Context

The Epic of Gilgamesh has been described as the first true work of world literature. It began to circulate in the ancient Near East as early as 1000 BCE. Portions of this epic have been found in Mesopotamia, Turkey, and in Palestine. The Mesopotamians had no word corresponding to the phrase "epic" and thus, ancient scholars of Mesopotamian literature refer to the epic as the "Gilgamesh Series." Eleven of the tablets form a continuous narrative poem, while the twelfth is a partial translation of a Sumerian poem about Gilgamesh appended to the narrative, during the first millennium BCE. The central setting of the Epic is in the ancient city-state of Uruk in the land of Sumer.

Historical Accuracy
Gilgamesh was an early king of the city-state of Uruk in southern Mesopotamia and lived sometime around 2750 BCE. In the years after his death, there was cult which grew around his memory as he became honored as a judge of the underworld. By around 2000 BCE, there was a set of loosely connected songs that had been written in Sumerian about his life and legendary adventures. He was a great warrior who journeyed to a distant mountain where he killed a monster, brought home cedar tresses for his palace, and has his servant and friend Enkidu descent into the underworld.

During the Old Babylonian period (2000-1600 BCE) poets in Babylon adapted the Sumerian poems into a connected epic, written in Akkadian. Around 1200 BCE, the epic was revised by a Babylonian priest named Sin-liqe-unninni, who compacted the story and added a preface. The writing style used to write the Akkadian language was Cuneiform.

Discovery of the Text

Following the defeat and destruction of major Mesopotamian cities by Persian invaders in 600-500 BCE, most of the poem disappeared. In 1850s, Iraqi archaeologist, Hormuzd Rassam, discovered the ruins of the great royal library of Ashurbanipal, King of the World and King of Assyria in the mid-seventh century. Thousands of tables were shipped back to the British Museum. 20 years later, George Smith, a curator at the museum, began to study the eleven tablets that became the work known today.

There is no recorded original that has survived. There are roughly 2000 lines of an original 3000 lines poem. Fragments from different places have ended up circulating around the world differently. The missing pieces are usually filled in by various orators.

There are three main translations that are currently used for the script, edited by David Damrosch, Benjamin Foster, and Andrew George. Each of these editors has provided their own perspectives by either removing verses which were not necessary for the overall meaning, or by providing their own interpretation for the missing verse. As an example, George fills out phrases with brackets, where the italics represent a guess while the regular font represents a phrase ascertained through context clues. Each of these texts provides a different emphasis, but the overall story remains the same throughout the versions.


What defines an Epic?

The classification of an epic is an interesting analysis. Examples of Epics include those narrated or written by Homer or Virgil; or the stories in India, told through the Ramayana or Mahabharata.

The etymology of "epic" comes from the Greek word "epos", which means word or song. The definition of epic by the Oxford Dictionary is "a long poem, typically one derived from ancient oral tradition, narrating the deeds and adventures of heroic or legendary figures or the history of a nation." Generally speaking, one of the key elements incorporates an interaction between Gods and mortals. There is also an explicit theme that looks at the founding of a culture, either in the overall world, a city, or a civilization.

In the case of Gilgamesh, it is very interesting to the core elements that incorporate an epic. For instance, there is the meeting of the Primitive (Enkidu) with the Civilized (Gilgamesh). There is an image of evolution, where Enkidu is looking at entering civilization - and going through a transition of life in nature versus life in the city versus life with the Gods. There is a significant important attributed to the role of the Divine and the role that Gods play in either the success or failures that both Enkidu and Gilgamesh experience. (See also the section on "Divine Intervention").

A question that arises with the analysis of Epics is the role of the Epic Hero. In this case, what elements would be necessary for Gilgamesh to be classified as a hero? In a very famous literary work, Joseph Campbell, writes in "The Hero of a Thousand Faces",

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.  

With this, it becomes clear that Gilgamesh certainly represents a hero. He goes on an adventure and quest to find immortality. He does not end up succeeding, but he instead comes back and realizes that one of his biggest legends has been to leave behind the city that he has laid claim to, and spent all these years developing and building. The city is his very "boon" to his fellow man. During an epic, the hero also usually undergoes a character transition and growth, and in this case, Gilgamesh also goes through different character growths and improvements.

Plot Summary

Tablet I

There is an introduction to the hero, Gilgamesh, and the great city of Uruk. There is a prelude which provides an overarching summary of everything that has happened to Gilgamesh. He has made temples for Anu, the god of heavens, and for Anu's daughter, Ishtar, the goddess of war and love. Gilgamesh has opened passes in mountains and wilderness. He has traveled to the end of the world, met Utanapishtim, and has come back to write down his stories.
The story begins, with a description of Gilgamesh - who is massively powerful. He does whatever he wants, and everyone is required to get out of his way or die standing up to him. The gods listen to the pleas of the townspeople, and ask Aruru, the goddess of creation, to clean up her mess and create someone of equal strength to match with Gilgamesh - in order to provide balance.

Aruru takes some clay, and creates another man, Enkidu. He is thrown into nature, and becomes one with the animals and forest. One day, a hunter finds Enkidu. Upon hearing his son’s discovery, the hunter’s father tells him to go to Uruk, ask for a temple prostitute, who will conquer Enkidu and cause him to become a man.

The temple prostitute, Shamhat, and the hunter wait for Enkidu for three days near the watering hole. When Enkidu finally arrives, the prostitute shows her breasts and body to Enkidu, and Enkidu becomes fully erect for six days and seven nights. The two continue to have sex until Enkidu’s desire is settled.

"She was not restrained, but took his energy. She spread out her robe and he lay upon her, she performed for the primitive the task of womankind. His lust groaned over her; for six days and seven nights, Enkidu stayed aroused, and had intercourse with the harlot until he was sated with her charms." (I, 163-169)

When he tries to go back to the animals, he discovers that they are all shunning him. The prostitute consoles him, and tells him that it is now time for Enkidu to settle down with civilization. She describes to him the tales of Gilgamesh, and upon hearing his, Enkidu longs to meet Gilgamesh and challenge him in strength.

