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Reflection on The Epic of Gilgamesh

*Gilgamesh said to Urshanabi, “Come here, look at this marvelous plant, the antidote to the fear of death. With it we return to the youth we once had. I will take it to Uruk, I will test its power by seeing what happens when an old man eats it. If that succeeds, I will eat some myself and become a carefree young man again.”*

*At four hundred miles they stopped to eat, at a thousand miles they pitched their camp. Gilgamesh saw a pond of cool water. He left the plant on the ground and bathed. A snake smelled its fragrance, stealthily it crawled up and carried the plant away. As it disappeared, it cast off its skin.*

*When Gilgamesh saw what the snake had done, he sat down and wept. He said to the boatman, “What shall I do now? All my hardships have been for nothing. O Urshanabi, was it for this that my hands have labored, was it for this that I gave my heart’s blood? I have gained no benefit for myself but have lost the marvelous plant to a reptile. I plucked it from the depths, and how could I ever manage to find that place again? And our little boat—we left it on the shore.”*

-The Epic of Gilgamesh, Book XI, Page 92

The Epic of Gilgamesh is one of mankind’s earliest written text, which focuses on King Gilgamesh and his transformation from a tyrant to a man fearful of his own mortality. This

passage in particular takes note of that mortality by having a reptile take the plant of immortality away from Gilgamesh, and Gilgamesh mourns its loss. This highlights Gilgamesh's mortality, and thus his humanity, in two ways. One way that it highlights his mortality is in the literal sense; he cannot become immortal anymore. In losing the plant that grants immortality, he loses any chance of becoming immortal ever again, both since he has no hope of finding it again, and since Utnapishtim sent him away. The other way Gilgamesh's mortality is highlighted is through him suffering the consequences for his actions. Had he simply ingested the plant as Utnapishtim had suggested earlier, he would have become immortal as he originally wanted. Instead, he held off on eating the plant so he could test its effects on another individual back in Uruk, which led to the plant getting stolen by a serpent. Thus, he made a mistake and suffered the consequences for it. This contrasts with the occurrences in the first half of the epic, in which Gilgamesh, as king, did not suffer repercussions for any of his tyranny, prompting the people of Uruk to pray to the gods in order to make him stop. This one event, where Gilgamesh's goal of immortality was taken from him at the very last moment, may serve as a fitting punishment for his actions at the very beginning of the epic.

In terms of themes, this passage, and perhaps the entirety of the second half of the epic, can present the very human message that obtaining immortality is impossible and should not be sought out; upon having the plant stolen from him, Gilgamesh is made more aware of his own mortality and never even thinks to seek out another one. Instead, the rest of the book has Gilgamesh show the city of Uruk to Urshanabi in all its glory (92). It can be inferred that with immortality outside of his grasp, Gilgamesh is made more aware of what mankind can do with their finite years of life. This illustrates that the pursuit of immortality can blind one to the beauty

and splendor one's mankind can bring, and once Gilgamesh finally gave up immortality, he was made aware of Uruk's greatness once more.

Ironically, Gilgamesh did achieve a form of immortality. In having his myth written down, his story lived on, and he is remembered long after his civilization became forgotten by the rest of the world, thus he became immortal.