**Epic**

*from* The Epic of Gilgamesh

**The Gilgamesh Epic**A long narrative poem named for a Sumerian king who lived between 2700 and 2500 b.c., the Gilgamesh epic describes an era about twenty-three times more distant from us than our own Revolutionary War. Its concerns, however, are timeless and universal: how to become known and respected, how to cope with the loss of a dear friend, and how to accept one’s own inevitable death. It is also an action-packed story, featuring battles, gods and goddesses, heroes, tests of strength and wisdom, and arduous journeys.

**How the Epic Endured**Stories about King Gilgamesh were told and handed down by Sumerians for hundreds of years after his death. By the twenty-first century b.c., however, these tales existed in written form. When the Babylonians conquered the Sumerians soon afterward, they inherited the Sumerian cultural tradition. A Babylonian author, borrowing from some of these tales, created the start of the unified *Gilgamesh* epic that we have today. Other Babylonian writers modified the epic, adding the prologue and the flood story and emphasizing the friendship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu. Most important, these writers gave the narrative its central theme: the search for immortality. By the seventh century b.c., a written version was included in the library of the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal.

After the fall of Babylonia, the written epic was lost. The story survived only in folklore until archaeologists excavated Ashurbanipal’s library in the mid-1880s. They discovered the poem on clay tablets in cuneiform, the wedge-shaped writing used by the Babylonians. Archaeologists were especially excited by the portion of the epic describing a great flood, an account remarkably similar to the story of Noah and the ark in the Bible.

**The Story of “The Arrogant King”**As the story begins, Gilgamesh is king of Uruk, an ancient Sumerian city. He is an arrogant king who is eager for fame. Periodically, the gods and goddesses intervene in his life to provide challenges, obstacles, and challenging tests of Gilgamesh’s mettle. The goddess Aruru creates Enkidu to provide such a challenge to Gilgamesh. Enkidu begins his life as a wild man who lives on friendly terms with gazelles and other beasts. He confronts Gilgamesh just as the king is about to claim certain rights that anger the men of Uruk. Gilgamesh and Enkidu become engaged in a heated wrestling match, which Gilgamesh wins after a hard-fought battle with his opponent. In spite of the contentious start to their relationship, the two men become close friends.

**A Name for Himself**As he searches to make a name for himself, the king battles the giant Humbaba, the Bull of Heaven, as well as lions that he encounters along a great journey. Worried about his mortality, Gilgamesh goes in search of everlasting life. He seeks out Utnapishtim, the sole survivor of a great flood that had destroyed humanity centuries before. On his quest, Gilgamesh has many adventures. He passes through the mysterious Mount Mashu, guarded by Man-Scorpions, and crosses the waters of death with the ferryman, Urshanabi. Gilgamesh seeks immortality, but instead he learns that, for him, there is no permanence. Sometime later, Gilgamesh dies and is lamented by his people. Death, then, completes the cycle of life.

**Preview**

**Connecting to the Literature**

You may have tried to imagine what it would mean to live forever. The hero of *Gilgamesh* can think of nothing else. He is desperate to find the one man who has the secret to everlasting life.

**Literary Analysis**

**Archetype: The Hero’s Quest**

An **archetype** is a basic plot, character, symbol, or idea that recurs in the literature of many cultures. One archetype is the **hero’s quest,** a plot in which an extraordinary person goes on a difficult journey or mission. The hero may search for a person, place, or object of value; the answer to a problem or puzzling question; or some other kind of special knowledge.

In *Gilgamesh,* a heroic king searches for the secret of immortality. As you read, think about why Gilgamesh might want that knowledge.

**Connecting Literary Elements**

Part of telling a quest story is providing details about the extraordinary person at the center of the action. **Characterization** is the means by which characters are created and developed. Authors reveal characters’ personalities through direct statements; through characters’ actions, speech, and thoughts; or through descriptive details. Look for these methods of characterization in Gilgamesh.

**Reading Strategy**

**Understanding the Cultural Context**

Gilgamesh was a real Sumerian king, and learning about the culture in which he lived—and in which his story grew and changed—will illuminate this work. Follow these steps to help you **understand the cultural context:**

* Before you read, use the unit introduction to get an overview of Sumerian and Babylonian civilization.
* As you read the selection, look for details about the way people lived, worked, and believed. For example, notice the writing materials, the agriculture, and the powers of the gods.
* On a chart, record details that provide clues to the culture that created this epic.