

from *The Epic of Gilgamesh*

translated by
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Background *Gilgamesh* is a story shaped by centuries of storytellers who lived in ancient Mesopotamia, a region between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Life in the desert region was simultaneously subject to poverty and plenty, opportunity and danger. Frequent floods enriched the soil, but they were also violent and unpredictable. The flat terrain left cities open to invaders. Ancient Near-Eastern religion reflected the insecurities of life in the region. For Mesopotamians, the underworld was a dreary, inhospitable place, and the quarreling, all-too-human gods had absolute control over human destiny.

The hero's quest is a theme found in the literature of many peoples. Usually, the hero must suffer a number of ordeals in the course of this search, yet this suffering leads to a special knowledge or understanding that could not otherwise have been gained. Gilgamesh's bravery, both during his journey and in battle, was legendary; such a role model may have been exceedingly necessary in a culture and time of tribal invasions. Nonetheless, accounts of this famous king—two thirds a god and one third a man—and his quest for everlasting life may have served as a lesson in accepting one's mortality for generations of listeners.

Critical Viewing ▶ In this statue of Gilgamesh holding a lion, which details reflect the legend that Gilgamesh was two thirds a god and one third a man? **[Explain]**



Prologue

I will proclaim to the world the deeds of Gilgamesh. This was the man to whom all things were known; this was the king who knew the countries of the world. He was wise, he saw mysteries and knew secret things, he brought us a tale of the days before the flood. He went on a long journey, was weary, worn-out with labor, returning he rested, he engraved on a stone the whole story.

When the gods created Gilgamesh they gave him a perfect body. Shamash the glorious sun endowed him with beauty, Adad the god of the storm endowed him with courage, the great gods made his beauty perfect, surpassing all others, terrifying like a great wild bull. Two thirds they made him god and one third man.

In Uruk he built walls, a great rampart, and the temple of blessed Eanna¹ for the god of the firmament Anu, and for Ishtar the goddess of love. Look at it still today: the outer wall where the cornice runs, it shines with the brilliance of copper; and the inner wall, it has no equal. Touch the threshold, it is ancient. Approach Eanna the dwelling of Ishtar, our lady of love and war, the like of which no latter-day king, no man alive can equal. Climb upon the wall of Uruk; walk along it, I say; regard the foundation terrace and examine the masonry: is it not burnt brick and good? The seven sages² laid the foundations.

The Battle With Humbaba

When the people of Uruk complain about Gilgamesh's arrogance, the goddess Aruru creates Enkidu to contend with the king and absorb his energies. At first, Enkidu lives like a wild animal and has no contact with other humans. Later, he enters Uruk, loses a wrestling match to Gilgamesh, and becomes his faithful friend. Then the two set off to destroy Humbaba, the giant who guards the cedar forest. As Gilgamesh prepares for battle, Enkidu expresses his fears.

1. **In Uruk . . . Eanna** Uruk was an important city in southern Babylonia, with temples to the gods Anu and Ishtar. Eanna was the temple site where these gods were worshiped.
2. **seven sages** legendary wise men who civilized Mesopotamia's seven oldest cities.

Literary Analysis

Archetype: The Hero's Quest What hints does the Prologue give about Gilgamesh's quest?

Reading Strategy

Understanding the Cultural Context What can you conclude about life in Gilgamesh's day from the importance placed on the rampart, or defensive wall, and other city walls?

Reading Check

Why does the goddess Aruru create Enkidu?

Then Enkidu, the faithful companion, pleaded, answering him, "O my lord, you do not know this monster and that is the reason you are not afraid. I who know him, I am terrified. His teeth are dragon's fangs, his countenance is like a lion, his charge is the rushing of the flood, with his look he crushes alike the trees of the forest and reeds in the swamp. O my lord, you may go on if you choose into this land, but I will go back to the city. I will tell the lady your mother all your glorious deeds till she shouts for joy: and then I will tell the death that followed till she weeps for bitterness." But Gilgamesh said, "Immolation and sacrifice are not yet for me, the boat of the dead³ shall not go down, nor the three-ply cloth be cut for my shrouding. Not yet will my people be desolate, nor the pyre be lit in my house and my dwelling burnt on the fire. Today, give me your aid and you shall have mine: what then can go amiss with us two? All living creatures born of the flesh shall sit at last in the boat of the West, and when it sinks, when the boat of Magilum sinks, they are gone; but we shall go forward and fix our eyes on this monster. If your heart is fearful throw away fear; if there is terror in it throw away terror. Take your ax in your hand and attack. He who leaves the fight unfinished is not at peace."

