

The Epic of Gilgamesh

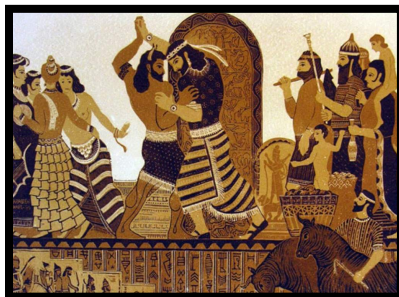
[The various NeoSumerian stories about Gilgamesh of Uruk and the *Epic of Atrahasis* were fashioned into an epic about Gilgamesh undergoing a hero's journey.]



1. The Birth of Enkidu

Two-thirds god, Gilgamesh was King of Uruk, but he was a very cruel king. When his subjects cried out to the gods to save them from his oppression, the gods sent the goddess Arurru to create a great menace to distract Gilgamesh, so that he would be far too distracted to oppress his

people. Out of clay from the earth, she created the primitive man Enkidu, who was covered in hair and lived in the wild with the animals. Enkidu is spotted by a trapper, whose livelihood is being ruined, because Enkidu is uprooting his traps. The trapper tells the sun-god Shamash about the man, and it is arranged for Enkidu to be tamed by the goddess Shamhat. After two weeks of teaching Enkidu about the ways of civilization, she takes him to a shepherd's camp to learn how to be civilized. Gilgamesh, meanwhile, has been dreaming about the imminent arrival of a beloved new friend, and he asks his mother (the goddess Ninsun) to help him interpret his dreams. While that is happening, Shamhat brings Enkidu to the shepherds' camp, where he is introduced to a human diet and becomes the night watchman. Learning from a passing stranger about Gilgamesh's cruelty, Enkidu travels to Uruk to fight Gilgamesh. Yet after a fierce battle, Enkidu



acknowledges Gilgamesh's superior strength, and they become friends.



2. Gilgamesh and Humbaba

In order to become famous, Gilgamesh proposes a journey to the Cedar Forest to slay the monstrous demigod Humbaba. Despite warnings from Enkidu and the council of elders, Gilgamesh remains resolute, so the elders give Gilgamesh advice for his journey. Gilgamesh then visits his mother, the goddess Ninsun, who seeks the support and protection of the sun-god Shamash for her son's adventure. Ninsun adopts Enkidu as her son, and Gilgamesh leaves instructions for the governance of Uruk for his

absence. When Gilgamesh and Enkidu enter the Cedar Forest, Humbaba insults and threatens them. Gilgamesh is afraid, but with Enkidu's encouragement, the battle commences. The mountains quake with the tumult, and the sky turns black. The god Shamash sends 13 winds to bind Humbaba, and he is captured. Humbaba pleads for his life, and Gilgamesh pities him. The monster Humbaba offers to make Gilgamesh king of the forest, to cut the trees for him, and to be his slave. Yet, Enkidu argues that Gilgamesh should kill Humbaba to establish his reputation forever.



Humbaba curses them both, and Gilgamesh kills Humbaba with a blow to the neck. After that, Gilgamesh & Enkidu cut down many cedar trees, including a gigantic tree that Enkidu plans to fashion into a gate for the temple of Enlil. They build a raft and float home along the Euphrates with the giant tree.

3. Ishtar and the Bull of Heaven

Due to her mistreatment of previous husbands (such as Tammuz), Gilgamesh rejects a marriage proposal from the goddess Ishtar. Insulted

by the rejection, Ishtar asks her father Anu to send the Bull of Heaven to avenge her. The god Anu states that if he gives her the Bull of Heaven, Uruk will face 7 years of famine. In exchange for the bull, Ishtar provides Anu with food for 7 years. Ishtar leads the Bull of Heaven to the city of Uruk, and it causes widespread devastation. It lowers the level of the Euphrates river, and it dries up the marshes. It opens up huge pits that swallow 300 men. Without any help from the gods, Enkidu and Gilgamesh kill the Bull of Heaven, and they offer up its heart to the sun god Shamash.



