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In this paper, students were to explain how Gilgamesh exemplifies characteristics of an epic hero.

Gilgamesh as an Epic Hero

The epic of Gilgamesh is a wonderful piece of literature portraying the main character, Gilgamesh, as a strong powerful leader who is two-thirds God and stronger than any other King alive. He was truly a hero showing skill, intelligence, valor, reverence, and a respect for death. He goes fearlessly into battle to rid the world of harmful beasts and travels to distant lands to find answers that will help the people of his city. He looks to God for his strength during battle and shows respect for everyone he meets along his journeys. Gilgamesh's friendship with Enkidu shows his loyalty to people who show respect for his city and for himself. The following illustrations will prove that Gilgamesh was truly a hero.

Gilgamesh was a historical king of Uruk in Sumer in the Middle East around 2700 B.C. His legend is chronicled in the myth today known as the "Epic of Gilgamesh." The term "epic" refers to a long poem about a hero's saga. Just as in modern novels by Tolstoy or Charles Dickens, the epic hero's life story plays out against a vast cultural and historical panorama. Gilgamesh's circumstances are consistent with those of most epic heroes: He is himself part divine, he interacts with gods and goddesses, and his story involves a series of adventures and superhuman victories. During his adventures, Gilgamesh is on a quest to find the secrets of immortality.

A Divine Birth

The epic opens with praise for Gilgamesh's accomplishments and the statement: "I will proclaim to the world the deeds of Gilgamesh." The unnamed narrator goes on to describe the city of Uruk, suggesting that the burnt brick walls and the masonry are of great excellence. We then learn that Gilgamesh is two-thirds god and one-third man. This is a very pivotal fact and the key to all of the specific accomplishments and adventures to follow: It makes Gilgamesh heroic. The only problem is that his human heritage means that he must face mortality and die. An important theme is revealed here: Life without death would not offer the meaning it does.

Adventures With Divine Interference

The gods create a sort of wild man named Enkidu with the goal of challenging Gilgamesh out of his arrogance and temperamental shenanigans. Quickly, he and Enkidu bond as friends, however. On one expedition to the Cedar Forest, they confront the evil monster Humbaba. The two also manage to kill the Bull of Heaven, sent against them by Ishtar, the goddess of lovemaking. The gods then strike down Enkidu in punishment. Gilgamesh is greatly saddened by the loss of Enkidu, whose friendship has taught him about the nature of love and compassion, as well as the meaning of loss and the meaning of human mortality.

Gilgamesh and Enkidu decide to steal trees from a distant cedar forest forbidden to mortals. A terrifying demon named Humbaba, the devoted servant of Enlil, the god of earth, wind, and air, guards it. The two heroes make the perilous journey to the forest, and, standing side by side, fight with the monster. With assistance from Shamash the sun god, they kill him. Then they cut down the forbidden trees, fashion the tallest into an enormous gate, make the rest into a raft, and float on it back to Uruk. Upon their return, Ishtar, the goddess of love, is overcome with lust for Gilgamesh. Gilgamesh spurns her. Enraged, the goddess asks her father, Anu, the god of the sky, to send the Bull of Heaven to punish him. The bull comes down from the sky, bringing with him seven years of famine. Gilgamesh and Enkidu wrestle with the bull and kill it. The gods meet in council and agree that one of the two friends must be punished for their transgression, and they decide Enkidu is going to die. He takes ill, suffers immensely, and shares his visions of the underworld with Gilgamesh. When he finally dies, Gilgamesh is heartbroken.

Gilgamesh can't stop grieving for Enkidu, and he can't stop brooding about the prospect of his own death. Exchanging his kingly garments for animal skins as a way of mourning Enkidu, he sets off into the wilderness, determined to find Utnapishtim, the Mesopotamian Noah. After the flood, the gods had granted Utnapishtim eternal life, and Gilgamesh hopes that Utnapishtim can tell him how he might avoid death too. Gilgamesh's journey takes him to the twin-peaked mountain called Mashu, where the sun sets into one side of the mountain at night and rises out of the other side in the morning. Utnapishtim lives beyond the mountain, but the two scorpion monsters that guard its entrance refuse to allow Gilgamesh into the tunnel that passes through it. Gilgamesh pleads with them, and they relent.

After a harrowing passage through total darkness, Gilgamesh emerges into a beautiful garden by the sea. There he meets Siduri, a veiled tavern keeper, and tells her about his quest. She warns him that seeking immortality is futile and that he should be satisfied with the pleasures of this world. However, when she can't turn him away from his purpose, she directs him to Urshanabi, the ferryman. Urshanabi takes Gilgamesh on the boat journey across the sea and through the Waters of Death to Utnapishtim. Utnapishtim tells Gilgamesh the story of the flood—how the gods met in council and decided to destroy humankind. Ea, the god of wisdom, warned Utnapishtim about the gods' plans and told him how to fashion a gigantic boat in which his family and the seed of every living creature might escape. When the waters finally receded, the gods regretted what they'd done and agreed that they would never try to destroy humankind again. Utnapishtim was rewarded with eternal life. Men would die, but humankind would continue.

When Gilgamesh insists that he be allowed to live forever, Utnapishtim gives him a test. If you think you can stay alive for eternity, he says, surely you can stay awake for a week. Gilgamesh tries and immediately fails. So Utnapishtim orders him to clean himself up, put on his royal garments again, and return to Uruk where he belongs. Just as Gilgamesh is departing, however, Utnapishtim's wife convinces him to tell Gilgamesh about a miraculous plant that restores youth. Gilgamesh finds the plant and takes it with him, planning to share it with the elders of Uruk. But a snake steals the plant one night while they are camping. As the serpent slithers away, it sheds its skin and becomes young again.

When Gilgamesh returns to Uruk, he is empty-handed but reconciled at last to his mortality. He knows that he can't live forever but that humankind will. Now he sees that the city he had repudiated in his grief and terror is a magnificent, enduring achievement—the closest thing to immortality to which a mortal can aspire.