

Gilgamesh finds
meaning in life after
his journey beyond
the waters of death



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What is the meaning of life? Is life not a constant journey to finding the meaning of our existence? Is life about finding this meaning of existence or is it all about searching? One of the oldest epics in the world, "The Epic of Gilgamesh", explores this subject in a very intricate manner. The main character - Gilgamesh, and his helper - Enkidu, both experience emotional catharses, which help them realize the true meaning of life. Gilgamesh is in constant search for heroic deeds, which he believes that will ensure him an immortal name. However, by the end of the epic, after his quest to the waters of death and his meeting with Utanapishtim, Gilgamesh finally finds the true meaning of life. Life is about the small steps that human civilization takes every day towards improvement, and Gilgamesh's contribution as a human being is what will ensure him a name in history.

At the beginning of the Epic, Gilgamesh believes that the mission of his existence is to find a way to leave his mark in history. He believes that due to his divine nature, he is superior to other humans, and so he is not concerned about everyday life because this is something he takes for granted. "And who, like Gilgamesh, can proclaim, "I am King!" / Gilgamesh was singled out from the day of his birth, / Two-thirds of him was divine, one-third of him was human!" (Foster, 5). Gilgamesh takes pride in his divine background, which makes him believe that he can achieve everything that he desires. Gilgamesh does not care about the surrounding world and the little things that make life meaningful. He is not concerned about the wellbeing of anybody else. "His teammates stood forth by his game stick, / He was harrying the young men of Uruk beyond reason. / Gilgamesh would leave no son to his father, / day and night he would rampage fiercely"

(Foster, 5). The only thing that brings joy to Gilgamesh is when he has established his status above everyone else's and has proven his mightiness. This constant establishment of superiority through the means of torturing his subjects, forces the people of Uruk to ask for help from the gods. “

Goddesses kept hearing their complaints” (Foster, 5). Therefore, the Gods create Enkidu with a mission to change Gilgamesh and bring him back closer to his human nature. In reality the human is created first, and later on his mission is to find the meaning of his existence. Enkidu differs from the humans in a way that his purpose comes before his creation. “[Let her create a partner for Gilgamesh], mighty in strength, / [Let them contend with each other], that Uruk may have peace” (Foster, 6). Enkidu's reason for creation and purpose in life is to “tame” Gilgamesh, and a big part of this task is to show Gilgamesh, who has forgotten his human nature, that life is not about finding the secret of immortality, but rather it is about finding this one reason that makes every day of one's lifetime meaningful and worth living. Enkidu is less of a human because he does not struggle with the existential question about the meaning of life, which all humans, including Gilgamesh, face. Therefore, Enkidu's path ends earlier than that of Gilgamesh. Enkidu's purpose in this epic starts from the process of distracting Gilgamesh, so that he would stop torturing his people. After this has been achieved, the second part of Enkidu's mission on earth is to die in order to show Gilgamesh that nothing in this world is permanent, especially human existence. Enkidu's death is the turning point for Gilgamesh because due to the experience of emotional catharsis, he dramatically becomes aware of his human nature. “I have been asleep all these years! / Now let my eyes see the sun, let me have all the light/ I could wish for, / Darkness is infinite, how little light there is!”
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(Foster, 67) Gilgamesh's realization through this vivid figurative language enables him to be aware of the lie that he has been living during his whole life that death can be avoided. He realizes that life is temporary and every second of it should be cherished, because what comes after life is nothingness.

After his friend's death, Gilgamesh is more determined than ever to find the secret to immortality. This becomes the sole purpose of his life which indicates his awareness of his human nature. " May I not see the death I constantly fear!" (Foster, 75) is what Gilgamesh asks for in front of the tavern keeper, who is another form of the goddess Ishtar. Experiencing human emotions like fear and sadness are among the first signs of this dramatic change in his character. Phrases like " I have grown afraid of death" (Foster, 66), " keep me safe" (Foster, 66), " woe in my vitals" (Foster, 74), become very common for Gilgamesh after Enkidu's death. Fighting against his fear of death, Gilgamesh goes on a journey to find Utanapishtim the Distant one, who is the only person in the world who knows the secret to immortal life. When Gilgamesh arrives at Utanapishtim's dwelling, he finds out that the " heroic" deeds which involve only taking away the life of monsters cannot ensure him eternal life, because they have not resulted in anything good, and so he cannot be compared to what Utanapishtim has done for the sake of humanity. Utanapishtim proposes a test that will prove to Gilgamesh that he is not worthy of eternal life. Gilgamesh fails the test and accepts his faith. On his way home, he receives a flower that restores youth and he regains his hope. The choice of a such fragile object for something that rejuvenates life is very deliberate here, because it shows the

fragile nature of life itself - one day it is here, the next second is gone. The loss of the flower is the culmination of Gilgamesh's catharsis and it completes the circle of returning Gilgamesh back to his human nature. The act of losing the flower in a matter of seconds shows in a figurative manner the act of dying.

The gradual return to the human nature of Gilgamesh ends with the realization that the meaning of life lies not in the search for immortality, but in appreciation of life itself at that moment while he still has it. The epic starts and ends with the same sentence " pace out the walls of Uruk. / Study the foundation terrace and examine the brickwork. /Is not its masonry of kiln-fired brick? And did not seven masters lay its foundations? / One square mile of city, one square mile of gardens, / One square mile of clay pits, a half square mile of Ishtar's dwelling, / Three and a half square miles is the measure of Uruk!" (Foster, 3; 95), which not only forms the structural frame for the work itself, but also means to show that everything starts and ends with the human civilization. While at the beginning, the reader cannot really understand why the protagonist is " at peace" (Foster, 3), in Tablet XI of the epic this phrase becomes the most significant part of the conclusion because it shows that Gilgamesh has finally completed his journey and found the meaning of life. In the end, he realizes what will stand the test of time. It is not the story of his battle with Humbaba, or his quest to the lands that no other person has gone before, but the city of Uruk - his achievement as a human being, the face of civilization.

The Epic of Gilgamesh is not just a poetic story about a heroic and brave fighter from a divine background. The heroism and bravery lie in accepting <https://assignbuster.com/gilgamesh-finds-meaning-in-life-after-his-journey-beyond-the-waters-of-death/>

one's faith and human nature; they lie in realizing that life is not infinite and is not something to be taken for granted. One cannot escape his human nature, and furthermore there is no need for that, because the beauty of life is in life itself. After all it is not about infinite existence, it's about living every moment to the fullest.