GILGAMESH: OVERVIEW

Western Canon 1 | Brendan Shea, PhD (Brendan.Shea@rtc.edu)

He who has discovered the heart of all matters, let him teach the nation; / He who all knowledge possesses should teach all the people; /He shall impart his wisdom, and so they shall share it together. /Gilgamesh—he was the Master of wisdom, with knowledge of all things; /He discovered concealed secrets, handed down a story of times before the flood /Went on a journey far away, returned all weary and worn with his toiling, /Engraved on a table of stone his story. /He it was who built the ramparts of Uruk, the high-walled, /And he it was who set the foundation, /As solid as brass, of Eanna, the sacred temple of Anu and Ishtar, Strengthened its base, its threshold…. /Two-thirds of Gilgamesh are divine, and one-third of him human…. (The Epic of Gilgamesh)

The **Epic of Gilgamesh** is the oldest written work of Western Literature that we have a record of. It tells the story of a part-god, part-man Gilgamesh who goes on adventures with his (fully human) friend **Enkidu**. Together, they kill the great forest beast **Humbaba,** as well as great bull sent by the goddess **Ishtar.** When Enkidu is killed by the gods in retaliation, Gilgamesh starts worrying about his own death, and seeks out **Utnapishtim**, the only immortal human (a "Noah"-type character who once saved humans and animals from a great flood). He discovers that the gods will not allow any more humans to be immortal, and so returns home, where he becomes a great and wise king (now that he's accepted his mortality). The ghost of Enkidu appears to tell of the afterlife.

The historical Gilgamesh probably lived sometime around 2500 BCE (this is two thousand years before Plato, Aristotle, or the building of the "second temple" in Jerusalem!), and stories of him were passed down for thousands of years. A little background:

1. The first written version of Gilgamesh was (re-)discovered in the 1850s in the Royal Library of Nineveh (in modern Iraq). It was on 12 stone tablets written in the ancient Akkadian language, and seems to have been a translation of older tale in Sumerian. Scholars of the time were especially excited that it seemed to contain a version of the flood story that appears in the Hebrew Bible (e.g., gods send a flood; one man and his family take a bunch of animals in a boat), which suggests some intermingling of culture/mythology. (Since both Gilgamesh and the Hebrew Scriptures both started at oral traditions, we don't have any reliable way of knowing which one came "first").
2. Since then, we've found different versions of the story, in different languages (in both Akkadian and Sumerian) of vastly different dates (from around 1500 BCE to around 300 BCE).
3. As far as we can tell, the story flourished for around 2,000 years (from time of Gilgamesh until rough 200 BCE), and then was completely forgotten, only to be rediscovered in the 1800s.

In this lecture, we'll be talking about Gilgamesh as a work of literature, with a special eye toward identifying themes/ideas that will come up in later Western literature.

THE SETTING: ANCIENT MESOPOTEMIA

What, then, will be my advantage, supposing I take you in marriage? /You are but a ruin that gives no shelter to man from the weather, / You are but a back door that gives no resistance to blast or to windstorm, / You are but a palace that collapses on the heroes within it, / You are but a pitfall with a covering that gives way treacherously, /You are but pitch that defiles the man who carries it, /You are but a bottle that leaks on him who carries it, / You are but limestone that lets stone ramparts fall crumbling in ruin. /You are but a sandal that causes its owner to trip. (Gilgamesh's reply to Ishtar)

Gilgamesh seems to have been the king of the ancient city of Uruk, in ancient Sumer, along the banks of the Euphrates river. Along with ancient China and Egypt, this was one of the oldest civilizations in the world, where people took up agriculture, writing, and began to live in permanent cities. As we'll see, the conflict between the "natural" life of humans outside civilization and the "urban" or "divine" life of humans living in civilization is one of the themes of the poem.

A little more about the gods. Like most ancient civilizations (including ancient Greece and Rome), Sumerians were **polytheistic:** they believed in (and worshipped) multiple gods. These gods include **Enlil** (the Father of the Gods), **Shamash** (the sun god), **Ninsun** (Gilgamesh's mother, who was a goddess), **Ereshkigal** (the goddess of the dead), and **Ishtar** (the goddess of love, who is angered when Gilgamesh turns down her marriage proposal—see above). When reading Gilgamesh, some important things for modern readers to remember:

1. The gods are not all-powerful or all-knowing: they can thwart each others' plans, and even clever humans can manage to get the best of them. They are something like super-powerful humans.
2. The gods didn't create the universe, and they don't exist "outside" of the natural world. They live *within* the world of humans, plants, and animals, and they regularly interact with this world. They created humans, but mainly so that they'd have some useful servants/slaves around.
3. The gods are not all-good, but nor are they all evil. Instead, they are more-or-less just like humans, and in fact tend to be *more* petty, short-sighted, and emotional (lots of anger and lust) than normal humans.

4. The limitation on the gods' power means that humans can *do* things for gods; for example, by providing sacrifices (which are something like "food" for the gods), or accomplishing various tasks the gods would like to have done.

Conceiving of the gods in this way makes a big difference for how the Epic of Gilgamesh explains various events. For example, in the Hebrew Bible, God sends the flood because of humanity's wickedness, which suggests that humans *deserved* it. In Gilgamesh, the gods apparently cause it because humans are too noisy (and most of the gods apparently regret doing it). This suggests that humans are more like the *victims* of the gods. Something similar holds for the death of Enkidu, and the more general fact of human mortality (both of which are due to the gods). These aren't presented as things that humans "deserve"; they are just the way things are.

