



# WORLD LITERATURE I (ENG 251)

## Gilgamesh Study Guide

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Gilgamesh & Sumer	Mesopotamia	Writing	Transmission	Sumerian & Akkadian	Twelve Tablets
Gilgamesh, a Real King	Gilgamesh Must Die	The Story	Sex & Gender	Under/Other Worlds	Responsibility
Heroes & Kings	Strangeness & Difference	Future Themes	Bibliography		

### GILGAMESH IS FROM ANCIENT SUMER

Gilgamesh is one of the oldest recorded stories in the world. It tells the story of an ancient King of Uruk, Gilgamesh, who may have actually existed, and whose name is on the Sumerian King List. The story of Gilgamesh, in various Sumerian versions, was originally widely known in the third millennium B.C. After a long history of retellings, this story was recorded, in a standardized Akkadian version, in the seventh century B.C., and stored in the famous library of King Assurbanipal.

Later, the story of Gilgamesh was lost to human memory, except for occasional fragments. The story was rediscovered in the mid-nineteenth century A.D., and made available in translation to German by the beginning of the twentieth century. People were especially amazed when they read this most ancient of stories, and realized that the flood story in Gilgamesh was a close analogue of the flood story in the Hebrew Bible.

[Top](#)

### SUMER WAS IN MESOPOTAMIA

Mesopotamia was in the geographical area that is today called Iraq. The name we call it, "Mesopotamia," is actually Greek for "between two rivers." The two rivers were the Tigris and the Euphrates.

Mesopotamia was the site of one of three earliest urban civilizations (along with the Indus Valley in India and the Nile Valley in Egypt).

During the fourth millennium B.C., human settlements underwent a surprisingly rapid transformation from villages into developed cities with large populations, temples and palaces. During this period, "writing is invented, large buildings, temples and ziggurats, appear for the first time. . . . it was the organization of the canal system, of irrigation, that made the further developments possible." (Kirk,98)

In Mesopotamia there were constant tensions between the radically new cities in the fertile river valley and the ancient ways of the nomadic and hill peoples outside of the cities. Some of these conditions still exist today, as can be seen in the conflicts between the cities and the outlying areas in modern Iraq. The basic conflict is between the ways of civilization and the ways of the wilderness.

Mesopotamia was a land of intermittent drought and violent floods; this was not a kindly tame nature at all, as can be seen in the conflict between the wild Enkidu, who undoes traps, interfering with people's livelihood, and the civilizing Harlot, who lures Enkidu into the delights and responsibilities of civilization. The taming of Enkidu by the Harlot can be seen as a metaphor for the taming of the land by the means of civilization, especially the system of canals that controlled the wild waters and allowed for predictable, irrigated farming.

[Top](#)

### WRITING

The reason the recorded story of Gilgamesh survived thousands of years was that it was written on clay, in a set of symbols we call cuneiform, and then fired. "Clay ... especially when fired...[is] the best--that is, the cheapest and most durable--writing material yet utilized by man, while papyrus, parchment, leather, wood, metal, and stone survive mainly by chance." (Oppenheim, 229)

Another reason for survival of ancient Mesopotamian texts is that the language itself was very difficult to learn. There were schools for scribes that taught a set curriculum of texts to copy precisely and in a fixed order. This resulted in lots of copies being made of many stories, with few variations, because accuracy of transcription was highly desired.

This tradition of exact copies can still be seen in the copying of the Torah (the first five books of the Old Testament), which is supposed to be a perfect copy.

[Top](#)

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## ORAL AND WRITTEN TRANSMISSION OF GILGAMESH

Without a fixed written text, stories can be told for thousands of years, varying from teller to teller, adapted to this folk and that folk, with the names of kings, places, people added and subtracted to meet the needs and interests of a current audience. The story of Gilgamesh was originally part of such an oral tradition. "It is virtually impossible to determine when the material was first written down, let alone when it originated orally or how long it existed in an oral tradition. Rather it can be assumed, from the materials handed down from succeeding ancient peoples and languages, that it was not composed all of a piece and at one time but was added to gradually and varied by many tellers." (Mason 98)

[Top](#)

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## SUMERIAN AND AKKADIAN VERSIONS

Originally, Gilgamesh was a Sumerian hero-king. But the kingdom of Sumer was eventually conquered by Akkadians, and became an Akkadian kingdom. Yet, the story of Gilgamesh continued to be told, now in the Akkadian language.

