***Gilgamesh***

This epic, composed over a thousand-year period, focuses on Gilgamesh, king of the Sumerian city of Uruk. After evolving for centuries in different cultures and languages, Akkadian and Sumerian, as part of oral tradition, the epic was recorded on tablets; none were discovered until mid-nineteenth century. Others were discovered later. Although more than one version exists and some tablets are missing or damaged, we can still follow the story about this king who lived around 2800 B.C.E. The epic demands an understanding of the importance of the city in these ancient times. Like the later city states of Greece, the city in Sumerian culture represented civilization, a bulwark against chaos. To the king belonged the responsibility for protecting and enhancing the city. Thus the people perceived Gilgamesh’s behaviour at the beginning of the story as threatening.

At the beginning of the story, Gilgamesh, described as two thirds god and one third human, is an arrogant, self-centred king. He, for instance, claims the privilege of sleeping with brides before they sleep with their husbands. In answer to his people’s pleas for help, the gods create Enkidu, a wild man who lives with and acts like the animals. When he becomes a nuisance to the people, the gods send a prostitute to civilize him, which she does by having sex with him and teaching him human behaviours.

After his experience with the prostitute, Enkidu confronts Gilgamesh about his sleeping with brides. They fight, but neither can defeat the other. They then become fast friends and together seek adventures.

One adventure involved Humbaba, the guardian of the Cedar Forest. When confronted by this creature of nature, who attempts to stop their pillage of the forest, they fight and overcome him. When Humbaba piteously pleads for his life, Gilgamesh wants to spare him, but Enkidu argues that it is natural to kill what has been defeated. Enkidu then cold-bloodedly kills Humbaba.

Gilgamesh now comes to the attention of the goddess Ishtar, the daughter of the father of the gods.

 *See chapter one of the textbook for this part of the story.*

After the slaying of the Bull of Heaven, Enkidu dreams that the gods, angry over the slayings of Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven, decree that either Enkidu or Gilgamesh must die, Enkidu then falls ill. Knowing he will die, Enkidu regrets becoming civilized but then acknowledges the joys that civilization has given him. Enkidu’s death traumatizes Gilgamesh. Despairing over the loss of his friend and terrorized by the thought of his own death, he sets out on a journey to find the secret of immortality from Utanapishti, the only immortal man. He refuses to stop in spite of the dangers he must face. He travels through the blackest darkness and goes to the end of the world in his search for immortality. Along the way he meets those who tell him that he cannot find what he searches for and that he should treasure what he has. Utanapishti, when Gilgamesh finds him, also tells him that the destiny of man is to die.

In explaining his own immortality, Utanapishti tells Gilgamesh the story of the flood, a story which in many ways echoes the story of Noah’s ark. In Utanapishti’s story, one of the gods, unable to sleep because of the constant noise of human beings, convinces the other gods to wipe out all humans in a great flood. One god, however, warns Utanapishti to build a boat and to take on that boat his family and the seeds of all creatures. In return for his actions, the gods, who later regretted the destruction, gave Utanapishti the gift of immortality.

Before Gilgamesh leaves, Utanapishti’s wife convinces her husband to tell Gilgamesh about a secret plant, which grows deep under water and can restore youth to man. Gilgamesh braves the deep water to get the plant and resolves to share it with his people, but later, while he is bathing, a snake eats the plant and sheds its skin. Gilgamesh weeps and tells Urshanabi, the ferry man who is taking him home, that his journey has been for nothing. When they come to Uruk, Gilgamesh proudly shows Urshanabi the splendid city using the same words that the poet used to describe the city at the beginning of the epic. The poet closes the poem praising Gilgamesh, who is now dead, as a great king who has helped to make Uruk a great city.

The poet’s words remind me of Shakespeare’s sonnet “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day” in which the poet tells his friend, the “thee” in the poem that, unlike summer’s, his glory will not fade because it will live on in the poem.

Significance

Why read such an old poem? Think about two reasons as you do your posts this week: one: to discover what we can about the culture and realities of life at the time and in the culture in which the work was created and two: to discover what the work tells us about ourselves as individual human beings and as members of a human community.

Before you respond to the prompts, think about themes that run through this one poem, e.g., the importance of leaders, the fight to defeat death, the price of violating nature, the coping with loss, the value of friendship, the need to grow up, proper behaviour, and an understanding of one’s limits and one’s potential. Look at the other works featured during this week. What themes do you identify with? What has any one work told you about the culture in which it was created?