

Immaturity in the epic of gilgamesh: a critique of the protagonist



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The most dreaded lesson in the eyes of a child is the concept of “no.” While most children eventually realize that not everything in the world is available for their taking, the select few who neglect to recognize their limitations inevitably grow up to be self-indulgent, immature adults and burdens to those around them. In the case of The Epic of Gilgamesh, the spoiled child is the King of Uruk, Gilgamesh, and it is his subjects who must bear the burden and suffer painfully under their king’s tyranny. While Gilgamesh is a glorified and accomplished figure in Uruk, his achievements are undeserved, and his defining feature is not his physical might but instead his egregious ignorance. This is perhaps most evident in the king’s perilous quest to defeat Humbaba. Contrary to the text’s implication, Gilgamesh’s invasion of the Forest of Cedar is not a powerful display of ambition or a right of passage that illustrates his maturation; despite the king’s apparent reformation, Gilgamesh remains an arrogant and entitled leader whose successes are merely a result of his privileged birth and upbringing replete with praise and devoid of constraints.

The Epic of Gilgamesh portrays the king as a mighty and heroic leader, and while it acknowledges Gilgamesh’s faults, the epic often overlooks his abusive tendencies and emphasizes his unmatched rigor and spirit. The high regard in which the text holds Gilgamesh is evident in the lofty descriptions of the king as “Surpassing all other kings, heroic in stature, / brave scion of Uruk, wild bull on the rampage” (1. 29-30). These grand depictions effectively imply that Gilgamesh’s deplorable actions are merely symptomatic of his greatness; as an authoritative man, the king wrongfully exploits his high status to excuse his many transgressions. However, from

the perspective of the people of Uruk whom Gilgamesh “harries without warrant,” the king’s exceptional capabilities are trivial in comparison to his cruel authority (l. 67). They do not view their king’s abhorrent treatment of his people as a mere byproduct of his extraordinary strength but instead as a sign of Gilgamesh’s immaturity and unrestrained upbringing. As a result of his unmatched physical prowess, the king grows up receiving only praise and submission to his superhuman potential, never realizing his own limitations. Gilgamesh’s incessant need to satisfy his urges to the detriment of his subjects stems from this lawless childhood, as nobody ever deprives the king of what he wants; consequently, Gilgamesh develops a severe sense of entitlement and fails to grasp how to behave appropriately as an important leader. Much like a child, all Gilgamesh knows in life is instant gratification.

While the actual text of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* emphasizes Gilgamesh’s feats and ambition, in reality, his achievements are more of a reflection of his birthright than his actual perseverance. Unlike the common people of Uruk, Gilgamesh was born under a unique lineage, with “two-thirds of him god and one-third human” (l. 48). In this sense, Gilgamesh quite literally is not a “man of the people.” It is not initiative and dedication that bring him success but rather his genetics that provide him with a significant upper hand in life. Given the unparalleled and godly capabilities with which he is endowed at birth, Gilgamesh’s extensive accomplishments are essentially meritless, as the king attains his high status solely through his arbitrarily privileged circumstances, which allow him to conquer lands more effectively than any human ever could. In its generous depictions of Gilgamesh, the epic overlooks an important qualification of true heroism—being born does not

make a man deserving of greatness; it only gives him the chance to be. In addition to bringing him undeserved power, Gilgamesh's unique lineage also breeds an unjustified sense of arrogance and superiority over his human subjects, which further contributes to his tyranny. While the text may imply that Gilgamesh is a mighty and ambitious ruler, the reality of the situation is that his many conquests are merely a result of a lucky birth and significantly contribute to his conceit. In essence, Gilgamesh's greatest triumph is simply being born.

In conjunction with the elevated language that the text adopts to excuse Gilgamesh's atrocious behavior, the introduction of his companion Enkidu produces a convenient plot point in which readers can settle their qualms with the king, as Enkidu appears to parallel Gilgamesh's strength and reforms his barbarous tendencies. Contrary to this interpretation, Gilgamesh actually remains a relatively static character and his new partner actually has an opposite effect to its original purpose. While the wild and innocent Enkidu undoubtedly serves as an effective foil to the civilized and tyrannical Gilgamesh, his morality fails to change the king's disregard for others because he does not possess the power to significantly influence Gilgamesh's decisions or character. This is most evident in their wrestling match in which Gilgamesh defeats Enkidu who then submits, stating " High over warriors you are exalted, / to be king of the people Enlil made it your destiny!" (P. 239-240). Although Enkidu is portrayed as a character equal in physical capacity to Gilgamesh, his loss in the wrestling match confirms his inferiority and essentially negates this claim. With another victory, Gilgamesh only fortifies his sense of superiority and greatness, failing to

meet anyone who can overcome his physical mastery. The sheer fact that Enkidu emerges from the fight secondary to Gilgamesh invalidates any possibility of reform or maturation. As such an impervious king, Gilgamesh does not yield to the admonitions of his inferiors; only a greater force can effect such a change. Consequently, at his core, Gilgamesh remains a spoiled child who merely channels his entitlement toward different goals in response to Enkidu's introduction.

The seemingly positive influence that Enkidu has on Gilgamesh is perhaps most evident in the two companions' journey into the Forest of Cedar. Gilgamesh's invasion of the forbidden forest, at first glance, appears to be a manifestation of his unrelenting ambition and a symbol of his internal transformation from a ruthless king to a great leader as reflected when he announces " Bold as I am I shall tread the distant path [to the home of Humbaba,] / I shall face a battle I know not" (ll. 262-263). While Gilgamesh's dauntless decision to invade the Forest of Cedar appears to be an effect of his new relationship with Enkidu, his true intentions are not nearly as honorable as they are immature. Gilgamesh's daring pursuit of the cedar trees is not a manifestation of his spirited ambition but instead a symptom of his spoiled upbringing and subsequent psychological underdevelopment. With a bolstered superiority complex from defeating the mighty Enkidu, the king further develops a heightened mentality of imperviousness and stubbornness against those who deny or challenge him. Consequently, when Enkidu and his own personal advisors caution the king, stating " That is a journey which must not be made, that is a man [who must not be] looked on" (ll. 274-275), Gilgamesh interprets the warning as a challenge not

motivated by ambition or glory but simply by the fact that his advisors oppose the decision. Much like a child who does not comprehend any perspectives other than his own, Gilgamesh wants to invade the forbidden forest simply because it is “ forbidden.”

The Epic of Gilgamesh does not recount the story of a tyrannical but accomplished conqueror; in reality, it is merely the story of a child who by circumstance alone finds himself sitting on a king’s throne. By viewing the plot through a different lens, specifically in the eyes of those who suffer painfully under Gilgamesh’s reign, it is clear that the interpretation the epic invites its readers to make is not an accurate illustration of the king’s true character. Gilgamesh’s juvenile belief that he can and should fulfill all internal urges is a blatant expression of his psychological immaturity that should not be ignored in the context of the epic as a whole. Whether it is battling Humbaba, killing the Bull of Heaven, or seeking immortality, Gilgamesh’s pursuits are not a consequence of his ambition, honor, or glory but instead by something entirely different—an unearned exemption of the rules that govern a mature and adult society.