

"epic of gilgamesh" –
characters
comparison essay



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Enkidu, in his last days of life, rails against the harlot who seduced him away from the wild life in which he had grown up. Despite the fact that the harlot who introduced him to sex, self-knowledge, and civilization acted under orders from others, and not out any personal motivation, he is angry at her, rather than with those who sent her. There are both literary and symbolic reasons for this behavior. The relationship that he later develops with Gilgamesh and the symbolic nature of his wild existence may explain this apparently illogical behavior.

The characters of Enkidu and Gilgamesh, and in fact, all the characters of this poem, are not notable for logical or reasonable behavior that makes sense to modern readers. Enkidu was literally created from clay, after all, specifically to distract Gilgamesh from sexual exploitation of his people. Given that the harlot was sent to him at the request of a local hunter who disliked Enkidu's sabotaging his traps, it is perhaps not surprising that he railed angrily against that unnamed hunter (Epic of Gilgamesh 129, line 50).

Given that the harlot was sent under the explicit orders of Gilgamesh the king, it is perhaps surprising that Enkidu did not rail against Gilgamesh. It was not the harlot's own idea, after all, to trap Enkidu and transform him from a creature who was one with the animals, into an urban and urbane gentleman. He could even have railed against the goddess who created him as a companion for Gilgamesh.

However, Enkidu has learned to love Gilgamesh and cherishes their friendship. By contrast, the poem does not report a deep relationship with the harlot after their initial week of passion and her introduction of him to

the pleasures of humanity. Thus, when he is at his life's end, regretting, perhaps, what he has done since joining civilization, it is she and not his friend whom he targets for his resentment, even though it was Gilgamesh who angered the goddess.

His cursing of the harlot also may express an ancient and ongoing conflict between the hunter gatherer and the settled agriculturalist. His initial wild existence really represents the earliest hominid way of life, earlier even than the hunter's. Despite its strenuousness, this life of a wild animal has distinct advantages over being crowded into a city and eating food that is grown way outside the Uruk city walls. Consider, as evidence that this is an ongoing debate, how many people today have adopted what they think of as a Paleolithic diet. However, Shamhat did not deliberately wrong Enkidu, but she certainly enabled a massive and irreversible change, one that was paralleled for the whole human race

After he experienced Shamhat, he "expanded his understanding" (Epic of Gilgamesh 104, line 194). The way of life that he adopted after the wild animals ran away from him also may symbolize the human race's achievements as it became civilized. As Shamhat describes it, the city offers ramparts, music, lovely ladies, celebration, and of course, Gilgamesh as a friend (Epic of Gilgamesh 105, line 224). Shamhat and Gilgamesh praise these as wonderful advantages. Without civilization, we would not have writing, math, science, and other advances, after all.

This highly colorful outburst seems to be, indeed, despair and lashing out in the face of death. Enkidu regrets losing his innocence and is reverting back

to the values of his youth (Epic of Gilgamesh 130, line 95). He would have lived and died as an animal if not for Shamhat. He might not have been so self-aware and it might have seemed less painful.

This vivid fit of anger against the door, the hunter and the harlot is Enkidu's way of protesting the way his life has been changed and his life cut short. He cherishes his friend but it is the adventures that he was drawn into that have killed him. His association with Gilgamesh has literally taken his life, but as a loyal friend he does not blame his friend, but rages against almost every other mortal.

"Epic of Gilgamesh." Norton Anthology of World Literature. Ed. Martin Puchner. Trans. Benjamin Foster. 3rd. Vol. A. New York: Norton, 2012. 95-151. Print.