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Spirituality: Take Me to a Higher Place


Kane Stanglin

Alexandra Mendez

Laura A. Eads

Kyle Crosslin

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Lexie Mendez

W. Scott Cheney

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The Acceptance of Fate from a Man of God

As children, we grow up reading pieces of literature ranging from different sizes that almost always incorporates a lesson to be learned, in other words, the moral of the story. In *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, there seemed to be an underlying theme of self-development throughout and especially towards the end of the poem. Gilgamesh, King of Uruk and the most powerful of men, was one to think highly of himself; although he walked through life as if his days were not numbered, but he soon was unwillingly forced to face the harsh reality soon after the death of his good friend, Enkidu. In chapter 2, Gilgamesh is reluctant to value life during the quest to kill Humbaba, he states “Only the gods live forever with glorious Shamash... I will go first... Then if I fall I leave behind me a name that endures me” (Sanders 71). Here we see Gilgamesh paying very little attention to his own safety, and not having the care in the world whether he will lose his life to Humbaba, the monster who guards the Cedar Forest. Enkidu warns Gilgamesh to not partake in this quest because he is afraid he will not be able to make it out of the Cedar Forest alive. But, in Gilgamesh’s point of view, he believes that we must achieve notable achievements in order to be remembered forever, even if that means losing your own life. Some critics argue that once Gilgamesh faced the thought of death, he learns how to obtain true heroic attributes, after the death of Enkidu. A few scholars evaluate the reasoning behind Enkidu’s purpose within *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, and how his role as a character has benefitted Gilgamesh as a whole.

One of the many scholars that saw Enkidu as a valuable aspect of Gilgamesh's life is Tzvi Abusch, who wrote *The Development and Meaning of The Epic of Gilgamesh: An Interpretive Essay*. Abusch is knowledgeable that Enkidu plays an important role in his life. A role that contributes to the self-growth and maturity of Gilgamesh. Abusch claims that "[He]... struggles against the world and is as deeply committed to his own personal absolutes" (Abusch 616). More specifically, Gilgamesh's weakness is that he is so heavily fixated on his own personal self that it negatively affects him and makes him vulnerable. In addition, Abusch disputes that "By making Enkidu... the composer has turned the *Epic* into a tale of growth-discovery of human suffering, limitation, death, and finally, human meaning" (Abusch 616). In other words, without Enkidu and more specifically his death, Gilgamesh would not have experienced the development he most desperately needed to improve himself as a man.

Corresponding to Tzvi Abusch beliefs, academic Lois J. Parker also believes that the loss of a loved one can help aid progress in oneself. Parker states that "the process of coming to maturity is not without a "terrible loss," ... [bringing] us to the stark realization "that death must be finally understood as not a negation but an integral part of living" (Parker 317). With that being said, death can lead to the maturity in our inner being, in this case, Gilgamesh was forced to face the reality that all human beings will once have to face death, and there is no way to deny it. In addition, he also states "the progress towards maturity, "self-aggrandizement" and its overly masculine portrayal give way to "a sense of oneself" as not only masculine, but feminine, and not only autonomous, but "part of a larger whole" (Parker 317). Parker is arguing the fact that it is acceptable to also display "weak" emotions and that promoting yourself as powerful or important individual regularly should not be the main purpose in life. Gilgamesh was one of

these beings that constantly showed no soft emotions because he was afraid he would be seen as weak and it would be detrimental to his heroic image he displayed. Lastly, academic Nicola Vulpe who wrote the *Irony and the Unity of the Gilgamesh Epic* recognizes that once Gilgamesh accepted his mortality that his perspective on life would begin to transform dramatically. Vulpe argues that “[a] hero must become conscious of his humanity... Enkidu teaches Gilgamesh that his power is not unlimited and effectively ends his tyranny in Uruk” (Vulpe 280). According to Vulpe, the purpose of Enkidu, as a character, was to help aid Gilgamesh to come to the realization that he is not the image he chooses to display to the world, “he is man like any other”, and that he must be cautious to how he uses his power for the greater good (Vulpe 280). These few academic writers all share quite similar beliefs and ideas that all seemed to feed off of each other as a whole; in conclusion, I too agree that Enkidu was purposely placed in Gilgamesh’s life in order to aid him in self-development.