"In the transmission of some of the Gilgamesh stories . . . not only is there a change of language from Sumerian to Akkadian . . . but there is also a marked alteration of emphasis and detail. . . . But most of the apparently 'new' themes in the developed Epic of Gilgamesh look just like the old--like traditional, oral themes of myth or folktale that have just been shifted from one literary formulation into another. All in all . . . it seems likely that there was a broadly based popular tradition of myths, from which the literate and poetical versions we know derived their persistent strength and their capacity for apparently spontaneous variation. (Kirk, 87)"

[Top](#)

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## GILGAMESH IS WRITTEN ON TWELVE TABLES

The story of Gilgamesh was first discovered in the library of King Assurbanipal of Nineveh, written on twelve tablets. "Gilgamesh's life and his adventures during his unsuccessful quest for immortality are told on eleven of the twelve tablets." The twelfth tablet is "a description of the nether world, in which Gilgamesh rules after his death as divine judge over the shades, guiding and advising them. . ." (Oppenheim,257)

[Top](#)

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## GILGAMESH WAS A REAL KING

Although the oral tale of Gilgamesh could have been attributed to various rulers over millennia, the story we know is probably attached to a real king. The "... Sumerian king list established a Gilgamesh as fifth in line of the First Dynasty of kingship of Uruk following the great flood recorded in the epic, placing him approximately in the latter half of the third millennium. He was

supposed to have reigned a hundred and twenty-six years. He was known as the builder of the wall of Uruk, and his mother was said to be the goddess Ninsun, wife of a god named Lugalbanda, who however was not his father. His real father was, according to the king list, a high priest of Kullab, a district of Uruk, from whom he derived his mortality."(Mason, 99)

[Top](#)

## ■ EVEN GILGAMESH MUST DIE

The Epic of Gilgamesh touches people profoundly after so many centuries because it is about issues that touch all people in all times--the anguish of loss and death for all human beings

As Siduri the barmaid tells Gilgamesh: "You will never find that life for which you are looking. When the gods created man they allotted to him death, but life they retained in their own keeping." (Sandars, 34)

This absolute difference between the gods and human beings: that the gods live forever and humans must die, is also the key difference between the gods and human beings in the Homeric epics. Such gods are generally not kind and caring; they have their own immortal lives to pursue and generally give little regard to their human servants.

In such a world, only one attitude makes much sense, and again, Siduri gives Gilgamesh good advice for a human being: "As for you, Gilgamesh, fill your belly with good things; day and night, night and day, dance and be merry, feast and rejoice. Let your clothes be fresh, bathe yourself in water, cherish the little child that holds your hand, and make your wife happy in your embrace; for this too is the lot of man." (Sandars, 34)

However, Gilgamesh is part god, although also part human. Thus, although he must die, because he is human, he also has the continuation of fame as a legendary king who had the great walls of Uruk built to protect his people.

Because Gilgamesh is part god, as well as part human, his death carries a message about the death of the semi-divine king. "One of the purposes of this poem, or the original that lies behind it, was surely to emphasize that even the king, in spite of his divine associations, must die; and to assert that this was no anomaly reflecting on the king's authority on earth, but the result of a solemn divine decree." (Kirk,142)

[Top](#)

## ■ THE STORY OF GILGAMESH

Gilgamesh is the King of Uruk. His father is mortal and his mother is a goddess. However, because he is part mortal, Gilgamesh must eventually die, as he discovers and comes to accept during the course of the story. Gilgamesh is a bad ruler; he sleeps with all the women and takes away children from their families. His subjects ask the gods for help, and the gods have the goddess Aruru create a man, Enkidu, who will be almost Gilgamesh's equal.

