

# **The Monarch and the (Non)-Human in Literature and Cinema**

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## 4 *Gilgamesh*

### The First *Bildungsroman*, or Portrait of the King Becoming a Man

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*Gilgamesh* – restored to the world by the combined efforts of the archaeologists Hormuzd Rassam and George Smith (between 1853 and 1872), and whose main character is first known as Izdubar (Smith’s original rendering of the name from Akkadian<sup>1</sup>) – is the world’s first example of a pattern we often see now in the *Bildungsroman*, or the portrait of the development of the child into maturity.<sup>2</sup> This genre, usually defined in reference to modern works like Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1796), and perhaps most famously illustrated by Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a young Man* (1916), typically puts its central character through four basic stages:

1. Loss (of innocence, one’s place in the world/sense of self, parents, a lover, a friend)
2. Leaving (a journey, often arduous and psychologically and physically taxing)
3. Learning (the struggle to come to grips with the world and one’s situation)
4. Living (coming to a mature understanding and acceptance of one’s own self, one’s capacities and limitations, and one’s relation to the larger world)

However, what sets *Gilgamesh* apart from such works as those mentioned above are two specific factors: first, it delivers its philosophical/pedagogical content in *epic poetic* form – it is not a novel, much less a *Roman* of the European (vernacular) type; but second, and more importantly for the argument here, the insights of this poem and its titular character are *generally applicable* – not merely for youth or those who are first venturing out into the world but for all people regardless of age who would learn how best to discover, inhabit, and govern themselves. In *Gilgamesh* we have an early example (once lost but now regained) of the pattern that stands behind millennia of philosophical and poetic thought about what it means to become not merely a just ruler but, more importantly, a just human being.

Thus, in its account of the great losses, journeys, and struggles for wisdom of its title character, *Gilgamesh* is our earliest example of a pattern later illustrated by the European *Bildungsroman* (the genre devoted to describing the development of the main character from youth to maturity). However, it is not – as in the modern *Bildungsroman* – limited to a portrayal of the struggles of youth.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, if *Gilgamesh* can also be seen, in the later Joycean sense, as an artist, and kingship as his art, then his story is not – as in the *specula principum*, what is referred to in

European literature as the *Mirror for Princes* – limited to advice for rulers, but it is expanded into advice for all people, *no matter the art they practice*. This is because Gilgamesh’s story illustrates not merely the struggle of moving from immaturity to maturity but also the struggles of moving from arrogance to wisdom, from denial to acceptance, from vainglorious notions of immortality, to the human, all-too-human acceptance of death as both a necessary limit and a stimulus to greater – and more lasting – achievement. Though it establishes the general patterns for each type of story, *Gilgamesh* is too large to be contained within their later constraints. Gilgamesh’s story is both a portrayal of and advice to a wide variety of people (not just princes and not just adolescents) because he goes through the struggles of *becoming* that nearly all of us go through in one way or another. As the 17th-century English poet and revolutionary John Milton argues in *Paradise Regained*, “every wise and virtuous man” can become – and is – a king.<sup>4</sup> Here the primary term is the former (“wise and virtuous man”), not the latter (“king”). In that later Miltonic sense, Gilgamesh becomes the first wise and virtuous man, not because of his kingship but, more importantly, because of his hard-won *maturity* and *humanity*,<sup>5</sup> which becomes a pattern for (and patron of) the good among ordinary people.

## **An Inauspicious Beginning – Early Brutality, Adventures With Enkidu**

*Gilgamesh* is among the oldest tales we have. Parts go back to the early third millennium BCE, maybe 2100 BCE, and other parts of this tale go back to about the eighth or seventh century BCE. Some of this text we owe to what appears to be a school assignment in which a student had been tasked with copying an already-known text (on this phenomenon, see George 1999, xviii–xx). This is a story that has been told, in one version or another, for more than 4,000 years.<sup>6</sup>

It is a familiar kind of story even to us today. In part, it is something like a modern buddy-movie, portraying Gilgamesh and Enkidu and the adventures they get up to. But it’s also a tragedy, a journey tale, a great quest, a story of loss and finally acceptance of loss that illustrates the classic stages of grief that we go through with loss: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance (see Kübler-Ross 1969). There’s a lot of that in this tale, especially when we reach the second half of it and move forward as Gilgamesh is trying to deal with the fact that his friend Enkidu is never coming back and deal with the fact that the same thing is going to happen to him, that he is going to have to, as he says, lie down and never rise again.

