

## LESSON PLANS: *Gilgamesh: A New English Version* by Stephen Mitchell

### SHORT SUMMARY:

Mesopotamia. The Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. The second and third millennia BCE. The story is simple and compelling. The King of Uruk, Gilgamesh, ruling about the time of 2500 BCE, is two-thirds god, one-third human. He is a bully who abuses his people. To tame him, the people of Uruk call on the gods to help, and the gods create the wild and handsome Enkidu. The two become friends and defy the gods in their violent adventures. Gilgamesh must face the very human conditions of loss and death. The images in the epic are spectacular and rival any video game students will ever play. There are frightening passages of hand-to-hand combat, revenge plots, sexual awakenings, and the sad image of a dying friend. The universal theme of friendship is the theme that drives the epic of Gilgamesh, which is considered the first hero's journey.

From Mesopotamia, the story was first written down long after King Gilgamesh was supposed to have ruled. It was based on earlier Sumerian legends of Gilgamesh. The most complete version of the epic was preserved on eleven clay tablets in the collection of a Seventh century BCE Assyrian king and was found by A. H. Layard, a British archaeologist, in 1850.

### IMPORTANT INTRODUCTORY VISUALS:

1) The map of the ancient Middle East showing the setting of *Gilgamesh* gives students a graphic idea of why the Sumerians were receptive to literature at the time. Looking at the fertile area of Mesopotamia nestled between the two rivers, the Tigris and Euphrates, it is easy to see that the region had the resources to cultivate plenty of food, which freed them to become artisans, craftsmen, and to develop a civilization sophisticated in building, writing, and in the arts.

2) The picture of cuneiform characters on baked clay tablets shows students the dedication the writer(s) had in carving the intricate figures and preserving them in libraries for others to read. **SEE PROJECT SECTION.**

### LESSON PLANS:

Each lesson plan will concentrate on the consecutive short Books or chapters of the epic. Stephen Mitchell's version interprets Books I–XI. His version is clear, dramatic, and poetic, and distinct from the word-for-word translations of many scholars. He fills in some gaps (perhaps a third to a fifth of the text is still missing), conveys events vividly, and allows the sometimes subtle emotions of the characters to emerge. (Note that there is a glossary of the many gods and characters in the back

of the book.) Suggested questions assume that the student will support his answers with words from the text.

### **PROLOGUE:**

The narrator of the epic introduces Gilgamesh in a unique way; he doesn't mention his name until the last line of the prologue.

- 1) What effect does the narrator create as he introduces the hero?
- 2) What kind of "portrait" does the narrator give of Gilgamesh?
- 3) Many of the sentences in the Prologue are imperative. Why does the narrator command the reader to do this and that?

### **BOOK I:**

- 1) This book opens with a positive description of Gilgamesh ending with the word "perfect." Then, in the next paragraph the description changes, and the word "arrogant" is used. What is the "true" picture of Gilgamesh?
- 2) When the goddess Aruru forms the savage man, Enkidu, another problem is presented. He is a wild man roaming the forest with the animals, and the trapper cannot make a living since the fearsome Enkidu is tearing out his traps and freeing the animals. Why do you think the *Gilgamesh* author made this "double for Gilgamesh, his second self" so different from the city-dwelling Gilgamesh?
- 3) The goddess's solution to the trapper's problem is to introduce the wild man to sex with the woman Shamhat. A priestess of the goddess of love, who has dedicated herself to being a servant of the goddess, Shamhat might be called a "sacred prostitute," but she is not out for personal gain. Her union with Enkidu changes him in many ways. What are they?
- 4) Book I foreshadows the friendship theme for both Gilgamesh and Enkidu. What in the text supports this?
- 5) **WRITING ASSIGNMENT:** The first book of the epic hints at the problems that may arise in this friendship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu. Write a short essay on your interpretation of that statement.

## BOOK II:

- 1) Now that Enkidu has gained some self-awareness, Shamhat continues to teach Enkidu. What lessons does he learn from her in this book?
- 2) The book begins with a violent fight but ends in the beginnings of friendship. What is your theory about why this happens? Is there any information in the text to support you?
- 3) **WRITING ASSIGNMENT:** Animals are used often in descriptions of Enkidu. Describe the fight with Gilgamesh using Enkidu's animal traits.

## BOOK III:

- 1) Much of this book is a debate between the two friends. The argument is over whether the two should journey to the Cedar Forest and kill the monster Humbaba. What is Enkidu's objection to the adventure?
- 2) What is Gilgamesh's reason for insisting on the adventure?
- 3) What is the elders' objection to the adventure? What is his mother Ninsun's attitude?
- 4) **WRITING ASSIGNMENT:** There is disagreement over whether to kill the monster Humbaba. Present all the arguments. Whose side would you take? Why?