Humbaba came out from his strong house of cedar. Then Enkidu called out, "O Gilgamesh, remember now your boasts in Uruk. Forward, attack, son of Uruk, there is nothing to fear." When he heard these words his courage rallied; he answered, "Make haste, close in, if the watchman is there do not let him escape to the woods where he will vanish. He has put on the first of his seven splendors but not yet the other six, let us trap him before he is armed." Like a raging wild bull he snuffed the ground; the watchman of the woods turned full of threatenings, he cried out. Humbaba came from his strong house of cedar. He nodded his head and shook it, menacing Gilgamesh; and on him he fastened his eye, the eye of death. Then Gilgamesh called to Shamash and his tears were flowing, "O glorious Shamash, I have followed the road you commanded but now if you send no succor how shall I escape?" Glorious Shamash heard his prayer and he summoned the great wind, the north wind, the whirlwind, the storm and the icy wind, the tempest and the scorching wind; they came like dragons, like a scorching fire, like a serpent that freezes the heart, a destroying flood and the lightning's fork. The eight winds rose up against Humbaba, they beat against his eyes; he was gripped, unable to go forward or back. Gilgamesh shouted, "By the life of Ninsun my mother and divine Lugulbanda my father, in the Country of the Living, in this Land I have discovered your dwelling; my weak arms and my small weapons I have brought to this Land against you, and now I will enter your house."

So he felled the first cedar and they cut the branches and laid them at the foot of the mountain. At the first stroke Humbaba blazed out, but still they advanced. They felled seven cedars and cut and bound the

3. **boat of the dead** ceremonial boat on which the dead were placed.

Vocabulary Builder

immolation (im' ə lā' shən)
n. offering or killing made as a sacrifice

Literary Analysis

Archetype: The Hero's Quest and Characterization According to Gilgamesh, what character traits are required to battle a fierce enemy like Humbaba?

Vocabulary Builder

succor (suk' ə r) *n.* aid; relief

Literary Analysis

Archetype: The Hero's Quest and Characterization What do Gilgamesh's calls to Shamash—and Shamash's tremendous response—reveal about Gilgamesh's own powers and their limitations?

branches and laid them at the foot of the mountain, and seven times Humbaba loosed his glory on them. As the seventh blaze died out they reached his lair. He slapped his thigh in scorn. He approached like a noble wild bull roped on the mountain, a warrior whose elbows are bound together. The tears started to his eyes and he was pale, "Gilgamesh, let me speak. I have never known a mother, no, nor a father who reared me. I was born of the mountain, he reared me, and Enlil made me the keeper of this forest. Let me go free, Gilgamesh, and I will be your servant, you shall be my lord; all the trees of the forest that I tended on the mountain shall be yours. I will cut them down and build you a palace." He took him by the hand and led him to his house, so that the heart of Gilgamesh was moved with compassion. He swore by the heavenly life, by the earthly life, by the underworld itself: "O Enkidu, should not the snared bird return to its nest and the captive man return to his mother's arms?" Enkidu answered, "The strongest of men will fall to fate if he has no judgment. Namtar, the evil fate that knows no distinction between men, will devour him. If the snared bird returns to its nest, if the captive man returns to his mother's arms, then you my friend will never return to the city where the mother is waiting who gave you birth. He will bar the mountain road against you, and make the pathways impassable."

Humbaba said, "Enkidu, what you have spoken is evil: you, a hireling, dependent for your bread! In envy and for fear of a rival you have spoken

Reading Check

Which god helps Gilgamesh in the battle against Humbaba?

evil words." Enkidu said, "Do not listen, Gilgamesh: this Humbaba must die. Kill Humbaba first and his servants after." But Gilgamesh said, "If we touch him the blaze and the glory of light will be put out in confusion, the glory and glamour will vanish, its rays will be quenched." Enkidu said to Gilgamesh, "Not so, my friend. First entrap the bird, and where shall the chicks run then? Afterwards we can search out the glory and the glamour, when the chicks run distracted through the grass."