The prostitute, Shamhat, tells Enkidu that Gilgamesh is far stronger than he is. But that Gilgamesh has already had two dreams about Enkidu. Shamhat proclaims that the two will actually end up becoming friends, and then she and Enkidu make love and fall asleep.

Tablet II

Shamhat provides Enkidu with some clothes and takes him towards the city of Uruk. Along the way, the two stop at a camp, and Enkidu is introduced to various foods and alcohol - and becomes extremely happy with the new environment that he is in. One day, a stranger who is on his way to Uruk stops by the camp, with a bunch of gifts. Enkidu discovers that those are gifts for Gilgamesh, and that Gilgamesh will end up sleeping with the bride before even the husband does. Enkidu is outraged and quickly hurries into town - defiantly placing himself on the threshold of the bride’s bedchamber, and blocks the king from entering.

Gilgamesh and Enkidu fight and going through the streets of the city. Once Gilgamesh wrestles Enkidu to the ground, they both forget their anger; Enkidu concedes defeat and pledges his loyalty to the rightful king of Uruk. The two men kiss and embrace; followed by blessings from Gilgamesh’s mother, Ninsun.

The duo decide that it is time that they seek an adventure. Enkidu tells Gilgamesh about the monster, Humbaba, who is the guardian of the Cedar Forest, a place that is forbidden to mortals. Upon hearing the challenge, Gilgamesh becomes determined to fight with the demon - even though Enkidu is convinced that this is an impossible task! Gilgamesh provides a speech about how he is not afraid of death, and that his immortality will be reached by his fame. The two heroes go towards the armor makers and begin gathering new weapons for their quest.

Tablet III

Gilgamesh stands before the gates of Uruk and tells his people that he and Enkidu will be going on the quest to cut down the cedar trees that Humbaba protects. The elders are extremely worried, and fear that Gilgamesh is underestimating Humbaba’s power. The elders caution Gilgamesh to not rely only on his strength, and remind him that Enkidu knows more about the wilderness.

Gilgamesh and Enkidu then decide to go ahead and seek the blessings of Gilgamesh’s mother, the goddess Ninsun. She is extremely upset, and decides to bathe, change into her priestly clothes, and pray to Shamash, the sun god. Ninsun asks for the protection of her son from Shamash, and then decides to formally adopt Enkidu as her son by placing a sacred pendant around his neck.

"I have taken Enkidu; Enkidu to Gilgamesh I have taken." (III, 64).

The Elders entrust Gilgamesh to this friend and brother, Enkidu.

Tablet IV

Gilgamesh and Enkidu are on their journey to the Cedar Forest. In a repetitive manner:

"At twenty leagues they broke for some food, at thirty leagues they stopped for the night, walking fifty leagues in a whole day, a walk of a month and a half." (IV, 1-4)

the two continue on their travels. Each night, Gilgamesh goes to sleep, hoping that:
"Mountain, bring me a dream, a favorable message from Shamash." (IV, 9)

He then has four different dreams, each of which is analyzed and explained in the section entitled: Gilgamesh’s Dream in the Cedar Forest

After continuing on their travel, they finally reach the evergreen forest, where they cut off their talk and stood still.

Tablet V

The two heroes stand at the gates of the vast forest, in awe of the cedar trees. They see the Cedar Mountain, the Dwelling of the Gods, and head towards it. Upon hearing them, Humbaba begins to roar and confronts the two soldiers. During their fight, Gilgamesh begins to feel frightened that they will lose. He prays to Shamash, who in return:

"Shamash raised up against Humbaba mighty tempests -
Southwind, Northwind, Eastwind, Westwind, Whistling Wind,
Piercing Wind, Blizzard, Bad Wind, Wind of Simurru,
Demon Wind, Ice Wind, Storm, Sandstorm --
three winds rose up against him and covered Humbaba’s face." (V, 33-38).

Gilgamesh is able to regain his composure, and is about to perform the finishing strikes. However, when Humbaba pleads for mercy and says that he will become Gilgamesh’s servant, Gilgamesh begins to consider letting him go. However, Enkidu is not at all convinced, and encourages Gilgamesh to kill the monster. Enkidu reiterates that this is the only way in which there will be a legacy and "an eternal monument proclaiming how Gilgamesh killed Humbaba." (V, 67).

Humbaba is distraught by Enkidu’s conviction, and decides that he will actually curse Enkidu.

"May he not live the longer of the two,
may Enkidu not have any old age more than his friend Gilgamesh!" (V, 69-70)

Upon hearing this, Gilgamesh becomes upset and decides to kill Humbaba with a finishing move. Enkidu and Gilgamesh cut down more cedar trees, create a raft to float back to Uruk, while

"Gilgamesh held the head of Humbaba." (V, 84).

Tablet VI

When Gilgamesh returns to Uruk, he washes his hair and body, dons a clean robe, and polishes his weapons. When he sits down and puts on his crown, Ishtar, the goddess of love and war, is overcome with lust. She pleads with Gilgamesh to be her husband. She promises harvest of riches, lapis lazuli chariot with golden wheels, and kings and princesses kissing his feet as they offer him all of their wealth. However, Gilgamesh refuses her offer. He says that he has nothing to offer her in return, and he says that her desire for his body is fleeting. He knows that she will eventually lose interest, similar to each of her previous lovers. In an insulting manner, he tells her a story of the outcome of each of her previous commitments.

Hearing all this, Ishtar becomes furious and goes to her father, Anu, and mother, Antum. She demands that they let her use the Bull of Heaven in order to watch him gore Gilgamesh to death. Her father does not understand why she is angry, since all that Gilgamesh was true. Ishtar throws a fit and threatens to call forth the dead people of the underworld to feast on the living. Her father is still not convinced, and says that using the bull will cause seven years of famine. Ishtar responds that she has already made provisions for the people and flocks of Uruk. Anu finally gives in.

