

Heroic Friendship

Mini-Course-- Summer, 2018

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Course Description

Read and discuss the main themes in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. **WE WILL ONLY READ AND DISCUSS PAGES 1-100.** The main themes are: mortality, desire, fear, family, revenge, courage, justice, power, friendship, violence and gender.

Our Main Learning Goals

Improve skills in writing, close reading, and discussion. Think about the central philosophical (!) questions of life. Develop means for individual expression and community building.

Assignments

- Your primary goal during the mini-course is to read and think about the Epic of Gilgamesh
- Your primary goal each week is to read and think about the assigned materials. You are asked to submit 2-3 pages (about 400 words or more) of commentary on the assigned reading **every week**. See questions in the Plot Summary. Pick a couple of questions and discuss them. This writing is casual and NOT formal. Just write stuff!

Schedule

Week 1 8/3: **Introduction to Course.**

Theatrical Introductions. Overview of Gilgamesh. Discuss main themes. Write a little bit. Discuss. Develop trust and comfortable environment.

Assistant teacher: Ketan (“Kathan”) Ketanrama

Week 2 8/10: **Tyrants, Wild Men, and Friendship**

REQUIRED: Read as much of Epic as you can, but pay special attention to Tablets I-III.

It would be helpful to read Intro, xxxi-li (see map, time-line too); Tablet I-III (pp. 1-29).

Assistant teachers: Ketan (“Kathan”) Ketanrama and Aminah Hasan-Birdwell

Week 3 8/17: **Heroism, Courage, Loss**

Required Reading: Tablets IV-VIII (pp. 30-69)

Assistant teachers: Ketan Ketanrama and Morgaine Gooding-Silverwood

Week 4 8/24: **Loss, Grief, and Journey**

Required Reading: Tablets IX- XI (pp. 70-100)

Assistant teachers: Morgaine Gooding-Silverwood and Jac Gares

Week 5 8/31: **Wisdom, Greatness**

Required Reading: Read Through ALL again!

Assistant teachers: Morgaine Gooding-Silverwood and Jac Gares (and maybe Ketan)

Epic of Gilgamesh

Plot Summary – With Questions

Main Story:

The epic’s intro offers a general introduction to **Gilgamesh**, king of Uruk, who was two-thirds god and one-third man. He built magnificent towers, surrounded his city with high walls, and laid out its orchards and fields. He was physically beautiful, immensely strong, and very wise. Although Gilgamesh was godlike in body and mind, he began his kingship as a cruel despot. He lorded over his

subjects, raping any woman who struck his fancy, whether she was the wife of one of his warriors or the daughter of a nobleman. He accomplished his building projects with forced labor, and his exhausted subjects groaned under his oppression. The gods heard his subjects' pleas and decided to keep Gilgamesh in check by creating a wild man named **Enkidu**, who was as magnificent as Gilgamesh. Enkidu became Gilgamesh's great friend, and Gilgamesh's heart was shattered when Enkidu died of an illness inflicted by the gods. Gilgamesh then traveled to the edge of the world and learned about the days before the deluge and other secrets of the gods, and he recorded them on stone tablets.

MAIN QUESTION: what makes Gilgamesh change? How is friendship, loss, and love important? Write about why Gilgamesh needs to CHANGE. What is he like and why do the gods create Enkidu to make him better?

Week 2: Tablets I-III

Enkidu lives with the animals, suckling at their breasts, grazing in the meadows, and drinking at their watering places. A hunter discovers him and sends a temple prostitute into the wilderness to tame him. In that time, people considered women and sex calming forces that could domesticate wild men like Enkidu and bring them into the civilized world. When Enkidu sleeps with the woman, the animals reject him. The harlot teaches him everything he needs to know to be a man. Enkidu is outraged by what he hears about Gilgamesh's excesses, so he travels to Uruk to challenge him. When he arrives, Gilgamesh is about to force his way into a bride's wedding chamber. Enkidu steps into the doorway and blocks his passage. The two men wrestle fiercely for a long time, and Gilgamesh finally prevails. After that, they become friends and set about looking for an adventure to share.

Why does sleeping with a woman, change Enkidu? Why does Enkidu care so much about Gilgamesh's being a jerk to go fight him? Why do they become such good friends so fast? The epic repeats the same lines (with small adjustments). Why does the author do this? Pick some lines and think about why the repetition is important.
On page 17 (II 177-81), Enkidu begins weeping. Why do you think he does this? What do you make of Shamhat's role in their journey?