But we get one more element with this story: it is ultimately a song.<sup>7</sup> The *Enuma Elish* was sung; *Atrahasis* was sung; *Gilgamesh* was sung. Much of our ancient literature originates in song (see Nagy 1990, ch. 1). With the Greeks, Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were performed, and one wouldn’t sit down and listen to the whole thing all at once – the length of each tale would be prohibitive. One current scholarly idea is that

these were performance cycles.<sup>8</sup> This would be something one would hear performed at a dinner, at a public show, and there would be sections of it performed, and one would eventually – over the course of many evenings – hear most or all of it.<sup>9</sup>

Now, of course, we're still in the cuneiform era (see Feldherr and Hardy 2011, 5) with the earliest of these texts, but what we are already moving into with *Gilgamesh* is the realm of the recognizably human character. Atrahasis is a human being in the earlier story but not really a fully fleshed-out character. Gilgamesh is someone with highs and lows, strong points and weak points. He's someone with nobility and also some clear petulance. In fact, he can be a brute, but he's also capable of being a strong and noble character. He has emotions. He has anxieties. He is abusive in some ways, and he is sympathetic in other ways. In other words (to borrow Emily Wilson's description of Odysseus), he's "complicated."<sup>10</sup> He's among our earliest literary attempts to capture what a complex and often contradictory person is like. Gilgamesh starts out externally focused (*What can I get/achieve?*). Not to put too fine a point on it, but Gilgamesh starts out as both a giant (11 cubits – in the range of 17 to 18 feet – in height) and a giant bully.

More than a mere bully, however, he begins his story as a terrifying tyrant who mercilessly abuses his own people. But through the course of his story, Gilgamesh, by coming to accept his mortality/humanity, becomes internally focused (*What is right/what can I give?*). In this realization, he sets down the pattern of so many later characters who come to understand that they are, and have been, only human – in the words of Shakespeare's Richard II: "I wasted time, and now doth time waste me."<sup>11</sup> In this process, the king of Uruk goes from being an arrogant (if enormous) boy to a wise and just man – and, as such, a wise and just king.

As the king of the great city of Uruk, he is described as two-thirds Divine and one-third human. We see a lot of this in early storytelling: human beings are descended from the gods or related to the gods or created by the gods. Gilgamesh is part god and part human. If we try to figure out how two-thirds and one-third work in terms of parenting, it doesn't really quite work. But this isn't intended to be mathematically precise. It's just intended to say that he is a blend and that most of him is godlike but that a crucial part of him (and the part of him that will inevitably be what ends him) is mortal. This is one of the ways our early stories try to capture the dilemma of being clearly more than merely an animal but also clearly an animal, clearly mammalian in our terms, but with higher aspirations that are inevitably limited by that animal nature.<sup>12</sup>

He's described at the beginning of his tale as an overbearing bully:

He had no rival, and at his pukku  
His weapons would rise up.

(52)<sup>13</sup>

What is his "pukku"? It's a reference to an old game of drumstick and drum, or "rod and ring" (see Abram 2011, 15–36). Those items can be literal, but they're also a metaphor, so at his "drumstick" or "rod," his comrades have to rise up anytime

Gilgamesh gets an idea in his head, and his comrades have to follow along. He lives by his nerve endings, in other words. He lives by his desire, his need, and his unquenchable thirst to have everything he wants, and that is what is boiled down into the image of his “pukku.”

He had no rival, and at his pukku  
His weapons would rise up, his comrades have to rise up.  
The young men of Uruk became dejected in their private [quarters (?)].  
Gilgamesh would not leave any son alone for his father.  
Day and night his [behaviour (?)] was overbearing.  
He was the shepherd (?) []  
He was their shepherd (?) yet []  
Powerful, superb, [knowledgeable and expert],  
Gilgamesh would not leave [young girls alone],  
The daughters of warriors, the brides of young men.  
The gods often heard their complaints.  
The gods of heaven [] the lord of Uruk.

