King Gilgamesh: Learning The Value Of A Legacy

The Epic of Gilgamesh, a Mesopotamiam epic poem inscribed into a series of tablets, is one of the oldest pieces of writing known to man. “It talks about the powerful human drive to achieve, the value of friendship, the experience of loss, the inevitability of death.” (Tzvi Abusch, 614) The story follows Gilgamesh, the mighty and power-hungry king of the city-state of Uruk. The loss of his beloved friend Enkidu helps him realize the limits of his power - that he too will suffer the same unavoidable fate that awaits all mortals. Gilgamesh leaves his kingdom to seek the mystical figure Utnapishtim, who he believes will help him gain eternal life. Although unsuccessful in his endeavours, Gilgamesh returns home suprisingly satisfied. It can therefore be argued that although Gilgamesh is in search of true immortality, he also aims to establish a legacy that will immortalize the grandure of his actions.

Gilgamesh is viewed by many as a hero due to his valiance, which he exhibits by performing extremely courageous and life-threatening acts. One could argue that because “two-thirds of him was divine, one-third of him was human,” the risks he takes do not merit the credit they are so often atttributed (1.50). Although Gilgamesh is and should be held to a higher standard than mere mortals, he is still a mortal nonethless; he faces fear throughout his quest and persists in spite of it. Gilgamesh knows that he is susceptible to death, so there has to be some fear instilled within him. The question that then surfaces is why Gilgamesh would repeatedly risk his life and act recklessly. It is human instinct to run away from scary or dangerous challenges, so why does the hero seem to gravitate towards them? The king does so in the pursuit of others’ admiration. He seeks to create an impressive legacy for himself that will outlast his death and inspire generations to come.

There is substantial evidence to suggest that Gilgamesh longed for a legacy that would stem from his bravery. Upon his first meeting with Enkidu, Gilgamesh ignores the perilous consequences of his actions. This scene describes the two mighty and dangerous men fighting brutally, despite not knowing the other’s abilities. “Enkidu blocked the door to the wedding with his foot, Not allowing Gilgamesh to enter. They grappled each other, holding fast like wrestlers, They shattered the doorpost, the wall shook” (2.97-100). This encounter shows that Gilgamesh was not afraid to fight a clearly powerful and dangerous stranger. Fighting with a barbaric opponent like Enkidu would prove Gilgamesh to be a fearless fighter, thus earning him the admiration of the people of Uruk; he fought Enkidu to gain the respect that would help to solidify his desired reputation.

Another heroic and fearless act the king performs is his battle against Humbaba, the giant creature who lives in the Cedar Forest. Humbaba is feared by all who live nearby and refuses to allow anyone to pass through the forest. The people of Uruk urge Gilgamesh not to fight the monster, fearing the battle will lead to his death. When the elders tell him: “You do not know what you are attempting… Who, even among the gods, could attack him?”. This only fuels Gilgamesh’s desire to fight Humbaba more (3.217-225). He wants to prove that he can accomplish a feat that is thought too difficult for even the gods. Surely achieving such a victory would guarantee him a grand legacy. Fortunately for Gilgamesh, he manages to come out victorious. Risking his life and living to tell the tale does help him gain a reputation as a courageous and respected hero, a legacy fit for a king.

Similarly, when Ishtar sends the Bull of Heaven to kill and devour Gilgamesh, the odds are clearly stacked against him. Nevertheless, Gilgamesh and Enkidu succeed in killing the creature with a sword and ripping out its heart. This victory further emphasizes Gilgamesh's heroism and bravery, thus cementing his legacy as a hero.

Gilgamesh’s ultimate goal in performing death defying stunts appears to be the solidification of his image as a hero in the eyes of his subjects. Although he initially seems to believe that the only way to be remembered forever is by achieving immortality, his journey teaches him that his acts of bravery are the true key to cementing his legacy.

Furthermore, Gilgamesh seeks to improve himself over the course of his journey in order to create as noble a legacy as possible. The reader can easily track these improvements by comparing his actions at different points in his quest. For example, when he decides to battle Humbaba, Gilgamesh displays arrogance and impulsiveness by acting against the advice of Enkidu, his best friend, and the elders, who are more experienced than him. Gilgamesh was willing to risk his life and potentially leave his people without a ruler in the selfish pursuit of glory.

