

# BACKGROUND

## THE GILGAMESH EPIC

### What Is the Gilgamesh Epic?

The Gilgamesh epic is a long narrative poem about a Sumerian king named Gilgamesh who lived between 2700 and 2500 B.C.—an era about twenty-three times more distant from us than our own Revolutionary War. Although this poem is probably the oldest work you have ever read, its concerns are timeless and universal: how to become known and respected, how to cope with the loss of a dear friend, and how to accept one's own inevitable death.

Unlike modern books, this epic does not have a single author. Stories about King Gilgamesh were told and handed down by Sumerians for hundreds of years after his death. By the twenty-first century B.C., however, these tales existed in written form. When the Babylonians conquered the Sumerians soon afterward, they inherited the Sumerian cultural tradition. A Babylonian author, borrowing from some of these tales, created a unified epic about the legendary Sumerian king. Other Babylonian writers modified the epic and, in the seventh century B.C., it was included in the library of the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal.

The Gilgamesh epic was an international favorite of its time, translated into many ancient Near Eastern languages. After the fall of Babylonia, however, the story survived only in folklore. The written epic was lost until archeologists excavated Ashurbanipal's library in the last century. They discovered the poem written on clay tablets in cuneiform, the wedge-shaped writing used by the Babylonians. Archeologists were especially excited by the portion of the epic describing a great flood, an account remarkably similar to the story of Noah's ark in the Bible.

### A Summary of the Story

The men of Uruk, an ancient Sumerian city, complain about the arrogance of Gilgamesh, their king, who is part god and part man. Their lament is heard in heaven, and the goddess Aruru creates Enkidu to contend with Gilgamesh and offer him an outlet for his energy. At first, Enkidu lives like a wild man, on friendly terms with gazelles and other beasts. Then Gilgamesh hears about Enkidu and sends a woman to entice him. She draws him into a relationship, alienates him from the wild beasts, and urges him to search out Gilgamesh in the city-state of Uruk. Meanwhile, Gilgamesh has dreams that foretell the coming of a companion for him. Before Enkidu goes to Uruk, however, he lives with a group of shepherds and protects their herd from wolves and lions.

Entering Uruk, Enkidu confronts Gilgamesh just as the king is about to claim his right to sleep with a subject's bride. Enkidu blocks his way, and the two mighty men wrestle, "holding each other like bulls." Gilgamesh wins after a hard-fought battle, but the king and the wild man become fast friends.

### A Name for Himself

Eager to make a name for himself, Gilgamesh takes Enkidu on a mission to slay the giant who guards a distant cedar forest. With the help of the sun-god Shamash, the heroes succeed in killing this giant.

Ishtar, the goddess of love, sees Gilgamesh in his splendor after the victory. She tries to seduce him, offering him gifts like "a chariot of . . . gold." He not only rejects her overtures but re-

cites for her all the ways in which she has wronged her former lovers. Furious, she sends the Bull of Heaven to destroy him. Gilgamesh and Enkidu kill the bull; however, Enkidu dreams that the gods have ordered him to die for helping to kill the giant and the Bull of Heaven. Soon afterward, he does perish.

### The Search for Everlasting Life

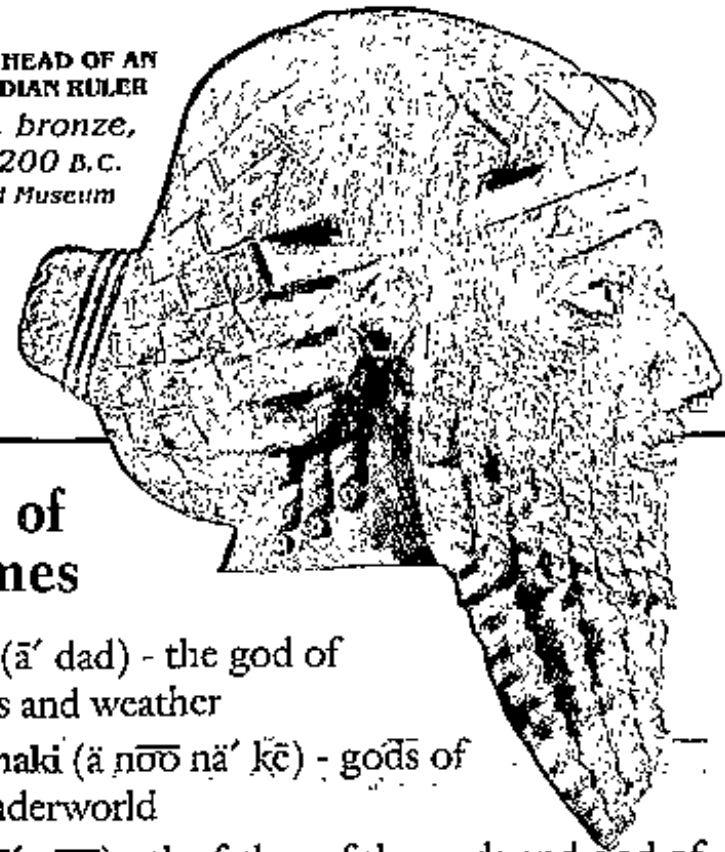
Gilgamesh bitterly laments his friend's death: "O Enkidu, my brother/You were the axe at my side,/My hand's strength . . ." Worried now about his own mortality, Gilgamesh goes in search of everlasting life. He seeks out Utnapishtim, a man who survived the great flood and who will live forever. On his quest Gilgamesh has many adventures. He kills lions in the mountains; passes through the mysterious Mount Mashu, guarded by Man-Scorpions; encounters the winemaker Siduri, who advises him to "be merry, feast, and rejoice"; and crosses the waters of death with the ferryman Urshanabi.

