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ENG 201- Discussion Questions for “Gilgamesh” translated by Stephen Mitchell

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Q1: Consider Gilgamesh’s silence throughout the battle against Humbaba. How does his actions differ from the beginning of the epic poem? In what ways does the finale of tablet 5 add to the characterization of Gilgamesh?

A1: I asked this question because of the stark difference in Gilgamesh’s character from the beginning of the epic to the end of tablet 5. Going back to the beginning the reader is immediately introduced to Gilgamesh as a “wild bull of a man, unvanquished leader, hero in the front lines,” strongly suggesting that he is a fearless leader (Mitchell 52). The feeling of invincibility and fearlessness goes straight to Gilgamesh’s head overall denouncing the fear of death “since sooner or later death must come”(Mitchell 58). To go from the established fearlessness to absolute silence in the heat of the battle when Gilgamesh has the sword Humbaba’s throat causes the reader to consider the underlying characteristics of Gilgamesh. Though silent through most of the exchange with Humaba pleading for mercy and Enkidu urging for the swift kill, it’s Humbaba’s last words that truly show Gilgamehs’s greatest fear, which was once masked by arrogance and pride. Humbaba’s curses that Enkidu will “die in great pain” if Gilgamesh kills him, causing Gilgamesh to essentially lose himself, dropping his axe, with the words going all the way through him (Mitchell 68). The utter fact that Gilgamesh even has a chance of losing someone to death paralyzes him in the moment, something the reader could never imagine with Gilgameshe’s perceived carelessness with mortality. Though he eventually does in the end slay Humbaba the moment Gilgamesh hesitates causes the reader to reflect and see that deep down Gilgamesh fears the inevitable: death. The entire moment shows a much more distressed side of Gilgamesh that will be explored in coming tablets of the epic.

Q2: Consider the services provided by Shamhat. How does the narrator's tone influence the reader's perception of Shamhat?

A2: To put it simply, Shamhat is a sex worker. It is no secret that sex workers and prostitutes have been seen throughout history as the bottom of the barrel, disgraced to society. Though prostitutes have a dehumanizing perception, the narrator in Gilgamesh forces the reader to think of her as the opposite. Shamhat is called to duty by Gilgamesh after a trapper finds Enkidu acting as a savage man with other wild animals. Though her job is to lure and have sex with Enkidu to civilize him, Gilgamesh almost subverts the blatant prostitution by describing the acts to honor the goddesses when talking to the trapper. By describing her actions as honoring gods, the reader immediately thinks of her as a symbol of divinity, since she's acting in god's favor. Almost immediately the trapper and Shamhat venture into the wilderness to meet Enkidu and civilize him. After Shamhat lured him in she "used her love-arts, she took his breath with her kisses, held nothing back, and showed him what a woman is" for seven days with Enkidu (Mitchell 54). Though the narrator is merely describing an interaction between a sex worker and a man, the narrator perceives it differently. The scene is narrated with much intimacy and nuance, not only focusing on the sexual aspect, but the raw emotional aspect as well. Shamhat is not only having sex with him but showing him *what* a woman is suggesting she is more than what meets the eye, more than just a symbol for sex, but also a caregiver for all sides of life. The notion of Shamhat acting as a caregiver doubles down as she cares for Enkidu in much more domestic ways, teaching how to function in civilized society. The narrator ensures that the reader sees Shamhat as more than a sex worker, but as a respectable woman in Uruk.