**from *The Epic of Gilgamesh***

**translated by N.K. Sandars**

**Background**

*Gilgamesh* is a story shaped by centuries of storytellers who lived in ancient Mesopotamia, a region between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Life in the desert region was simultaneously subject to poverty and plenty, opportunity and danger. Frequent floods enriched the soil, but they were also violent and unpredictable. The flat terrain left cities open to invaders. Ancient Near-Eastern religion reflected the insecurities of life in the region. For Mesopotamians, the underworld was a dreary, inhospitable place, and the quarreling, all-too-human gods had absolute control over human destiny.

The hero’s quest is a theme found in the literature of many peoples. Usually, the hero must suffer a number of ordeals in the course of this search, yet this suffering leads to a special knowledge or understanding that could not otherwise have been gained. Gilgamesh’s bravery, both during his journey and in battle, was legendary; such a role model may have been exceedingly necessary in a culture and time of tribal invasions. Nonetheless, accounts of this famous king—two thirds a god and one third a man—and his quest for everlasting life may have served as a lesson in accepting one’s mortality for generations of listeners.

***Prologue***

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. Shamash the glorious sun endowed him with beauty, Adad the god of the storm endowed him with courage, the great gods made his beauty perfect, surpassing all others, terrifying like a great wild bull. Two thirds they made him god and one third man.

In Uruk he built walls, a great rampart, and the temple of blessed Eanna[**1**](javascript:openCrossRef('../bm/fa_hu1gilg_10001.html'))for the god of the firmament Anu, and for Ishtar the goddess of love. Look at it still today: the outer wall where the cornice runs, it shines with the brilliance of copper; and the inner wall, it has no equal. Touch the threshold, it is ancient. Approach Eanna the dwelling of Ishtar, our lady of love and war, the like of which no latter-day king, no man alive can equal. Climb upon the wall of Uruk; walk along it, I say; regard the foundation terrace and examine the masonry: is it not burnt brick and good? The seven sages[**2**](javascript:openCrossRef('../bm/fa_hu1gilg_10002.html'))laid the foundations.

***The Battle with Humbaba***

*When the people of Uruk complain about Gilgamesh’s arrogance, the goddess Aruru creates Enkidu to contend with the king and absorb his energies. At first, Enkidu lives like a wild animal and has no contact with other humans. Later, he enters Uruk, loses a wrestling match to Gilgamesh, and becomes his faithful friend. Then the two set off to destroy Humbaba, the giant who guards the cedar forest. As Gilgamesh prepares for battle, Enkidu expresses his fears.*

Then Enkidu, the faithful companion, pleaded, answering him, “O my lord, you do not know this monster and that is the reason you are not afraid. I who know him, I am terrified. His teeth are dragon’s fangs, his countenance is like a lion, his charge is the rushing of the flood, with his look he crushes alike the trees of the forest and reeds in the swamp. O my lord, you may go on if you choose into this land, but I will go back to the city. I will tell the lady your mother all your glorious deeds till she shouts for joy: and then I will tell the death that followed till she weeps for bitterness.” But Gilgamesh said, “**[Immolation](javascript:openGlossaryWnd('ltWMu1_gilg_1.t00')" \o "Glossary Term, link opens in new window)** and sacrifice are not yet for me, the boat of the dead[**3**](javascript:openCrossRef('../bm/fa_hu1gilg_10003.html'))shall not go down, nor the three-ply cloth be cut for my shrouding. Not yet will my people be desolate, nor the pyre be lit in my house and my dwelling burnt on the fire. Today, give me your aid and you shall have mine: what then can go amiss with us two? All living creatures born of the flesh shall sit at last in the boat of the West, and when it sinks, when the boat of Magilum sinks, they are gone; but we shall go forward and fix our eyes on this monster. If your heart is fearful throw away fear; if there is terror in it throw away terror. Take your ax in your hand and attack. He who leaves the fight unfinished is not at peace.”

