Arrogance- Loss- Bereavement- Wisdom.

The Epic of Gilgamesh

A spiritual journey from youth to maturity

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 primary texts.
- Text interpretations and analysis.
- 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:
  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 Mesopomamia 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:
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 (woman of the temple).
- Friendship between 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?
- 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
- Enkidu’s death: period of loss.
- 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.
- Period of bereavement

b. Gilgamesh’s 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
     Utnapishtin
   - Death is inevitable
   - Gilgamesh 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, Utnapishtin… 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 is in front of two roads: despair or freedom

c. Heroism of Maturity - Gilgamesh “at peace” with himself: period of wisdom.
   - 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:
- 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 exactly do we know when we are grown up?

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

Selected Bibliography

Harris, Rivkah, *Gender and Aging in Mesopotamia*, University of Oklahoma Press, 2000
Mcintosh, Jane, R. *Ancient Mesopotamia*, Oxford, ABC Clio, 2005
Tigay, Jeffrey, H., *The Evolution of Gilgamesh Epic*, University of Pensylvania Press, 1982