Week 3: Tablets IV-VIII

Gilgamesh and Enkidu decide to steal trees from a distant cedar forest forbidden to mortals. A terrifying demon named Humbaba, the devoted servant of Enlil, the god of earth, wind, and air, guards it. The two heroes make the perilous journey to the forest, and, standing side by side, fight with the monster. With assistance from Shamash the sun god, they kill him. Then they cut down the forbidden trees, fashion the tallest into an enormous gate, make the rest into a raft, and float on it back to Uruk. Upon their return, Ishtar, the goddess of love, is overcome with lust for Gilgamesh. Gilgamesh spurns her. Enraged, the goddess asks her father, Anu, the god of the sky, to send the Bull of Heaven to punish him. The bull comes down from the sky, bringing with him seven years of famine. Gilgamesh and Enkidu wrestle with the bull and kill it. The gods meet in council and agree that one of the two friends must be punished for their transgression, and they decide Enkidu is going to die. He takes ill, suffers immensely, and shares his visions of the underworld with Gilgamesh. When he finally dies, Gilgamesh is heartbroken.

Gilgamesh is being stupid and rash. What's up with that? How does Enkidu help Gilgamesh? How does his relation to Gilgamesh change? How does Gilgamesh pay for being so careless and cavalier? It's sad that Enkidu dies but what makes his death especially upsetting? Why does Gilgamesh spurn Ishtar? What do you think about Enkidu as a character at this point? What about Gilgamesh?

Week 4: Tablets IX- XI

Gilgamesh can't stop grieving for Enkidu, and he can't stop brooding about the prospect of his own death. Exchanging his kingly garments for animal skins as a way of mourning Enkidu, he sets off into the wilderness, determined to find Utnapishtim, the Mesopotamian Noah. After the flood, the gods had granted Utnapishtim eternal life, and Gilgamesh hopes that Utnapishtim can tell him how he might avoid death too. Gilgamesh's journey takes him to the twin-peaked mountain called Mashu, where the sun sets into one side of the mountain at night and rises out of the other side in the morning. Utnapishtim lives beyond the mountain, but the two scorpion monsters that guard its entrance refuse to allow Gilgamesh into the tunnel that passes through it. Gilgamesh pleads with them, and they relent.

What's important about Gilgamesh putting on animal skins? How does he physically change?

After a harrowing passage through total darkness, Gilgamesh emerges into a beautiful garden by the sea. There he meets Siduri, a veiled tavern keeper, and tells her about his quest. She warns him that seeking immortality is futile and that he should be satisfied with the pleasures of this world. However, when she can't turn him away from his purpose, she directs him to Urshanabi, the ferryman. Urshanabi takes Gilgamesh on the boat journey across the sea and through the Waters of Death to Utnapishtim. Utnapishtim tells Gilgamesh the story of the flood—how the gods met in council and decided to destroy humankind. Ea, the god of wisdom, warned Utnapishtim about the gods' plans and told him how to fashion a gigantic boat in which his family and the seed of every living creature might escape. When the waters finally receded, the gods regretted what they'd done and agreed that they would never try to destroy humankind again. Utnapishtim was rewarded with eternal life. Men would die, but humankind would continue.

How is Siduri like the harlot? How do women contribute to the story? How is death a constant theme even in the journey?

When Gilgamesh insists that he be allowed to live forever, Utnapishtim gives him a test. If you think you can stay alive for eternity, he says, surely you can stay awake for a week. Gilgamesh tries and immediately fails. So Utnapishtim orders him to clean himself up, put on his royal garments again, and return to Uruk where he belongs. Just as Gilgamesh is departing, however, Utnapishtim's wife convinces him to tell Gilgamesh about a miraculous plant that restores youth. Gilgamesh finds the plant and takes it with him, planning to share it with the elders of Uruk. But a snake steals the plant one night while they are camping. As the serpent slithers away, it sheds its skin and becomes young again.

What do Gilgamesh's failures teach us about ourselves and about humanity? What should we seek in life?

When Gilgamesh returns to Uruk, he is empty-handed but reconciled at last to his mortality. He knows that he can't live forever but that humankind will. Now he sees that the city he had repudiated in his grief and terror is a magnificent, enduring achievement—the closest thing to immortality to which a mortal can aspire.

How is he transformed on his journey? How does Gilgamesh become wise? How does he attain immortality in the end? How is his journey like yours????!!!

