The Epic of Gilgamesh
A spiritual journey from youth to maturity
Heroism of arrogance and rebellion to heroism of wisdom and realism

Introduction:

“I will proclaim to the world the deeds of Gilgamesh. This was the man to whom all things were known; this was the king who knew the countries of the world. He was wise, he saw mysteries and knew secret things, he brought us a tale of the days 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.

When the gods created Gilgamesh they gave him a perfect body….the great gods made his beauty perfect, surpassing all others…two thirds they made him god and one third man.

In Uruk he built walls.. look at it still today.. it has no equal…regard the foundation terrace and examine the masonry: is it not burnt brick and good? The seven sages laid the foundations.” (The Epic of Gilgamesh, ed. by N.K. Sandars, Penguin Classics, 1972, p.61)

I - 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 were 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 in Nineveh.

II - 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.

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

The Epic of Gilgamesh is a journey from youth to maturity where we accompany the hero in his existential change through encountering the different characters, gods and humans, and his experiences that led to this change. This is how as we walk along with the hero, the meanings and themes project from every winding giving us a panorama of the different stages or episodes in Gilgamesh’s growth and development.

a- Heroism of Youth : Arrogance and Rebellion

- Power of a king : arrogance and injustice-imbalance in the city
- Creation of Enkidu.
- Primitiveness and civilization- role of the harlot.
- friendship and its effect on Gilgamesh.
- fame and adventure: restlessness and anxiety- Forest Journey and killing of Humbaba- significance: Humbaba has his appointed place in the divine order of things.
- Defying Ishtar.
- Killing the bull of heaven- consequences-role of Ishtar
- Gilgamesh’s fear of death.. existential anxiety, withdrawal, mystical yearning for the truth in a world where the gods do not satisfy man’s quest for eternity, Gilgamesh an epic hero and a philosophical hero as well.

b-Gilgamesh Search for the Truth- Towards a New Self

On leaving Uruk Gilgamesh reverses Enkidu’s journey from wilderness to civilization, Gilgamesh puts animal skin and leaves Uruk thus abandoning all privileges and responsibilities. He steps across the boundary of youth and will return to Uruk as an adult…

Stages in the journey

- Man Scorpion
  Shamash
  Siduri
  Urshanabi
  Uthnapishtin
Death is inevitable
He is worn out and his cheeks pale
Notice his encounter with Siduri..she made him go back to himself when he arrogantly pushed the door and boasted about his achievements. She then gave him a peace of conventional wisdom advising him to be realistic.
Gilgamesh stands before his last hope Uthnapishtin. Same questions and same answers..
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 in front of two roads: despair or freedom

c-Heroism of Maturity-Transcendence of the self

- 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.
- Mesopotamians viewed life as a road, a course to be traveled. At the end of the road lay death. Death as an integral part of life.
- Gilgamesh’s epic is a remarkable portrait of the hero’s transition from youth to mature adulthood, exploring the characteristic of the former and its shortcomings..
- 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 and “mystical” 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

Gilgamesh returned to Uruk acting as a responsible ,compassionate king. Out of the depths, somehow, Gilgamesh has managed to “close the gate of sorrow”. Only when he is freed from his restless heart can he fully return to the place he started from. Gilgamesh has absorbed the deeper wisdom of accepting reality, coming back to his city and enjoying the works of his hands.

“This too was the work of Gilgamesh, the king, who knew the countries of the world. He Was wise he saw mysteries and knew secret things, he brought us a tale of the days before the flood. He went on a long journey, was weary, worn out with labor, and returning engraved on a stone the whole story”(The Epic of Gilgamesh, - p.117 )

“O Gilgamesh , lord of Kullab, great is thy praise”(p.119)
Selected Bibliography


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