

CHARACTER DESCRIPTION

Gilgamesh - King of Uruk, the strongest of men, and the perfect example of all human virtues. A brave warrior, fair judge, and ambitious builder, Gilgamesh surrounds the city of Uruk with magnificent walls and erects its glorious ziggurats, or temple towers. Two-thirds god and one-third mortal, Gilgamesh is undone by grief when his beloved companion Enkidu dies, and by despair at the fear of his own extinction. He travels to the ends of the Earth in search of answers to the mysteries of life and death.

Enkidu - Companion and friend of Gilgamesh. Hairy-bodied and muscular, Enkidu was raised by animals. Even after he joins the civilized world, he retains many of his undomesticated characteristics. Enkidu looks much like Gilgamesh and is almost his physical equal. He aspires to be Gilgamesh's rival but instead becomes his soul mate. The gods punish Gilgamesh and Enkidu by giving Enkidu a slow, painful, inglorious death for killing the demon Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven.

Aruru - A goddess of creation who fashioned Enkidu from clay and her saliva.

Humbaba - The fearsome demon who guards the Cedar Forest forbidden to mortals. Humbaba's seven garments produce a feeling that paralyzes fear in anyone who would defy or confront him. He is the prime example of awesome natural power and danger. His mouth is fire, he roars like a flood, and he breathes death, much like an erupting volcano. In his very last moments he acquires personality and pathos, when he pleads cunningly for his life.

Siduri - The goddess of wine-making and brewing. Siduri is the veiled tavern keeper who comforts Gilgamesh and who, though she knows his quest is unsuccessful, helps him on his way to Utnapishtim.

Enlil - God of earth, wind, and air. A superior god, Enlil is not very fond of humankind.

Ishtar - The goddess of love and fertility, as well as the goddess of war. Ishtar is frequently called the Queen of Heaven. Though she can be unpredictable at times, she is a nurturing mother figure, and other times she is spiteful and cruel. She is the patroness of Uruk, where she has a temple.

AN "EPIC" SUMMARY

The Epic of Gilgamesh is among the earliest known works of literature. An epic is a long poem that tells the story of legendary or heroic people or gods. Like most epics, the first stories of Gilgamesh began as oral stories handed down by word of mouth. Hundreds of years after the poets first spoke of Gilgamesh; the legends were collected and recorded on clay tablets.

The story takes place nearly five thousand years ago. Gilgamesh was the king of the wealthy city of Urduk. The king was strong and handsome, but he was also cruel. Gilgamesh forced the people of Urduk to build him great palaces. He also made his subjects live in constant fear. When the people of Urduk begged the gods for help, they led Enkidu to Urduk. Enkidu was also big and strong, but he was wild and ignorant of the ways of civilized people. Enkidu was raised in the forest where he lived with the animals. When Enkidu learned of Gilgamesh's cruelty, the wild man challenged the mighty king to fight. As the two powerful men battled, they realized they admired one another; so instead of remaining enemies, they became inseparable friends.

The unlikely pair left Urduk to embark on many adventures. Gilgamesh and Enkidu entered the forbidden Cedar Forest where the gods lived, but they soon faced a grotesque monster named Humbaba.

When Gilgamesh and Enkidu tricked the beast, the powers of Humbaba were spread over the lands of Sumer.

Gilgamesh displeased the goddess Ishtar, so she sent the fearsome Bull of Heaven to destroy the crops of the Sumerian farmers. Gilgamesh and Enkidu killed the bull. This enraged the gods, so they caused Enkidu to fall ill and die.

Gilgamesh was heartbroken by the death of his friend. The king also feared that one day he would also die, so Gilgamesh began to search for the secret of eternal life. One version of the epic describes a terrible flood that covered the earth many years before the time of Gilgamesh. Gilgamesh went on a long journey to meet Utnapishtim, an elderly man who survived the flood because the gods warned him of the coming deluge. Utnapishtim told Gilgamesh,

"The life that you are seeking you will never find. When the gods created man they allotted to him death, but life they retained in their own keeping."

Gilgamesh returned home filled with wisdom from his adventures with Enkidu and Utnapishtim. Gilgamesh became a gentle ruler who no longer mistreated the people of Urduk. Gilgamesh realized that he could not escape death, but he could live on in the memories of the people he loved.