Humbaba came out from his strong house of cedar. Then Enkidu called out, “O Gilgamesh, remember now your boasts in Uruk. Forward, attack, son of Uruk, there is nothing to fear.” When he heard these words his courage rallied; he answered, “Make haste, close in, if the watchman is there do not let him escape to the woods where he will vanish. He has put on the first of his seven splendors but not yet the other six, let us trap him before he is armed.” Like a raging wild bull he snuffed the ground; the watchman of the woods turned full of threatenings, he cried out. Humbaba came from his strong house of cedar. He nodded his head and shook it, menacing Gilgamesh; and on him he fastened his eye, the eye of death. Then Gilgamesh called to Shamash and his tears were flowing, “O glorious Shamash, I have followed the road you commanded but now if you send no **[succor](javascript:openGlossaryWnd('ltWMu1_gilg_1.t02')" \o "Glossary Term, link opens in new window)** how shall I escape?” Glorious Shamash heard his prayer and he summoned the great wind, the north wind, the whirlwind, the storm and the icy wind, the tempest and the scorching wind; they came like dragons, like a scorching fire, like a serpent that freezes the heart, a destroying flood and the lightning’s fork. The eight winds rose up against Humbaba, they beat against his eyes; he was gripped, unable to go forward or back. Gilgamesh shouted, “By the life of Ninsun my mother and divine Lugulbanda my father, in the Country of the Living, in this Land I have discovered your dwelling; my weak arms and my small weapons I have brought to this Land against you, and now I will enter your house.”

So he felled the first cedar and they cut the branches and laid them at the foot of the mountain. At the first stroke Humbaba blazed out, but still they advanced. They felled seven cedars and cut and bound the branches and laid them at the foot of the mountain, and seven times Humbaba loosed his glory on them. As the seventh blaze died out they reached his lair. He slapped his thigh in scorn. He approached like a noble wild bull roped on the mountain, a warrior whose elbows are bound together. The tears started to his eyes and he was pale, “Gilgamesh, let me speak. I have never known a mother, no, nor a father who reared me. I was born of the mountain, he reared me, and Enlil made me the keeper of this forest. Let me go free, Gilgamesh, and I will be your servant, you shall be my lord; all the trees of the forest that I tended on the mountain shall be yours. I will cut them down and build you a palace.” He took him by the hand and led him to his house, so that the heart of Gilgamesh was moved with compassion. He swore by the heavenly life, by the earthly life, by the underworld itself: “O Enkidu, should not the snared bird return to its nest and the captive man return to his mother’s arms?” Enkidu answered, “The strongest of men will fall to fate if he has no judgment. Namtar, the evil fate that knows no distinction between men, will devour him. If the snared bird returns to its nest, if the captive man returns to his mother’s arms, then you my friend will never return to the city where the mother is waiting who gave you birth. He will bar the mountain road against you, and make the pathways impassable.”

Humbaba said, “Enkidu, what you have spoken is evil: you, a hireling, dependent for your bread! In envy and for fear of a rival you have spoken evil words.” Enkidu said, “Do not listen, Gilgamesh: this Humbaba must die. Kill Humbaba first and his servants after.” But Gilgamesh said, “If we touch him the blaze and the glory of light will be put out in confusion, the glory and glamour will vanish, its rays will be quenched.” Enkidu said to Gilgamesh, “Not so, my friend. First entrap the bird, and where shall the chicks run then? Afterwards we can search out the glory and the glamour, when the chicks run distracted through the grass.”

