

# Friendship: how the death of a soulmate affect gilgamesh



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

The famous Italian priest Thomas Aquinas once said: “ There is nothing on this earth more to be prized than true friendship.” How does the loss of a friend affect a human being? In Herbert Mason’s retelling book *Gilgamesh: A verse narrative*, the concept of friendship and death in Sumerian society is an important theme. The main character – Gilgamesh – is a tyrant king and the only one who befriends him is Enkidu. However, Enkidu passes away and his death brings sorrow and loss to Gilgamesh, but also becomes the motivation for Gilgamesh to become a better person and teaches the king life lessons about the importance of friendship and death.

When Enkidu takes his last breath, Gilgamesh is drowned in pain and depression. Memories of their friendship takes over him. Enkidu, struggling in his final moments of life, witnesses his bitter tears: “ You are crying. You never cried before./ It’s not like you./ Why am I to die,/ You to wander on alone?/ Is that the way it is with friends?” (Mason, 50). Perhaps too late, but Gilgamesh realizes how the loss of a soulmate will leave him in loneliness forever. This sudden acknowledgement makes him cry, which Enkidu says: “ It’s not like you”. As Gilgamesh struggles with melancholy, he : “...wept bitterly for his friend./ He felt himself now singled out for loss/ Apart from everyone else...” (53). The vicious and careless king whose only joy in life is to sleep with other people’s bride, is shedding tears. This major change indicates how Enkidu influences Gilgamesh’s personality and emotions. A feeling of empty and meaninglessness starts to sink into his soul: “ Gilgamesh wandered through the desert/ Alone as he had never been alone/.../ He was no more a king/ But just a man who now had lost his way” (54). What is life without Enkidu? What is life without a soul mate? That is

what Gilgamesh is wondering as he ponders through the death of his best friend. His loss soon turns so painful that it gives him illusions: “ He could almost touch his friend,/ Could speak to him as if he were there:/ Enkidu. Enkidu” (60, 61). The hallucinations soon vanishes: “ But suddenly the silence/ Was deeper than before/ In a place where they had never been/ Together” (60, 61). The phrase “ Deeper than ever” describes perfectly how Gilgamesh’s mood blooms for one moment, but then is dragged down when he realizes that what he has seen are just simply illusions. If not because Enkidu’s image in his memory is so vivid, how can Gilgamesh have such lively hallucination? The loss of the only friend has twisted his mind, turned him into a depressed man and no longer the lackadaisical and ruthless king.

Not only does Enkidu’s death bring Gilgamesh agony and sorrow, it also becomes his motivation. Because of Enkidu, he is motivated to find the key to immortality and bring it to his soulmate, though acknowledges that it is almost impossible: “ Perhaps insane, he tried/ To bring Enkidu back to life” (55). Grief and loneliness has tortured Gilgamesh for so long that he has to do something to stop: “ To end his bitterness,/ His fear of death” (55). He turned his life into: “...a quest/ To find the secret of eternal life” (55). Before Enkidu’s death, Gilgamesh’s life goal is to nothing meaningful. But now, his life becomes a mission for something else much more than he has ever thought of. Gilgamesh also grows more mature and less selfish: he cares for someone else beside from himself. His development of selflessness is also demonstrated through his self-sacrifice. Gilgamesh fearlessly says: “ Even if there will be more pain,/ And heat and cold, I will go on!/ Open the gate to the mountains!” (57, 58). This act does not come from inconsiderateness,

but rather bravery and devotion for Enkidu. The path to find the secret of eternal life is full of risks and hidden threats, but Gilgamesh is no longer afraid. Even when he is deep in pain, knowing that he has in hands what can bring his friend back to life, he breaks down in joy: "...When he saw the plant/ Of rich rose color and ambrosial/.../ ... He seized it, and it cut/ Into his palms. He saw his blood flow in the water./.../ He was calling out, I have it! I have it!" (85). His reaction is not someone being injured, but rather that of a drowning man who sees a rope to cling onto. Sudden cheerfulness of acknowledging that he can bring Enkidu back to life again makes his pain and efforts worthwhile. Being hot-tempered is also one serious flaw of Gilgamesh. Because of his arrogance, he angers Ishtar and that action results in the death of his beloved friend whom he considers a brother. However, Gilgamesh learns to control himself in front of those that are more powerful than him, such as when he approaches the Scorpion people of the mountains of Mashu: " When he saw them, his face turned ashen with dismay,/ But he bowed down to them, the only way to shield himself" (57). Though upset, Gilgamesh makes a wise decision: not to express his unpleasantness. He knows very well that if he makes these gods unhappy, he will have to pay the price. Thus, Enkidu's death influences Gilgamesh to be a better being.

The loss of a companion teaches Gilgamesh an important lesson that he does not know when Enkidu is still alive. Friendship can be the strongest thing in the world, but can be very fragile at the same time. Only when his friend has passed away does Gilgamesh realize that Enkidu is much more meaningful than just a normal friend, but a brother, a sibling: " My young

brother who saved me from/ The Bull of Heaven and Humbaba/" (68). He also acknowledges that Enkidu is also a listener and a soulmate: " Who listened to my dreams,/ Who shared my pain/" (68). Being a king and part god pushes everyone away from Gilgamesh, thus, having Enkidu by his side is remarkable. Gilgamesh, more than anyone, understands how loyal and compassionate Enkidu can be, as he mourns: " Why did he have to die?/ He would have stayed with me in death./ He would not have let me die alone./ He was a friend" (68). Gilgamesh mourns words of regrets, but it is all too late. The belated realization only makes Enkidu appears more vivid in him: " My friend has died so many times in me,/ And yet he still seems so alive,/ Like a younger brother," (73). He also acknowledges how frightening death can be: " I was afraid./ Is there something more than death?/ Some other end to friendship?" (73). His words, " Is there something more than death?", are not just simply a question, but an exclamation, an expression. Enkidu's death teaches Gilgamesh so much than he has ever learned in life.

Enkidu's death has great influence on Gilgamesh, not only on his feelings but also how he is as an individual. The loss of a soulmate brings him agony and sorrow. At the same time, it becomes his motivation to become a better person and teaches him a pivotal lesson of friendship and death. The moral values in Sumerian culture are different from modern society', but they are the baseline for our ethics. Friendship and death are two important concepts that make us recognize the vitality of companionship in life. Acknowledging their cruciality is necessary for self development.