Ishtar unleashes the Bull of Heaven, who comes down from the sky. He starts to cause terror in the city, opening up cracks where men become swallowed whole. In third crack, Enkidu jumps out and seizes the Bull of Heaven by its horns. He calls out to Gilgamesh, who joins him in the fight. Together, they corner the beast, and

Gilamesh, like an expert butcher... thrust his sword
After they killed the Bull of Heaven,
they ripped out its hear and presented it to Shamash." (VI, 119-122).

Ishtar climbs up onto the walls of city and shouts a curse onto both men:

"Woe unto Gilgamesh who slandered me and killed the Bull of Heaven." (VI, 127).

Enkidu threatens to do the same to Ishtar, unless she leaves. Gilgamesh then gathers the men of Uruk and boasts how the best heroes around are Gilgamesh and Enkidu.

That night, Enkidu awakens from a dream, and reveals this dream to his friend.

Tablet VII
Enkidu awakens from a nightmare and describes his dream to Gilgamesh and explains that the God's have decided that Enkidu will die for their transgressions.

After his first dream, Enkidu falls ill. Overcome with pity, he curses the cedar gate that he and Gilgamesh brought back. Gilgamesh promises that he will erect an enormous statue of Enkidu, made entirely of gold. Enkidu calls out to Shamash, and curses the hunter who first spotted him at the watering hole. He also curses Shamat for domesticating him. Shamash answers from afar and asks why Enkidu curses the harlot, when she is the very reason that Enkidu has tasted the richness of life and Gilgamesh's friendship. Shamash tells Enkidu that after Enkidu's death, Gilgamesh will make sure that he is properly honored and that "the people of Uruk go into mourning and moaning over you" (VII, 86). Enkidu retracts the curse and instead offers the prostitute blessings so that her patrons be generous and rich.

The next morning, lying in bed, Enkidu tells Gilgamesh about his second dream. In this dream, a lion-headed eagle swoop down and seized him, dragging him down into the Underworld and the House of Dust. He describes to Gilgamesh what he has seen, and ends with saying that he would have been blessed to die in battle, because those who die in battle are glorious.

Both of the dreams have been explained and analyzed in the section entitled: Enkidu's Dreams of Death.

Afterwards, Gilgamesh replies:

"My friend has had a dream that bodes ill." (VII, 147)

Enkidu's death is recounted to the audience:

"Enkidu lies down a first day, a second day,... a third day and fourth day, that Enkidu remains in his bed; a fifth, a sixth, and seventh, that Enkidu remains in his bed; an eighth, a ninth, a tenth, that Enkidu remains in his bed. Enkidu's illness grew ever worse. The eleventh and twelfth day his illness grew ever worse. Enkidu drew up from his bed, and called out to Gilgamesh."

[Thirty fragmentary lines recount Enkidu's last worth and his death.] (VII, 148-156)

Here is an analysis of the role of divine intervention on Enkidu's death.

Tablet VIII

Gilgamesh is completely devastated by Enkidu's death. He proclaims his grief, and the entire speech that follows overflows with images of nature and animals. Gilgamesh addresses his friend and asks for rivers, men, animals, farmers, herders, gods, harlots, all mourn for his death. He covers over his friend's face like a bride as he paces around. Gilgamesh then summons blacksmith, lapidary, coppersmith, goldsmith, and jeweler from the land, to fashion a statue of Enkidu to honor his deeds and celebrate his fame.

Tablet IX

Gilgamesh has a new transition in his life, where he now begins to fear death!

""I am going to die! -- am I not like Enkidu?! Deep sadness penetrates my core, I fear death, and now roam the wilderness -- I will set out to the region of Utanapishtim, son of Ubartutu, and will go with utmost dispatch." (IX, 2-5)

Gilgamesh sets out on this quest, and has a dream where a warrior is attacking animals with his axe. The following day, he reaches Mount Mashu, where a scorpion-man and scorpion-wife guard the gates. The male monster tells his wife that the person who dares to come here must be a god. The wife says that two-thirds of him is god, but the rest of him is human. The male monster asks why is trying to cross the river, to which Gilgamesh explains his new quest:

"I have come on account of my ancestor Utanapishtim, who joined the Assembly of the Gods, and was given eternal life. About Death and Life I must ask him!" (IX, 26-38)

The Scorpion-man tells Gilgamesh that he would need to take the tunnel through the mountain which is taken by Shamash every night, when he travels back to the place where he rises in the morning. The tunnel will be too dark for mortals to survive, but because he continues to express his desire, they allow him passage, telling him to be careful.

Gilgamesh walks twelve leagues and for twelfth double hours, before he emerges out of the tunnel into a jewelled garden, filed with trees bearing carnelian, jewels, rubies, and lapis lazuli. The full description of the jewelled garden is too illegible to be transcribed.
Tablet X

Siduri, the tavern-keeper, sees a man coming towards her - wearing animal skins, face is wind-bitten and battered, and has a deep sadness within him. She thought to herself:

"That fellow is surely a murderer!" (X, 11)

and locks the door. Gilgamesh, hears the door being bolted, and then knocks loudly on the door, threatening to smash it down. Siduri asks why he is dressed like this, and he responds saying that he is grieving for his companion who helped to fight the lions, the wolves, killed Humbaba, and killed the Bull of Heaven. He narrates an entire speech about the effect that the death of Enkidu had on him, and asks if he too will turn into clay like the friend who he has loved.