Gilgamesh listened to the word of his companion, he took the ax in his hand, he drew the sword from his belt, and he struck Humbaba with a thrust of the sword to the neck, and Enkidu his comrade struck the second blow. At the third blow Humbaba fell. Then there followed confusion for this was the guardian of the forest whom they had felled to the ground. For as far as two leagues the cedars shivered when Enkidu felled the watcher of the forest, he at whose voice Hermon and Lebanon used to tremble. Now the mountains were moved and all the hills, for the guardian of the forest was killed. They attacked the cedars, the seven splendors of Humbaba were extinguished. So they pressed on into the forest bearing the sword of eight talents.[**4**](javascript:openCrossRef('../bm/fa_hu1gilg_10004.html'))They uncovered the sacred dwellings of the Anunnaki[**5**](javascript:openCrossRef('../bm/fa_hu1gilg_10005.html'))and while Gilgamesh felled the first of the trees of the forest Enkidu cleared their roots as far as the banks of Euphrates.[**6**](javascript:openCrossRef('../bm/fa_hu1gilg_10006.html'))They set Humbaba before the gods, before Enlil; they kissed the ground and dropped the shroud and set the head before him. When he saw the head of Humbaba, Enlil raged at them. “Why did you do this thing? From henceforth may the fire be on your faces, may it eat the bread that you eat, may it drink where you drink.” Then Enlil took again the blaze and the seven splendors that had been Humbaba’s: he gave the first to the river, and he gave to the lion, to the stone of execration[**7**](javascript:openCrossRef('../bm/fa_hu1gilg_10007.html'))to the mountain and to the dreaded daughter of the Queen of Hell.

O Gilgamesh, king and conqueror of the dreadful blaze; wild bull who plunders the mountain, who crosses the sea, glory to him, and from the brave the greater glory is Enki’s![**8**](javascript:openCrossRef('../bm/fa_hu1gilg_10008.html'))

***The Death of Enkidu***

*Gilgamesh rejects the advances of Ishtar, goddess of love. In revenge, she brings the mighty Bull of Heaven down to threaten Uruk. Gilgamesh and Enkidu kill the bull, but Enkidu dreams that the gods have decreed his death for helping to slaughter the bull and Humbaba. Enkidu is furious at his fate until Shamash, the sun god, allays some of his anger. Then Enkidu describes another dream about death.*

As Enkidu slept alone in his sickness, in bitterness of spirit he poured out his heart to his friend. “It was I who cut down the cedar, I who leveled the forest, I who slew Humbaba and now see what has become of me. Listen, my friend, this is the dream I dreamed last night. The heavens roared, and earth rumbled back an answer; between them stood I before an awful being, the **[somber](javascript:openGlossaryWnd('ltWMu1_gilg_1.t03')" \o "Glossary Term, link opens in new window)** -faced man-bird; he had directed on me his purpose. His was a vampire face, his foot was a lion’s foot, his hand was an eagle’s talon. He fell on me and his claws were in my hair, he held me fast and I smothered; then he transformed me so that my arms became wings covered with feathers. He turned his stare towards me, and he led me away to the palace of Irkalla, the Queen of Darkness, to the house from which none who enters ever returns, down the road from which there is no coming back.

“There is the house whose people sit in darkness; dust is their food and clay their meat. They are clothed like birds with wings for covering, they see no light, they sit in darkness. I entered the house of dust and I saw the kings of the earth, their crowns put away for ever; rulers and princes, all those who once wore kingly crowns and ruled the world in the days of old. They who had stood in the place of the gods like Anu and Enlil, stood now like servants to fetch baked meats in the house of dust, to carry cooked meat and cold water from the water-skin. In the house of dust which I entered were high priests and acolytes[**9**](javascript:openCrossRef('../bm/fa_hu1gilg_10009.html'))priests of the **[incantation](javascript:openGlossaryWnd('ltWMu1_gilg_1.t04')" \o "Glossary Term, link opens in new window)** and of **[ecstasy](javascript:openGlossaryWnd('ltWMu1_gilg_1.t05')" \o "Glossary Term, link opens in new window)** ; there were servers of the temple, and there was Etana, that king of Kish whom the eagle carried to heaven in the days of old. I saw also Samuqan, god of cattle, and there was Ereshkigal the Queen of the Underworld; and Belit-Sheri squatted in front of her, she who is recorder of the gods and keeps the book of death. She held a tablet from which she read. She raised her head, she saw me and spoke: ‘Who has brought this one here?’ Then I awoke like a man drained of blood who wanders alone in a waste of rushes; like one whom the bailiff[**10**](javascript:openCrossRef('../bm/fa_hu1gilg_10010.html'))has seized and his heart pounds with terror.”

