

# Life after death



The Epic of Gilgamesh focuses on the inevitability of death and the ways mortals can come to terms with their mortality. In the classical Babylonian epic, *He Who Saw the Deep*, Gilgamesh is a mighty king who longs to achieve fame and glory, unafraid of death. After the death of a beloved friend, however, he fears death and seeks to find a way to immortality. However, by the end of the epic, he realizes that death is not as scary as it seems and that his actions in life matter more than his impending death. In the more ancient Sumerian version, *The Death of Bilgames*, legacy is the most critical factor, and Bilgames is consoled by the promise that he will be commemorated even after his death. Thus, although Gilgamesh comes to terms with his mortality in both *He Who Saw the Deep* and *The Death of Bilgames*, the path he takes to come to that realization differs. The classical epic emphasizes death as the culmination of the quality of one's life, while the more ancient version focuses on the legacy left behind.

In both *He Who Saw the Deep* and *The Death of Bilgames*, the inevitability of death is emphasized to a great extent, as well as living life to the fullest. Both life and death are tied together, and Gilgamesh initially realizes this early on in the epic when he tells Enkidu "As for man, his days are numbered, whatever he may do, it is but wind..." (19). Gilgamesh initially views death as unavoidable and seeks to achieve fame to bring meaning and significance to his life. He convinces Enkidu to fight Humbaba despite the fear, saying that his fame will live on even if he dies. Furthermore, Gilgamesh comes to realize the importance of life and how it is measured by the influences one has on others in life. "O Ur-Shanabi, climb Uruk's walls and walk back and forth!" (99). By boasting of Uruk's features to Ur-Shanabi,

it is shown that Gilgamesh has overcome his fears of death and come to appreciate his city and life. After the failed quest for immortality, Gilgamesh comes back to Uruk and accepts that although his name will not live on forever, his feats and accomplishments will inspire others forever. In *The Death of Bilgames*, after learning of his impending death in a dream, Bilgames decides to build a great tomb instead of pondering his death. “The lord levied a workforce in his city, the herald sounded his horn in the lands.” (205). Through the erection of his magnificent tomb, Bilgames decides to fulfill his life’s desires before his impending death, knowing that it is unavoidable. Thus, in both versions of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, the inescapable nature of death is highlighted, as well as the appreciation of life.

In *He Who Saw the Deep*, Gilgamesh realizes that immortality can be achieved through one’s actions by leaving an impact on the lives of others while alive. However, *The Death of Bilgames* seems to focus on a more lasting impact that will span across time and allow for Gilgamesh to be commemorated. In the classical version of the epic, Gilgamesh obtains a plant that allows one to be youthful again and decides to share this plant with the elders of Uruk. “[For whom,] Ur-shanabi, toiled my arms so hard, for whom ran dry the blood of my heart?” (99). However, upon losing the plant to a snake, Gilgamesh realizes that death is unavoidable, and describes to the boatman the city in which will be his final resting place. He realizes the significance of Uruk and the extent to which he has left an impact on the lives of others through being the king of Uruk. In *The Death of Bilgames*, the dream that Bilgames has tells him of the lasting legacy that he will leave behind after his death. “[In the Month of Torches, the festival of ghosts,

without him being present light will not be provided before them.]” (200).

Even after death, Bilgames will be commemorated as a god and celebrated in a festival. After consultation, Bilgames realizes that his everlasting legacy will allow him to live even after his death, and his fear of death finally dissipates. Thus, while He Who Saw the Deep focuses on the values of life before death, The Death of Bilgames centralizes on the status after death.

Although the vision of death is similar in both He Who Saw the Deep and The Death of Bilgames, the essential idea behind death differs in the two versions of the epic. In the classical version of the epic, Gilgamesh ends up coming to terms with the fact that his quest for immortality is a complete failure, and tells O-Shanabi that the city of Uruk will be his final resting place. He realizes how important his life is, and seeks to leave a lasting impact on the people of Uruk before his death. However, in the more ancient version of the epic, Bilgames is given consolation before his death in the form of the promise of commemoration. By giving assurance to Bilgames that his death will not be the end of him, he ceases his effort to live life to the fullest. While uncertain of the outcome of his life, Gilgamesh, in the classical version of the epic, would attempt to create his own legacy by passing on his ideas to the people of Uruk. Thus, it can be argued that the Bilgames in The Death of Bilgames has essentially already ceased to live even before his death, as after being assured of his name living on, he focuses only on his tomb and his death. On the other hand, the Gilgamesh in the classical version truly lives his life to the fullest and the quality of his time can measure the quality of his life. Overall, Gilgamesh comes to terms with death by himself, while Bilgames requires the assurance of the gods to dispel his fears of death.

In conclusion, The Epic of Gilgamesh is an epic that focuses on the theme of death and the ways mortals can cope with the inevitability of it. The essential question that arises from the epic is how one can face death without fear, knowing that they have lived their life to the fullest. He Who Saw the Deep provides a path to the answer, while The Death of Bilgames provides the answer to the significant question itself, thus making The Death of Bilgames an unsuitable epilogue to He Who Saw the Deep. The classical epic provides a clear path by focusing on the impact one has while they are alive, one can face death without fear, knowing that they live on in other's memories and actions. The ancient version of the epic, however, merely emphasizes the legacy one has to leave behind to not fear death. Overall, the epic challenges the reader to interpret how to create meaning in the face of death.