NO PREP

The Epic of Gilgamesh

The World's Oldest Story

Includes: Student reading, case study, differentiated questions, teacher key

Name: Period: Date:

The Epic of Gilgamesh: The World's Oldest Story

Twelve Tablets and a King Who Wanted to Live Forever

Sometime around 2700 BCE, a king ruled the Sumerian city of Uruk. His name was Gilgamesh, and whether he was a historical person or a mythological one — or both — he became the central figure in the oldest surviving long-form narrative in human history. The Epic of Gilgamesh, compiled in its most complete form around 1200 BCE during the Assyrian period, tells the story of a king who was two-thirds divine and one-third human, who was so powerful and reckless that the gods created a wild man named Enkidu specifically to occupy him. Their relationship — from enemies to the closest of friends — is the emotional heart of the story. When Enkidu dies, Gilgamesh is shattered. For the first time in his life, the unkillable king is forced to reckon with mortality. He sets out on a desperate journey across the world to find Utnapishtim, the only

Name: **Period:** **Date:**

The Epic of Gilgamesh: The World's Oldest Story

Twelve Tablets and a King Who Wanted to Live Forever

Sometime around 2700 BCE, a king ruled the Sumerian city of Uruk. His name was Gilgamesh, and whether he was a historical person, a mythological one, or both, he became the central figure in the oldest surviving long-form narrative in human history. The Epic of Gilgamesh, compiled in its most complete form around 1200 BCE during the Assyrian period, tells the story of a king who was two-thirds divine and one-third human, who was so powerful and reckless that the gods created a wild man named Enkidu specifically to occupy him. Their relationship, from enemies to the closest of friends, is the emotional heart of the story. When Enkidu dies, Gilgamesh is shattered. For the first time in his life, the unkillable king is forced to reckon with mortality. He sets out on a desperate journey across the world to find Utnapishtim, the only human being the gods have made immortal, hoping to learn the secret of eternal life. What he finds instead is one of the oldest messages literature has ever delivered: that immortality is not available to humans, that death is the price of being alive, and that the proper response to that fact is to live fully, love those around you, and build something that lasts.

George Smith and the Flood Tablet

The Epic of Gilgamesh was lost for more than two thousand years. After the fall of Nineveh in 612 BCE, the tablets were buried under the rubble of Ashurbanipal's palace, where they remained until British excavators brought them to the British Museum in the 1850s. The tablets sat in storage, largely ignored, until a self-taught cuneiform scholar named George Smith sorted through a box of fragments in 1872 and recognized that he was reading a flood story. Tablet Eleven of the Epic, the one Smith found, describes how the god Ea warned a man named Utnapishtim that the gods intended to destroy humanity with a great flood. Utnapishtim was instructed to

build a boat and fill it with all living creatures. After the flood receded, he released a dove, a swallow, and a raven to find dry land. The parallels to the biblical story of Noah were unmistakable, and Smith's announcement caused an international sensation. Here was evidence that biblical narratives had older Mesopotamian predecessors (a fact that profoundly unsettled Victorian religious certainty and opened new questions about the relationships between ancient cultures).

What the Epic Tells Us About Mesopotamian Values

The Epic of Gilgamesh is not just a flood story. It is a meditation on friendship, loss, hubris, and the human condition. Gilgamesh himself is portrayed as a deeply flawed figure: brilliant and courageous, but also arrogant and reckless. His relationship with Enkidu humanizes him. When Enkidu dies after they kill the Bull of Heaven, Gilgamesh's grief is portrayed with striking psychological realism: he refuses to acknowledge the death for days, unable to accept that his friend is gone. It is recognizably modern grief written more than three thousand years ago. The epic also reveals Mesopotamian ideas about the divine world. The gods in Gilgamesh are petty, quarrelsome, and sometimes cruel: they decide to send the flood not because humanity has sinned in any moral sense, but because humans have become too noisy and are disturbing the gods' sleep. This is a very different divine motivation than in the biblical account, and it reflects a Mesopotamian theology in which the relationship between humans and gods was more contractual than moral: humans served the gods, fed them through offerings, and the gods provided protection and fertility in return.

Immortality, Mortality, and the Plant That Was Lost

At the end of his journey, Gilgamesh meets Utnapishtim, who tells him that immortality is not a gift that can be given. He offers Gilgamesh a consolation prize: a thorny plant that grows at the bottom of the sea and restores youth, if not eternal life. Gilgamesh dives to the bottom and retrieves it, intending to bring it back to the elders of Uruk. But on the way home, while Gilgamesh is sleeping, a serpent smells the plant and steals it, slithering away and shedding its skin as it goes — explaining, the story implies, why snakes can shed their skin and thus appear to renew themselves. Gilgamesh returns to Uruk empty-handed, his quest a failure. But the ending of the epic is not entirely bleak. Standing at the walls of his city, Gilgamesh reflects on what he has built — the great walls of Uruk, the temples, the civilization.

