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Immortality in the Epic of Gilgamesh

Introduction

The Epic of Gilgamesh largely centers on nature and immortality. The epos illustrates the life of Gilgamesh, a powerful ruler that exceeds other humans in stature and might. However, like the rest of humans, his life is not far removed from the fate that everyone encounters—death. The epic wonderfully weaves human achievements and power they have over other humans and animals against the overwhelming nature of death to illustrate that all humans are mortals (Świercz 38).

Immortality and Death in the epic, *Gilgamesh*

The main character, Gilgamesh is mysterious in the sense that he is two-thirds god and one-third human. However, his realization that death is inevitable and imminent helps to expound on human limitation as far as death is concerned. According to this epic, the dogma that surrounds immortality is far much greater to the extent that it transcends time and power of humans. Gilgamesh allows one side of his life (the mortal side) to limit his pride all at once upon the demise of Enkidu. However, it is quite interesting to see that the death in some way, awakens his own fear of mortality and initiates quest for cure and search for immortality.

Gilgamesh comes to the realization that even as king, he has to face the reality of his own death. This is evident in the poem when on the way to Cedar Forst to face Humbaba, Enkidu expresses personal concern about death to which Gilgamesh laughs, informing him that in the

physical world, no one lives for eternity. Enkidu admits that indeed life is short. However, deep down, Gilgamesh is quite distressed that he tries to look for ways through which he can learn about some of the secrets of immortality by consulting Utnapishtim.

Furthermore, the epic presents the concept of death when Gilgamesh explains to Enkidu in their journey to Humbaba, “Surely, we are mere mortal men...the gods live for eternity” (George 92). However, despite Gilgamesh’s awareness of the mortality of mankind, his ambitions to escape death and achieve fame are purely selfish (George 17). For instance, despite Humbaba representing the point of balance and defender of the ecosystem, Gilgamesh still goes ahead to hunt for him in order to kill him purely to gain fame no matter the consequences.

Gilgamesh’s hopes to find cure for death is thwarted by Utnapishtim when he narrates the story of the flood. At this point, he advises Gilgamesh that his quest for immortality is a futile one because from the very beginning of life, humans contained the seed of death, hence, inevitable. A major lesson that Gilgamesh, like his contemporaries learn is that the quality of life is not determined by the amount of wealth that one possesses, but by the quality of time spent while one is on earth, and by the impact they make on the people that surround them.

The theme of immortality is also evident in the poem when Gilgamesh develops some jealousy towards the gods and the immortality they enjoy. From their conversation with Enkidu, Gilgamesh comes to the realization that encountering the gods’ wrath can have dangerous repercussions, including facing death itself. Gilgamesh almost becomes a victim of such circumstance when Ishtar turns to the father Anu in order to send the Bull of Heaven to punish Gilgamesh. When Anu rejects such a request, she threatens to raise the dead to devour the living. As such, the immortality of humans is unequivocally brought out in the poem.

Importantly, in the epic, the concept of mortality is also highlighted through the death of Enkidu, which provides some awakening to Gilgamesh that human life is short, and no man is immortal. From such encounter with death, Gilgamesh is able to see his own mortality. However, though he seems devastated by the death of Enkidu, the epic reveals to the audience that through their relationships with others, it is possible to come to terms with the reality of life rather than being highly obsessed with earthly materials that do not last forever (Khan 6). While Enkidu's death provides one of the very first instances in which Gilgamesh tries to overcome his own mortality, the unfortunate loss of the plant that restores youth attests to the epic's emphasis on the mortality of humans and the vanity of every accomplishment in life. After the death of Enkidu, Gilgamesh is terrified of death, and curses the fact that like his friend Enkidu, he too will die. It is for this reason that he says to his mother Ninsun, "Will I too die? Will I be as lifeless as my friend Enkidu?" (Ziolkowski 159). From this argument, it is right to mention that Enkidu's death reawakens the reality of death on Gilgamesh and he almost accepts the fact that death is inevitable.

However, prior to the death of Enkidu, the concept of immortality is evinced through the prophetic dreams that he encounters. To a greater extent, the dreams act as premonition to Enkidu's death. Firstly, he moves to the Netherworld in an effort to escape death. At the same time, he curses Shamhat and the hunter by pouring tantrums at them and accusing them for conspiring to end his life. He says, "...the hunter, the trapper man did not let me be as great as my friend...you made me so weak" (Epic of Gilgamesh: 94). Based on this assertion, it is important to mention that there is eminent difficulty in Enkidu, like Gilgamesh, to come to terms with mortality as an aspect of human nature.

Kortesoja says that the Sumerian sages that wrote the epic was cognizant of the reality of human existence by comparing it to “mayfly floating on water” that momentarily disappears in the sun (p.3). In this regard, having failed in his mission to find cure for mortality, Gilgamesh makes his way back to Uruk saying, “I have filled my sinews with sadness, and I have achieved nothing with my toil” (George 169). Based on this assertion, while it is evident that Gilgamesh returns without finding cure for mortality, at least, he comes back with full acceptance that humans are mortal.

Conclusion

In trying to understand the concept of immortality in the epic, Gilgamesh, analyzing the character archetype of Gilgamesh is crucial. Gilgamesh’s character is typical of the heroes in the ancient world. He is a man of divine descent, and he is also capable of superhuman feats. Nonetheless, he is still limited in his ability to influence the course of nature. By and large, Gilgamesh is able to see the reality of death through events that occur around him, such as the death of Enkidu, hence, accentuating the fact that the epic largely delves around immortality.

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