

Amaya Campbell

Professor Stubbs

ENG 201

9 March 2023

Surrender to Nature Through the “Epic of Gilgamesh”

It's a simple fact human beings are dependent on nature to survive. Every facet of our human experience revolves around the need to utilize the environment, from eating fresh fruits and vegetables to using clay and wood to build homes since ancient times. Though civilization was built around using the environment to do daily activities there are a plethora of ways humanity has negatively impacted the natural world. Interestingly, The Epic of Gilgamesh, the oldest fictional story in the entire world, grapples with the idea of nature, specifically the relationship between man and nature. Throughout the powerful epic, one of its central ideas is man's surrender to the natural world, the surrender of the ego to nature. The main character Gilgamesh's journey shows the theme of nature vs. man. Through analyzing the actions, motivation, and growth in Gilgamesh, the epic conveys the cautionary theme that man and nature can coexist without being opposed to each other. The Epic of Gilgamesh argues that humans can have a harmonious, beautiful relationship between man and nature if they discard their selfish desire for control.

Before delving into the allusive epic, having historical context surrounding the time The Epic of Gilgamesh was written is helpful. The poem dates all the way back around 4,000 years ago in ancient Mesopotamia, originally scribed by Sîn-lēqi-unninni. Most historians believe the story was written by people of the Sumerian society who lived in Uruk. To the Sumerian people, the natural world was tied to every facet of life and held to a very high standard. From the “great

realms of heaven, earth, sea, and air...to the dike and ditch, field and farm,” the natural world was considered divine, heavenly in a sense (Kramer 113-114).

From tablet 1, the reader immediately learns about Gilgamesh's character traits and motivations. His ego drives him as a person, with the city truly being his fortress to reign power among all of the citizens "like a wild bull"(Mitchell 54). Though he lives in a city built by the citizens using natural resources, he takes everything for granted. The tyranny becomes so bad the citizens have to beg and plead to the gods to "do something quickly, before the people overwhelm heaven with their heart-rending cries"(Mitchell 32). Instead of merely giving Gilgamesh a lesson about being a humble leader to his civilization, the god Anura goes to nature and creates Enkidu out of a handful of clay. Pre-civilized Enkidu spent his days frolicking with the gazelles and drinking water with the deer deep into the wilderness, fully embracing his wild and natural form. Interestingly though Enkidu is Gilgamesh's true other half being "his second self, a man who equals his strength and courage," Enkidu does not have pompous, selfish characteristics (Mitchell 53). True corruption and big ego come strictly from staying within the civilization, far from the wilderness. Unfortunately for Enkidu, he becomes civilized, discarding the remnants of his naturally wild side and stepping into Gilgamesh's embrace, holding "hands like brothers"(Mitchell 57).

With Enkidu civilized, Gilgamesh decides he wants the both of them to venture into the Cedar Forest to kill the monster Humbaba. At this point, Gilgamesh's motivations are purely to feed his pride and ego. When asked, his motivation is to cement his name in history, to "stamp [his] fame on men's minds forever" when murdering the forest's terrifying defender (Mitchell 59). The irony of the situation is that Humbaba was created to protect a facet of nature that was not available to humans, the Cedar Forest. Humbaba is an integral part of the natural world,

sacred to the Gods. and a protector against the corruption in humanity, but Gilgamesh ignores all of it. Gilgamesh is using the natural facets of the world for his personal gain, exploiting the natural to build his reputation and rapport for centuries to come. Even the God Ninsun, the people in this epic that are supposed to guide the heroes, is weary about the controversial quest, commanding the winds to help Gilgamesh murder the forest keeper.

Foolishly Gilgamesh and Enkidu travel miles to the Cedar Forest, but on the way, Gilgamesh has vivid nightmares foreshadowing numerous ways the adventure could end badly after making an offering to the Gods and praying for a good mission. The repetitive nature of tablet four going from setting out offerings for the mountain to bring him “a favorable dream” to panicky waking up at midnight from a bad omen, represents a warning sign (Mitchell 62). The bad omens represent nature telling, almost begging Gilgamesh to turn around and let go. At this moment in the story, Gilgamesh is grasping at a slippery rope, trying to get the world to bend to him and his desires, but the world is not his, and nature is not inherently his. The key is that keeping nature in alignment with humanity lets humans let go of the desire for control, letting go of pride.