### "There Is No Permanence"

When Gilgamesh finally reaches Utnapishtim, he receives the disappointing news that "There is no permanence." Then Utnapishtim tells him the story of the great flood that wiped out all human life but his own. After hearing this story, Gilgamesh tries to resist sleeping for six days and seven nights to prove that he can attain immortality. He is unsuccessful: As with all humans, death is the dark reality; immortality is out of his grasp. Nevertheless, before the hero returns to Uruk with the ferryman Urshanabi, Utnapishtim tells him about a plant, growing underwater, that magically restores youth. Gilgamesh dives for this plant and finds some to take back to Uruk as an offering to his people. On the journey home, however, a serpent steals this sweet flower. The king is bitterly disappointed, but there is nothing he can do. When the travelers reach Uruk, Gilgamesh shows Urshanabi the famous walls of the city.

Sometime later, Gilgamesh dies and is lamented by his "people . . . , great and small." Death, then, completes the cycle of life.

HEAD OF AN  
AKKADIAN RULER  
Ninevah, bronze,  
2300-2200 B.C.  
Baghdad Museum



### List of Names

**Adad** (ā' dad) - the god of storms and weather

**Annunaki** (ā nōō nā' kē) - gods of the underworld

**Anu** (ā' nōō) - the father of the gods and god of the sky

**Belit-Sheri** (bel' ēt sher' ē) - the scribe for the underworld gods

**Ea** (ā' ä) - the god of the waters and of wisdom; also called **Enki** (en' kē)

**Enkidu** (en' kē dōō) - Gilgamesh's friend and adviser

**Enlil** (en lil') - the god of earth, wind, and air

**Gilgamesh** (gil' gā mesh') - the hero of the epic, king of Uruk

**Humbaba** (hum bā' bā) - the giant who guards the cedar forest

**Irkalla** (ir kā' lā) - the queen of the underworld; also known as **Ereshkigal** (er esh kē' gāl)

**Ishtar** (ish' tār) - the goddess of love

**Namtar** (nām' tār) - the god of evil fate

**Samuqan** (sām' ōō kān) - the god of cattle

**Shamash** (shā' māsh) - the sun god

**Shurruapak** (shə rōō' pāk) - an ancient Sumerian city, eighteen miles northwest of Uruk

**Urshanabi** (ur' shə nā bē) - Utnapishtim's ferryman

**Uruk** (ōō' rōok) - an ancient Sumerian city on the Euphrates river

**Utnapishtim** (oot nā pēsh' tēm) - the Mesopotamian Noah, survivor of the great flood

# READING CRITICALLY

## Sumerian, Egyptian, and Hebrew Literature

### Historical Context

Situated on the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, ancient Mesopotamia was simultaneously a region of plenty and poverty, opportunity and danger. Frequent floods created rich soil. Yet floods could also be violent and unpredictable, and the summer droughts could turn the soil to dust and wither crops. With its two major rivers, the region was ideally situated for trade. However, the flat alluvial plain, without forests or other natural obstacles, left the region open to invaders.

Between 2500 and 500 B.C., Mesopotamia was invaded repeatedly. Those who built the first great civilization on the two rivers, the Sumerians, gave way to the Babylonians and Assyrians. As often happens, however, the conquerors adopted the culture of the conquered. *The Epic of Gilgamesh* itself is eloquent testimony to this fact. This tale of a Sumerian ruler was shaped by Babylonians and preserved in the library of a great Assyrian king.

### Cultural Context

Ancient Near-Eastern religion reflected the insecurities of life in a region threatened by flood and invaders. Mesopotamians believed, for example, that humans were created only to serve the gods. These unpredictable, quarreling, working, eating, drinking, and all-too-human gods had absolute control over human destiny. Also, Mesopotamians envisioned the underworld as a dreary and inhospitable place.