When Ishtar cries out, Enkidu hurls the bull's limbs at her. When the news of the bull's death had reached Uruk, the people of the city rejoiced. Yet that evening, Enkidu had an ominous dream.

4. The Death of Enkidu

In Enkidu's dream, the gods decide that one of the heroes must die, because they killed Humbaba. Despite the protestations of Shamash, Enkidu is marked for death. Enkidu curses the great door he has fashioned for Enlil's temple. He also curses the trapper and Shamhat for removing him from the wild. Shamash reminds Enkidu of how Shamhat fed him, clothed him, and introduced him to Gilgamesh. Shamash tells Enkidu that Gilgamesh will bestow great honors upon him at his funeral, and will wander into the wild consumed with grief. Enkidu regrets his curses, and he blesses Shamhat. Yet in a second dream, he sees himself being taken captive to the Netherworld by a terrifying Angel of Death. The underworld is a "house of dust" and darkness whose inhabitants eat clay, and are clothed in bird feathers, supervised by terrifying beings. For twelve days, Enkidu's condition worsens. Finally, after lamenting that he could not meet a heroic death in battle, he dies.

Gilgamesh clings to Enkidu's body and denies that he has died until a maggot drops from the corpse's nose. Gilgamesh calls upon mountains, forests, fields, rivers, wild animals, and all of Uruk to mourn for his friend. Recalling their adventures together, Gilgamesh tears at his hair & clothes in grief. He commissions a funerary statue, and provides grave gifts from his royal treasury to ensure that Enkidu has a favorable reception in the realm of the dead. A great banquet is held where the treasures are offered to the gods of the underworld. After that, Gilgamesh wandered into the wild consumed with grief. He roamed the wild wearing animal skins,



grieving for Enkidu. Now fearful of his own death, he decided to find his ancestor Utnapishtim, because Utnapishtim was an immortal who was born mortal.

5. The Quest for Immortality

Gilgamesh crosses a mountain pass at night, and hides from a pride of lions. Before sleeping, he prays for protection to the moon god Sin. Then, waking from a good dream, he kills the lions & uses their skins for clothing. After a long and perilous journey, Gilgamesh arrives at the twin peaks of Mount Mashu at the end of the earth. He comes across a tunnel, which no man has ever entered, guarded by two scorpion monsters, who appear to be a married couple. The husband tries to dissuade Gilgamesh from passing, but the wife intervenes, expresses sympathy for Gilgamesh, and allows his passage. He passes under the mountains along the Road of the Sun. In complete darkness, he follows the road for a day. He arrives at the garden of the gods, which is a paradise full of jewel-laden trees. Gilgamesh meets the hospitable maiden Siduri, who assumes that he is a murderer or a thief because of his disheveled appearance. Gilgamesh tells her about the purpose of his journey. She attempts to dissuade him from his quest, but sends him to the ferryman Urshanabi, who will help him cross the sea to Dilmun, where Utnapishtim lives. Urshanabi instructs Gilgamesh to cut down 120 trees and fashion them into a small boat. When they finally reach the island where Utnapishtim lives, Gilgamesh recounts his story, asking Utnapishtim for help. Yet, Utnapishtim reprimands him, declaring that trying to cheat death is futile & diminishes life's joys.



Gilgamesh observes that Utnapishtim seems no different from himself, and asks him how he obtained his immortality. Utnapishtim explains that the gods decided to send a great flood. Ea gave Utnapishtim precise dimensions, and it was sealed with pitch and bitumen. Utnapishtim's entire family went aboard together with his craftsmen and all of the animals of the field. Then, a violent storm arose, which caused the terrified gods to retreat to the heavens. Ishtar lamented the wholesale destruction of humanity, and the other gods wept beside her. The storm lasted six days and nights, after which all of the human beings turned to clay. Utnapishtim weeps when he sees the destruction. Utnapishtim's boat became lodged on a mountaintop, where he released a dove, a swallow, and a raven. When the raven failed to return, he opened the ark and freed its inhabitants. Utnapishtim offered a sacrifice to the gods, who smelt the sweet savor and gather around. Ishtar vowed that, just as she will never forget the brilliant necklace that hangs around her neck, she will always remember this time. When Enlil became angry that there were survivors, Ishtar chastised him for causing the flood. Enki also scolded him for sending a disproportionate punishment. Feeling guilt, regret, and remorse, Enlil did three things: he blessed Utnapishtim & his wife, he made them immortal, and he nicknamed Utnapishtim "Atraḫasīs".¹