THE PLOT AND CHARACTERS: FROM URUK TO THE EDGE OF THE WORLD AND BACK AGAIN

The Epic of Gilgamesh is told over 12 tablets, and we are missing some pieces of it. We also have multiple (different) versions of other parts of the story. That being said, the story goes something like follows:

1. When the story begins, Gilgamesh is a king, but a bad one: he'll leave neither the "sons" nor "daughters" of the people alone. The people ask the gods to help them (Gilgamesh is a god's child, after all), and the gods respond by creating the powerful human Enkidu.
2. Unlike the city-dweller Gilgamesh, Enkidu begins life isolated from other humans, perfectly in tune with nature. He is brought into civilization by the "harlot" Shamat (who is a servant of Ishtar). She gets him to join civilization with a combination of sex, beer, and bread (all things which you need other people for!). Enkidu immediately gets into a fight with Gilgamesh (who's misbehaving, as always). They are impressed by each others' strength, become friends.
3. To distract Enkidu from problems with his love life, Gilgamesh suggests they go kill Humbaba, a great beast of the forest, and cut down the huge tree that he guards. (The gods apparently want Humbaba dead, but it is not exactly clear why).
4. Ishtar is impressed by this, and proposes marriage to Gilgamesh. He gives an emphatic "no", listing all the problems that Ishtar (and love more generally?) have caused for people. Ishtar gets angry, and convinces her father to send a great bull to kill the people of Uruk. Gilgamesh and Enkidu kill the bull, too, which angers the gods even more.
5. The gods retaliate by giving Enkidu some sort of infectious disease (another gift of civilization!). At first, he says that he regrets ever coming out of the woods, but before he dies he repents after thinking of the good things (friends, fame, etc.). civilization has given him.
6. Gilgamesh is deeply upset by Enkidu's death, and decides to try to become immortal. He seeks out Utnapishtim in a mystical land. Utnapishtim tells him the story of the flood, and how he saved humanity/animals (which was why he was granted immortality). He (along with everyone else) tells Gilgamesh he can't be immortal, but notes there is a flower which might restore his youth. Gilgamesh obtains the flower, but quickly loses it because of his human limitations (for sleep, etc.).
7. Gilgamesh arrives home. The gods let him speak with the ghost of Enkidu, who says that the afterlife is good (or at least OK) for those who've done great deeds, with friends to remember them. Basically: you need to be satisfied with what you can accomplish here, and aim to accomplish a lot. Gilgamesh is (hopefully) satisfied, and apparently became a much better king as the result of his experiences.

THEMES IN GILGAMESH

Gilgamesh (a king and 2/3 god) is far from an ordinary human, but his experiences—a misspent youth, a desire for professional success a close friend who dies, problems with love, and a tough time dealing with his mortality—are pretty universal. As one of the oldest pieces of literature, its worth highlighting three themes that will reoccur in literature throughout the ages.

What is better—going "back to nature" or "making a mark on society"? Ancient Mesopotamia was one of the first agriculture civilizations in the world, and among the first places where people would (permanently) live in large groups of fellow humans. This led to many good things—there was new food, a greater choice of mates/occupations/ways of living, and a variety of new technologies (money, writing, etc.) that allowed one to "leave a mark" on the world. However, there were also costs: the rulers of the new cities could be cruel (as Gilgamesh was at the beginning), and new dangers (war, infectious disease, floods that could destroy crops and houses). Gilgamesh in some ways represents the new "urban" human, while Enkido (along with Humbaba) represents an older, natural way of life. Enkido willingly gives this life up (and Humbaba is killed), but there is a real cost to doing so. This question will be one future authors and artists will return to again and again, from the time of Gilgamesh to our own time.

What are the sources of human happiness? Misery? What if they are the same? Gilgamesh and Enkido find joy in things such as (1) friendship and relationships, (2) the satisfaction of desires for sex, food, and sleep (3) accomplishment and the praise of others. However, these same things also serve to make them miserable: (1) Gilgamesh is inconsolable after Enkido's death, (2) these basic human desires lead to both Enkido's death and Gilgamesh's failure and (3) Gilgamesh must eventually learn to accept that there are limits to what he can accomplish, and that nothing lasts forever. The pursuit of a truly "good" or "happy" human life is thus a difficult puzzle: Should we pursue

what we desire and "live in the moment" (as Gilgamesh seems to do for most of the time)? Or should we instead try to eliminate our desires, recognizing the impossibility of truly fulfilling them (as Gilgamesh is forced to do, in the case of immortality)? Again, this is the sort of problem/question that will recur in future literature.

How can humans have meaningful lives when we know we must die? Both Gilgamesh and Enkidu struggle to deal with the knowledge that even the most powerful and clever humans have to die, as will everything and everyone that they love and care about. We don't actually know how Gilgamesh comes to terms with this (this part of the story is lost). Gilgamesh tries, and fails, to find a magical remedy for this, while Enkido suggests that religion (and the afterlives most religions promise) can, at best, offer a partial answer.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. *Why* do you think the story of Gilgamesh was so important, for so many thousands of years? What might have caused people to keep retelling it, and retelling it?
2. More generally: Why do people tell stories in general? What is the "purpose" of myth and fiction for the individual? For society as a whole?
3. In what ways is Gilgamesh similar to contemporary "superheroes"? In what ways is he different?