Another time where Gilgamesh demonstrates the worst qualities of human beings is right at the beginning. He “is a restless hero, unrivalled and undisciplined, who tyrannizes over the dwellers of his city; especially oppressive are his unreasonable demands for the satisfaction of his Rabelaisian sex-appetite.” (S.N. Kramer, 11) According to the trapper who recruited Shamhat, the harlot, to seduce Enkidu, “For Gilgamesh, king of ramparted Uruk, People’s veils are open for the taking! He mates with the lawful wife, He first, the groom after.” (2.67-69) This act shows that the king is entitled and selfish. All of these undesirable qualities prove that Gilgamesh didn’t deserve a legacy or to be remembered, let alone immortality.

The turning point for Gilgamesh is when he “was weeping bitterly for [the death of] Enkidu, his friend” (9.1). This is the first time we see Gilgamesh caring about someone other than himself. Here, he displays the most admirable of qualities: empathy. The reader sees further proof of this change when Gilgamesh finds the plant of eternal youth. Rather than being happy solely for himself, he thinks first about the elders of Uruk, stating: “I will take it to ramparted Uruk, I will have an old man eat some and so test the plant” (11.300-301). These two events show that the king is becoming selfless and more compassionate. Although it is not uncommon for people to be remembered for the bad things they did, Gilgamesh seeks to create as positive a legacy as possible once he realizes that the reputation outlives the individual. He wants to be remembered fondly as a heroic leader, not a reckless king, and therefore improves his character accordingly. Gilgamesh successfully redeems himself throughout his quest by becoming less self-centered and impulsive and more compassionate and caring; it is this type of character that will earn him a favorable legacy.

The fact that Gilgamesh does not appear too upset when the snake eats the plant of eternal youth, which is his only chance to achieve immortality, is further proof of the idea that he is in search of an immortalized legacy. His unexpected reaction upon losing the plant suggests that although he failed to achieve immortality, he still feels successful because he has accomplished his goal of establishing a legacy. Although Gilgamesh does not achieve immorality or even eternal youth, he does obtain what he truly wants all along: a legacy. Gilgamesh does want that plant he does want to be immortal. However, he also wants to create a grand legacy for himself; by completing a journey of this caliber, he knows that he has done just that. He gains respect and thus a good reputation for persevering and being extremely courageous.

The final paragraph of the text, which recounts Gilgamesh and Ur-Shanabi returning to Uruk, further proves that Gilgamesh is happy with the way his journey turns out:

Gilgamesh said to him, to Ur-Shanabi the boatman: Go up, Ur-Shanabi, pace out the walls of Uruk. Study the foundation terrace and examine the brickwork. Is it not the 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!" (11. 310-319).

Although at first glance this may seem like a simple description of the kingdom, one could argue that it helps the reader understand that the city of Uruk represents Gilgamesh's legacy. The people of Uruk will remember his heroic actions, specifically his quest for immortality, and the city will always be reminiscent of the great king. Gilgamesh realizes that his efforts were not for nothing, thus ending the story on a happy note. In short, although Gilgamesh didn't obtain the plant, he still managed to come out victorious because he earned his legacy by completing the quest. Gilgamesh being joyous upon his return to his kingdom proves that he really did just want to be remembered.

The central argument of this paper has been that Gilgamesh, the protaginist of the story, wasn't in search for immortality exclusively; the hero longed for a positive legacy. This can be proven by questioning his motive for performing death-defying acts. His motivation seems to be to be remembered and recognized for these actions. Another argument that can be made is that the only reason Gilgamesh grew as a leader and became a better person along his journey is so that he would be admired forever, rather than feared. Finally, his reaction upon failing to acquire the plant of eternal youth is further proof that his main goal wasn't eternal life, it was to be remembered. The king knew that simply attempting to complete the quest was enough for his subjects to commend him. The moral of this story is that enduring fame and an everlasting name are more valuable than a prolonged but unheroic existence. (S.N. Kramer, 9) In short, this epic contains a timeless message; as William James eloquently put it: "The great use of life is to spend it for something that will outlast it."