**Critical Reading**

**1. Respond:** Is Gilgamesh the kind of hero that you admire? Why or why not?

**2. (a) Recall:** According to the Prologue, what combination of god and man is Gilgamesh? **(b) Analyze Cause and Effect:** How might this combination affect him as a leader?

**3. (a) Recall:** Why does the goddess Aruru create Enkidu? **(b) Infer:** Why do you think Enkidu and Gilgamesh eventually become good friends?

**4. (a) Recall:** Before the battle, what does Enkidu tell Gilgamesh about Humbaba? **(b) Interpret:** In his response, what attitude does Gilgamesh display toward death?

**5. (a) Recall:** What material has Humbaba used to build his house? **(b) Draw Conclusions:** What do the repeated references to cedar trees and Humbaba’s offer of them in exchange for his life suggest about their value to this culture?

**6. (a) Summarize:** Summarize the battle with Humbaba, and identify Enkidu’s role in it. **(b) Compare and Contrast:** What differences between Gilgamesh and Enkidu does the battle reveal?

**7. (a) Speculate:** What do you think will happen to Enkidu, and how do you think Gilgamesh will react? **(b) Support:** Which details led you to this conclusion?

**8. (a) Evaluate:** How effective is Gilgamesh as a leader? **(b) Apply:** In what way is he both like and unlike other strong leaders you have seen or read about?

**Background**

In the early sections of *Gilgamesh,* the goddess Aruru creates Enkidu to temper Gilgamesh’s arrogance and his dynamic energies. Enkidu quickly becomes the king’s valued companion. After many glorious battles, Enkidu dies, and Gilgamesh, greatly saddened by his death, goes on a quest for immortality. He seeks Utnapishtim and his family, the only humans who have defeated death. Will Utnapishtim explain how a human might achieve immortality? Will the king return to his people with the knowledge of everlasting life? Find the answers to these questions in “The Story of the Flood” and “The Return” from *Gilgamesh.*

**The Story of the Flood**

“You know the city Shurrupak, it stands on the banks of Euphrates? That city grew old and the gods that were in it were old. There was Anu, lord of the firmament, their father, and warrior Enlil their counselor, Ninurta the helper, and Ennugi watcher over canals; and with them also was Ea. In those days the world **[teemed](javascript:openGlossaryWnd('ltWMu1_gilg_2.t06')" \o "Glossary Term, link opens in new window)** , the people multiplied, the world bellowed like a wild bull, and the great god was aroused by the clamor. Enlil heard the clamor and he said to the gods in council, ‘The uproar of mankind is intolerable and sleep is no longer possible by reason of the **[babel](javascript:openGlossaryWnd('ltWMu1_gilg_2.t07')" \o "Glossary Term, link opens in new window)** .’ So the gods agreed to exterminate mankind. Enlil did this, but Ea because of his oath warned me in a dream. He whispered their words to my house of reeds, ‘Reed-house, reed-house! Wall, O wall, harken reed-house, wall reflect: O man of Shurrupak, son of Ubara-Tutu; tear down your house and build a boat, abandon possessions and look for life, despise worldly goods and save your soul alive. Tear down your house, I say, and build a boat. These are the measurements of the barque as you shall build her: let her beam equal her length, let her deck be roofed like the vault that covers the abyss;[**1**](javascript:openCrossRef('../bm/fa_hu1gilg_20001.html'))then take up into the boat the seed of all living creatures.’