(52)

He appears to be having his way with everybody in his kingdom; whether that is literal or metaphorical, I'll leave the reader to decide. But the idea is that he has what he wants, and he takes what he wants, whether it's purely sexual or whether it's more generally in terms of dominance and submission and forcing people to do what he demands. That's Gilgamesh at the beginning of his story. He is basically an archetypal young male narcissist, except that he is also equipped with unequaled power.

At this point, the poem introduces a second element. As a result of the numerous complaints his people bring against Gilgamesh, another gigantic man is created:

Aruru washed her hands, pinched off a piece of clay,  
cast it out into open country.  
She created a [primitive man], Enkidu the warrior.

(52-53)

Enkidu will generally be displayed in the fashion you see in this picture, with horns and a beard, somehow a kind of human-animal hybrid.

What appears to be an erection, prominent under Enkidu's left elbow, is a way of illustrating power, raw physical power expressed in very particular, if none-too-subtle, imagery. As his story progresses, Enkidu will become associated with developing civilization and the way that human beings tend to think of themselves as separate from nature, even though death inevitably reminds us that we are not separate from nature. But initially, Enkidu is created as a being that is fully integrated with the natural environment.

He eats and drinks alongside the beasts of the field and they pay him no mind, no more mind than they pay each other. He is one of them. He is also very strong:

His strength was very hard, like a sky-bolt of Anu.  
He walks about on the mountain all the time,  
All the time he eats vegetation with cattle,  
All the time he puts his feet in (the water) at the watering place.

(53)

But he, too, causes trouble for the ordinary people: shepherds, farmers, people who work with animals and work with the land all find him frightening. They cannot go about the ordinary course of their business because this great powerful figure is out there, and they're afraid of him. So Gilgamesh comes up with an idea: "the harlot Shamhat" (55).

Now, this is something we need a little context for. There's one obvious way of reading this: *send him a prostitute and he'll have sex with the prostitute, and then he will be pulled out of his relationship with nature*. It's that, yes, but it is also more than that. Unfortunately, there's not a really good way of translating this term/concept into English without using an entire paragraph.

You see references to this role in the Hebrew biblical texts (specifically in the female figure of the קדשה or *qedesa*<sup>14</sup> – the one set apart, whose male counterpart was the קדוש (*qades*<sup>15</sup>), the sacred devotee whose acts of worship involved sexual rituals considered licentious by the Biblical writers. In the old religions, especially those involving the worship of both gods and goddesses (not later religions that have become monotheistic and pulled all divine functions into one figure), one of the primary means of worship often involved a reenactment of divine sexuality, bringing the god and the goddess together.<sup>16</sup> This is, in fact, one of the things that's going on in the much-earlier *Enuma Elish*, a reenactment of the rise of spring and the return of fertility to the world. One of the ways in which that is acted out by human beings in terms of religious ritual is sex – literally enacting the fertility that you are hoping to see in the world. That's why there is often a metaphorical and imaginative connection made between fertility in the fields and human fertility.

What's being translated as "harlot" would probably be more literally translated into the English "prostitute." However, even that term is still misleading on its surface, but when we dig beneath the surface, the sense becomes clearer. The term "prostitute" comes from the Latin *pro*, in front of, and *standere*, to stand: the full meaning of the term, then is "to stand before/to stand in front of." The woman in the *qedesa* role (to invoke the Hebrew terms) stands in front of the altar to the goddess, and the man in the *qades* role enters to enact the ritual.<sup>17</sup> Shamhat here is playing a sacred role<sup>18</sup> and, at the same time, playing a civilizing role.<sup>19</sup> With this move on Gilgamesh's part, it is not just the physical sex that's at work. The real significance lies in pulling Enkidu into the rituals of society and, at the same time, pulling him away from nature through the process of bringing him into the structures of civilization, with its myriad rules and norms.

And we can see the effect that it has after six days and seven nights:

His love-making he lavished upon her.