Siduri, opens the door, and says that only Gods are immortal. He asks her how to find Utanapishtim. Siduri tells him that he needs to cross the sea that Shamash crosses every day – but that crossing it would be too treacherous and story. Even if he were to cross it, he would then reach the poisonous Waters of Death, to which only Urshanabi, Utanapishtim's boatman, knows how to cross. When Gilgamesh will not be swayed from his quest, Siduri instructs Gilgamesh how to find Urshanabi.

When Gilgamesh find Urshanabi, Urshanabi takes some convincing to take Gilgamesh to Utanapishtim. Finally, he says that Gilgamesh must cut down 300 punting poles, each 60 cubits (approximately 90 feet) in length, and bring them to the boat, which will be necessary on their voyage. When they get to the waters, Gilgamesh using the punting poles to steer the boat. When he goes through 120 rods, he loosens his waist-cloth and uses it for a sail. Utanapishtim sees this from afar, and is wondering who is on the boat coming towards him.

Gilgamesh arrives and meets Utanapishtim, who asks him the same question that Siduri has asked about his appearance. Gilgamesh provides the same exact speech (repetition) about everything that happened with Enkidu. Utanapishtim begins to ask Gilgamesh, why he fears death and what it is that he plans to gain. The old man establishes that "The image of Death cannot be depicted" (X, 196) and that death is a certain destiny.

Tablet XI

Gilgamesh then questions Utanapishtim and asks how he became a god. Utanapishtim then reveals to Gilgamesh the story of the Flood and the Gods. After hearing the story, Utanapishtim challenges Gilgamesh to see if he truly is worthy. He says that as a test, Gilgamesh must not lie down for six days and seven nights. However, as soon as he sat down, sleep blew over him like a fog!

Utanapishtim shows his wife, who says that they should wake up Gilgamesh and send him home. Utanapishtim thinks that Gilgamesh will just deny that he slept, and that "Mankind is deceptive, and will deceive you." (XI, 215). This indicates that even though he is an immortal, Utanapishtim still does not trust humans. His wife plans that they will bake a piece of bread each day, and leave it next to him with a mark against the wall.

Seven days go by, and then Gilgamesh wakes up. Gilgamesh says,

"The very moment sleep was pouring over me, you touched me and altered me!" (XI, 225-226)

To which Utanapishtim shows the seven pieces of bread and seven marks on the wall. Gilgamesh is devastated, and does not know what he shall do or where he shall go! Utanapishtim than tells Urshanabi to take Gilgamesh away from here, and to take him to the washing place so Gilgamesh can clean himself and reveal the beauty that he has been hiding. Gilgamesh washes himself, cleans up, and changes into royal garments.

As they are leaving, Utanapishtim's wife says to Utanapishtim:

"Gilgamesh came here exhausted and worn out. What can you give him so that can return to his land with honor?" (XI, 265-266).

Gilgamesh returns to shore, and Utanapishtim tells him of a secret of the Gods.

"There is a plant like a boxthorn, whose thorns will prick your hand like a rose. If you reach that plant you will become a young man again." (XI, 274-276).

Gilgamesh then ties stones onto his feet, and dives into the sea. He find the plant, and then cuts the stones from his feet, so that he may return to shore. He tells Urshanabi that he will take the plant to Uruk, and call the plan, "The Old Man Becomes a Young Man."

One night, when they stop to camp, Gilgamesh goes down and was bathing in the water.

"A snake smelled the fragrance of the plant, silently came up and carried off the plant." (XI, 294-295)

Gilgamesh is distraught, and just asks Urshanabi to take him back to Uruk. Upon arriving in Uruk, Gilgamesh shows to Urshanabi the entire kingdom of Uruk and the structures. The Epic ends with the same lines about the city that it began with,
"Go up on the wall of Uruk and walk around, examine its foundation, inspect its brickwork thoroughly. Is not even the core of the brick structure made of kiln-fired brick, and did not the Seven Sages themselves lay out its plans? One league city, one league palm gardens, one league lowlands, the open area of the Ishtar Temple, three leagues and the open area of Uruk the wall encloses." (I, 16:21; XI, 312-319).

indicating that Gilgamesh finally understands that his legacy and means for immortality is the kingdom that he is leaving behind.

Character Analysis

Gilgamesh

Gilgamesh is the protagonist of the story. He is described as:

"Supreme over other kings, lordly in appearance, he is the hero, born of Uruk, the goring wild bull. He walks out in front, the leader, and walks at the rear, trusted by his companions. Mighty net, protector of his people

... Gilgamesh is strong to perfection

... Gilgamesh is awesome to perfection

... Two-thirds of him is god, one-third of him is human. The Great Goddess designed the model for his body, she prepared his form, beautiful, handsomest of men.

... Gilgamesh does not leave a son to his father; Is Gilgamesh the shepherd of Uruk-Haven, bold, eminent, knowing, and wise? Gilgamesh does not leave a girl to her betrothed!" (I, 27:56.)

Enkidu

Gilgamesh’s friend, lover, companion, servant, brother, and equal. There is significant analysis on Enkidu done in Tablet 1, Enkidu and Gilgamesh, Enkidu’s Death, and Enkidu’s Dreams.

Utanapishtim

Utanapishtim and his wife are the sole two survivors of the flood that wiped out all of humanity. He is an immortal being, and after Enkidu’s death, Gilgamesh sets out on a long quest to find him. Utanapishtim’s story is explained in great detail in "The Flood".

Shamhat / Siduri / Utanapishtim’s Wife

The role of women becomes very important in the Epic of Gilgamesh, and even though this entire civilization represents a patriarchal society, women are the cornerstone of ensuring that actions are taken.

Shamat is the temple prostitute that tames the beast that is inside Enkidu. Even though this may seem like a minor role, Shamat is a very important character because she is necessary to represent the bridge between nature and civilization.

The tavern-keeper, Siduri, originally closes the door to Gilgamesh, but after understanding the situation in which Gilgamesh is in, she decides to open the door for him. She then provides directions on how to find Urshanabi, and is massively warm and kind to Gilgamesh. Without her help, Gilgamesh would have failed to even continue on his quest.