“When I had understood I said to my lord, ‘Behold, what you have commanded I will honor and perform, but how shall I answer the people, the city, the elders?’ Then Ea opened his mouth and said to me, his servant, ‘Tell them this: I have learnt that Enlil is wrathful against me, I dare no longer walk in his land nor live in his city; I will go down to the Gulf[**2**](javascript:openCrossRef('../bm/fa_hu1gilg_20002.html'))to dwell with Ea my lord. But on you he will rain down abundance, rare fish and shy wild-fowl, a rich harvest-tide. In the evening the rider of the storm will bring you wheat in torrents.’

“In the first light of dawn all my household gathered round me, the children brought pitch and the men whatever was necessary. On the fifth day I laid the keel and the ribs, then I made fast the planking. The ground-space was one acre, each side of the deck measured one hundred and twenty cubits[**3**](javascript:openCrossRef('../bm/fa_hu1gilg_20003.html'))making a square. I built six decks below, seven in all, I divided them into nine sections with bulkheads between. I drove in wedges where needed, I saw to the punt-poles[**4**](javascript:openCrossRef('../bm/fa_hu1gilg_20004.html'))and laid in supplies. The carriers brought oil in baskets, I poured pitch into the furnace and asphalt and oil; more oil was consumed in caulking[**5**](javascript:openCrossRef('../bm/fa_hu1gilg_20005.html'))and more again the master of the boat took into his stores. I slaughtered bullocks for the people and every day I killed sheep. I gave the shipwrights wine to drink as though it were river water, raw wine and red wine and oil and white wine. There was feasting then as there is at the time of the New Year’s festival; I myself anointed my head. On the seventh day the boat was complete.

“Then was the launching full of difficulty; there was shifting of ballast above and below till two thirds was submerged. I loaded into her all that I had of gold and of living things, my family, my kin, the beasts of the field both wild and tame, and all the craftsmen. I sent them on board, for the time that Shamash had ordained was already fulfilled when he said, ‘In the evening, when the rider of the storm sends down the destroying rain, enter the boat and batten her down.’ The time was fulfilled, the evening came, the rider of the storm sent down the rain. I looked out at the weather and it was terrible, so I too boarded the boat and battened her down. All was now complete, the battening and the caulking; so I handed the tiller to Puzur-Amurri the steersman, with the navigation and the care of the whole boat.

“With the first light of dawn a black cloud came from the horizon; it thundered within where Adad, lord of the storm, was riding. In front over hill and plain Shullat and Hanish, heralds of the storm, led on. Then the gods of the abyss rose up; Nergal pulled out the dams of the nether[**6**](javascript:openCrossRef('../bm/fa_hu1gilg_20006.html'))waters, Ninurta the war-lord threw down the dykes, and the seven judges of hell, the Anunnaki, raised their torches, lighting the land with their livid flame. A stupor of despair went up to heaven when the god of the storm turned daylight to darkness, when he smashed the land like a cup. One whole day the tempest raged, gathering fury as it went, it poured over the people like the tides of battle; a man could not see his brother nor the people be seen from heaven. Even the gods were terrified at the flood, they fled to the highest heaven, the firmament of Anu; they crouched against the walls, cowering like curs. Then Ishtar the sweet-voiced Queen of Heaven cried out like a woman in travail: ‘Alas the days of old are turned to dust because I commanded evil; why did I command this evil in the council of all the gods? I commanded wars to destroy the people, but are they not my people, for I brought them forth? Now like the spawn of fish they float in the ocean.’ The great gods of heaven and of hell wept, they covered their mouths.