### Literary Context

Both the Sumerians and the Babylonians had schools of scribes who created a varied and impressive literature. Among the works they produced were essays, proverbs, dialogues, myths, hymns, and epics. As the *Gilgamesh* tale passed through the hands of these authors, it was continually reshaped. The Babylonians, who fashioned the epic as we know it today, added the prologue and flood story and emphasized the friendship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu. Most important, they gave the narrative its central theme: the search for immortality.

On the following pages is part of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. The annotations in the margin point out the historical context, cultural context, and literary context.

from **The Epic  
of Gilgamesh**  
translated by N. K. Sandars

## 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.

**Cultural Context:** Some scholars consider this poem an epic rather than a myth since its protagonist, or main character, is a hero, not a god. The recitation of epics was probably accompanied by music. Sumerians and Babylonians were familiar with such instruments as harps and lyres, drums, and pipes of reed and metal.

**Literary Context:** The first words of the epic in Akkadian are *Sha nagba imuru*, meaning "He who saw everything" or "he who saw the abyss." They refer to Gilgamesh, who looks into the abyss and finds wisdom.

**Historical Context:** Ancient Mesopotamians divided history into two parts—before the Flood and after the Flood. Before the Flood great sages ruled the land. These sages received instruction in developing civilization from Ea, the god of the waters and of wisdom. After the Flood kings like Gilgamesh ruled the land.



**Front of lyre from tomb of Queen Pu-abi at Ur. Recitations of epics and tales may have been accompanied by music from lyres like this one.**

*Early Dynastic period,  
c. 2685–2290 B.C.  
British Museum, London*

**Historical Context:** The city-state of Uruk was located in what is now southern Iraq. Uruk was a powerful and wealthy city-state. In ancient times, it was a king's chief function to protect his people. Building walls around the city was therefore a notable achievement.

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 Eanna<sup>1</sup> 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 sages<sup>2</sup> laid the foundations.

## The Battle with Humbaba

**Literary Context:** Babylonian writers stressed the friendship between Enkidu and Gilgamesh, which is not such a consistent theme in the Sumerian sources. Gilgamesh sets off to slay Humbaba in order to make a name for himself. The way making a name for yourself grants a type of immortality is another important theme in literature.

**Literary Context:** Humbaba is presented as a personification of what is evil. Since Shamash the sun god—the god of goodness and light—supports Gilgamesh's endeavor, the battle takes on mythic proportions.

*When the people of Uruk complain about Gilgamesh's arrogance, the goddess Aruru creates Enkidu to contend with the king and absorb his en-ergies. 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.*

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 glori-

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.



ous 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 dead<sup>3</sup> 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."

#### Cultural Context:

Gilgamesh's last statement expresses part of the code of the warrior-king. A battle must be fought to its conclusion.

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."

#### Literary Context:

In calling for Shamash's help Gilgamesh reveals that he is human and vulnerable, not a god.

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 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

**Cultural Context:** In many Eastern cultures, seven is the number of completion or perfection. Belief in the power of the number seven is apparent even today when we speak of "lucky seven."

3. boat of the dead: A ceremonial boat on which the dead were placed.



**Bronze head from Nineveh.**  
**Gilgamesh probably looked**  
**something like this warrior.**  
*Imperial Akkadian II-III Phase,*  
*c. 2415-2290 B.C.*  
*Iraq Museum, Baghdad*

**Literary Context:** Enkidu  
 guesses that if Humbaba is  
 snared, he will prove a  
 dangerous foe. Here,  
 Enkidu demonstrates that  
 he is shrewder and less  
 trusting than Gilgamesh.

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."

**Literary Context:**  
 Gilgamesh seems to be  
 afraid that, when the light  
 goes out, the forest will be  
 utter darkness.

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 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.<sup>4</sup> They uncovered the sacred dwellings of the Anunnaki<sup>5</sup> and while Gilgamesh felled the first of the trees of the forest Enkidu cleared their roots as far as the banks of Euphrates.<sup>6</sup> 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 execration,<sup>7</sup> 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!<sup>8</sup>

## Enkidu's Dream of the Underworld

*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.*

**Cultural Context:** Enlil was the father of the gods, the most important of the Sumerian deities. There is a conflict of interest between Enlil, who is angry at the death of Humbaba, and Shamash, who helped bring it about. The episode of the flood, which appears later in the epic, reveals further differences among the gods.

**Cultural Context:** The ancient Sumerians viewed the underworld as a bleak abode where little distinction was made between those who did evil on earth and those who did good. Only leaving loved ones on earth to keep their names alive offered any respite for the dead.

4. talents: Large units of weight and money used in the ancient world.

5. Anunnaki: Gods of the underworld.

6. Euphrates (yōō frāt' ēz): A river flowing from Turkey generally southward through Syria and Iraq, joining the Tigris River.