Utanapishtim’s wife plays a crucial role in encouraging her husband to help out Gilgamesh on his quest for immortality. When Gilgamesh is on the cusp of leaving the shore and returning home empty-handed, she appeals to her husband and asks if there is anything at all that he can do for Gilgamesh. Without this plea, Gilgamesh would not have even discovered the fruit through which he could potentially gain immortality.
Ishtar

Ishtar is the Goddess of Love and War. She is also the patron goddess of the city of Uruk. Therefore, she gets the most space and is considered to be one of the most powerful Goddesses in the story. When Gilgamesh says no to Ishtar’s marriage proposal, he sets into motion a set of events that leads to the eventual death of his best friend. He is purely insulting to her, and results in greater issues.

Shamash

Shamash is the Sun God, associated with light and wisdom. Humbaba, whom Shamash detests, is associated with darkness and evil. As Gilgamesh and Enkidu are on their quest to kill Humbaba, they are actually doing God’s work - even if it is directly opposing the desire of other gods. Ninsun prays to Shamash to watch over her sons because she wants them to return safely. Each night on their quest to the Cedar Forest, Gilgamesh prays to Shamash in order to try and see a message and try and predict what the future will hold.

Literary Structure

Parallelism

In Mesopotamian poetry, each line usually consists of a complete sentence or thought. Lines are often divided into two, three, or four parts of roughly the same number of words. Lines also generally come in pairs where each line is related to another in sound, rhythm, or meaning. The use of parallelism is to show that subsequent statements hay restate, expand, complete, contrast, render more specific, or carry further the first message. For instance:

“He anointed himself with oil, turned into a man,  
He put on clothing, became like a warrior.” (Il, 43-44)

The first part of each line indicates the actual action that Enkidu is taking, while the second half of each lines focuses on Enkiud's progress from being a human being to becoming a leader among men.

Line Structure

When looking at the meter of the original translation, it is clear that there are sound patterns that rhyme. Each of the lines is also extremely short and focuses on staying in meter so that it is easier to continue an oral performance. The audience is also more likely to remain engrossed in the play or Epic because there are chances that they will remember the play and be able to sing along.

Additionally, the line structure is important because of the fact that this was all written on a clay tablet. Because of the level of detail that goes into actually making the tablet, it becomes both extremely difficult to carve more characters, as it does to actually store the full tablet. This is in direct contrast to the areas and times where paper or papyrus were used to write the full stories. These would be much more compact and easier to write extra lines and elements on. This is one of the key reasons why the Epic of Gilgamesh was approximately 3000 lines, while Homer would be on the order of magnitude of 20,000 lines.

Repetition

Throughout the Epic, there are many instances where multiple lines are repeated in their entirety. As example, there are entire passages repeated when it comes to explaining the start of Gilgamesh’s dream, the journey that Enkidu and Gilgamesh are on, the impact of Gilgamesh’s death on Enkidu, and even the opening and closing lines of the Epic. Although the Epic is literary on paper, it used to be spoken out loud. Thus, the repetition of a set speech could be used to help the audience remember the different repeated verses. As this was originally being spoken in a fundamentally oral society, having the audience know passages by hear and repeat it word for word would increase the audience participation.

Moreover, even though the authors were writing this text, they were stilling thinking in the oral tradition and what would eventually be easier for the convenience of the singer.

Additionally, the use of a repeated phrase, juxtaposed with a new set of lines would lead to both artistic manipulation and a greater emphasis on the subject. As an example, when Enkidu and Gilgamesh are on their way to the Cedar Forest, Gilgamesh goes through a set of four different dreams. The first part of each dream is exactly the same, and repeated as follows:

“While Gilagmesh rested his chin on his knees,  
sleep that pours over mankind overtook him.  
In the middle of the night his sleep came to an end,  
so he got up and said to his friend:  
“My friend, did you not call out to me? Why did I wake up?  
Did you not touch me? Why am I so disturbed?  
Did a god pass by? Why are my muscles trembling?  
Enkidu, my friend, I have a had [a] dream...” (IV, 13-20; 41-47; 74-81; 101-108)
The change in the lines comes when Gilgamesh actually describes the dream itself. Enkidu is then acting more of a yes man, and is actually interpreting each of the dreams on his own to benefit Gilgamesh. The audience will be far more attentive to Gilgamesh’s dream and Enkidu’s interpretation if they end up waiting to hear the new lines that have not yet been repeated.

Themes

**Hero's Fear of Death and Quest for Immortality**

The key question to address here would be “How does the poem work through the problem of the fear of death?” This poem does not end with a happy mythological ending where the hero, Gilgamesh, is successful and achieves becoming an immortal. In fact, there is an interesting turn of events when it comes to Gilgamesh’s view of death.

From the start of the Epic, it is quite clear that Gilgamesh does not at all fear death. He has gone on many quests and encourages Enkidu to fight Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven.

> "Who, my Friend, can ascend to the heavens? Only the gods can dwell forever with Shamash. As for human beings, their days are numbered, and whatever they keep trying to achieve is but wind! Now you are afraid of death - what has become of your bold strength? I will go on in front of you, and your mother can call out: 'Go on closer, do not be afraid!' Should I fall, I will have established my fame." (II, 81-90).

However, after Enkidu dies, Gilgamesh becomes afraid of death. He sees what has happened to Enkidu and decides that he does not want that to happen with him.

> "I am going to die! – am I not like Enkidu?! Deep sadness penetrates my core, I fear death, and now roam the wilderness -- I will set out to the region of Utanapishtim, son of Ubartutu, and will go with utmost dispatch." (IX, 2-5)

He decides that he will go onto a Quest for Immortality, because of his desire for fame, glory, and immortality.

