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English 201

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2 March 2023

Literary Analysis of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*

The *Epic of Gilgamesh*, as one of the earliest known written texts, serves as the archetypical work of fiction to which all other works can be compared. Even without knowledge of the Mesopotamian mythology that serves as the backdrop to the Epic, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* can be taken as a standalone plot concerning its main character, King Gilgamesh of Uruk, and his humbling from a petty tyrant his people fear into a wise king his people revere. This transition in King Gilgamesh's character is perhaps the earliest known example of any character undergoing character development for the better, and, as such, is the first archetypical case of character development in fiction.

The Epic of Gilgamesh, as translated by Stephen Mitchell, begins with its prologue on Page 51, which describes Gilgamesh as an individual who has seen and known everything and has inscribed his deeds upon lapis lazuli tables before welcoming the reader to experience King Gilgamesh's story for themselves. This prologue gives readers a glimpse of what King Gilgamesh will turn into, and not who Gilgamesh is at the beginning of the epic (Mitchell 51).

Book I, starting at page 52, properly introduces king Gilgamesh, where he is described as a tyrant who "does whatever he wants", from harming his own subjects, to "using" the unwedded female citizens, even during their wedding night (Mitchell 52). King Gilgamesh's antics have gotten to a point where his people are begging the gods to humble him, which suggests to the

reader that his actions are getting especially heinous, even though he is the king. However, shortly after the gods created Enkidu, who was created to humble Gilgamesh, he was sent into the forest, where he caused chaos for the hunters in the forest. After being told of this in page 53, King Gilgamesh ordered the hunter who alerted him to request aid from a priestess of the goddess Ishtar to humanize him (Mitchell 53). While this order may come off as strange to modern readers, it does work, and it also highlights King Gilgamesh's wisdom, foreshadowing of who he will become by the end of the epic.

The next key point in Gilgamesh's character development is when he first meets Enkidu in Book 2. After learning of King Gilgamesh's misdeeds towards his own subjects, Enkidu becomes enraged and vows to confront him over his injustices (Mitchell 56). However, after clashing against one another for seven days, King Gilgamesh and Enkidu end up becoming inseparable friends (Mitchell 77). While this isn't quite the kind of humbling one would expect to happen, Enkidu does play a pivotal role in King Gilgamesh's character development. Not to mention, King Gilgamesh's earlier injustices of taking wives on their wedding night or otherwise harming his populace do not come up after he befriends Enkidu, so it can be interpreted that Gilgamesh's behavior improves due to Enkidu's presence in his life.

King Gilgamesh and Enkidu's next feat, the slaying of Humbaba, would return attention to King Gilgamesh's arrogance, which has yet to be curbed by this point of the epic. Books III to V detail King Gilgamesh's quest to slay Humbaba, the beast of the cedar forest (Mitchell 58-69). While considered an incredibly bad idea by both the elders and Enkidu himself, since it will offend the god Enlil and Humbaba is a terrifying monster in its own right, King Gilgamesh arrogantly proclaims that they can do it, and Enkidu follows him with some prodding. (Mitchell 58-61). It should be noted that King Gilgamesh is not afraid of death at this point, and proclaims

that this quest will immortalize them in the minds of the men of Uruk, but without Enkidu, he will surely perish (Mitchell 59). It should be noted that while he is aware of his own mortality, he is not afraid of it at this point, and notes that without Enkidu, he would surely perish against Humbaba (Mitchell 66). Despite his arrogance and willingness to potentially offend the gods, King Gilgamesh does note that he is mortal and will die, despite his lack of attention to it. It also highlights his reverence to his own mother, Ninsun, as he seeks her counsel beforehand, which acknowledges the fact that King Gilgamesh does hold reverence to the gods, and in such, other individuals besides himself and Enkidu (Mitchell 60-61).