Eventually, though, despite the constant bad omens and dreams, Gilgamesh eventually kills Humbaba, but not without immense consequences. Humbaba cursed Enkidu to “die in great pain” and Gilgamesh to be “crushed with grief” right before he knew Gilgamesh was going to finish the job. Humbaba’s retaliation by cursing both of them to misery illustrates nature's almost coming back to Gilgamesh’s selfish actions (Mitchell 68). Up until this point, the natural world has been calm to civilization, staying within the confinements of the wilderness, drinking water from the waterhole with the deer and gazelles. The natural world only retaliates because Gilgamesh went into the natural world and killed a figure important to the forest, which is a clear

violation of maintaining the harmony between nature and humanity. Circling back to Gilgamesh's motivations, he only wanted to kill Humababa to cement his status in society, only thinking about himself, not the big picture.

Inevitably Gilgamesh loses Enkidu to a terribly slow illness, spinning him into a downward spiral of overwhelming and debilitating grief. The death of Enkidu brings out a different side of Gilgamesh; instead of the confident and arrogant leader ready to demolish an entire forest, he's all alone and lacks the courage or confidence in the earlier part of the story, pacing "back and forth, like a lioness whose cubs are trapped, he tore out clumps of his hair"(Mitchell 78). Consumed with guilt and grief, Gilgamesh decides to go to the very place that put a curse on him: "into the wilderness with matted hair, in a lion skin"(Mitchell 79). This moment is pivotal to tying Gilgamesh's character arc and the theme of harmony between humanity and nature. At this moment, Gilgamesh takes a full step back, a step back from the power and pride, and control he's been tethered to up until this point. Though Gilgamesh has not transformed completely, this is at least a step toward him learning to let go of the anger and need for control that has been consuming him.

On his way into the wilderness, Gilgamesh's goal is to find the key to immortality; he wants to overcome the way he lost his best friend by finding the one man that gained the escape from death: Utnapishtim. Though the last scene showed a glimpse of letting go of some power and control, he still has some in his heart and soul. Death is a process inherently tied to the natural and human world. Everything that is living must inevitably face death, so Gilgamesh seeking a way to overcome it illustrates him still craving a sense of control. On his quest to find Utnapishtim, Gilgamesh goes through multiple challenges but eventually seeks out Utnapishtim. When confronted with a challenge in exchange for immortality, Gilgamesh ultimately fails, but

he eventually gets the secret to youth from a plant in the Great Deep. At last, Gilgamesh has the secret he's been waiting for, the ultimate token for defying the inevitable natural occurrence, but the excitement is short-lived. A snake smelled the flower of immortality and "stealthily crawled up and carried the plant away" (Mitchell 92). Though the experience crushes Gilgamesh, he continues on back to his city of Uruk. Gilgamesh not freaking out, using his super strength and skill to hunt down the snake and steal the fruit back, shows how much he let go. Gilgamesh ultimately let go of his pent-up pride and massive ego he had for everything and anything. He metaphorically and literally gave up and waved a white flag to end the war. Returning to Uruk, he's found a new sense of wonder and gratitude; he truly sees the beauty and art within the city from "orchards, the glorious palaces and temples" (Mitchell 92). With him fully letting go of the control that was putting him in a chokehold. The balance between humanity and nature is finally restored.

Interestingly, The Epic of Gilgamesh's overall theme has a lot of parallels with how humanity treats the environment in modern times. Big corporations run by greedy, money-hungry people that parallel Gilgamesh at the poem's beginning are constantly exploiting the environment. Almost every day, there is a new ore opening to mine for oil, a new factory emitting more greenhouse gasses, and another forest being plowed. The epic poem is urging humanity to break up with its toxic ex: craving control, so the environment can heal and rebuild. We, humans, have gotten to a point where the harmony between nature and humans is wholly skewed, but we also have a way to fix it, thanks to Gilgameh's story. Letting go is the only way to realign ourselves back with nature, back to caring for and maintaining the environment. If Gilgamesh could turn himself around, humanity could as well.

Works Cited

Kramer, S. N. "Religion: Theology, Rite, and Myth." *The Sumerians: Their History, Culture and Character*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, Illinois, 1963, pp. 112–165.

Mitchell, Stephen. *Gilgamesh: A New English Version*. Atria Paperback, 2013.