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Love in Gilgamesh

The story of *Gilgamesh* explores three different aspects of love and the way it functions both in the story, through character development, and its role in ancient Mesopotamian culture. At the beginning of the story, sexual love is revealed, as Enkidu has sex with Shamhat, then brotherly love is represented through Enkidu and Gilgamesh's friendship, and lastly love is revealed during Gilgamesh's season of grief after Enkidu dies. Love between two people strengthens and sustains them even in the most difficult circumstances. The story of *Gilgamesh* reveals that love serves as a catalyst for change, is complex in nature, and remains even after death.

The first instance of love is romantic in nature and occurs at the beginning of the story, when Enkidu has sex with Shamhat. Enkidu was created by the goddess Aruru to become a "wild man", uncivilized in nature, that lived in the forest and roamed it naked, along with the animals. This was done in order to rival Gilgamesh and create his "second half" to complement Gilgamesh's characteristics. Enkidu was strong like Gilgamesh and ruled in the wilderness. Once the trapper sees Enkidu, he devises a plan, with Gilgamesh, by sending Shamhat to sleep with Enkidu, to weaken him. After displaying her own sexual desires with Enkidu in the forest, Shamhat realizes that Enkidu's wild nature needs to be civilized. Sexual love with Shamhat leads to Enkidu's transformation to become a civilized man. After having sex with Shamhat, Enkidu "tries to catch up, but his body was exhausted, his life-force was spent, his knees trembled, he

could no longer run like an animal, as he had before... he knows things now that an animal can't know" (*Mitchell 77). Enkidu transforms physically and intellectually, as a result of sleeping with Shamhat. His mind is more like a human and he is aware that his life is changing. As this story was written and shared widely within the Mesopotamian culture, their view of sexual love appears to civilize men and was a characteristic of being a man. In this instance, sexual love is a catalyst for Enkidu's change, as it tames his "wild nature" and transforms his mind and heart to become a man.

In addition to romantic love being a characteristic of the civilized man, romantic love also allowed Enkidu to have a sense of justice. When Enkidu hears that Gilgamesh requests to have sex with brides at the night of their wedding, Enkidu becomes angry and full of rage. He understands that this is not right and that something needs to change. As Enkidu listens to Shamhat explaining Gilgamesh's abuse, his face "went pale with anger. 'I will go to Uruk now, to the palace of Gilgamesh the mighty King. I will challenge him. I will shout to his face: I am the mightiest! I am the man who can make the world tremble!'" (Mitchell 87). As a result of romantic love, Enkidu now has a sense of reason and justice, that he did not possess as a wild man. His experience of romantic love, with Shamhat, served as a catalyst for his own change because he is now a man of logic and reason. Love with Shamphat also gave him the opportunity to befriend Gilgamesh.

Another element of love, found in the story, is brotherly love between Enkidu and Gilgamesh. Their friendship displays loyalty to one another as they seek to encourage each other before they face Humbaba. After Enkidu fights Gilgamesh over his unjust treatment of women in Uruk, "they embraced and kissed. They held hands like brothers. They walked side by side. They became true friends" (Mitchell 89). Though at the beginning of their journey, Enkidu was created

to rival Gilgamesh and ultimately stop his ruthless behavior, their friendship becomes a source of strength for both of them as they both lean on each other's confidence when facing Humbaba.

The complexities, yet loyalties of love are evident in this part of the story because even though Enkidu knows that Gilgamesh mistreats women and fights him about it, Enkidu is still willing to befriend Gilgamesh and stand by his side, in spite of his faults.

