



*Arrogance- Loss- Bereavement-Wisdom.*

***The Epic of Gilgamesh:***  
**Victory in Defeat**

**General Introduction to CVSP program**

- General education looking at civilization from ancient epochs till our contemporary world.
- General view about various fields of knowledge such as literature, religion, philosophy, politics, law, science and others. - A better understanding of man and his place in the universe.
- Avoid lopsidedness and have a more balanced personality.  
**“A man may be tempted to try a short cut and resort to the device of raising some single faculty to the higher level without bothering about the whole personality This means forcing of a human being into a lopsided development.. It is not difficult to make an efficient mechanic out of a person whose soul remains in all other departments primitive and barbarous...” (Arnold Toynbee (1889-1975), *A Study of History*.**
- C.S. courses are based on reading, interpreting, and analyzing texts from different cultural and historical backgrounds in an interdisciplinary and” multi accentual” approach (made to mean in many different ways)-Texts can be articulated with different accents by different people in different contexts . Meaning and the field of culture in general is always a site of negotiation, debate, disagreement and intervention..
- Thinking together about the individual and the questions he raises in his quest to understand himself and others, the natural and the supernatural world.
- CVSP Courses:
- 201-204- Core courses: From late antiquity to the present.  
 Sequence one courses: 201-202-205...ancient world up to the Renaissance.  
 Sequence two courses: 203-204-206... Pre-modern to *contemporary* world  
 207 and 208 are also combinations, but they deal with specific themes  
 295 special topics.

**The Epic of Gilgamesh**

**Introduction**

**I. Ancient peoples in Mesopotamia:**

Mesopotamia is a Greek name meaning (the land) “between the two rivers”, The Tigris and the Euphrates.

- The early inhabitants of southern Mesopotamia were the Sumerians. They discovered the earliest writing system: the cuneiform script. They spoke a language, Sumerian, that cannot be compared to any known language.
- Gilgamesh was a Sumerian king of Uruk. He lived around 2700 B.C.
- The Akkadians are a Semitic people who spoke a language close to Arabic. They lived with the Sumerians in Southern Mesopotamia. Around 2000 B.C. their language replaced Sumerian as a spoken language.

**II. Background of the Epic:**

- After the death of Gilgamesh, oral transmission of his great deeds.
- Short unconnected episodes or tales about Gilgamesh were written in Sumerian language.

- First integrated and coherent version of the epic was written in Akkadian towards the middle of the second millennium B.C.
- Several copies or versions of the epic are found in various cities of the ancient Near East.. The standard version which we are reading was written on twelve clay tablets. These were found in the library of the Assyrian King Assurbanipal (669-627 B.C) in Nineweh, northern Iraq.

### III. What is an epic?

- The epic is a long narrative poem that celebrates the great deeds of legendary heroes.
- Epic poetry is heroic poetry.
- A poetry of celebration- The Epic of Gilgamesh can be called epic of Uruk for it celebrated the city as much as its famous king.
- Epic poetry is often said to be divinely inspired, a tale of long ago where we are taken to a world of enchantment and super reality.
- It describes what may be called heroic history, one in which heroes are recognizably human beings with all their virtues and faults, but seem to be slightly superior to ordinary men and women.
- Exhausting quests and difficult journeys, battles against monsters, supernatural beings, forces of nature...
- Techniques in an epic: flashback, repetition, imagery, etc...

### IV. The Epic of Gilgamesh - From Youth to Maturity:

#### a- Heroism of Youth – First Phase- Victory?

- Kingship : arrogance and injustice-imbalance in the city
- Creation of Enkidu...
- Primitiveness and civilization-
- Eros: role of the harlot (woman of the temple).- role of women in the epic..
- Friendship : Gilgamesh and Enkidu:
  1. What is the nature of this friendship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu?
  2. Why was Uruk relieved when Enkidu came?
  3. Can we apply our sexual categories to ancient texts?
  4. What does the language and content of the epic which describe Gilgamesh and Enkidu as equals suggest about their relation in the context of Mesopotamian culture and society where an egalitarian sexual relationship was not conceivable?
  5. Are the epic's eroticized references metaphorical or actual?
  6. Is this friendship a reflection of the bonds of human sociability including marriage and partnership which Gilgamesh will be invited to consider later?
  7. Can we assume that the ancient audience would have grasped and understood that the text's eroticized language and imagery were directed toward promoting only a constitution of heroic friendship?
- Travel of fame and adventure: restlessness and anxiety- Forest Journey and killing of Humbaba- significance :victory in subduing others. Humbaba has his place in the divine order of things.
- Killing the bull of heaven- consequences- role of Ishtar
- Enkidu's dream: Idea of the underworld in ancient Mesopotamia.
- Enkidu's death: **period of loss.**
- Gilgamesh's fear of death..." existential" anxiety, withdrawal-Man and the gods in Mesopotamia.
- Gilgamesh an epic hero and a philosophical hero as well.
- **Period of bereavement**

**b- Gilgamesh's Search for the Truth- Towards a New Self: 2<sup>nd</sup> Phase of heroism- new meaning for the journey and the return. Travel is the paradigmatic "experience" to travel, to go out, to traverse, to wander. Travel tests and refines the character of the traveller (skilled, clever, well travelled).**

- On leaving Uruk Gilgamesh reverses Enkidu's journey from wilderness to civilization.
- Stages in the journey
  - Man Scorpion
  - Shamash
  - Siduri
  - Urshanabi
  - Uthnapishtin
- Encounter with Siduri... conventional wisdom – realism.
- Gilgamesh 's last hope, Uthnapishtin.
- The story of the flood and Old Testament parallels.
- Gilgamesh's failure in overcoming sleep for seven days is an indication of his limitations.
- His last hope, the plant of youth (Gilgamesh calls it when speaking to Urshanabi) "the antidote to the fear of death."
- Gilgamesh's transformation has begun from egoism to altruism... Instead of eating the plant, he wants to take it to Uruk
- The plant is eaten by a snake.
- Gilgamesh is in front of two roads: despair or freedom

**c- Heroism of Maturity - Gilgamesh "at peace" with himself: period of wisdom. Victory or defeat?**

- Gilgamesh chooses freedom.
- The change came gradually as a result of his experience, advice of others, but above all he has come to wisdom by himself.
- Going back to the city restoring human balance.
- Heroism in accepting reality.
- Eventual acceptance of responsibility of death are features of mature adulthood.
- Change in Gilgamesh is a consequence of personal experience, advice of people, but above all an "existential" change.
- Gilgamesh says to Urshanabi" this is the wall of Uruk, which no city on earth can equal".

The poem ends where it began...

### **Conclusion:**

- **From youth to maturity: arrogance-loss-bereavement - wisdom.**
- **The lessons we learn from Gilgamesh's story:**
  - How can we live at peace with what is, letting go of what we wish would be?**
  - How can we learn to accept death as part of life?**
  - How can we be defeated and victorious at the same time**
  - What is the real meaning of victory?**

*"He was wise, he saw mysteries and knew secret things, he brought us a tale before the flood. He went on a long journey, was weary, worn out with labor, returning he rested, he engraved on a stone the whole story" (p.117).*

*"O Gilgamesh, lord of Kullab, great is thy praise" (p.119).*



Ruins from Uruk

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Cuneiform Writing



Gilgamesh and Enkidu