## BOOK IV:

- 1) This book is notable for its repetitive descriptions and the interpretation of dreams as in other epics like *Beowulf* and those by Homer. Each day the two men travel exactly the same amount of miles, set up camp the same way, and each night Gilgamesh has an ominous dream that Enkidu interprets as favorable. Repetition, interpretation of dreams – what do you see as the importance of this book to the narrative?
- 2) The monster Humbaba is portrayed as pathetic, comic, and scary – yet we, as readers, sympathize with him. Why? What support do you find in the text for this sympathy?
- 3) **WRITING ASSIGNMENT:** Why do you think that Enkidu interprets all Gilgamesh's dreams as "favorable"?

## BOOK V:

- 1) The two friends exhibit real fear in this book. In this way, they are unlike other heroes in later epics – Beowulf and Odysseus, for example. For Gilgamesh and Enkidu, fear is not a shameful trait. In fact, it works well in this book. Why? What does sharing their fear accomplish?
- 2) With the help of the god Shamash, the two defeat the monster in an epic battle. When Humbaba begs for his life, why does Enkidu persuade Gilgamesh to refuse?
- 3) Interpret, if you can, the repetitive lines that come right after the terrible mutilation of Humbaba:  
    “A gentle rain fell onto the mountains.  
    A gentle rain fell onto the mountains.”
- 4) **WRITING ASSIGNMENT:** Was it necessary to kill Humbaba as Enkidu suggested? Defend your answer.

## BOOK VI:

- 1) After Gilgamesh’s victory over the monster, the goddess Ishtar propositions him. Why does Gilgamesh refuse the goddess?
- 2) Of the six insulting examples Gilgamesh throws at Ishtar, which one is most convincing to you? Why?
- 3) Deeply insulted, Ishtar prevails on her father, the sky-god, to let her have the Bull of Heaven to wreak vengeance on Gilgamesh and his city. The images of the gigantic bull are fierce, but again, the two friends work together to kill the monster. What does Enkidu do at the finish of the battle, and what does that tell us about him?
- 4) **WRITING ASSIGNMENT:** Compare the fight with the bull of heaven to the one with Humbaba (Book V).

## BOOK VII:

- 1) At the end of Book VI, Enkidu has a frightening dream, and in Book VII he recalls it for Gilgamesh along with another bad dream. Gilgamesh tries to

interpret the dreams as favorable, but Enkidu realizes that his fate has been sealed. How has Enkidu angered the gods?

- 2) When Enkidu realizes his fate, he curses both the trapper and Shamhat, who brought him to the city of Uruk, but Shamash offers a more balanced view. What is his view, and how does Enkidu react to it?
- 3) **WRITING ASSIGNMENT:** Is Enkidu the villain in this myth? Why or why not?

### **BOOK VIII:**

- 1) The loss of Enkidu is devastating to Gilgamesh. How does he express his grief?
- 2) How does Gilgamesh describe his friendship with Enkidu? How does he honor his friend's memory? What would he do today?
- 3) **WRITING ASSIGNMENT:** After Enkidu's death, the epic goes in a new direction. Gilgamesh begins a long, beautiful lament for his dead friend. Write a short essay on the changes that Gilgamesh undergoes as a result of his friendship with Enkidu. (This essay should include a before/after Enkidu thesis.)
- 4) **WRITING ASSIGNMENT:** Gilgamesh is devastated by the loss of Enkidu. Rewrite his lament in modern language.

### **BOOK IX:**

- 1) Gilgamesh now realizes that he, too, will die. He allows his life to fall apart; he does not bathe, shave, or take care of himself (somewhat reminiscent of the original Enkidu). This is not so much out of grief for Enkidu, but because he is terrified about death. He decides to find the one man onto whom the gods granted immortality, Utnapishtim. The first stage of his journey – the trip through the tunnel – is successful. What are the dangers in this first part of the quest?
- 2) **WRITING ASSIGNMENT:** Many dreams have appeared in this myth. What is the purpose of dreams in *Gilgamesh*? Use two examples to prove your point from two different books of the myth.

## BOOK X:

- 1) The tavern keeper, Shiduri, seems to offer Gilgamesh good advice for living after Enkidu's death. Why doesn't Gilgamesh pay attention?
- 2) Gilgamesh goes through more stages along the way to the immortal man, Utnapishtim, and when Gilgamesh finally reaches him, he receives more advice – this time about death – which he also rejects. Is the advice good in your opinion? Why?
- 3) Gilgamesh is offered two chances: one, immortality; two, a return to his youth. What does he have to do, and how does he handle these choices?
- 4) **WRITING ASSIGNMENT:** What is the significance of Gilgamesh's passage through the darkness underneath the twin-peaked mountain?

