

Gilgamesh Goes Greek

Teaching the Epic as the “College Experience”

By Steven Patterson

Editor’s Note: Today, what is conventionally called the Ancient Near East is actually Southwest Asia. Although we rarely publish articles about this region, this practical, well-written essay on a unique technique for teaching the Mesopotamian epic, *Gilgamesh*, deserves readers’ attention.

Teachers in the Ancient Near East could beat their students for minor infractions and general inattention, and while no teacher today could mimic this behavior, the world of the Ancient Near

East is not as remote to today’s school environment as one might think.¹ To help students see the similarities between the ancient world of Mesopotamia and modern America, I have been assigning the *Gilgamesh* epic for many years now, and as one recent senior admitted to me, it is the subject she remembers best from my freshman World Civilizations class. Perhaps this is because the paper that my students write on the epic is a comparison between the *Gilgamesh* epic and college. I resisted these sorts of comparison papers for a long time, but after grading dozens (if not hundreds) of papers on the role of kingship or social status in the Ancient Near East, I decided to change the assignment, both as an experiment to see how the students would respond, since many of them appear to be heavily invested in “the college experience,” and because I was ready to grade a different kind of *Gilgamesh* paper.

My students wrote some compelling essays on the comparisons between Mesopotamian life and college, describing Gilgamesh as a “jock” or “spoiled frat guy,” and Ishtar, the Semitic fertility deity, as the quintessential “stuck-up sorority girl.” Hoping to tap in to what students find compelling about college, I found that the students had a greater comprehension of the story when they sought resemblances between their own social and academic worlds and that of Gilgamesh. Psychologists have long recognized that establishing this kind of emotional connection can be a powerful method for getting students invested in a class or a subject when the teacher employs analogies and metaphors from the cultural context of the student and applies them to something that is otherwise alien and unfamiliar, such as Near Eastern myths. I also hope this exercise teaches students to think like historians, since

they should develop the ability to bend one ear to the rhythms of ancient Sumer while keeping the other ear attached to their iPod.

For those not familiar with the epic, Gilgamesh tells the story of the king of Uruk (Biblical Erech), who exploits his subjects. The people of Uruk, in a situation that should resonate with Americans, must decide what recourse they have against a tyrannical despot in the land between the Tigris and Euphrates.² Like most other denizens of the ancient world, the Sumerians pray to their gods for justice and deliverance, and the gods respond by sending Enkidu to counter Gilgamesh. Enkidu, however,

must first be tamed, since he is initially a wild and shaggy man living with the animals. This taming is achieved by a woman named Shamhat who seduces Enkidu, and the ensuing sex apparently lasts an entire week. Enkidu is then introduced to the city and to that other marker of a civilized society for the Sumerians—beer. Already the parallels with college all but suggest themselves, with the young male experiencing an awakening on many different levels that will ultimately lead towards greater wisdom, if not necessarily happiness. Students also like to point out that after Shamhat seduces Enkidu, he will follow her anywhere. Still,



Babylonian cylinder seal depicting a scene from the epic poem *Gilgamesh*. Depicted is Gilgamesh and Enkidu slaying the Bull of Heaven. Image source: <http://users.mhc.edu/facultystaff/mbaldwin/LAA121/>.

the discussion of sex can lead to other questions that are not quite so obvious to the student, e.g., What makes one civilized? At what point in your life did you become civilized? What is a civilization? How do our conceptions of civilization differ from those of the Sumerians?

To return to the narrative of the epic, after the eventual fight between Gilgamesh and Enkidu ends in a draw, the two men decide that they are now equals, and they decide on an adventure together.³ Unfortunately, they anger the gods in their escapades, and the gods decree that one of them must die. Enkidu thus wastes away and perishes, and Gilgamesh, now realizing his own human mortality, begins his quest for immortality. Ultimately, he fails, though he comes close when Utnapishtim (the Mesopotamian Noah, since he survived a flood sent to wipe out humankind), gives him a plant that will rejuvenate him, but then a snake steals it from Gilgamesh.⁴ Gilgamesh then returns to Uruk as a chastened but now more benevolent ruler, whose immortality will be based on his reputation as a just king. Thus the epic has been one of self-discovery for Gilgamesh, which is another—albeit more hopeful—parallel with college, and Gilgamesh gains maturity through

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his actions, even when not successful, since he transforms from a king who acts before thinking into a wise and humane ruler.

This is the basic outline of the story. However strange Sumerian myths may initially seem to students, there are a number of topics embedded in the tale that should resonate with them. Themes such as friendship, loneliness, acceptance, loss, regret, revenge, and fame found in the epic are likewise central preoccupations of most youth. To be remembered and honored by their peers (or even successive generations) seems to be a universal desire of students, and college, as snopes.com will attest, is a huge myth-making machine whose stories—especially of road trips or spring break vacations—take epic forms that would be familiar to the ancient world. In short, Gilgamesh’s immortality (and at times, his immorality) is often what students hope to achieve while in college, though these goals may have changed by the time they are seniors.