“For six days and six nights the winds blew, torrent and tempest and flood overwhelmed the world, tempest and flood raged together like warring hosts. When the seventh day dawned the storm from the south **[subsided](javascript:openGlossaryWnd('ltWMu1_gilg_2.t08')" \o "Glossary Term, link opens in new window)** , the sea grew calm, the flood was stilled; I looked at the face of the world and there was silence, all mankind was turned to clay. The surface of the sea stretched as flat as a roof-top; I opened a hatch and the light fell on my face. Then I bowed low, I sat down and I wept, the tears streamed down my face, for on every side was the waste of water. I looked for land in vain, but fourteen leagues[**7**](javascript:openCrossRef('../bm/fa_hu1gilg_20007.html'))distant there appeared a mountain, and there the boat grounded; on the mountain of Nisir the boat held fast, she held fast and did not budge. One day she held, and a second day on the mountain of Nisir she held fast and did not budge. A third day, and a fourth day she held fast on the mountain and did not budge; a fifth day and a sixth day she held fast on the mountain. When the seventh day dawned I loosed a dove and let her go. She flew away, but finding no resting-place she returned. Then I loosed a swallow, and she flew away but finding no resting-place she returned. I loosed a raven, she saw that the waters had retreated, she ate, she flew around, she cawed, and she did not come back. Then I threw everything open to the four winds, I made a sacrifice and poured out a libation[**8**](javascript:openCrossRef('../bm/fa_hu1gilg_20008.html'))on the mountain top. Seven and again seven cauldrons I set up on their stands, I heaped up wood and cane and cedar and myrtle. When the gods smelled the sweet savor, they gathered like flies over the sacrifice. Then, at last, Ishtar also came, she lifted her necklace with the jewels of heaven that once Anu had made to please her. ‘O you gods here present, by the lapis lazuli[**9**](javascript:openCrossRef('../bm/hu1gilg_20009.html'))round my neck I shall remember these days as I remember the jewels of my throat: these last days I shall not forget. Let all the gods gather round the sacrifice, except Enlil. He shall not approach this offering, for without reflection he brought the flood; he consigned my people to destruction.”

“When Enlil had come, when he saw the boat, he was wrath and swelled with anger at the gods, the host of heaven, ‘Has any of these mortals escaped? Not one was to have survived the destruction.’ Then the god of the wells and canals Ninurta opened his mouth and said to the warrior Enlil, ‘Who is there of the gods that can devise without Ea? It is Ea alone who knows all things.’ Then Ea opened his mouth and spoke to warrior Enlil, ‘Wisest of gods, hero Enlil, how could you so senselessly bring down the flood?

Lay upon the sinner his sin,

Lay upon the transgressor his transgression,

Punish him a little when he breaks loose,

Do not drive him too hard or he perishes;

Would that a lion had ravaged mankind

Rather than the flood,

Would that a wolf had ravaged mankind

Rather than the flood,

Would that famine had wasted the world

Rather than the flood,

Would that pestilence had wasted mankind

Rather than the flood.

It was not I that revealed the secret of the gods; the wise man learned it in a dream. Now take your counsel what shall be done with him.’

“Then Enlil went up into the boat, he took me by the hand and my wife and made us enter the boat and kneel down on either side, he standing between us. He touched our foreheads to bless us saying. ‘In time past Utnapishtim was a mortal man; henceforth he and his wife shall live in the distance at the mouth of the rivers.’ Thus it was that the gods took me and placed me here to live in the distance, at the mouth of the rivers.”

***The Return***

Utnapishtim said, “As for you, Gilgamesh, who will assemble the gods for your sake, so that you may find that life for which you are searching? But if you wish, come and put it to the test: only prevail against sleep for six days and seven nights.” But while Gilgamesh sat there resting on his haunches, a mist of sleep like soft wool teased from the fleece drifted over him, and Utnapishtim said to his wife, “Look at him now, the strong man who would have everlasting life, even now the mists of sleep are drifting over him.” His wife replied, “Touch the man to wake him, so that he may return to his own land in peace, going back through the gate by which he came.” Utnapishtim said to his wife, “All men are deceivers, even you he will attempt to deceive; therefore bake loaves of bread, each day one loaf, and put it beside his head; and make a mark on the wall to number the days he has slept.”