> "I have come on account of my ancestor Utanapishtim, who joined the Assembly of the Gods, and was given eternal life. About Death and Life I must ask him!" (IX, 35-38)

In all actuality, this quest for immortality represents more of an "anti-quest" rather than a quest, as the hero is doomed to fall from the start.

In an interesting analysis, the first journey to fight Humbaba represented an element of gaining immortality through fame. In the second journey to find Utanapishtim, Gilgamesh believes in finding his soul, and to actually gain immortality to live forever.

Thus, the pattern follows as:

At the end of the day, the poet is trying to show that the key take away is that the quest for immortality is not necessarily the most important. The idea is that no one can actually become immortal (Utanapishtim is the exception.) The fruit that Gilgamesh finds is eaten by a snake and nothing more can become of that. The reality is that the true immortality resides with the legacy and fame that is left behind - and in this case, the fame of the city.

Both the beginning and the end have passages that focus on the description of Uruk with the three cities. The following set of lines are actually repeated verbatim at the start of Tablet I and the last lines of the epic at the end of Tablet XI.

> "Go up on the wall of Uruk and walk around, examine its foundation, inspect its brickwork thoroughly. Is not even the core of the brick structure made of kiln-fired brick, and did not the Seven Sages themselves lay out its plans? One league city, one league palm gardens, one league lowlands, the open area of the Ishtar Temple, three leagues and the open area of Uruk the wall encloses." (I, 16-21; XI, 312-319).

This use of fame created by the city is important in demonstrating that the lack of immortality is not designed to be tragic, but rather uplifting to allow for the reader to have a feasible goal of building something tangible that can remain behind for years to come.
The Role of Love

Enkidu and Shamhat

The physical connection between Shamhat and Enkidu is the first major desire that is expressed in the Epic. In this case, Shamhat ends up coming to see Enkidu while he is in the forest, and she civilizes him with her touch and sexual prowess. The connection between the two has been analyzed in great detail in the Tablet I summary.

Gilgamesh and Ishtar

This is one of the major love connections in this play. See the section on Ishtar's Desire for Gilgamesh.

Enkidu and Gilgamesh

One of the principle love stories in this Epic is the relationship that is presented between Enkidu and Gilgamesh. In the patriarchal world in which the Epic takes place, open homosexuality would be heavily disapproved. Thus, the poet, ends up showing through various hints that there is more than just a friendship between the two - and that they are "homosocial" with traits lining up towards "homoeroticism".

From the beginning, when Gilgamesh has the dreams about Enkidu, it is interesting to note that:
1) Gilgamesh says that he "loved and embraced" the mountain "as a wife"; to which his mother responds saying that this mountain represents a comrade who saves him and becomes like Gilgamesh's wife.
2) Gilgamesh says that he "loved and embraced" the axe "as a wife"; to which his mother responds saying that this mountain represents a comrade who saves his him becomes like Gilgamesh's wife.

Anne Kilmer, writes that there is an interesting pun with the word-play in Gilgamesh's second dream. The Akkadian word "hassinu" means "axe", while the Akkadian word "assinu" means "male prostitute". Thus, it seems that there is an element of hinting that Enkidu will become Gilgamesh's male lover.

There are also other passages which portray the physical connection between the two:

"They kissed each other and became friends." (II, 72).
"Holding each other by the hand they went over to the forge." (II, 98).

During the ceremony conducted by Gilgamesh's mother, Ninsun, Enkidu is formally adopted as the son Ninsun and becomes Gilgamesh's brother.

During the dreams that Gilgamesh has in the Cedar Forest, Enkidu is the one who provides the interpretation as to what it all means. As noted by Andrew George, dreams are often exclaimed and interpreted by an intimate female. In the case of the Cedar Forest, Enkidu ends up being the equivalent of a servant and female, as he is set on interpreting the dreams that Gilgamesh has.

After Enkidu's death, Gilgamesh is extremely distraught and laments and is constant pain. The amount of anguish that Gilgamesh has, can only be because of the intimate relationship and love (whether or not sexual) that he had with Enkidu.

Divine Intervention

The use of Divine Intervention is seen in five different scenarios in this Epic. Collectively, the overall theme is that humans have to negotiate with powerful figures who do not necessarily have the best interests of humans in their mind at all times. Many times, the Gods actually have hidden agendas that end up playing as antagonist to the desires of the humans.

In fact, in the Babylonian creation mythos, Enûma Eliš, the Gods created humans in order for the humans to act as their servants. Thus, it is also interesting to note how the overall role of the Gods has also changed over time.

The Creation of Enkidu

Gilgamesh was created by Aruru, the goddess of creation. At the start of the Epic, Gilgamesh is so massively powerful, that he does whatever he wants, and everyone is required to get out of his way or die standing up to him. The gods listen to the pleas of the townspeople, and ask Aruru, the goddess of creation, to clean up her mess and create someone of equal strength to match with Gilgamesh - in order to provide balance.

Aruru takes some clay, and creates another man, Enkidu. The Gods decide that Enkidu will come forth and respond to the needs of the humans. This is the only time in the play where the Gods are actually looking for the benefit of the humans and have the interests of the humans at heart.

Ishtar's Desire for Gilgamesh

When Ishtar sees Gilgamesh completely cleaned up after his conquest with Humbaba, she has an immense lust for his body. In response to Ishtar's advances, Gilgamesh catalogs the human lovers who, at Ishtar's hands, became animals—a shepherd changed into a broken-winged bird, a goat herder into a wolf, a gardener into a frog. One of these lovers is the god of vegetation and flocks, Tammuz.
When Gilgamesh does not accept her advance, he is actually going against one of the rules between the divine and the kings - which is to pay respects to the patron God or goddess of a city. The fact that Gilgamesh is able to make love (whether or not it was sexual) with Enkidu, a companion of the same gender, would have also offended the goddess of fertility. Regardless of the languages that Gilgamesh uses, and his attempts to be witty and clever, he is nonetheless, extremely disrespectful. The result of this is that Ishtar longs to provide pain to Gilgamesh and destroy his image.