Enkidu comes to life in the wilderness. He is covered with hair, shaggy, wild like the wilderness. He eats grass with the gazelles and drinks water with the animals. A trapper is frightened by the sight of Enkidu and asks his father what to do, because Enkidu is freeing animals from the traps.

His father advises him to go to Uruk, find Gilgamesh, and tell him of the wild man. Then he should ask for a harlot from the temple and bring her back with him. She will seduce Enkidu, and then the wild animals will reject him and he can be lured to civilization.

The harlot does just that, seducing Enkidu, so he is rejected by the animals. She teaches Enkidu some of the ways of civilization, such as wearing clothing, eating bread and drinking wine. Then she tells him of the strength of Gilgamesh. Enkidu wants to meet and challenge Gilgamesh to a contest of strength.

Enkidu hears how Gilgamesh is sleeping with all the women of Uruk, and he is shocked. He now wants to challenge Gilgamesh to conquer him and force him to behave properly. They struggle like equals, but finally Gilgamesh throws Enkidu, who loses his anger and recognizes Gilgamesh as a true king. They embrace and become best friends.

Gilgamesh longs to perform great deeds, so his name will be remembered. He wants to go to the cedar forest and slay its guardian monster, Humbaba. Enkidu is terrified, because he knows Humbaba, but Gilgamesh insists, and they prepare for the journey.

Enkidu's hand is paralyzed when he touches the cedar forest gate, but Gilgamesh helps him to continue. They have disturbing dreams, but nonetheless cut down a cedar tree. Humbaba approaches and they fight; Humbaba begs for his life, but they cut off his head.

Gilgamesh washes himself and puts on clean clothes and his crown. He is so attractive that Ishtar, the goddess of love, wants to marry him. He refuses, quite rudely, pointing out how she had ruined the lives of her previous husbands. Ishtar is hurt and furious and she goes to her father, Anu, demanding that he send the Bull of Heaven (drought) to punish Gilgamesh. She threatens to smash down the gates to the underworld if her father does not comply. Anu sends the Bull of Heaven, but Enkidu catches it by the horns, and Gilgamesh kills it.

Unfortunately, as Enkidu discovers in a dream, the gods are holding a council to determine who should die for these attacks on divinity: Gilgamesh or Enkidu. Naturally, since Gilgamesh is part divine and part human, while Enkidu is part human and part animal, the sacrifice, the judgment falls on Enkidu, who sickens and dies, at first cursing the harlot who led him to civilization, Gilgamesh and death, but then blessing her for the joy of friendship with Gilgamesh.

Gilgamesh is distraught with grief and denial of death. First he keeps the body of Enkidu for a week, until the body became wormy. Then, he had him buried and wandered out from Uruk into the wilderness as a wild hunter, dressed in animal skins. Gilgamesh despairs for the loss of Enkidu, but also for his own death, which he now understands must come some day. Seeking to avoid death, Gilgamesh looks for Utnapishtim, the only human being who was granted eternal life by the gods. He wants to learn the secret of how to avoid death.

Eventually, Gilgamesh comes to the entry to the land of the gods, an other-world, which is under a mountain, guarded by a Man-scorpion and his mate. Gilgamesh gains entrance to the mountain and travels for leagues in the dark until he arrives in the jeweled garden of the gods.

Gilgamesh continues in his search for Utnapishtim and the secrets of life and death. He meets a divine wine-maker, Siduri, who gives him shelter and advises him to accept his human fate and enjoy life while he can. But he insists that he must find Utnapishtim, so she tells him that the boatman Urshanabi can take him across the Sea of Death to the place where Utnapishtim lives with his wife.

After a complicated boat-trip, Urshanabi brings Gilgamesh to Utnapishtim, who tells his story. It is the story of the Flood (remarkably similar to the Flood story in Genesis). The point is, the Flood was a one time ever event, will never occur again, and the only reason Utnapishtim and his wife are now immortal is because the gods chose to make them so after they survived the flood. The final blow to Gilgamesh here is seven loaves of bread which Utnapishtim's wife made, one each day that Gilgamesh slept. He could not even stay awake for seven days; how could he ever hope to live forever?

