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The Meaning of Life: Literary Analysis of The Epic of Gilgamesh

Since the dawn of human existence, the question of purpose has been intriguing and significant. The Epic of Gilgamesh is one of the world's earliest known pieces of literature. The Epic of Gilgamesh was written approximately from 2100-1200 B.C., long before the fall of Rome and the rule of Alexander the Great. This piece of literature is nearly as old as the great pyramids of Egypt. The story explores themes of mortality and how life could have meaning if there is an inevitable end. Several characters in the epic explore the essence of our finite time on Earth. Gilgamesh, the great ruler of the even greater city of Uruk, is forced to confront his mortality after the death of a close friend. Enkidu, a formerly primitive man, is haunted by nightmares of a grim future. Moreover, Utnapishtim is rumored to have gained access to eternal life. Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and Utnapishtem have different experiences and views on the relationship between life and death; however, the Epic of Gilgamesh has these characters come to similar conclusions on what it means to live a meaningful life.

Gilgamesh is the $\frac{2}{3}$ god $\frac{1}{3}$ human ruler of the great city of Uruk. Initially, Gilgamesh's reign was reckless. He lived freely without any concern about anyone except himself. In the first tablet, it states that: "The people suffer from his tyranny, the people cry out that he takes the son from his father and crushes him, takes the girl from her mother and uses her, the warrior's daughter, the young man's bride, he uses her, no one dares to oppose him." (Mitchell 52) In this introduction to Gilgamesh's character, the reader understands that Gilgamesh does not take life

seriously because of his god-like strength and stature. When people live recklessly, they communicate their lack of gratitude for their life. However, after encountering the wild man, Enkidu, he begins to look at life differently—Gilgamesh's demeanor changes. After befriending Enkidu, Gilgamesh becomes concerned with driving evil out of the world. He says, "We must kill him and drive out evil from the world" (Mitchell 58). This virtuous characteristic is incongruent with his previous way of living. For the first time in the epic, Gilgamesh is concerned with people other than himself. Gilgamesh's most significant character change comes when his close friend Enkidu succumbs to his illness. Gilgamesh is confronted with the harsh reality of mortality. While on his search for eternal life, Gilgamesh exclaims, "Must I die too? Must I be as lifeless as Enkidu? How can I bear this sorrow that gnaws at my belly, this fear of death that restlessly drives me onward?" (Mitchell 80) Even as a god-like man, Gilgamesh begins to fear death unlike ever before. When closely confronted by death, people tend to think deeply about how they are living their life. Gilgamesh's only solution to his fear is to try and find eternal life. After failing to find eternal life, Gilgamesh learns from the immortal man Utnapishtem; he understands that instead of trying to live forever, he must learn how to make the most of his mortality. Many times, ungratefulness plagues the minds of people. Gilgamesh falls victim to this when he searches for eternal life. Utnapishtem and his wife try to help him to see how the gods blessed his life beyond measure. Unlike Gilgamesh, Enkidu's untimely demise prevents him from learning to use his given time.

Throughout the story, Enkidu encounters near-death experiences multiple times. Enkidu was born in the wild and gained consciousness through his sexual experience with Shamhat. This powerful man becomes feeble in the face of his own mortality. When Enkidu is gearing up to fight Humbaba, the protector of the Cedar Forest, he starts to fear for his life. At the sight of

Humbaba, Enkidu says: "But when I saw him, my blood ran cold. His teeth are knife-sharp, they stick out like tusks, his face, blood smeared..." (Mitchell 66). Enkidu exuded confidence on the journey to face Humbaba. However, as soon as he realized that Humbaba could be responsible for his demise, he began to feel immense fear. In addition, in the seventh tablet, Enkidu begins to have terrifying dreams about his subsequent passing. The fear makes Enkidu act entirely out of character. He begins cursing Shamhat, the woman who pulled him out of the wilderness. This emotion encapsulates how humans desperately try to cling to life in the face of death. Enkidu's death highlights the mortality of man. When people die, it changes the people around them. Many people today are affected by the loss of a loved one. It is impossible to lose someone close and stay the same. Enkidu had great physical strength; however, no amount of physical strength could halt the inevitability of death. On the other hand, Utnapishtim is a man who gained immortality through favor from the gods.

Gilgamesh finds Utnapishtim to find the secret to eternal life. Instead of telling Gilgamesh the secret to living forever, he tells him how to live well. "To the fool they gave beer dregs instead of butter, stale crusts instead of bread that is fit for gods, rags instead of magnificent garments, instead of a wide fringed belt an old rope, and a frantic, senseless, dissatisfied mind. Can't you see how fortunate you are?" (Mitchell 85) In this quote, Utnapishtim attempts to correct Gilgamesh's flawed mindset. He compares the life of Gilgamesh and what most people lived at the time. Gilgamesh lived like a god, was wealthy, and was extremely powerful. His life completely outclassed the average person. Utnapishtim calls Gilgamesh to be grateful for his blessings and the life he has already lived. Furthermore, Utnapishtim also highlights that death is inevitable when he says, "The handsome young man, the lovely young woman—in their prime, death comes and drags them away." (Mitchell 85) Through this, he

discourages Gilgamesh from thinking about how his life will end because his death is inescapable. These are valuable lessons that Utnapishtim indicates, and they can be applied to contemporary society.

Today, there are 331 million people that live in the United States. The United States is one of the wealthiest countries in the world, and many people suffer from depression. As United States citizens, many freedoms are taken for granted. Freedom of religion, speech and privacy are all taken for granted. Several countries across the world have many of their freedoms infringed upon by their governments. Countries like North Korea are ruled entirely by their government, and their people suffer from strict laws. Many people forget how blessed and favored their lives are. When Americans and other wealthy countries compare their lives to countries that do not have access to clean water, it is clear that Americans live high-quality lives. It is easy to complain when you do not comprehend the suffering that others go through.

With that being said, the characters in the Epic of Gilgamesh encapsulate the inevitability of death and how humans reliably cope with that reality. Gilgamesh's reckless living mirrors how many people today live life. In addition, his reaction and growth to Enkidu's death symbolize how the death of a loved one can transform the mind and disposition of an individual. Also, Utnapishtim's words of advice can be significant for being grateful for what you have and living a fulfilled life. The Epic of Gilgamesh highlights the relationship that people have with death and urges people to live life well.

Sources

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