7. execration (ek' si krā' shān) *n.*: Cursing, denunciation.

8. Enki's: Belonging to Enki, god of wisdom and one of the creators of human beings.



**Cultural Context:** The underworld, ruled by Ereshkigal (also known as Irkalla) and Nergal, included the deities mentioned here and special officers called *gallas*. The realm of the dead was a large region below the earth, comparable to the sky above. The Sumerians believed that this lower region could be reached through special openings and gates in Uruk and other major cities. Sumerian myth, however, is uncertain as to the exact location of Ereshkigal's seven-gated palace.

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 forever; 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 house of dust which I entered were high priests and acolytes,<sup>9</sup> priests of the incantation<sup>10</sup> 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 Samuqan, 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 bailiff<sup>11</sup> has seized and his heart pounds with terror."

9. acolytes (ak' ə līts') *n.*: Attendants, faithful followers.

10. incantation (in' kan tā' shən) *n.*: Chanting of magical words.

11. bailiff (bāl' if) *n.*: Court officer or law officer

**Reader's Response** Would you like to have been Gilgamesh's companion? Why or why not?

## THINKING ABOUT THE SELECTION

### Clarifying

1. For which qualities and achievements is Gilgamesh praised in the prologue?
2. Briefly summarize the battle with Humbaba.
3. What role do the dead play in the palace of Irkalla?

### Interpreting

4. What does the prologue suggest about the values of ancient Mesopotamians?
5. Gilgamesh is described as being "two thirds" a god "and one third man." What conflicts might arise from such a combination?
6. When Gilgamesh and Enkidu debate whether to fight Humbaba, what is Gilgamesh's attitude toward death?
7. How important is Enkidu's role in the battle with Humbaba? Support your opinion with specific passages from the epic.
8. (a) Identify the figure of speech that occurs at the end of the selection. (b) How does it contribute to the mood?

### Applying

9. Some scholars have characterized the ancient Mesopotamian outlook on life as pessimistic. Find passages in the epic that support or disprove this assertion and explain your choices.

## ANALYZING LITERATURE

### Understanding Conflict

An **archetype** is a pattern or theme that recurs in many different cultures. One such archetype, which appears in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, is the battle between the forces of good (or light) and those of evil (or darkness). It is around this **conflict**, or struggle between two forces, that this episode of the epic is built.

In the battle with the giant Humbaba, Gilgamesh and Enkidu are on the side of goodness and light. They are representatives of Shamash, who is the god of light himself.

1. How does Enkidu's description of Humbaba reveal that the giant is evil?
2. Humbaba is the guardian of a forest. Why might a forest be associated with an evil or demonic being?
3. Does Shamash's role in the battle diminish the heroes' achievement? Why or why not?
4. What other tales have you read or seen dramatized in which the forces of good combat the forces of evil?

## CRITICAL THINKING AND READING

### Contrasting Gilgamesh and Enkidu

Although friends, Gilgamesh and Enkidu differ in important ways. The king, for example, is a civilized man of the city, while his companion lived in the wilderness among wild beasts. The battle with Humbaba and Enkidu's dream bring out other contrasts between the two heroes.

1. (a) How do Gilgamesh and Enkidu differ in their willingness to fight and willingness to spare their opponent? (b) What do these disagreements suggest about their different natures?
2. Why do you think that Enkidu, rather than Gilgamesh, is marked for death by the gods and dreams about the underworld?

## THINKING AND WRITING

### Creating an Imaginary Underworld

Enkidu's dream contains a memorable description of the Babylonian Underworld. In "the palace of Irkalla," the mysterious, birdlike dead "sit in darkness" consuming "dust" and "clay." Imagine that you are Enkidu. Continue relating your dream. Take into account such factors as the food, if any, of the dead, their appearance, and the location of this underworld. If you like, you can even include dialogue. When you revise your dream, make sure you have used language that appeals to more than one sense. Will your readers be able to visualize the inhabitants you have created and to see the strange world in which they dwell? Finally, proofread your paper and share it with your classmates.

# GUIDE FOR INTERPRETING

## Commentary

### *from The Epic of Gilgamesh*

**The Hero and His Quest.** The turning point of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* is the death of Enkidu. Gilgamesh is deeply troubled by this event: "Hear me, great ones of Uruk, / I weep for Enkidu, my friend, / Bitterly moaning like a woman mourning / I weep for my brother." The king cannot accept the inevitability of death, and with all the energy of his proud and restless nature, he begins a quest, or search, for everlasting life. He determines to find Utnapishtim, survivor of an ancient flood and the only man to whom the gods have granted immortality. Up until this time, Gilgamesh was ambitious for glory. He undertook the battle with the giant Humbaba in order to rid the land of evil and create a name for himself. Now he is not concerned with fame. He does not want survival in story and song but immortal life in his own body.