The *Gilgamesh* epic is also a useful exercise for a close reading of a text, since much of the power of the myth comes from opposites. I typically break students into groups and have them come up with as many of these as possible, e.g. king/wild man, shepherd/exploiter, just/unjust rule, prostitution/legitimate marriage, male/female roles, country/city, virginity/sexual awakening, attraction/repulsion, dignity/life on the street (Enkidu curses Shamhat that she will have no home, and as a prostitute must live on the street), arousal/sleep (Gilgamesh is initially jittery and, as my students call him, ADD, but he can’t stay awake at the end), nature/civilization, and the proper roles of humans and gods. If history is the search for patterns, this exercise teaches students how to find and possibly develop these patterns into thematic essays.⁵ The essay itself can become a form of personalized wisdom literature for the students, showing them that they can comprehend and describe their own social world, realizing its similarities and its differences with the past.

Gilgamesh, the oldest story in the world, can be studied through the prism of college life, and just as the myths of the ancient world were often reworked to make them relevant for particular societies, I attempt something similar—a reworking of the myth that makes it more accessible for today’s student, who lives in a world of epic movies and epic video games. They should therefore understand the nature of the epic and how it can structure a society’s view of itself, even that of college. ■

NOTES

1. The term “Ancient Near East” reflects our Western bias, since the land being described is more properly Southwestern or Western Asia. Still, the term stuck, but it should not obscure the fact that Mesopotamia is Asian. Also, in this essay, I use *Mesopotamia* to refer to the Land Between Two Rivers (which comes from the Greek and was never used by the people who lived there), and *Sumerians* for the early inhabitants of the land between the Tigris and Euphrates, who gave us cuneiform in addition to the *Gilgamesh* epic.
2. Saddam Hussein often compared himself to Gilgamesh. He had intended to establish the Saddam Institute of Cuneiform Studies in a reconstructed version of Ashurbanipal’s library at Nineveh. By other writers in the Middle East, Hussein has more often been compared to Humbaba, the demon guardian of the forest slain by the outsiders

Gilgamesh and Enkidu, since Gilgamesh wants to control the natural resources of the land. See David Damrosch, *The Buried Book* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2006), 254.

3. While journeying into a sacred forest, the men discuss the dreams they are having that are full of ill omens. In an early example of critical thinking, or lack thereof, both Gilgamesh and Enkidu interpret these dreams in the least threatening manner possible, ignoring the obvious dire portents of the dream.
4. The story of Utnapishtim is also useful in showing the precursors of the flood story in Genesis, and perhaps showing some of the Near Eastern origins of Judeo-Christianity, as well the effects of the Babylonian Captivity on subsequent Western Civilization.
5. The curses in *Gilgamesh*, though not my primary focus here, are provocative and still hold our interest. When Gilgamesh turns down the marriage proposal from Ishtar, he tells her: “Why would I want to be the lover of a broken oven that fails in the cold, a flimsy door that the wind blows through, a palace that falls on its staunchest defenders . . . a waterskin that is full of holes and leaks all over its bearer, a shoe that mangles its owner’s foot?” Enkidu likewise curses Shamhat that she would never have a home or family, or a child of her own. “May your man prefer younger, prettier girls, may he beat you . . . may drunkards vomit all over you, may a tavern wall be your place of business.” (Mitchell, *Gilgamesh*, 132, 146.) These particular curses also reveal some of the misogynistic elements of Sumerian society, though in general, the women in *Gilgamesh* (with the obvious exception of Ishtar), have a moderating, civilizing effect on men.

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While there are several versions of the *Gilgamesh* epic available, the translation by Stephen Mitchell is the most accessible for students. It also has a lengthy and useful introduction, in addition to extensive footnotes, so teachers can assign the story or the story plus the introduction and notes. There are also fine translations of *Gilgamesh* by Maureen Kovacs, Andrew George, and Benjamin Foster. All have valuable introductions for teachers looking for extra material. For those in English or Humanities, the other versions might also be useful in showing how different translations describe the same episode from the epic. Additionally, *The Buried Book: The Loss and Rediscovery of the Great Epic of Gilgamesh* by David Damrosch tells the absorbing story of the rediscovery of *Gilgamesh* in the nineteenth century, including the translation work of George Smith, the brilliant working-class engraver of currency who taught himself cuneiform and pieced together the tablets of the flood story found in the epic. There are many other manifestations of *Gilgamesh* in modern culture, but two more worth mentioning are Philip Roth’s *The Great American Novel*, whose main character is a baseball pitcher named Gil Gamesh, and, from a very different context, there is a *Star Trek: The Next Generation* episode which retells the epic in the episode *Darmok*.