So she baked loaves of bread, each day one loaf, and put it beside his head, and she marked on the wall the days that he slept; and there came a day when the first loaf was hard, the second loaf was like leather, the third was soggy, the crust of the fourth had mold, the fifth was mildewed, the sixth was fresh, and the seventh was still on the embers. Then Utnapishtim touched him and he woke. Gilgamesh said to Utnapishtim the Faraway, “I hardly slept when you touched and roused me.” But Utnapishtim said, “Count these loaves and learn how many days you slept, for your first is hard, your second like leather, your third is soggy, the crust of your fourth has mold, your fifth is mildewed, your sixth is fresh and your seventh was still over the glowing embers when I touched and woke you.” Gilgamesh said, “What shall I do, O Utnapishtim, where shall I go? Already the thief in the night has hold of my limbs, death inhabits my room; wherever my foot rests, there I find death.”

Then Utnapishtim spoke to Urshanabi the ferryman: “Woe to you Urshanabi, now and for ever more you have become hateful to this harborage; it is not for you, nor for you are the crossings of this sea. Go now, banished from the shore. But this man before whom you walked, bringing him here, whose body is covered with foulness and the grace of whose limbs has been spoiled by wild skins, take him to the washing-place. There he shall wash his long hair clean as snow in the water, he shall throw off his skins and let the sea carry them away, and the beauty of his body shall be shown, the fillet[**10**](javascript:openCrossRef('../bm/fa_hu1gilg_20010.html'))on his forehead shall be renewed, and he shall be given clothes to cover his nakedness. Till he reaches his own city and his journey is accomplished, these clothes will show no sign of age, they will wear like a new garment.” So Urshanabi took Gilgamesh and led him to the washing-place, he washed his long hair as clean as snow in the water, he threw off his skins, which the sea carried away, and showed the beauty of his body. He renewed the fillet on his forehead, and to cover his nakedness gave him clothes which would show no sign of age, but would wear like a new garment till he reached his own city, and his journey was accomplished.

Then Gilgamesh and Urshanabi launched the boat onto the water and boarded it, and they made ready to sail away; but the wife of Utnapishtim the Faraway said to him, “Gilgamesh came here wearied out, he is worn out; what will you give him to carry him back to his own country?” So Utnapishtim spoke, and Gilgamesh took a pole and brought the boat in to the bank. “Gilgamesh, you came here a man wearied out, you have worn yourself out; what shall I give you to carry you back to your own country? Gilgamesh, I shall reveal a secret thing, it is a mystery of the gods that I am telling you. There is a plant that grows under the water, it has a prickle like a thorn, like a rose; it will wound your hands, but if you succeed in taking it, then your hands will hold that which restores his lost youth to a man.”

When Gilgamesh heard this he opened the sluices so that a sweet-water current might carry him out to the deepest channel; he tied heavy stones to his feet and they dragged him down to the water-bed. There he saw the plant growing; although it pricked him he took it in his hands; then he cut the heavy stones from his feet, and the sea carried him and threw him onto the shore. Gilgamesh said to Urshanabi the ferryman, “Come here, and see this marvelous plant. By its virtue a man may win back all his former strength. I will take it to Uruk of the strong walls; there I will give it to the old men to eat. Its name shall be ‘The Old Men Are Young Again’; and at last I shall eat it myself and have back all my lost youth.” So Gilgamesh returned by the gate through which he had come, Gilgamesh and Urshanabi went together. They traveled their twenty leagues and then they broke their fast; after thirty leagues they stopped for the night.

Gilgamesh saw a well of cool water and he went down and bathed; but deep in the pool there was lying a serpent, and the serpent sensed the sweetness of the flower. It rose out of the water and snatched it away, and immediately it sloughed its skin and returned to the well. Then Gilgamesh sat down and wept, the tears ran down his face, and he took the hand of Urshanabi; “O Urshanabi, was it for this that I toiled with my hands, is it for this I have wrung out my heart’s blood? For myself I have gained nothing; not I, but the beast of the earth has joy of it now. Already the stream has carried it twenty leagues back to the channels where I found it. I found a sign and now I have lost it. Let us leave the boat on the bank and go.”

