

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

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Gilgamesh (18th-17th Centuries B.C.)

Babylonia Epic

Ashurbanipal If any text of Ancient Near Eastern *imagination* has crossed into the cultural mainstream of the Hebraic/Greco-Roman tradition, it is *Gilgamesh*, an Akkadian/Babylonian epic of 2900 lines, found on eleven clay tablets, dating in its most complete form to the seventh century B.C., and in that form best preserved in the Palace and Temple libraries of the ruler of Assyria, King Ashurbanipal (685-627 B.C.). (The oldest fragments of the text probably go back to the 18th century B.C., and a variety of versions studied the intervening centuries.) Six or seven other versions of the 'text' have been found in Iraq, but the epic itself has been known to the world only for the last century and a half. This fact could go far to explaining the partial *but only partial* incorporation of this epic into our literary canon, though a degree of cultural otherness plays a part in the difficulty of our access to this work. Famed though *Gilgamesh* is for its universal human values, and now internationally known and studied, the looming figures, the potent epic forces at work here remind us of another epic created nearer to our time, but equally 'strange,' *Beowulf*. The chief manuscript of *Beowulf* was destroyed in a fire in the early 18th century A. D., and only introduced into our cultural awareness in 1815, thanks to the work of editors and scholars.

Story of Gilgamesh The epic of *Gilgamesh* 'concerns' certain exploits of an Assyrian king who flourished around 2700 B.C.; in other words we deal here with an historical figure of the—already at the time of the writing of the epic—distant past, a figure whose exploits are cast onto the screen of mythical thinking, and through whose destiny we rehearse many of the profound rites of the human condition. (This text is more than a quest for selfhood; it is an exploration of the depths of the human condition: the meanings of friendship, the love of adventure, the fear of death and longing for immortality, the exhausting delights of lust.) These rites will make themselves clear to the reader as he/she passes through the reading of this epic.

Gilgamesh as a developing person Through many versions of the text Gilgamesh remains the perceiving center. From the start 'the hero' speaks to us from under a cloud—he is guilty of having mistreated the citizens of Uruk, oppressing the men, invoking the *droit du seigneur* with the women. To tame him the mother goddess creates Enkidu, a force of nature, mankind in the primitive state of oneness with nature 'before the fall.' This formulation of the nature-culture divide—which reminds us of the imagination of Jean Jacques Rousseau—enriches itself throughout the epic, as Gilgamesh ultimately joins Enkidu in close friendship, in searing adventures, and ultimately in the terrifying experience of his friend's death. Gilgamesh's consequent dread of death leads him to seek immortality, in classic encounter with the Ur-Noah, Utanpishtim, who has survived death, but who in the end cannot rescue Gilgamesh from the common fate.

Reconstructing the Text From clay tablets inscribed with cuneiform, and broken repeatedly through the centuries, we inherit a text full of lacunae, which must be reconstructed in places or left for lost, depending on the judgment of the editor. The text with which we are left acquires a certain additional power and archaic depth from the stark brokenness of the tale. The search for selfhood, which drives Gilgamesh, replicates itself in the tenacity with which 'scholars' have struggled, for over a century, to reconstruct these eleven tablets, on which some of the boldest human self-analyses are worked through.

Reading

The Epic of Gilgamesh, Translated, with an introduction, by Maureen Kovacs

Ziolkowski, *Gilgamesh Among Us*

-*Bedford Anthology of World Literature, Book 1. Boston: Bedford-St. Martins, 2004.*
--*Gilgamesh, Book 1, 791-7*

Discussion Questions

Idea: Different Perspectives - What seem to you the chief differences in perspective, between the Gilgamesh vision of the world and that of Hesiod and Ovid? Is Gilgamesh a mythological poem? What kind of archaic religious perspectives seem to you embedded in this work?

Theme: Friendship - What draws Gilgamesh and Enkido together? In what ways do their characteristics help them complement each other?

Theme: Journey - What stages does Gilgamesh undergo in his quest for immortality? What obstacles does he encounter? Does he learn anything at a particular stage to help him in his further quest? Which of Gilgamesh's qualities would make him a hero in the modern world? Do any recent figures exhibit those qualities?

The German/Swiss philosopher/psychologist, Carl Jung, established an influential theory of archetypes, pervasive and repetitive patterns of human psychology, which dominate the deeper strata of our mental life; one of his followers, Maud Bodkin, transferred his basic notions into the study of literature, and of the archetypes to which great works of literature give expression. It is plausible to view the major themes of *Gilgamesh*—the love/friendship relationship, the quest for immortality, the heroic defeat of the monster-giant, the vulnerability to the sexual passion—as examples of such archetypal patterns, by which masterpieces from world literature can reveal certain interrelationships. What do you think of this idea of Bodkin's, and how explanatory do you find it, for a text like *Gilgamesh*?

In *Gilgamesh* human themes are deeply plumbed—as we imply in the previous question, above. Do you *feel* that *Gilgamesh* is a work embedded in an historical situation, expressing group memory and attitude, or do you *feel* you are dealing with an individual creator's work? Whichever *feeling* you have, can you support it with some hard evidence? If not, why not?

Utanapishtim, Humbaba, Innana, Enkidu: in these 'minor characters' *Gilgamesh* displays what at first sight seems almost a novelist's skill at perception and depiction. Have these 'characters' that concrete universal richness which brings, say, a Shakespearean character (Falstaff? Hamlet?) to unanalyzable life? Or are these figures in archaic epic more nearly abstractions, representing distinctive *roles* in the human condition?