The implication is that this is where immortality actually lives: not in a magical plant or divine intervention, but in what human beings create and leave behind. The walls of Uruk were still standing when the epic was written. The reader was meant to look at them and understand.

Key Information: The Epic of Gilgamesh

Detail	Information
Date of Composition	Various versions from c. 2100 BCE; most complete version c. 1200 BCE
Origin	Sumerian and Babylonian Mesopotamia; compiled at Nineveh
Format	12 clay tablets, written in cuneiform (Akkadian language in final version)
Main Characters	Gilgamesh (king), Enkidu (wild man / friend), Utnapishtim (immortal man)
Flood Tablet	Tablet Eleven; parallels the biblical story of Noah
Discovery	George Smith, British Museum, 1872
Key Themes	Friendship, mortality, the search for immortality, legacy
Significance	Oldest surviving long-form narrative literature in human history

Case Study: The Tablet Restorer

Dr. Amira Khalil had been working with Tablet Eleven for three weeks. Not the famous complete version — that was safely housed under glass. This was a newly recovered fragment, about the size of a smartphone, that had surfaced in a private collection in Geneva and been repatriated to Iraq with minimal documentation of where it had originally been found. Her job was to determine whether it was a genuine ancient fragment and, if so, what it contained. The cuneiform on the fragment's surface matched the Babylonian script of the late second millennium BCE. Under magnification, she could make out portions of several lines. The words 'flood,' 'boat,' and what appeared to be the name 'Utnapishtim' were legible. She photographed it at multiple angles under different lighting conditions, then carefully 3D-scanned the surface to map every mark. 'This is a piece of the flood story,' she told her colleague. 'Another witness to the same text.' The fragment had likely been looted from a site in Iraq sometime after 2003 — the years of chaos had emptied entire storage rooms of tablets — and sold through the black market to a European collector who had eventually thought better of it. The fragment's exact origin was gone. That information, which would have told archaeologists where in Mesopotamia this particular scribal tradition was active, was lost the moment the tablet left its original context. Amira added the fragment to the database. Another piece of the oldest story, found and partially damaged. Better than nothing. Not nearly enough.

1. The fragment Amira examines was likely looted and sold before being repatriated. According to the reading and the case study, what specific kind of information is permanently lost when an artifact is removed from its archaeological context without proper documentation?

2. The Epic of Gilgamesh ends with Gilgamesh standing at the walls of Uruk, reflecting on what he has built. Based on the case study, in what sense does the work of scholars like Amira carry forward the same theme — that what we preserve and document is how we achieve a kind of immortality?

Multiple Choice

1. George Smith's 1872 discovery was significant because it revealed that:

    a) A flood narrative similar to the story of Noah existed in Mesopotamian literature before the Bible

    b) Gilgamesh was a historical king whose tomb had been found at Uruk

    c) The Assyrians had invented writing independently of the Sumerians

    d) The biblical story of creation was copied directly from very ancient Mesopotamian religious sources

2. In the Epic of Gilgamesh, why do the gods send the great flood?

    a) To punish humanity for moral sins and corruption

    b) Because humans have become too noisy and are disturbing their sleep

    c) To test whether Utnapishtim deserves immortality

    d) To destroy the city of Uruk for defying divine authority and the gods

3. The ending of the Epic of Gilgamesh suggests that true immortality can be found in:

    a) The mercy of the gods that awaits if one lives a righteous and virtuous life

    b) A magical plant that grows at the bottom of the sea

    c) The permanent works and civilization that a person builds and leaves behind

    d) The friendship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu, which outlasts death

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ Gilgamesh	A) A wild man created by the gods; Gilgamesh's companion whose death sets the plot in motion
2. ___ Enkidu	B) Legendary king of Uruk, protagonist of the world's oldest surviving long-form narrative
3. ___ Utnapishtim	C) Self-taught cuneiform scholar who in 1872 recognized the flood narrative in the British Museum
4. ___ Tablet Eleven	D) The only mortal granted immortality by the gods; holds the secret Gilgamesh seeks
5. ___ George Smith	E) The section of the Epic that describes the great flood, paralleling the biblical story of Noah

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. The Epic of Gilgamesh survives on twelve clay _____, written in cuneiform script.

2. Gilgamesh sets out to find _____, who is the only mortal ever granted eternal life by the gods.

3. A _____ steals the plant of youth from Gilgamesh while he sleeps, explaining why these creatures appear to renew themselves by shedding their skin.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. How does the portrayal of Gilgamesh's grief after Enkidu's death demonstrate that the Epic is more than a simple adventure story?

2. Compare the reason the gods send the flood in the Epic of Gilgamesh with the reason given in the biblical story of Noah. What does this difference reveal about how Mesopotamian and later religious traditions thought about the relationship between humans and gods?

3. Why is the fact that the Epic of Gilgamesh was 'lost' for more than 2,000 years significant, and what does its rediscovery tell us about the limits of what we think we know about ancient history?