The hero's **quest**—a search for immortal life or some kind of secret knowledge—is a theme found in the folklore and literature of many peoples. Usually, the hero must suffer a number of ordeals in the course of this search. This suffering can be compared to an initiation. In fact, the initiation into a club or fraternity resembles in a minor way the difficulties faced on a quest. In both situations, suffering leads to special knowledge or privileges.

Like any serious quest, Gilgamesh's journey is dangerous because it takes him past the boundaries of the familiar world. He travels to distant places known only in legend, such as "the great mountains . . . which guard the rising and the setting sun." His appearance, too, becomes less and less civilized as he journeys farther from Uruk. He wears animal skins, and his cheeks look "drawn." Ironically, he is now more of a wild man, just as Enkidu was when he roamed with gazelles and other beasts.

Not only does the king's quest take him over the edge of the map, but it also takes him backward in time to an unimaginably ancient past. In speaking with Utnapishtim, Gilgamesh will be encountering a man whose memories predate any known historical records. He will be journeying back to the legendary beginnings of his people.

## Writing

Gilgamesh searches out Utnapishtim to gain a vital piece of knowledge. Describe a conversation in which an adult or a friend gave you vital knowledge about yourself and your place in the world.

# from The Epic of Gilgamesh

## The Story of the Flood

*Enkidu dies, and greatly saddened by his death, Gilgamesh goes on a quest for immortality. He journeys through the mysterious mountain of Manshu, encounters the sun-god Shamash and the goddess Siduri, and travels across the Ocean to Utnapishtim, whose name means "He Who Saw Life." Utnapishtim and his family are the only humans who have been granted immortality. When Gilgamesh asks him how he has defeated death, Utnapishtim tells the following story.*

"You know the city Shurrupak, 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 Shurrupak, 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

**Detail of alabaster relief from the Palace of King Sargon II (721-705 B.C.) at Khorsabad. This ship, which is transporting timber, conveys some idea of Mesopotamian vessels.**

*The Louvre, Paris*



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;<sup>1</sup> 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 servant, 'Tell them this: I have learnt that Enlil is wrathful against me, I dare no longer walk in his land nor live in his city; I will go down to the Gulf<sup>2</sup> to dwell with Ea my lord. But on you he will rain down abundance, rare fish and shy wild-fowl, a rich harvest-tide. In the evening the rider of the storm will bring you wheat in torrents.'

"In the first light of dawn all my household gathered round me, the children brought pitch and the men whatever was necessary. On the fifth day I laid the keel and the ribs, then I made fast the planking. The ground-space was one acre, each side of the deck measured one hundred and twenty cubits,<sup>3</sup> making a square. I built six decks below, seven in all, I divided them into nine sections with bulkheads between. I drove in wedges where needed, I saw to the punt-poles,<sup>4</sup> and laid in supplies. The carriers brought oil in baskets, I poured pitch into the furnace and asphalt and oil; more oil was consumed in caulking,<sup>5</sup> and more again the master of the boat took into his stores. I slaughtered bullocks for the people and every day I killed sheep. I gave the shipwrights wine to drink as though it were river water, raw wine and red wine and oil and white wine. There was feasting then as there is at the time of the New Year's festival; I myself anointed my head. On the seventh day the boat was complete.

1. like . . . abyss: Like the firmament or heaven that covers the depths.

2. Gulf: The abyss, the great depths of the waters, where Ea, also called Enki, was supposed to dwell.

3. cubits: Ancient units of linear measure, about 18-22 inches each (originally, the distance from the elbow to the tip of the middle finger).

4. punt-poles: Poles that are pushed against the bottom of a shallow river or lake in order to propel a boat.

5. caulking (kôk' in) n.: Stopping up cracks or seams with a sealant.

"Then was the launching full of difficulty; there was shifting of ballast above and below till two thirds was submerged. I loaded into her all that I had of gold and of living things, my family, my kin, the beasts of the field both wild and tame, and all the craftsmen. I sent them on board, for the time that Shamash had ordained was already fulfilled when he said, 'In the evening, when the rider of the storm sends down the destroying rain, enter the boat and batten her down.' The time was fulfilled, the evening came, the rider of the storm sent down the rain. I looked out at the weather and it was terrible, so I too boarded the boat and battened her down. All was now complete, the battening and the caulking; so I handed the tiller to Puzur-Amurri the steersman, with the navigation and the care of the whole boat.