For six days and seven nights Enkidu was aroused  
and poured himself into Shamhat.  
When he was sated with her charms,  
He set his face towards the open country of his cattle.  
The gazelles saw Enkidu and scattered,  
The cattle of open country kept away from his body.

(55-56)

Why do the cattle keep away from him? Because he's changed. He's no longer one with nature. He is now separated from them. This is something a lot of our old stories tell of, too, in one way or another. Stories of loss, not in terms of death, not end-of-life loss stories, but stories of loss at the beginning of life. The classic image of this in the Western world is the Garden of Eden: the time and place of innocence that human beings move away from, and out of; the time and place of innocence in your own life.

This time is often imagined as childhood, a time when we didn't know any better. When we thought our parents knew everything – but when did we first figure out that our parents didn't know everything? That's the loss-of-innocence moment. That's the moment when we move from a belief, a simple belief, in things to a kind of complicated loss of belief in *some* things in an attempt to continue believing in *other* things and a movement into a world that we start to have to negotiate with because we understand it now in a different way. Enkidu has had his simple time, and now he moves into a more complex time through this description of sexuality and movement into the “civilized” world.

When Enkidu realizes that he is no longer part of the environment that he has always taken for granted, he is told of Gilgamesh. And, of course, the first thing they do when they meet is fight, and, perhaps predictably, they immediately bond and then engage in a series of adventures. What they do on these adventures is join forces and project that initial fighting between them outward, and the first target of this is Nature. This is represented primarily by Humbaba (in the later Akkadian, or Huwawa, in the earlier Sumerian stories). Humbaba is a forest spirit. We see J.R.R. Tolkien, in his *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, still dealing with such characters in the 20th century, with Forest Spirits that he calls the Ents, each of whom are much the same thing as Humbaba 4,000 years previously – a spirit, an entity, a kind of lower-level god that inhabits a place.

(This is actually the root of the English word *genius*. It comes from the Roman concept for the same kind of lower-level inhabiting spirit. The genius was the spirit that inhabited a particular place. So, when we describe a person as a genius, behind that idea is an even older idea that that person is being inhabited, in a way, by his or her intelligence.) So this Spirit of the Forest is the first thing they take on, and what do they do? They fight him, and they kill him:

He struck (?) (his) head (?), and matched him []  
They stirred up the ground with the heels of their feet,  
Sirara and Lebanon were split apart at their gyrations,



White clouds grew black,  
Death dropped down over them like a fog. [. . .]  
Thus the weapons of Gilgamesh succeeded against Humbaba.

(74)

Humbaba expresses bitterness:

I should have taken you (and) slain you at the  
entrance to my forest's growth,  
I should have given your flesh to be eaten by the  
birds of the forest, roaring (lions), birds of  
prey, and scavengers.

(75)

But he also asks for mercy:

But now, Enkidu, it is in your power(?) to . . .,  
So tell Gilgamesh to spare my life (!)!

(75)

Enkidu tells Gilgamesh no:

Finish him off, slay him, grind him up that [I may survive]  
Humbaba, the guardian of the forest.

(75)

Why are they fighting the forest god in the first place? And why is it that when Humbaba asks for mercy, Gilgamesh and Enkidu refuse to grant it? One of the things that this illustrates is the idea not just that the environment can be hostile to us, but we can be hostile to it. What have we been doing to the planet in increasingly accelerated ways since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution? Taking it. Cutting it. Tearing it. Polluting it. Looting it.

The literary technique at work here, of course, is something called personification. When we run into this in any kind of story, whether it's a classic old bit of literature or whether it's in a fantasy film today, personification is the technique of allowing something that does not normally speak to have a voice. From that perspective, Humbaba is the Earth speaking back to us, and it asks for a mercy that we refuse to grant. This also suggests something about the further development of Enkidu: from being one with nature, he moves to being cast out of nature to becoming an outright enemy to nature. (We are all perhaps just a bit more like Enkidu than it is comfortable to contemplate.)