Now, when Enlil had granted eternal life to Utnapishtim & his wife, it was a unique gift, which was given *only* to Utnapishtim & his wife. As if to demonstrate this point, Utnapishtim challenges Gilgamesh to stay awake for six days & seven nights. In the end, Gilgamesh finally falls asleep.

¹ In the Akkadian language (spoken by the Babylonians), the name "Atraḫasīs" (𒀠𒄠𒂗𒊩𒌆𒊕) means "Very Wise".

Gilgamesh, who is seeking to cheat death, cannot even conquer sleep. Urshanabi the ferryman washes Gilgamesh & clothes him in royal robes, and then they depart for Uruk. As they are leaving, Utnapishtim's wife tells her husband to offer a parting gift. Utnapishtim tells Gilgamesh that at the bottom of the sea there lives a plant that can make him young again. Gilgamesh, by binding stones to his feet so he can walk on the bottom, manages to obtain the plant. Yet when Gilgamesh stops to bathe, it is stolen by a serpent, who sheds its skin as it departs. Gilgamesh weeps at the futility of his efforts, because he has now lost all chance of immortality. In the end, he finally returns to Uruk, where he spends the rest of his life a compassionate ruler.



Ten Questions about the *Epic of Gilgamesh*

1. In literature and the arts, situational irony occurs when something unexpected happens in a story. In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, what is ironic about the fact that Gilgamesh and Enkidu became friends?
2. In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, friendship plays an important role in Gilgamesh's transformation (and growth) as a person, but *how* does friendship do so?

3. In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Enkidu cursed the trapper and Shamhat, but then he quickly regretted his curses, and he blessed Shamhat.

(a) Why did Enkidu curse the trapper and Shamhat?

(b) Why did Enkidu quickly regret cursing the trapper and Shamhat?

4. In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, why did Gilgamesh want to become immortal?

5. In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, why did Gilgamesh think that Utnapishtim could help him become immortal?

6. According to the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, why couldn't Utnapishtim help Gilgamesh become immortal?
7. In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, how did Utnapishtim compare sleep to death?
8. In literature, the *moral* of a story is a lesson to be learned from the story. Now that you have read the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, what is the moral of the story?
(Hint: Think about the test that Utnapishtim challenges Gilgamesh to take.)

9. Gilgamesh is the hero of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, which is the oldest known tale of a hero's journey. Taking into account the story as a whole (from beginning to end), how did Gilgamesh transform (or change) as a person? How did his character develop throughout the story. By the end of the story, did he *lose* character flaws that he had in the beginning of the story? *Why* or why *not*? Explain. By the end of the story, did he *gain* character flaws that he did not have in the beginning of the story? *Why* or why *not*? Explain.

10. Two part question -

- (a) Now that you are familiar with the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, was he a **good** person, a **bad** person, or *neither* a **good** person *nor* a **bad** person? For your answer to that question, make sure to provide evidence from the epic. [As part of your answer, explain what you think it means for someone to be a **good** person, and explain what you think it means for someone to be a **bad** person. (If you believe that there's *no such thing* as a **good** person or a **bad** person, explain why you think so.)]
- (b) In light of your answer to part(a) of question #10, recall how you read four Sumerian myths about Gilgamesh for an earlier assignment. Now that you also have read the Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, have you changed your mind about Gilgamesh? *Why* or *why not*? Explain. (If you need to go back to the earlier assignment on the four Neo-Sumerian Gilgamesh stories, please do not hesitate to do so.)