"With the first light of dawn a black cloud came from the horizon; it thundered within where Adad, lord of the storm, was riding. In front over hill and plain Shullat and Hanish, heralds of the storm, led on. Then the gods of the abyss rose up; Nergal pulled out the dams of the nether<sup>6</sup> waters, Ninurta the war-lord threw down the dykes, and the seven judges of hell, the Anunnaki, raised their torches, lighting the land with their livid flame. A stupor of despair went up to heaven when the god of the storm turned daylight to darkness, when he smashed the land like a cup. One whole day the tempest raged, gathering fury as it went, it poured over the people like the tides of battle; a man could not see his brother nor the people be seen from heaven. Even the gods were terrified at the flood, they fled to the highest heaven, the firmament of Anu; they crouched against the walls, cowering like curs. Then Ishtar the sweet-voiced Queen of Heaven cried out like a woman in travail: 'Alas the days of old are turned to dust because I commanded evil; why did I command this evil in the council of all the gods? I commanded wars to destroy the people, but are they not my people, for I brought them forth? Now like the spawn of fish they float in the ocean.' The great gods of heaven and of hell wept, they covered their mouths.

6. nether (net'h or) *adj.*: Below the earth's surface; lower.



Flood stories were popular in many different cultures. This picture illustrates an Indian tale called "The Legend of the Fish."

New York Public Library



"For six days and six nights the winds blew, torrent and tempest and flood overwhelmed the world, tempest and flood raged together like warring hosts. When the seventh day dawned the storm from the south subsided, the sea grew calm; the flood was stilled; I looked at the face of the world and there was silence, all mankind was turned to clay. The surface of the sea stretched as flat as a rooftop; I opened a hatch and the light fell on my face. Then I bowed low, I sat down and I wept, the tears streamed down my face, for on every side was the waste of water. I looked for land in vain, but fourteen leagues<sup>7</sup> distant there appeared a mountain, and there the boat grounded; on the mountain

of Nisir the boat held fast, she held fast and did not budge. One day she held, and a second day on the mountain of Nisir she held fast and did not budge. A third day, and a fourth day she held fast on the mountain and did not budge; a fifth day and a sixth day she held fast on the mountain. When the seventh day dawned I loosed a dove and let her go. She flew away, but finding no resting-place she returned. Then I loosed a swallow, and she flew away but finding no resting-place she returned. I loosed a raven, she saw that the waters had retreated, she ate, she flew around, she cawed, and she did not come back. Then I threw everything open to the four winds, I made a sacrifice and poured out a libation<sup>8</sup>

7. leagues: Units of linear measure, varying in different times and countries; usually a league is about three miles.

8. libation (lī bā' shən) *n.*: A liquid poured out as a sacrifice to a god.



on the mountain top. Seven and again seven cauldrons I set up on their stands, I heaped up wood and cane and cedar and myrtle. When the gods smelled the sweet savor, they gathered like flies over the sacrifice. Then, at last, Ishtar also came, she lifted her necklace with the jewels of heaven that once Anu had made to please her. 'O you gods here present, by the lapis lazuli<sup>9</sup> round my neck I shall remember these days as I remember the jewels of my throat: these last days I shall not forget. Let all the gods gather round the sacrifice, except Enlil. He shall not approach this offering, for without reflection he brought the flood; he consigned my people to destruction.'

"When Enlil had come, when he saw the boat, he was wroth and swelled with anger at the gods, the host of heaven, 'Has any of these mortals escaped? Not one was to have survived the destruction.' Then the god of the wells and canals Ninurta opened his mouth and said to the warrior Enlil, 'Who is there of the gods that can devise without Ea? It is Ea alone who knows all things.' Then Ea opened his mouth and spoke to warrior Enlil, 'Wise-est of gods, hero Enlil, how could you so senselessly bring down the flood?'"

*Lay upon the sinner his sin,  
Lay upon the transgressor his transgression,  
Punish him a little when he breaks loose,  
Do not drive him too hard or he perishes;  
Would that a lion had ravaged mankind  
Rather than the flood,  
Would that a wolf had ravaged mankind  
Rather than the flood,  
Would that famine had wasted the world  
Rather than the flood,  
Would that pestilence had wasted mankind  
Rather than the flood.*

It was not I that revealed the secret of the gods; the wise man learned it in a dream. Now take your counsel what shall be done with him.'

"Then Enlil went up into the boat, he took me by the hand and my wife and made us enter the boat and kneel down on either side, he standing between us. He touched our foreheads to bless us saying, 'In time past Utnapishtim was a mortal man; henceforth he and his wife shall live in the distance at the mouth of the rivers.' Thus it was that the gods took me and placed me here to live in the distance, at the mouth of the rivers."