Gilgamesh listened to the word of his companion, he took the ax in his hand, he drew the sword from his belt, and he struck Humbaba with a thrust of the sword to the neck, and Enkidu his comrade struck the second blow. At the third blow Humbaba fell. Then there followed confusion for this was the guardian of the forest whom they had felled to the ground. For as far as two leagues the cedars shivered when Enkidu felled the watcher of the forest, he at whose voice Hermon and Lebanon used to tremble. Now the mountains were moved and all the hills, for the guardian of the forest was killed. They attacked the cedars, the seven splendors of Humbaba were extinguished. So they pressed on into the forest bearing the sword of eight talents.⁴ They uncovered the sacred dwellings of the Anunnaki⁵ and while Gilgamesh felled the first of the trees of the forest Enkidu cleared their roots as far as the banks of Euphrates.⁶ They set Humbaba before the gods, before Enlil; they kissed the ground and dropped the shroud and set the head before him. When he saw the head of Humbaba, Enlil raged at them. "Why did you do this thing? From henceforth may the fire be on your faces, may it eat the bread that you eat, may it drink where you drink." Then Enlil took again the blaze and the seven splendors that had been Humbaba's: he gave the first to the river, and he gave to the lion, to the stone of execration⁷ to the mountain and to the dreaded daughter of the Queen of Hell.

O Gilgamesh, king and conqueror of the dreadful blaze; wild bull who plunders the mountain, who crosses the sea, glory to him, and from the brave the greater glory is Enki's!⁸



4. **talents** large units of weight and money used in the ancient world.
5. **Anunnaki** gods of the underworld.
6. **Euphrates** (yōō frāt' ēz) river flowing from eastern Turkey generally southeastward through Syria and Iraq.
7. **execration** (ek' si krā' shen) *n.* cursing, denunciation.
8. **Enki's** belonging to Enki, god of wisdom and one of the creators of human beings.

Literature in Context

Cultural Connection

Ancient Gods and Goddesses

The Babylonians adopted much of the religion of the ancient Sumerians, including their gods and goddesses, though they often used different names for them. Listed below are some of the gods and goddesses mentioned in *Gilgamesh*:

- **Adad** (ā' dad): god of storms and weather
- **Anunnaki** (ā nōō nā' kē): Anu's sons, gods of the underworld
- **Anu** (ā' nōō): father of gods; the god of the heavens
- **Aruru** (ā rōō' rōō): goddess of creation
- **Ea** (ā' ā), also called **Enki** (en' kē): god of waters and wisdom
- **Enlil** (en lil'): god of earth, wind, air, and agriculture
- **Irkalla** (ir kā' lē), also called **Ereshkigal** (er esh kē' gāl): queen of the underworld
- **Ishtar** (ish' tār): goddess of love and war; patron goddess of the city of Uruk
- **Namtar** (nām' tār): god of evil fate
- **Ninurta** (nē nur' tē): god of war, wells, and irrigation
- **Samuqan** (sām' ōō kân): god of cattle
- **Shamash** (shā' māsh): the sun god; also a lawgiver
- **Siduri** (sē dōō' rē): goddess of wine

Connect to the Literature

Which of these gods or goddesses have the most impact on the characters in *Gilgamesh*?

The Death of Enkidu

Gilgamesh rejects the advances of Ishtar, goddess of love. In revenge, she brings the mighty Bull of Heaven down to threaten Uruk. Gilgamesh and Enkidu kill the bull, but Enkidu dreams that the gods have decreed his death for helping to slaughter the bull and Humbaba. Enkidu is furious at his fate until Shamash, the sun god, allays some of his anger. Then Enkidu describes another dream about death.

As Enkidu slept alone in his sickness, in bitterness of spirit he poured out his heart to his friend. "It was I who cut down the cedar, I who leveled the forest, I who slew Humbaba and now see what has become of me. Listen, my friend, this is the dream I dreamed last night. The heavens roared, and earth rumbled back an answer; between them stood I before an awful being, the **somber**-faced man-bird; he had directed on me his purpose. His was a vampire face, his foot was a lion's foot, his hand was an eagle's talon. He fell on me and his claws were in my hair, he held me fast and I smothered; then he transformed me so that my arms became wings covered with feathers. He turned his stare towards me, and he led me away to the palace of Irkalla, the Queen of Darkness, to the house from which none who enters ever returns, down the road from which there is no coming back.

"There is the house whose people sit in darkness; dust is their food and clay their meat. They are clothed like birds with wings for covering, they see no light, they sit in darkness. I entered the house of dust and I saw the kings of the earth, their crowns put away for ever; rulers and princes, all those who once wore kingly crowns and ruled the world in the days of old. They who had stood in the place of the gods like Anu and Enlil, stood now like servants to fetch baked meats in the house of dust, to carry cooked meat and cold water from the water-skin. In the



Vocabulary Builder

somber (sām' bər) *adj.*
dark; gloomy

Reading Check

According to Enkidu, what actions resulted in dreams about his own death?