## BOOK XI:

- 1) When Gilgamesh asks Utnapishtim to reveal the reason the gods made him immortal, the man recounts the ancient story of the Flood. This is the "vision" of the "primeval days before the Flood" promised in the Prologue. But this vision doesn't seem to help Gilgamesh find the answer to his question, "Must I die, too?" Scholars differ on the reasons for including this account of the Flood; why do you think the narrator included it?
- 2) In the Prologue, the unknown narrator takes the reader proudly through the city of Uruk. These same lines are spoken by Gilgamesh at the end of the tale. What is significance of this? What has Gilgamesh learned by the end of his epic journey?
- 3) **WRITING ASSIGNMENT:** Gilgamesh is at the end of his quest. And what has he gained? Read his words to the boatman, Urshanabi at the end of this book. Notice how Gilgamesh, King of Uruk, has become the narrator of the tale, saying the same words as the narrator does in the Prologue. Draw some conclusions about why the book has returned to the beginning.

## SUGGESTED PROJECTS;

### BEFORE READING THE EPIC:

- 1) Cuneiform writing is picture writing invented by Sumerians who wrote with long reeds on clay tablets while the clay was wet. (Latin: “cuneus” = wedge, “forma” = shape) Writing allowed these ancient people to write laws and to incorporate more of local cultures and their history. Students can “write” cuneiform by using a piece of clay and logging on to [www.upenn.edu/museum](http://www.upenn.edu/museum). The title of the Web site section is “How to Write Like a Babylonian.” Browsers can see their monograms in cuneiform, and there is further information on the writing form.
- 2) Students can research the gods, goddesses, mortals, and locations in the epic. Make clear that any research furthers their understanding of the epic.
- 3) In this epic, many symbols and motifs appear whose meanings are not always the same as contemporary meanings. Some of these symbols and motifs include: the interpretation of dreams, the role of a priestess of Ishtar as opposed to a prostitute, the sympathy we have for monsters, the significance of bathing or not bathing, the similarities between Gilgamesh and Enkidu, and the many journeys that Gilgamesh makes – each physical journey mirrors his emotional quest. Compare and contrast two of the above with examples from the text and what their modern meaning would be.

### SUGGESTED BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Although the tablets of *Gilgamesh* were found only 150 years ago, many stories/books/myths contain similar details. Here are a few:

The Bible: the flood story

The Odyssey and The Aeneid: underworld, heroes, wandering of Odysseus

Medea: the raging of Ishtar

Beowulf: scary monster like Humbaba

Grendel: The Beowulf story told from the monster’s perspective (note: Grendel is a contemporary work!)

Select two and compare and contrast using examples from the text.

Related Web sites:

<http://novaonline.nv.cc.va.us/eli/eng251/gilgameshstudy.htm>  
Study guide for the epic Gilgamesh.

<http://gilgamesh.psnk.pl/>  
The tale of Gilgamesh told through graphic animation.

<http://www.garone.net/tony/gilgamesh.html>  
A musical interpretation of the epic.

<http://www.aina.org/news/20050125100240.htm>  
News article relating to the epic of Gilgamesh.

<http://www.mythinglinks.org/NearEast~TigrisEuphrates.html>  
Maps and other links related to the epic of Gilgamesh.

<http://gilgamesh-online.bolchazy.com/>  
Gilgamesh online is intended to serve as a newsletter, encyclopedia of information, repository of essays, communication center, message board, and link to other Web sites for those interested in the epic of Gilgamesh.

<http://www.historyguide.org/ancient/cuneiform.html>  
Resource for cuneiform writing.

[http://oi.uchicago.edu/OI/INFO/MAP/SITE/ANE\\_Site\\_Maps.html](http://oi.uchicago.edu/OI/INFO/MAP/SITE/ANE_Site_Maps.html)  
Site with maps relating to the epic.

<http://www.faculty.fairfield.edu/jmac/meso/meso.htm>  
Maps and history related to the epic.

<http://www.baghdadmuseum.org/ref/>  
Resource for information on the birthplace of the epic of Gilgamesh.

## **GILGAMESH by Stephen Mitchell**

### **SUMMARY:**

Stephen Mitchell's Gilgamesh is the definitive interpretation and translation of the oldest epic poem in history and the oldest piece of writing attributed to a named author. Written 2,500 years before the Common Era, *Gilgamesh* commemorates the life of the ruler of the city of Uruk, from which Iraq gets its name, and is an important text for understanding the roots of civilization and human nature.

Vivid, highly emotional, and more moving than any other *Gilgamesh* translation and interpretation available – and particularly timely now as the West is in conflict with the countries and peoples descended from the world's first civilization – *Gilgamesh* provides a view into the way our most ancient ancestors lived and thought, as well as the most basic values of an ancient culture and civilization. It also shows how these values and their literary tradition serve as the framework for society and spirituality through the ages.

