divine in heritage and fated to kingship, the real man reached a supreme importance during his unusual life, and his position as ruler of Uruk seems destined even to the modern skeptic’s eye. Gilgamesh remains relevant still millennia after his death, though not for the reasons he had wished: He has been granted immortality through this work not because his adventures were grand but because they failed; and not because he believed his life to be meaningful but because people throughout time have found lessons in the way that he lived. In many respects, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* teaches its audience how to live, and its suggestions are universal and independent of place and time. It muses poignantly on the fear of death, on the commonality of dissatisfaction, and on the rich potentials of human experience. And so from the life of a man who never found any answers, there came a work of staggering profundity that carries many.