The next book continues to pursue these ideas, that while King Gilgamesh still does not yet fear his own death, he is still wise enough to avoid it, as seen when he rejects the goddess Ishtar's advances due to her reputation of bringing ruin to her lovers (Mitchell 70-71). And when she tries to seek retribution, he kills the beast she sent, assaults her with its corpse, and then promptly uses the horns to honor his father (Mitchell 71-73). This event, unfortunately, leads to Enkidu's doom, as he foretells in his dreams of his own demise in the underworld, and dies shortly afterward (Mitchell 74-76). This leads to Gilgamesh going into denial, until he is sure of Enkidu's demise, at which he mourns properly and prepares to bury him with as many honors as he can (Mitchell 77-79). These acts once again prove that Gilgamesh does love Enkidu and that he has a heart underneath all of his arrogance. This also is the first time he is humbled in the narrative, as he is finally inflicted with consequences for his actions, and these consequences weigh upon him for the rest of the narrative.

With the fear of his own mortality ingrained into his heart by the demise of his one and only friend, King Gilgamesh begins a long, perilous quest for immortality. However, this pursuit of immortality is repeatedly called out by numerous characters in the narrative, starting with the

scorpion man in Book XI (Mitchell 81), then with Shiduri the tavern owner in book X (Mitchell 83). Last but not least, the final person to call Gilgamesh out on this pointless endeavor is the immortal man Utnapishtim.

One of the first people who tries to dissuade him is the scorpion man and woman, who Gilgamesh meets in the twin peaks. They notice that he is running himself ragged in his quest and try to tell him to just turn back and accept his mortality, but give Gilgamesh the advice he needs to continue anyway (Mitchell 80-81). Here, Gilgamesh is clearly going to extremes to seek immortality, and the reaction of the scorpion couple suggests that this pursuit is immature on Gilgamesh's part, but help him anyway, since Gilgamesh is so stubborn to pursue this goal, and he will not stop until all options are exhausted.

The next notable individual who tries to dissuade him is Shiduri. Shiduri is this tavern keeper, though her own mortality and possible godhood can be put into question since her tavern is located far from any mentioned civilization; Gilgamesh comes out of the tunnel when he had to outrun the sun, which doesn't seem to be a place where mortals normally access (Mitchell 82). After Gilgamesh tells her of his quest, Shiduri tries to tell him that he's not going , to find eternal life; the Gods decreed that humans are to have finite lives, and that the best way to live is to enjoy his life to the fullest (Mitchell 83). She is trying to help him accept his loss and move on, but Gilgamesh, still in grief, does not listen, highlighting his stubbornness and immaturity on the matter upon being called out on his behavior.

Finally, the one who convinces Gilgamesh to stop his fruitless quest is Utnapishtim. Utnapishtim, himself, is an interesting figure. He is a notable survivor of a great flood that happened many years prior to the beginning of the story. Because he was one of the survivors, he and his wife were granted immortality by the Gods (Mitchell 88-89). While this passage is a

notable analog to the Biblical figure Noah, as well as other flood myths, it highlights that immortality is only granted by the gods and that mortals seeking it out by themselves is a foolish endeavor, one that he further proves by testing Gilgamesh with trying to stay awake, to which the king fails (90-91). But King Gilgamesh does not want to give up his endeavor, and it's not until his last chance at immortality, a magical plant, is stolen by a serpent that he eventually gives up his quest for eternal life (Mitchell 91-92). It should be noted that after this point that Gilgamesh makes no more attempts at finding eternal life, and instead shows off the splendor of Uruk to the boat man who brought him home (Mitchell 92). This passage can be taken as Gilgamesh finally maturing, accepting that he will die, but acknowledging his own city, and the chronicle of his adventures, will long outlive him. He has finally embraced his mortality for what it is, and acknowledges the wisdom of those he has met along the way.

King Gilgamesh may very well be history's oldest archetypical hero, in that he is the protagonist of his own story. While modern audiences wouldn't find themselves rooting for the King of Uruk at first, it is universally appealing to see an individual undergo change that would turn him or her from an unlikeable, arrogant tyrant to a beloved wise king who forgoes the pursuit of eternal life and enjoys the splendor of his city, whose legacy will long outlast. Despite King Gilgamesh's divinity, he is still one-third human, and with that humanity brings mortality, and the ability to grow and change. Ironically, when King Gilgamesh abandoned his goal of eternal life, his story in which he changed from tyrant to wise king immortalized him in written word forever.

Works cited

Mitchell, Stephen. *Gilgamesh: A New English Version. Atria Paperback*, 2006. pp. 1-92.