Throughout the story, brotherly love between Gilgamesh and Enkidu symbolizes loyalty and provides the reader with a deeper understanding of what friendship means. Their love for one another displays selflessness as they each are a source of strength when the other is weak. For example, before Gilgamesh killed Humbaba, he told Enkidu "courage, dear brother, this is no time to give in to fear... though your arms feel weak now and your legs tremble, you are a warrior, you know what to do" (Mitchell 120). Gilgamesh's encouragement to Enkidu reveals their brotherly love because when Enkidu feels weaker, Gilgamesh encourages him. In the same way, Enkidu also encourages Gilgamesh before killing Humbaba, by saying "two intimate friends cannot be defeated. Be courageous. Remember how strong you are. I will stand by you. Now let us attack" (Mitchell 122). The quote is not only an example of deep friendship, but brotherly love. Gilgamesh and Enkidu's relationship reveals the importance of courage, strength, and victory to the male gender role. The Mesopotamian culture placed a high value on male qualities of victory and strength in battle which was their source of popularity and revealed their strength as individuals. In this scene, their brotherly love gave them the strength to kill Humbaba and served as the catalyst for their bravery.

In addition, both Enkidu and Gilgamesh share a special bond with one another and they both complement each other in character. The complexity of love is revealed in their friendship because even when Gilgamesh is driven by hubris, Enkidu has the ability to love and support

him, even when he did not want to. In moments where Enkidu is just and logical, Gilgamesh is led by his own emotions. Through their friendship, the contrast between logic and passion is evident. When Enkidu is led by logical reasoning and love for Gilgamesh, Gilgamesh is led by emotion and passion for his own sake. Before going to kill Humbaba, Gilgamesh gathered the people of Uruk and declared to them that he will kill Humbaba. He states “I will kill Humbaba, the whole world will know how mighty I am. I will make a lasting name for myself, I will stamp my fame on men’s minds forever” (Mitchell 93). Gilgamesh seems driven by his own selfish desires to make a name for himself and build his own legacy for future generations. The complexity of love is shown as Enkidu will not gain anything from killing Humbaba, but will still support Gilgamesh and his pursuits. Gilgamesh, though led by his own ego, is loved by Enkidu, who complements his character and seeks to support him even when fighting Humbaba.

Although Gilgamesh’s passion is selfish in nature, he is complemented by Enkidu’s character of humility, selflessness, and logic. Even though Enkidu explained his own concerns about fighting Humbaba, he is still willing to sacrifice his own will to support Gilgamesh and his ambitions. Enkidu’s humility shows his love for Gilgamesh as he is willing to submit to his leadership at his own expense. Love remains steadfast in difficult situations. Before killing Humbaba, Enkidu says “since you must do this, I must go with you. So let us leave. Let our hearts be fearless. I will go first, since I know the way to the Cedar forest, where Humbaba lives” (Mitchell 104). Here, Enkidu’s act of submission is an act of love to serve Gilgamesh. Even though it is against his own will, Enkidu chose to support his friend. Love is complex as it rises during moments of humility and allows characters to submit to each other, even against their will.

In addition to the brotherly love between the two characters, love is also shown to be present even through Gilgamesh's grief and loss after Enkidu dies. The reader can see that love shines during Gilgamesh's season of grief and mourning. In grief he cries "hear me, elders, hear me, young men, my beloved brother is dead, I will mourn as long as I breathe, I will sob for him like a woman who has lost her only child" (Mitchell 151-152). In his mourning, Gilgamesh displays his love for Enkidu and compares his loss to a mother who loses her child. In this scene love shines through grief and loss. One does not grieve, if love is not present and when Gilgamesh takes time to grieve for Enkidu, he shows his love for the friendship and how invested he was in it. Through Gilgamesh's grief love is still present and remains even though Enkidu dies. The presence of love is shown through Gilgamesh's emotions and is symbolic that love does not only change people, but that it lasts longer than life itself. There is an eternal value to love and that is shown through the tears and grief that Gilgamesh experiences.

The story of Gilgamesh reveals that love is a catalyst for change, is complex, and remains constant even after death. At the beginning of the story, love is a force that civilizes Enkidu, causes both Gilgamesh and Enkidu to be brave, and lasts longer than death. Love is a complex force. It changes people's attitudes, unites them, and lasts even after loss of life. Throughout the story, love is found to be a constant force that rises to unify in the midst of conflict, builds lasting friendships, and has an eternal value to those it impacts.

*Pages will not match those of the physical book because my book is on kindle.

Works Cited

Stephen Mitchell. *Gilgamesh: a New English Version*. New York :Free Press, 2004.