### **READING GROUP DISCUSSION:**

#### **BOOK I:**

- 1) This book opens with a positive description of Gilgamesh ending with the word “perfect.” Then, in the next paragraph the description changes, and the word “arrogant” is used. What is the “true” picture of Gilgamesh?
- 2) The solution to the trapper’s problem is the introduction of sex to the wild man by Shamhat, who is not what we would call a prostitute, someone who sells her body for personal gain, but a priestess of the goddess of love who has dedicated herself to being a servant of the goddess. Discuss the ways in which her union with Enkidu changes him. Is this a change for the good? What does he gain, and what does he lose?

#### **BOOK II:**

- 1) Now that Enkidu has gained some self-awareness, Shamhat continues to teach Enkidu. What lessons does he learn from her in this book?
- 2) The book begins with a violent fight but ends in the beginnings of friendship. What is your theory about why this happens?

### **BOOK III:**

- 1) Much of this book is a debate between the two friends. The argument is over whether the two should journey to the Cedar Forest and kill the monster Humbaba. Do you agree or disagree with: Enkidu's objection to the adventure? Gilgamesh's reason for insisting on the adventure? His mother Ninsun and the elders' objection to the adventure?
- 2) There is disagreement over whether to kill the monster Humbaba. Presented with all the arguments, whose side would you take and why?

### **BOOK IV:**

- 1) This book is notable for its repetitive descriptions and the interpretation of dreams. Each day the two men travel exactly the same amount of miles, set up camp the same way, and each night Gilgamesh has an ominous dream which Enkidu interprets as favorable. Repetition, interpretation of dreams – what do you see as the importance of this book to the narrative? Why do you think that Enkidu interprets all Gilgamesh's dreams as "favorable"?
- 2) The monster Humbaba is portrayed as pathetic, comic, and scary. Did you find yourself sympathizing with him at all as you read, and if so, why?

### **BOOK V:**

- 1) The two friends exhibit real fear in this book. In this way, they are unlike other heroes in later epics – Beowulf and Odysseus, for example. For Gilgamesh and Enkidu, fear is not a shameful trait. What does sharing their fear accomplish?
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monster. What does Enkidu's action at the finish of the battle tell us about him?

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- 2) When Enkidu realizes his fate, he curses both the trapper and Shamhat, who brought him to the city of Uruk, but Shamash offers a more balanced view. What is his view, and how does Enkidu react to it? Discuss why you do or don't believe that Enkidu is the villain in this myth.

#### **BOOK VIII:**

- 1) The loss of Enkidu is devastating to Gilgamesh. How does he express his grief and how does he honor his friend's memory? What would he do today?
- 2) After Enkidu's death, the epic goes in a new direction. Gilgamesh begins a long, beautiful lament for his dead friend. Discuss the changes that Gilgamesh undergoes as a result of his friendship with Enkidu.

#### **BOOK IX:**

- 1) Gilgamesh now realizes that he, too, will die and allows his life to fall apart; he does not bathe, shave, or take care of himself (somewhat reminiscent of the original Enkidu) because he is terrified about death. On his journey to find Utnapishtim, the first stage – the trip through the tunnel – is successful. What are the dangers in this first part of the quest?
- 2) So many dreams appear in this myth. What two examples can you remember from any of the books of the myth explain the purpose of dreams in *Gilgamesh*?

#### **BOOK X:**

- 1) The tavern keeper, Shiduri, seems to offer Gilgamesh good advice for living after Enkidu's death. Why doesn't Gilgamesh pay attention?
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- 2) In the Prologue, the unknown narrator takes the reader proudly through the city of Uruk. These same lines are spoken by Gilgamesh at the end of the tale. What is significance of this? What has Gilgamesh learned by the end of his epic journey?

## ENHANCE YOUR BOOK CLUB:

- 1) Be inspired by the rich, luxurious colors evoked by the story of *Gilgamesh*. Have everyone in your book club wear something gold, deep blue, or blood red.
- 2) Enjoy a bountiful feast of exotic Middle Eastern dishes such as Baba Ghannouj, Makanek, Falafel, Sambousek, and Adas Bil Hamod. Go online to <http://www.citysearch.com/?choose=1&> or <http://zagat.com/> to find a Middle Eastern restaurant near you. Can't find one? Host a potluck and have everyone bring a dish (recipes can be found at <http://www.mideastweb.org/recipes.htm>).
- 3) The Sumerians developed the art of writing in an efficient form. Their language was pictographic – each sign was a simplified picture of an article that the scribe had in mind. Eventually the scribes reduced the complexity of a pictographic system by combining several pictures into one. Try your hand at cuneiform: Give out a piece of blank paper and a pencil to everyone in your group and have them depict their favorite scenes of *Gilgamesh* in a simple drawing.