## The Return

Utnapishtim said, "As for you, Gilgamesh, who will assemble the gods for your sake, so that you may find that life for which you are searching? But if you wish, come and put it to the test: only prevail against sleep for six days and seven nights." But while Gilgamesh sat there resting on his haunches, a mist of sleep like soft wool teased from the fleece drifted over him, and Utnapishtim said to his wife, "Look at him now, the strong man who would have everlasting life, even now the mists of sleep are drifting over him." His wife

replied, "Touch the man to wake him, so that he may return to his own land in peace, going back through the gate by which he came." Utnapishtim said to his wife, "All men are deceivers, even you he will attempt to deceive; therefore bake loaves of bread, each day one loaf, and put it beside his head; and make a mark on the wall to number the days he has slept."

So she baked loaves of bread, each day one loaf, and put it beside his head, and she marked on the wall the days that he slept; and there came a day when the first loaf was hard, the second loaf was like leather, the third was soggy, the crust of the fourth had mold, the fifth was mildewed, the sixth was fresh, and the seventh was still on the em-

9. lapis lazuli (lap' is laz' yōō lī): A sky-blue gemstone.

bers. Then Utnapishtim touched him and he woke. Gilgamesh said to Utnapishtim the Faraway, "I hardly slept when you touched and roused me." But Utnapishtim said, "Count these loaves and learn how many days you slept, for your first is hard, your second like leather, your third is soggy, the crust of your fourth has mold, your fifth is mildewed, your sixth is fresh and your seventh was still over the glowing embers when I touched and woke you." Gilgamesh said, "What shall I do, O Utnapishtim, where shall I go? Already the thief in the night has hold of my limbs, death inhabits my room; wherever my foot rests, there I find death."

Then Utnapishtim spoke to Urshanabi the ferryman: "Woe to you Urshanabi, now and forevermore you have become hateful to this harborage; it is not for you, nor for you are the crossings of this sea. Go now, banished from the shore. But this man before whom you walked, bringing him here, whose body is covered with foulness and the grace of whose limbs has been spoiled by wild skins, take him to the washing-place. There he shall wash his long hair clean as snow in the water, he shall throw off his skins and let the sea carry them away, and the beauty of his body shall be shown, the fillet<sup>10</sup> on his forehead shall be renewed, and he shall be given clothes to cover his nakedness. Till he reaches his own city and his journey is accomplished, these clothes will show no sign of age, they will wear like a new garment." So Urshanabi took Gilgamesh and led him to the washing-place, he washed his long hair as clean as snow in the water, he threw off his skins, which the sea carried away, and showed the beauty of his body. He renewed the fillet on his forehead, and to cover his nakedness gave him clothes which would show no sign of age, but would wear like a new garment till he reached his own city, and his journey was accomplished.

Then Gilgamesh and Urshanabi launched the boat onto the water and boarded it, and they made ready to sail away; but the wife of Utnapishtim the Faraway said to him, "Gilgamesh came here wearied out, he is worn out; what will you

give him to carry him back to his own country?" So Utnapishtim spoke, and Gilgamesh took a pole and brought the boat in to the bank. "Gilgamesh, you came here a man wearied out, you have worn yourself out; what shall I give you to carry you back to your own country? Gilgamesh, I shall reveal a secret thing, it is a mystery of the gods that I am telling you. There is a plant that grows under the water, it has a prickle like a thorn, like a rose; it will wound your hands, but if you succeed in taking it, then your hands will hold that which restores his lost youth to a man."

When Gilgamesh heard this he opened the sluices so that a sweet-water current might carry him out to the deepest channel; he tied heavy stones to his feet and they dragged him down to the water-bed. There he saw the plant growing; although it pricked him he took it in his hands; then he cut the heavy stones from his feet, and the sea carried him and threw him onto the shore. Gilgamesh said to Urshanabi the ferryman, "Come here, and see this marvelous plant. By its virtue a man may win back all his former strength. I will take it to Uruk of the strong walls; there I will give it to the old men to eat. Its name shall be 'The Old Men Are Young Again'; and at last I shall eat it myself and have back all my lost youth." So Gilgamesh returned by the gate through which he had come, Gilgamesh and Urshanabi went together. They traveled their twenty leagues and then they broke their fast; after thirty leagues they stopped for the night.

Gilgamesh saw a well of cool water and he went down and bathed; but deep in the pool there was lying a serpent, and the serpent sensed the sweetness of the flower. It rose out of the water and snatched it away, and immediately it sloughed its skin and returned to the well. Then Gilgamesh sat down and wept, the tears ran down his face, and he took the hand of Urshanabi; "O Urshanabi, was it for this that I toiled with my hands, is it for this I have wrung out my heart's blood? For myself I have gained nothing; not I, but the beast of the earth has joy of it now. Already the stream has carried it twenty leagues back to the channels where I found it. I found a sign and now I have lost it. Let us leave the boat on the bank and go."

10. fillet (fil' it) n.: A narrow band worn around the head to hold the hair in place.