After twenty leagues they broke their fast, after thirty leagues they stopped for the night; in three days they had walked as much as a journey of a month and fifteen days. When the journey was accomplished they arrived at Uruk, the strong-walled city. Gilgamesh spoke to him, to Urshanabi the ferryman, “Urshanabi, climb up onto the wall of Uruk, inspect its foundation terrace, and examine well the brickwork; see if it is not of burnt bricks; and did not the seven wise men lay these foundations? One third of the whole is city, one third is garden, and one third is field, with the precinct of the goddess Ishtar. These parts and the precinct are all Uruk.”

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 a long journey, was weary, worn out with labor, and returning engraved on a stone the whole story.

**Critical Reading**

**1. Respond:**Did the gods and goddesses in *Gilgamesh* behave in ways you expected? Explain.

**2. (a) Recall:**How does Gilgamesh come to hear the story of the flood?**(b)Make Inferences:**Relative to the other events in *Gilgamesh,* when did the flood happen?**(c) Draw Conclusions:**Why is Utnapishtim able to tell about it?

**3. (a) Recall:**Why do the gods decide to destroy humanity?**(b) Analyze Cause and Effect:**Why do they soon question the wisdom of their decision?**(c) Interpret:**What lessons might Gilgamesh draw from the gods’ experiences?

**4. (a) Recall:**After telling the story of the flood, what mysterious gift does Utnapishtim direct Gilgamesh to find?**(b) Recall:**What happens to this gift?**(c) Interpret:**What lesson might Gilgamesh draw from this experience?

**5. Modify:**What changes would you make to *Gilgamesh* if you were adapting it into an adventure or science-fiction film for today’s audiences? Explain.

**Apply Skills**

**Quick Review**

An **archetype** is a basic plot, character, symbol, or idea that recurs in the literature of many cultures. The **hero’s quest** is an archetype in which an extraordinary person goes on a difficult journey to find something important.

**Characterization** is the means by which characters are developed. Authors may reveal characters’ personalities directly, through statements and descriptions, or indirectly, through characters’ actions, speech, and thoughts.

To **understand the cultural context,** look for details in ancient works about the way people lived and worked and what they believed.

### **Literary Analysis**

**Archetype: The Hero’s Quest**

**1. (a)**How does *The Epic of Gilgamesh* fit the **archetype** of a **hero’s quest?(b)**How does Gilgamesh resmd to the difficult obstacles he encounters?

**2.**Would you say Gilgamesh’s quest is a selfish or an altruistic one? Cite details to explain your opinion.

**3. (a)**What does the outcome of Gilgamesh’s quest suggest about human limitations?**(b)**How might the tale he brings home to Uruk eventually grant Gilgamesh the immortality he seeks?

### **Connecting Literary Elements**

**4.**List at least three examples of actions, speech, or thoughts that contribute to the **characterization** of Gilgamesh as a hero. Use a chart to explain what each example reveals about Gilgamesh’s personality, values, or talents.

**5. (a)**What part does Gilgamesh’s nature—two thirds god, one third man—play in his behavior?**(b)**What part does his nature play in motivating his quest?

**6.**What drawbacks or limitations on Gilgamesh’s powers and talents seem to exist?

### **Reading Strategy**

**Understanding the Cultural Context**

**7. (a)**Identify three qualities or beliefs in *Gilgamesh* that the Sumerians and Babylonians seemed to value.**(b)**For each one, cite supporting evidence in the selection that suggests this **cultural context.**

**8.**Identify three details that show that Sumerian or Babylonian society was highly organized. Consider such things as where people lived, what jobs they held, and their common beliefs.

### **Extend Understanding**

**9. Cultural Connection:** What personal goals set by people today might be considered quests for immortality? Explain.