Utnapishtim's wife takes pity on Gilgamesh and asks her husband to tell him about the plant that can make him young again, if not immortal. Gilgamesh dives into the sea to pick the plant, but loses it later, while bathing, because a snake slithers up and eats it.

Gilgamesh returns to Uruk with the boatman Urshanabi, and points out to him the mighty walls; this is the proper work of a human being, not the search for eternal life.

The final segment of the story tells of the death of Gilgamesh and the mourning for him of all the people of Uruk.

[Top](#)

## ISSUES IN GILGAMESH: SEX AND GENDER

Utnapishtim's wife -- her role is like that of a servant, yet she is wise and compassionate. She is the one who persuades Utnapishtim to tell Gilgamesh about the plant which restores youth.

[Top](#)

## ISSUES IN GILGAMESH: OTHERWORLDS AND UNDERWORLDS

There are two distinct places that are both "under" the world. One is the place of the dead, which Enkidu sees in his dream before he dies. This is a wretched place, where feathered dead mortals exist in darkness and dust. This underworld is as bleak as Hades in the Odyssey. The theme of weakness, sleep and death is most extreme when Gilgamesh sleeps for seven days in

## Utnapishtim's house.

The other underworld is really an other-world, the place of the gods, under the mountain, including the Sea of Death, but containing no dead creatures, only divine and/or immortal ones, such as Siduri and Utnapishtim. Largely, it's an empty place, where the sun goes at night when it descends down into the mountains in the west.

[Top](#)

## ISSUES IN GILGAMESH: RESPONSIBILITY

Gilgamesh is a bad king, exhausting his people with wall building and womanizing. Finally, the gods take responsibility and make Enkidu to create a balance. The appearance of Enkidu is occasioned by the hubris of Gilgamesh, who forces all the inhabitants of his city to work for him, building the very walls and temples, which at first we are asked to admire and which are eventually to secure him lasting fame; enraged, the gods create Enkidu in order to check Gilgamesh.

Gilgamesh and Enkidu upset the world order by destroying sacred monsters of nature: Gilgamesh killed Humbaba and Enkidu killed the Bull of Heaven). Therefore, one of them must die. Enkidu, the more innocent, yet lesser man, takes on the responsibility of dying for both of them.

Gilgamesh is finally only responsible for living well and building the walls of Uruk.

[Top](#)

## ISSUES IN GILGAMESH: HEROES AND KINGS

Gilgamesh as a heroic king. His traits: powerful, impulsive, sexually aggressive, wants to destroy/conquer wilderness, builds city walls.

Enkidu as heroic friend. His traits: innocent origins (wild, hairy, sexually innocent), as strong as Gilgamesh, knows nature of wilderness (Humbaba), is insolent toward the gods (bone flung at Ishtar; lack of courtly behavior?), can be wounded (by Humbaba) and killed (by the gods).

[Top](#)

## ISSUES IN GILGAMESH: STRANGENESS AND DIFFERENCE

Gilgamesh as god/man

Enkidu as animal/man

Bull of Heaven -- drought

[Top](#)

## THEMES FOR FUTURE READINGS

Gilgamesh/Enkidu, heroic friendship, Achilles/Patrocles and death of hero-friend

Underworlds in Gilgamesh, the Odyssey, and the Aeneid (don't touch the dead)

Raging Ishtar in Gilgamesh, raging Medea, and raging Juno and Dido in the Aeneid

Wanderings of Gilgamesh and wanderings of Odysseus

Killing Humbaba plus insolence kills Enkidu; blinding Cyclops plus insolence nearly kills Odysseus

## Flood story in Gilgamesh and flood story in the Hebrew Bible

[Top](#)

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[Top](#)© [Diane Thompson](#): 8/13/1998; last updated: January 25, 2012