Unfinished *Kudurru* (boundary-stone). These boundary-stones, indicating a royal grant of land to a citizen, were set up in the field received from the king. This one depicts a snake like the one that stole Gilgamesh's magical plant.

The Louvre, Paris

After twenty leagues they broke their fast, after thirty leagues they stopped for the night; in three days they had walked as much as a journey of a month and fifteen days. When the journey was accomplished they arrived at Uruk, the strong-walled city. Gilgamesh spoke to him, to Urshanabi the ferryman, "Urshanabi, climb up onto the wall of Uruk, inspect its foundation terrace, and examine well the brickwork; see if it is not of burnt bricks; and did not the seven wise men lay these foundations? One third of the whole is city, one third is garden, and one third is field, with the precinct of the goddess Ishtar. These parts and the precinct are all Uruk."

This too was the work of Gilgamesh, 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 a long journey, was weary, worn out with labor, and returning engraved on a stone the whole story.

*Source: The Epic of Gilgamesh*

**Reader's Response** What kinds of quests, if any, do people go on today?

## THINKING ABOUT THE SELECTION

### Verifying

- Why do the gods agree to destroy humankind?
  - What causes them to change their minds?
- List in order the key events that occur after Utnapishtim tells his story.

### Interpreting

- What purpose does the flood story serve in the epic?
- What evidence is there that Utnapishtim is not

- entirely sympathetic to Gilgamesh's quest? (b) What might cause Utnapishtim to have mixed feelings about Gilgamesh?
- When the snake steals the plants, why doesn't Gilgamesh return for more?
- Which of the following phrases best summarizes Gilgamesh's mood at the end? (a) bitter resignation, (b) pride in the walls of Uruk. Give your reasons for your choice.
- (a) What insights into life do you think the ancient people who heard this epic gained? (b) What insights did you gain from reading it?

## Applying

- a. (a) What makes this epic difficult to read? (b) Which passages or lines did you find the most thought-provoking? Why?
- b. What do you think Gilgamesh would find most surprising about our civilization? Least surprising? Explain.

## ANALYZING LITERATURE

### Understanding the Hero and His Quest

A hero is a character whose actions are inspiring or noble. Deeply troubled by the death of his friend Enkidu, Gilgamesh embarks on a quest not for glory but for everlasting life in the flesh. Strangely, both his success and his failure have an accidental quality. Utnapishtim gives him the secret of a magical, restorative plant not in answer to his request but as a parting gift, an afterthought. Similarly, his loss of the plant to a snake, described very briefly, is presented as a chance occurrence.

1. What is the connection between the role of chance or accident and the theme that humans cannot attain everlasting life?
2. Which passages in the epic foreshadow the failure of the quest? Explain.
3. Why is it appropriate that a snake, rather than some other beast, steals the magical plant?
4. Was Gilgamesh's quest a selfish one? Why or why not?
5. When speaking to Urshanabi, Gilgamesh says he has "gained nothing" for his trouble. Do you agree? Give reasons for your answer.

## CRITICAL THINKING AND READING

### Inferring the Purpose of the Flood Story

The flood narrative was added to a late version of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, and scholars have disagreed about the role it was meant to play. Joffroy Tignay, for instance, argues that it was introduced to distract an audience from Gilgamesh's quest. As a result, the suspense would diminish and the audience would be

readier to accept the hero's failure to gain immortality. Other critics have asserted that the flood story was meant to show Gilgamesh the futility of his search for everlasting life. According to this viewpoint, the story demonstrates that the bestowal of immortality on Utnapishtim was a unique, unrepeatable event.

Evaluate each of these arguments, citing passages from the text to back up your opinion.

## UNDERSTANDING LANGUAGE

### Appreciating an Akkadian Pun

Ea, the Mesopotamian god of the waters, was known for his slyness. When Utnapishtim wonders what he will tell his fellow citizens about the ark he is building, Ea gives him a clever speech to recite. This speech contains the Akkadian words *kukku* and *kibati*, which can mean either "bran and wheat" or "misfortune and sorrow." When Utnapishtim uses these words, his listeners think of the first meaning and believe that Enlil "will rain down abundance . . . a rich harvest-tide." The real message, however, is that the god will shower the people with misfortune.

Like Akkadian, most languages have words and phrases with several different, sometimes opposite, meanings. What are the advantages and disadvantages of this characteristic of language?

## THINKING AND WRITING

### Comparing and Contrasting Heroes

Gilgamesh is a hero on a quest for eternal life. Think of a modern-day hero—from the movies, television, or fiction—who also journeys in search of a goal. Write an essay comparing and contrasting Gilgamesh to this modern hero. Consider such factors as the nature of the goal, the difficulties that must be overcome, the help, if any, that the hero receives, and the hero's ultimate success or failure. When you revise your essay, make sure that you have organized it logically so that readers can follow your comparisons and contrasts.