Critical Viewing

Which details in this crown make it a worthy symbol for a king? [Speculate]

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house of dust which I entered were high priests and acolytes⁹ priests of the incantation and of ecstasy; there were servers of the temple, and there was Etana, that king of Kish whom the eagle carried to heaven in the days of old. I saw also Samuḡan, god of cattle, and there was Ereshkigal the Queen of the Underworld; and Belit-Sheri squatted in front of her, she who is recorder of the gods and keeps the book of death. She held a tablet from which she read. She raised her head, she saw me and spoke: 'Who has brought this one here?' Then I awoke like a man drained of blood who wanders alone in a waste of rushes; like one whom the bailiff¹⁰ has seized and his heart pounds with terror."

9. **acolytes** (ak' ə līts) *n.* attendants; faithful followers.
 10. **bailiff** (bā' if) *n.* court officer; law officer.

Critical Reading

1. **Respond:** Is Gilgamesh the kind of hero that you admire? Why or why not?
2. (a) **Recall:** According to the Prologue, what combination of god and man is Gilgamesh? (b) **Analyze Cause and Effect:** How might this combination affect him as a leader?
3. (a) **Recall:** Why does the goddess Aruru create Enkidu? (b) **Infer:** Why do you think Enkidu and Gilgamesh eventually become good friends?
4. (a) **Recall:** Before the battle, what does Enkidu tell Gilgamesh about Humbaba? (b) **Interpret:** In his response, what attitude does Gilgamesh display toward death?
5. (a) **Recall:** What material has Humbaba used to build his house? (b) **Draw Conclusions:** What do the repeated references to cedar trees and Humbaba's offer of them in exchange for his life suggest about their value to this culture?
6. (a) **Summarize:** Summarize the battle with Humbaba, and identify Enkidu's role in it. (b) **Compare and Contrast:** What differences between Gilgamesh and Enkidu does the battle reveal?
7. (a) **Speculate:** What do you think will happen to Enkidu, and how do you think Gilgamesh will react? (b) **Support:** Which details led you to this conclusion?
8. (a) **Evaluate:** How effective is Gilgamesh as a leader? (b) **Apply:** In what way is he both like and unlike other strong leaders you have seen or read about?

Vocabulary Builder

incantation (in' kan tā' shən)
n. chant

ecstasy (ek' ste sē) *n.* great joy

from *The Epic of Gilgamesh*

Background

In the early sections of *Gilgamesh*, the goddess Aruru creates Enkidu to temper Gilgamesh's arrogance and his dynamic energies. Enkidu quickly becomes the king's valued companion. After many glorious battles, Enkidu dies, and Gilgamesh, greatly saddened by his death, goes on a quest for immortality. He seeks Utnapishtim and his family, the only humans who have defeated death. Will Utnapishtim explain how a human might achieve immortality? Will the king return to his people with the knowledge of everlasting life? Find the answers to these questions in "The Story of the Flood" and "The Return" from *Gilgamesh*.

The Story of the Flood

"You know the city Shurruapak, it stands on the banks of Euphrates? That city grew old and the gods that were in it were old. There was Anu, lord of the firmament, their father, and warrior Enlil their counselor, Ninurta the helper, and Ennugi watcher over canals; and with them also was Ea. In those days the world teemed, the people multiplied, the world bellowed like a wild bull, and the great god was aroused by the clamor. Enlil heard the clamor and he said to the gods in council, 'The uproar of mankind is intolerable and sleep is no longer possible by reason of the babel.' So the gods agreed to exterminate mankind. Enlil did this, but Ea because of his oath warned me in a dream. He whispered their words to my house of reeds, 'Reed-house, reed-house! Wall, O wall, harken reed-house, wall reflect: O man of Shurruapak, son of Ubara-Tutu; tear down your house and build a boat, abandon possessions and look for life, despise worldly goods and save your soul alive. Tear down your house, I say, and build a boat. These are the measurements of the barque as you shall build her: let her beam equal her length, let her deck be roofed like the vault that covers the abyss;¹ then take up into the boat the seed of all living creatures.'

"When I had understood I said to my lord, 'Behold, what you have commanded I will honor and perform, but how shall I answer the people, the city, the elders?' Then Ea opened his mouth and said to me, his

Vocabulary Builder

teemed (tēmd) *v.* was full of; swarmed

babel (bab' əl) *n.* confusion of voices or sounds

Reading Check

What arouses the ire and frustration of Enlil?

1. like ... **abyss** like the firmament, or heaven, that covers the depths.