

The epic of gilgamesh essay sample

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The world's first literary work, The Epic of Gilgamesh, is a story that dates back four millennia to the ancient Sumerian culture. The story centers on Gilgamesh, a man with superhuman qualities who struggles with the quest for immortality and knowledge. This story is important for understanding the ancient Sumerians because it portrays their beliefs about cultural values and about religion and the afterlife. Ancient Sumerian culture valued the ideas of heroism, knowledge and loyalty. They have an anthropomorphic slant on religion, specifically in regards to their gods. Also, their view of the afterlife is somewhat dark and morbid.

One important aspect of The Epic of Gilgamesh is that it communicates the prevailing societal values of ancient Sumeria. One of these values is the act of having right conduct toward others, or heroism. In this story, Gilgamesh displays heroic actions by slaying the Bull of Heaven, which was created to destroy him. Gilgamesh praises, " Who is the most glorious of heroes, the most eminent among men." He is also tragically heroic after the death of his friend, Enkidu. After his death he mourns him and wanders throughout the desert for the rest of this life. This suggests heuristic qualities such as doing good deeds, having integrity and living by one's ethics was something valued highly in ancient Sumeria.

Another highly important value among the Sumerians is knowledge. When the goddess Ishtar tried to seduce Gilgamesh, he realized it was a trick and told her to let him alone: " Which of your lovers did you ever love forever? What shepherd of yours has pleased you for all time?" Apart from that he is also a very knowledgeable hunter, able to kill large beasts such as Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven. From this knowledge he gains notoriety (and

jealousy) among the gods. For the Sumerians having knowledge seems to be both a blessing and a curse. It is a blessing because it allows one to see what is happening. It is also a curse because, like Gilgamesh, it can lead one into a chasm of misery.

Loyalty to friends is another important characteristic in ancient Sumerian culture. Gilgamesh and Enkidu are loyal friends who would make awesome sacrifices for one another. While Enkidu makes the ultimate sacrifice (death) for the life of Gilgamesh, Gilgamesh also makes sacrifice to Enkidu, weeps for him and mourns his death forever. This is a sad portrayal of loyalty but it shows the depths of which the Sumerians value loyalty and friendship. They are willing to give up everything to keep their true friends.

Ethics and having a value system became important once cities developed in Sumeria and people had to deal with one another on a more frequent basis. It shows how the Sumerians expected people to communicate and act toward each other in modern civilizations of the second millennium BC

The Epic of Gilgamesh sketches out a picture of ancient Sumerian views on religion and the afterlife. In the story, gods such as Enlil, Shabash and Ishtar all possess the humanistic attributes of anger, deception, love and retribution. Enlil becomes furious with Shamash when he disagrees with him, “ when he disagrees with him, “ You have gone down to them every day like one of themselves, therefore you speak!” The Sumerians anthropomorphized their gods by showing their feelings. Ishtar tries to deceive Gilgamesh into being her lover and becomes irate when he turns down her affections. After Gilgamesh and Enkidu slay Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven, Enlil settles the

score with Gilgamesh by handing out a death sentence to Enkidu. The fact that the Sumerians thought of their gods similarly to humans is due in part to their cyclical, agrarian way of life on a river. In some years the crops are fruitful, in other years there are droughts and famine. One way of explaining this phenomenon is through a god's pleasure or distaste with the people's actions. It also helps to explain death, invasion or any other extraordinary occurrence.

According to The Epic of Gilgamesh, the Sumerians see the afterlife as something negative. Before his death, Enkidu has a dream about the afterlife, which paints a very gloomy and dark picture: " I stood alone before an awful being; his face was somber like the black bird of the storm." The Sumerian view of the gods as moody and ever changing probably contributes to this negative belief of the afterlife. The afterlife is place where humans are servants, a life in bondage to the gods. One of the Sumerian ways of improving their image before the gods was practicing ritual sacrifice and other religious activities. This is something that influenced the way Sumerians lived and their thought of morality and ethics.

The Epic of Gilgamesh is an important document to learning about the ancient Sumerian culture because it gives insights into how they lived their lives. It shows their societal values of heroism, knowledge and loyalty and their importance. It also gives insights to their religious beliefs and their thoughts about the afterlife. These elements helped to shape their social lives and how they dealt with others. Even though it has a tragic ending, the story shows many interesting insights into the Sumerian culture and how people lived during ancient times.

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