The Bull of Heaven

The interaction between Ishtar, Anu, and Antum, is actually very interesting. Anu knows that his daughter's desire to set upon the Bull of Heaven on the mortal world will lead to devastating consequences. However, he still decides that the will do it, because of the major temper-tantrum that Ishtar is having. Anu does not understand why Ishtar is so furious, when Gilgamesh has only said the truth and has not at all lied or slandered Ishtar's name.

The purpose of the Bull of Heaven could be used to play up the role of Ishtar and the relationship between humans and Gods. In this case, Anu is willing to sacrifice seven years of harvest in order to appease his daughter. And even though Ishtar has procured enough rations, the Gods are not looking at the bigger picture and are set on this desire to complete this childish desire of Ishtar's to punish Gilgamesh - without regards to whoever else will die.

Enkidu's Death

The Gods decide that for the transgressions that Enkidu and Gilgamesh have committed by killing Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven, one of them must die. In a meeting that Enkidu has as a dream, he realizes that he is the one that has been selected. This is interesting, because Enkidu's death is foretold by the fact that both Humbaba and Ishtar curse him. This is the poet's way of thinking where the story will end up twisting and where it can go wrong, right from the beginning when Enkidu becomes cursed - not once, but twice.

Humbaba is protected by Enlil, and thus, when Humbaba is killed because of Enkidu's initial desire to go and kill Humbaba, Enlil is rightfully upset. However, instead of immediately taking out his anger upon the two mortals, Enlil ends up saving his anger and then strikes with they both least expect it; punishing Enkidu. On the contrary, the two were also completely supported on their quest by the god, Shamash.

An analysis of Enkidu's Dreams has also been done.

The Flood

Utanapishtim explains to Gilgamesh, that the is the sole survivor a flood that wiped out the entire human race. Utanapishtim used to be the king of the city Shuruppak. The Gods - Anu, Ninurta, Enlil, Ennugi, and Ea - met in a secret council where Enlil ordered a flood to destroy humankind. Ea, had been sworn to secrecy, but he cleverly spoke to the walls of Utanapishtim's house and describe the plans. Utanapishtim was sitting on the other side and heard everything. Ea warned him to build a huge boat, and load it up with animals, seeds of plants, his family, and possessions. Utanapishtim told his people that Enlil hated him, and that he was going to be banished from his kingdom.

"Six days and seven nights came the wind and flood, the storm flattening the land." (XI, 125-126)

He continued to look out for the coastlines, but could not find land. He sent out a dove, who flew around and returned. Then he sent out a swallow, who also flew around and returned. And then he sent out a raven, who did not return, indicating that land was soon to be found.

Upon reaching the shore, Utanapishtim began to make a sacrifice to the Gods. Ishtar came down, and was extremely upset and angry with the decision made by Enlil without consulting the other Gods. When Enlil saw that the entire boat had survived, Ea spoke up and berated Enil for his actions. He said that the punishment should have fit the crime, and that not everyone deserved to die. He said that plagues, lion, wolves, and famine could be used to kill certain people, rather than the entire human race.

Enlil understood, went inside the boat, and touched the forehead of Utanapishtim and his wife. He said:

"Previously Utanapishtim was a human being. But now let Utanapishtim and his wife become like us, the gods! Let Utanapishtim reside far away, at the Mouth of the Rivers!" (XI, 198-200)

From there, Utanapishtim was taken away to the Mouth of the Rivers, and he and his wife were granted eternal life for saving humanity.

In this interesting story, the entire theme of Divine Intervention can be seen where the Gods make decisions for themselves as to what will happen with people. There is conflict even among the Gods, as they each have their own hidden agenda and desires. In this case, Ea was smart enough to save the entire human race from the malevolent desire that was coming from Enlil. Instead of picking different punishments for individuals, the divine intervention of wiping out the entire human race is definitely an extreme action taken by the Gods.

Dreams

A central issue raised is the importance of dreams. The basic fact that the poet tried to convey in the olden era was that dreams are the main ways in which Gods can communicate with humans. Generally, in the mythology of most culture (Roman, Greek, and Hindu) to name a few examples, God would come during a dream and provide guidance as to what the individual should do. Interestingly enough, this is very different from the current day situation and belief where humans believe that dreams are based on the mix of anxiety and Freudian desires.

Gilgamesh's Dreams About Enkidu
Shamat, the temple prostitute, tells Enkidu that there have been two dreams that Gilgamesh has had about Enkidu.

**Gilgamesh Dream #1 to his mother:** (Tablet I: 219-246)

In the first dream, a meteorite lands in a field outside Uruk. Gilgamesh is drawn to the rock as if it were a woman. He was unable to budge it, but he "I loved it and embraced it as a wife." His mother, Ninsun, says that the mountain represents a man. She responds to this dream and tells him,

"There will come to you a mighty man, a comrade who saves his friend -- he is the mightiest in the land, he is stronger, his strength is might as the meteorite of Anu!" (I, 241-243)

**Gilgamesh Dream #2 to his mother:** (Tablet I: 247-269)

In the second dream immediately afterwards, Gilgamesh finds an axe lying at the gate of his marital chamber. Gilgamesh too, "loved it and embraced it as a wife". His mother once again says that the axe is a man. She responds to the dream with the same lines as before,

"There will come to you a mighty man, a comrade who saves his friend -- he is the mightiest in the land, he is stronger, his strength is might as the meteorite of Anu!" (I, 262-265)

Both of these dreams foreshadow the strong connection that will be seen between Enkidu and Gilgamesh.

