

First Name

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Text: *Gilgamesh*

Passage: “Bitterly Gilgamesh wept for his friend Enkidu ... ‘I will reveal to you a mystery, I will tell you a secret of the gods’” (30-35). – In short, the entire section titled “The Search for Everlasting Life.”

Question: With respect to Enkidu’s loss, how does Gilgamesh transition from a man of disillusionment to a man of existential ideals, persistent in a search for one’s own meaning in life?

Issues: The thematic and pattern issues are analyzed in the excerpt. A major theme of *Gilgamesh* is the understanding and searching for the meaning of life. Throughout the course of the epic, Gilgamesh develops an understanding that, although life is transient, it can be worthwhile if one makes optimal use of his/her time. The chosen passage highlights a critical transition towards his newfound insight. In addition, the structure of certain passages and text contribute towards the theme by accentuating the opposing tones of disillusionment as well as rebirth and renewal.

Critical Approaches: The New Criticism approach is selected as a means to examine the question. The approach is concerned with how the specific elements of text collectively enforce a solid conclusion of interpretation. In this passage, diction, tone and symbolism reflect the disillusioned state Gilgamesh is immersed in following Enkidu’s death. Furthermore, details and textual patterns reveal Gilgamesh’s perseverance through overwhelming obstacles to ultimately discover a meaning to his life when it seems that all is lost.

Answer: Gilgamesh’s visions of an everlasting camaraderie with Enkidu are shattered in the wakes of Enkidu’s tragic death. Although Gilgamesh is initially trapped psychologically in a state of disillusionment and despair, several textual details gauge his transformation into an individual whose fervent thirst to find out the truths of life for himself overcomes the seemingly absurd and daunting task at hand. The impact of Enkidu’s death on Gilgamesh is aptly described through diction when Gilgamesh claims that “despair is in [his] heart” (30) and that “since Enkidu went, [his] life is nothing” (31). Gilgamesh’s comments, especially the selective word choice of “despair” and “nothingness”, reflect beliefs prevalent in existential philosophy – the world is irrationally cruel and there can be no reliance on divine forces, but rather on only on one’s self, to create meaning out of nothingness. As Gilgamesh embarks on his quest for truth, he encounters warnings that “no mortal man has gone into the mountain; the length of it is twelve leagues of darkness...in it there is no light...” (31). Yet Gilgamesh is willing to through himself

in dangerous waters, suggesting that he transcends the mere “mortal man” and that his actions epitomize the existential notion of finding meaning for one’s self, no matter what the cost. Soon, Gilgamesh finds himself traversing the mountains, where “at the end of [however many] leagues the darkness was thick and there was no light, he could see nothing ahead and nothing behind him” (31). The text is repeated a staggering twelve consecutive times, and serves to emphasize both the disillusioned emptiness Gilgamesh is wallowing in, as well as his extraordinary commitment to seek the truth. When Gilgamesh finally nears the end of the mountains, he sees “the dawn light” and that the “sun streamed out” (31), which are symbolic of a rebirth in Gilgamesh’s character. No longer is the protagonist paralyzed in a world of despair, but ready to seek the meaning of life. Despite jeers from Siduri that he is “wandering over the pastures in search of the wind” (32), which can be interpreted as a fruitless endeavor that ends with no reward, Gilgamesh is resolute that he will not give up, but rather continue the search for life’s truths. At last, Siduri and Utnapishtim impart some of life’s truths – “dance and be merry” (33) while one still lives, for “there is no permanence” (35). The wisdom behind Siduri and Utnapishtim’s words again highlight the existentialist belief to create meaning for one’s self while one can. As Gilgamesh finds out life’s truths, his transition from a disillusioned man to one who seeks his own purpose also manifests aspects of existentialism through several literary elements.