Upon applying “The Method” on to *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, there are numerous of indication of Gilgamesh himself showing signs of his progression in maturity after the death of Enkidu. Prior to the death of Enkidu, it is quite obvious that he displayed himself in an arrogant and pretentious manner. His pride and joy were his self-pride and it was extremely important to him because believed that his greatness would live on after he has died. In the beginning of the poem Gilgamesh is described as “strong as a savage bull, none can withstand his arms” (Sanders 62). As the poem continues on his “savage” behavior is no longer an attribute he contains as he faces the death of his dear friend. As he mourns, he repeats the word “weep” nine times and “weeps for you” six times. As he says the phrase “weeps for you,” he would state a variety of people, places, and things that Enkidu has come across prior to stating it (Sanders 94-95). As

Gilgamesh begins to develop a fear of death, internally he progresses in his journey in maturity. Even after experiencing the trauma he has faced from the death of his good friend, and his travels to eternal life he still is obligated to say “I am Gilgamesh who seized and killed the Bull of Heaven, I killed the watchman of the cedar forest, I overthrew Humbaba who lived in the forest, and I killed the lions in the passes of the mountains” (Sanders 101). After he stated this, Siduri questions why if he is great then why is he here and looked so troubled. Although he still remained prideful, but now his good deeds he once thought so highly of were questioned. He then comes to the realizes death is a fate we all have to accept and his sense of pride transitions. N.K Sanders presents Gilgamesh with pride through the course of the poem, but as the Epic continues on the tone of Gilgamesh’s pride alters as he matures.

Examples of pride and self-development are shown within *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and not just in Gilgamesh himself, but many others. In the very beginning of the book, in Chapter 1, where Enkidu also displays a sense of pride as well, he states “Come take me... to the place where Gilgamesh lords it over the people... I will cry out aloud in Uruk, “I am the strongest here... I am he who is strongest of all”” (Sanders 65). This bold statement of Enkidu was said in a tone of dignity and pride, but of course, we know it did not turn out that way. This quote highlights that even though they seem to be the polar opposite, but they once shared a similar interest in power. As mentioned earlier, in Chapter 2, Gilgamesh states “our days are numbered... If I fall... men will say “Gilgamesh has fallen in fight with ferocious Humbaba.” Long after the child has been born in my house, they will say it, and remember” (Sanders 71). His priorities are to accomplish good deeds in his life, in order to die with his achievements known even if that means he will die trying. At this point, it is clear that Gilgamesh has quite a

bit of room in improvement for self-development, but eventually, as the poem continues on, he grows. In addition, even the goddess Ishtar's pride is tainted by the all powerful Gilgamesh himself, she states "Gilgamesh has heaped into insults on me, he has told over all my abominable behavior, my foul and hideous acts." Anu opened his mouth and said, "... Did not you quarrel with Gilgamesh the king, so now he has related your abominable behavior, your foul and hideous acts" (Sanders 87). Although Anu, Ishtar's Father, believes she deserves those insults said by Gilgamesh, but Ishtar's pride cannot stand being shamed. She next requests Anu to send the Bull of Heaven to destroy Gilgamesh, which later contributes to the curse of Enkidu that results in his death.

The overall tone of the book begins to shift after the death of Enkidu, self-development begins to occur more progressively. Although the pride within Gilgamesh stays constant, but it is displayed in a different manner than we are used too. Gilgamesh begins to mourn the death of Enkidu by pleading on different animals and humans that they once came across to mourn the loss of Enkidu. For example, "the mountain we climbed where we slew the Watchman, weeps for you" and "all long-tailed creatures that nourished you, weeps for you" (Sanders 94). In addition, Gilgamesh would do the same with the phrase "mourns for you" three times and "lament for you now" two times. During this long and extensive monologue and the events that follow, I believe this is where Gilgamesh is the most vulnerable he has ever shown us. In these very moments, is the turning point of the arrogant and prideful Gilgamesh that we are all familiar with. Soon after he shifts his mourning from Enkidu to himself, he comes to the realization that he too will die someday and he must find a way to stop it. He states "Despair is in my heart. What my brother is now, that shall I be when I am dead. Because I am afraid I will go as best I

can to find Utnapishtim” (Sanders 97). Mentioned earlier, Gilgamesh still continues to display a sense of pride in himself and his good deeds he has accomplished in his lifetime. He says “I am Gilgamesh who seized and killed the Bull of Heaven, I killed the watchman of the cedar forest, I overthrew Humbaba who lived in the forest, and I killed the lions in the passes of the mountains” (Sanders 101) to Siduri. She is not convinced of his greatness, which gives Gilgamesh a sense that his accomplishments are not as important as he may think. In conclusion, Gilgamesh is forced to face the fact that every human will once have to accept their fate of death and that he is a man like any other. Gilgamesh’s tale of growth gives him the ability to understand the true meaning of life.

1,849 words

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