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HRS 190 Reading Analyses

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Epic of Gilgamesh- word count 1630

The Epic of Gilgamesh is a tale known worldwide with many ancient translations making up the modern story but most translations contain the same characters and themes. For our perspective on the tale of Gilgamesh our version is that of the Sin-leqi-unninni translation, the earliest recorded written version. This version, because of its age, is partially fragmented, for its original transcription is that of on clay tablets, which unfortunately through the ages has corroded away. The authors who assisted with this translation are John Gardner and John Maier. In order to be able to fully comprehend the translation of the Epic of Gilgamesh the authors included notes parallel to each tablet's column. In the notes there are explanations and alternative translations to the corroded texts, these alternative translations are based on other early versions from civilizations such as the Babylonians, which have been orally passed down and written. Because of these notes this particular translation is amazing and easy to read; the cultural and social issues of the people of Early Mesopotamia are exemplified within this translation of the Epic of Gilgamesh. The importance of sustaining and living in conjunction with nature, and also self sustainability in looking towards the future are issues and underlying themes of this tale.

In the beginning of the epic we are quickly introduced to the main character, Gilgamesh a powerful king of the ancient Sumerian city of Uruk, we are told that he is two thirds god and a tyrannical ruler lusting after women of other men. But since he was too powerful to be stopped by ordinary men, people prayed to the goddess Arura to intervene. She created a man who was more powerful than Gilgamesh, named Enkidu,

When Aruru heard this, she formed an image of Anu in her heart. Aruru washed her hands, pinched off clay and threw it into the wilderness: In the wilderness she made Enkidu the fighter; she gave birth in darkness and silence to one like the war god Ninurta. His whole body was covered thickly with hair, his head covered with hair like a woman's; the locks of his hair grew abundantly, like those of the grain god Nisaba. He knew neither people nor homeland; he was clothed in the clothing of Sumuqan the cattle god. He fed with the gazelles on grass; with the wild animals he drank at waterholes; with hurrying animals his heart grew light in the waters. (68)

He was a pure incarnation of nature not tainted by man and society; overtime his existence grew into legend. Gilgamesh sent a temple prostitute to find Enkidu and bring him back to the palace. She achieved this request by offering herself to Enkidu and inviting him back to wonders civilization and the glorious palace, things which he could not refuse.

In his return to civilization and the palace of Gilgamesh, Enkidu is severed a bountiful meal. The translator's notes a Babylonian version which states, "Enkidu is brought into nomadic life, and he learns to eat and drink...The love priestess opened her mouth, said to Enkidu: Eat the food, Enkidu. As life requires" (92-93) this although just a small excerpt, exemplifies the importance in which this society places on human interaction and food. One can say Enkidu represents that of a being with nature as to the way he lived his life before, but as he moved into civilization, he lost this connection. Now like all mankind his dependency is more clearly visible, he must relearn something which all humans have an innate ability to do. It is interesting that in nature he knew how to eat, but as he joins civilization, they feel (the civilized) that he must learn how to eat. One can see that the people who passed on this tale saw and respected this connection of nature and mankind's existence and possibly a critique of how man interacts with what he encounters within nature.

The two apparent opposites become fast friends, and after awhile through dreams and messages from gods based upon ceremonial sacrifices they set out on a journey to fight and conquer Khumbaba the Strong, the king of the Cedar Mountain. With Khumbaba out of the way, the heroes would be able to cut down part of the forest and use as materials for the Uruk city temple. They achieve

their mission and in thanks they make a fire sacrifice to the gods. Yet during the sacrifice Gilgameash thwarts the advances of the goddess Ishtar, in response to this rejection she releases a bull monster, whom the two heroes slay, they then foolishly gloat about their slaughter. Ishtar full of rage curses Enkidu with illness and sadly twelve days later Enkidu dies, Gilgamesh is distraught in losing his dear friend.

Gilgamesh's morning is that which makes up tablet eight. Gilgamesh laments over the death of his friend, making many poetic connections to nature suffering. But the course of events and his morning leads Gilgamesh to the realization of death. Gilgamesh wishes not to die; this obsession is that which sets him upon his journey to find Utanpishtim and learn from him how and why the gods graced him with eternal life. Skipping ahead, this plan does not work out and Gilgamesh is sent home without the answers he seeks, but before he leaves Utanpishtim's wife notifies Gilgamesh that there is a plant which gives man eternal life, its location is on the bottom of the sea floor. Gilgamesh obtains this plant and returns on his journey home. Yet before he returns to the walls of his city, he bathes himself clean. As he bathes, a serpent eats the plant and takes away his chance for eternal life. This ends the tale of Gilgamesh, he realizes that man must and will die. He realizes what will live on is that which he has accomplished for future people. One can see the theme of sustaining nature and society over oneself. Steeping back and seeing the bigger picture of one's actions which causes a difference in the world. One can simplify the lessons of Gilgamesh as –what one does affects the world and the future; one can easily forget this idea.

#2 In evaluating the Epic of Gilgamesh in the context of our course and discipline there are many interesting things which can be shared. I looked at this text not as being translated in the mid 1980's by professional linguist, but rather the Epic itself as a written and oral story shared by

Early Mesopotamian societies in the connection to an underlying theme. Now I am not an expert in this area of studies, but from the human experience in connection to the storyline one can personalize the story into something he or she can relate to. For those who hear this story may take a small piece away and connect to it on a personal level. The intent of the story itself, thanks to those who proudly preserved it, concerns the topics of nature and the importance of understanding not only the present but looking towards the future as well.

Nature is huge within the story, in understanding where things come and that which preserves man. We see in the story that sacrifice is used to give thanks and reminds one that the gods and earth are that which helps mankind prosper. Also the outcome of Gilgamesh's journey can be personalized into idea of sustaining culture for future generations over one's selfishness. These two ideas do not justify all that which the epic has to offer; these are just two central ideas which I feel are important and emphasized in this epic.

#3 In connection to this course in its wider relevance, one can make the assertion in broad strokes that this tale exemplifies ancient thought on sustainability. During the tale the practice of sacrifice is used tremendously, in most cases it was that of the fire sacrifice. I could not help of thinking of the "Puja Rituels" which we have studied earlier this semester, burning in a ritualistic matter to feed the gods and thanking them or ask them for help. What we have here in the Epic is early tradition of people who burning different types of food or in some cases wild brush for the same reasons. But it is done so none inconspicuously, as if it were part of everyday life. Something which I found puja can sometimes consist of.

The major connection to our studies is that of sustainability, now the particular focus of the Epic may not be that of food but it is there none the less. Sustainability is defined as "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their

own needs". If one were to compare this to what the epic suggest Gilgamesh learned at the end of his journey, that in a subtle way this idea was on the minds of those who composed and shared this epic tale. We have Gilgamesh understanding that he must not live forever; he must release his control over nature and let that of the natural course run. In stepping back and relinquishing his desires, that which he will leave behind for future generations is his accomplishments, not his ruling. He understands that he will only be living for awhile, and what he does matters to future generation. This form of understanding sustainability is much like that Kingsolver or Gould stressing the understanding of nature and food and the connection it has with our lives and our hope to continue it to future generations. The legacy which we leave when were gone is important now as well in ancient times, weather a great wall or an idea of respect and understanding of nature.