**Gilgamesh's Dreams in the Cedar Forest**

The next set of four dreams occur while Gilgamesh and Enkidu are on their way to kill Humbaba in the Cedar Forest. The general theme is that Gilgamesh asks for a dream to come from the Gods, and in particular Shamash. As previously mentioned, these dreams all have a similar set of repeated lines at the beginning. However, the change that occurs for each dream provides the poet and orator to provide a psychologically interesting interpretation in how Enkidu reacts in a particular way to Gilgamesh. In these four passages, Enkidu essentially turns into a "yes-man", who misinterprets and twists each of the actual dreams into making Gilgamesh believe that they will be successful. In this route, Enkidu actually fails in his primary job as the king's counselor.

**Gilgamesh Dream #1 from Shamash:** (IV, 17-30)

Gilgamesh was walking through a deep gorge when a huge mountain fell on top of them. Enkidu interprets the dream and says it is nothing to fear. He says that the mountain is Humbaba, and that he and Gilgamesh will topple Humbaba and his corpse will lie like a plain into the wasteland.

**Gilgamesh Dream #2 from Shamash:** (IV, 45-63)

A wild bull attacked Gilgamesh, and Gilgamesh was sunk to his knees in front of him - completely helpless on the ground. He could hear the bull bellowing and could feel its hot breath on his face. Then someone offered him water. Again, Enkidu interprets the dream as fortunate. He says that the bull is not their enemy Humbaba, but Shamash, who blesses Gilgamesh by fighting with him. The man who brought water, Enkidu says, is Gilgamesh's father, Lugulbanda.

**Gilgamesh Dream #3 from Shamash:** (IV, 77-90)

The heavens roared and the earth rumbled. This time he dreams that the earth is shaking amidst the noise of thunder and lightning, and fire and ashes fall from the sky. There rained death. Once again, Enkidu interprets the dream favorably, but his response is actually missing from the text.

**Gilgamesh Dream #4 from Shamash:** (IV, 105-115)

The fourth dream is missing, but Gilgamesh wakes up in fear. Enkidu again interprets this dream and says that it is favorable! And that in the morning, there will be a favorable message from Shamash. There is a fragmentary fifth dream that follows, which is removed from the text.

In the morning, Gilgamesh prays to Shamash, desperately pleading for his protection. Shamash answers and explains that Humbaba has seven garments, each of which spreads terror. Shamash tells Gilgamesh that Humbaba is wearing only one of them now, and that if he dons all seven, Gilgamesh will be unable to defeat him. Time is of the essence in carrying out this attack and they must attack him now.

**Enkidu's Dreams of Death**

**Enkidu's Dream #1:** Tablet VII: Lines 1-17

This is a very significant dream as it foretells Enkidu's future. It is interesting that this vision arises as Enkidu ends up becoming cursed twice - by both Ishtar and Humbaba. Thus, the role of Divine Intervention can be seen to even extend into the realm of curses.

Enkidu awakes from a chilling nightmare in which the Gods were angry with him and Gilgamesh and were meeting to decide their fate. Anu decreed that they must punish one of the two for killing Humbaba, killing the Bull of Heaven, and for felling the tallest cedar tree. Enlil proclaims that Enkidu should die, while Shamash is wondering why either of them needs to die since the Gods are the ones who wanted these two to go on this quest.

**Enkidu's Dream #2:** Tablet VII: Lines 120-144: Images of the House of Dust
In the second dream, Enkidu actually goes and sees the House of Dust and the underworld. In this dream, a lion-headed eagle swoop down and seized him, dragging him down into the Underworld and the House of Dust. There, Enkidu saw kings, gods, and priests, all dressed in feathers. He saw Etana, Sumukan, and other Queens and important figures. All of them were living in darkness, with dirt as their food and drink. The Queen of the Netherworld, Ereshkigal, saw Enkidu and said "Who has taken this man?" (VII, 144), but with the fifty lines afterwards missing.

Interestingly enough, there have also been short stories that have been written about Enkidu and Gilgamesh's adventures, prior to the discovery of the Epic. Andrew George points out one story in particular, where Enkidu and Gilgamesh are playing ball, and the ball falls into the underworld. Enkidu is required to go to the underworld and return the ball. This is an early poem, but is important as it shows how Enkidu is forced to deal with the House of Dust, in a different context.

Relationships with Other Works

Christianity / Hinduism

There is a very similar connection between Utanapishtim and Noah from the Bible. There was also a similar story narrated in Hindu mythology, with the God Vishnu coming down in the form of a fish, Matsya, to come and guide an arch to safety after a flood. In all works, the protagonist ends up sending out birds to help find land and get help from the Divine. This is genuinely interesting because it leads into a discussion of comparative mythology. It seems that there is a common source of the stories, that probably extends further back than the older Babylonian works. Given the regional contexts of overlapping with the Biblical and Hindu (India) myths, the story of Gilgamesh and Utanapishtim is somewhere in between. There are differences when compared, such as Hinduism and the Bible having a monotheistic world, while Gilgamesh resides in the polytheistic world, which results in an understanding of the culture.

In a different frame of reference, another similarity between the Bible and this Epic would be the motif of Adam and Eve’s fall from innocence in Eden when they become aware of their sexuality; whereas Enkidu becomes tamed after he has sexual intercourse with Shamhat for six days and seven nights. Female sexuality forces Enkidu to become domesticated and this theme is presented in the power of females.

Another interesting parallel would be the snake who takes away the immortal fruit from Gilgamesh to the snake in the Garden of Eden tempting fate with an apple.

Homer’s Works

The opening paragraph of Gilgamesh is similar to the opening paragraph of the Odyssey. They both link together the struggle for a city. In this case, Odysseus has a patron Goddess of Athena, while Gilgamesh has Ishtar. In the Iliad, Achilles has a mother who is a minor goddess and a father who is a human being. This is exactly that same as Gilgamesh. In all three works, the protagonists, Odysseus, Achilles, and Gilgamesh go on a journey or face a battle.

Images
Sources

5. Foster, xvi.