Having taken this stand against nature, the next thing the two encounter is the goddess (77-79). This is Ishtar – the Akkadian name; an older name from Sumerian culture is Inanna. Ishtar will also be known in various of the near Middle Eastern regions by slightly different names: Astarte, for instance. Ishtar is both a goddess of

sex and sexuality, a goddess of love, an Aphrodite or Venus figure, but also a goddess of war, an Athena figure if you will.

Ishtar is goddess and god, female and male, a gender-fluid ambiguous character that will manifest in a particular way for a particular purpose. Most of the stories have Ishtar manifesting as female, but several of them do have this figure manifesting or self-describing as male.<sup>20</sup> In her female form, Ishtar approaches Gilgamesh. She's gotten a good look at Gilgamesh, and she likes what she sees. Now, there are a lot of these stories, especially in the Greek tradition which will arise later, where a god or a goddess looks at a human being and begins to burn with desire, but it never turns out well for the human being. Perhaps the most famous examples of these stories involve Zeus.<sup>21</sup> Basically, the moral of these tales is "don't get too close to the gods." They're not us, and we aren't them, and it's better that we stay as far away from them as we possibly can.

Ishtar decides she wants Gilgamesh:

'Come to me, Gilgamesh, and be my lover!  
Bestow on me the gift of your fruit!  
You can be my husband, and I can be your wife.

(77)

*Bad idea.* Gilgamesh recognizes it right away, because even as old as this story is, it's referring to even older stories. That's one of the things the singer of the tale is setting up: the story is ancient even at the time of its first telling. Gilgamesh has already heard of her exploits. He thinks: "Which of your lovers [lasted] forever?" (78). How many of your lovers have not died, spontaneously combusted, suddenly turned into a toad, or had something bad happen to them?

Which of your masterful paramours went to heaven?  
Come, let me [describe (?)] your lovers to you!

(78)

Gilgamesh immediately begins to harshly criticize the goddess and her treatment of all her previous lovers. (It is as if here, he is beginning to understand – though still in only the most self-centered manner – the gross injustice involved in subjecting those weaker than oneself to cruelty and brutal treatment.) He starts with Dumuzi (this is the same figure that the Bible will call Tammuz):

Dumuzi the lover of your youth  
You decreed that he should keep weeping year after year.  
You loved the colourful allallu-bird,  
But you hit him and broke his wing.

(78)

Many of these ancient stories involve the gods and goddesses turning into animals and/or turning human beings into animals for sexual purposes.

He stays in the woods crying “My wing!”  
You loved the lion, whose strength is complete,  
But you dug seven and seven pits for him.  
You loved the horse, so trustworthy in battle,  
But you decreed the whip, goad, and lash for him,  
You decreed that he should gallop seven leagues (non-stop),  
You decreed that he should be overwrought and thirsty,  
You decreed endless weeping for his mother Sililu.  
You loved the shepherd, herdsman, and chief shepherd  
Who was always heaping up the glowing ashes for you,  
And cooked ewe-lambs for you every day  
But you hit him and turned him into a wolf,  
His own herd-boys hunt him down  
And his dogs tear at his haunches  
You loved Ishullanu, your father’s gardener,  
Who was always bringing you baskets of dates.  
They brightened your table every day;  
You lifted your eyes to him and went to him  
“My own Ishullanu, let us enjoy your strength,  
So put out your hand and touch our vulva!”

(79)

The superhuman characters, the non-human characters, the divine characters are generally regarded in these old stories as a threat if human beings get too close to them. And the closest interaction that’s imaginable in many ways is that kind of erotic interaction. And when it happens to a human being, bad things happen to the human being.

He turns her down, and she gets angry. So she goes back to the gods to ask her father, Anu: “Please give me the Bull of Heaven and let me strike Gilgamesh down” (80). Anu initially refuses: “On no account should you request the Bull of Heaven from me. There would be seven years of chaff in the land of Uruk” (80). But of course, what does he eventually do? He gives in, and Ishtar unleashes the Bull of Heaven in a supreme expression of divine wrath.

The Bull of Heaven is presented as the ultimate weapon in the universe – this is supposed to kill Gilgamesh:

At the snorting of the Bull of Heaven a chasm  
opened up, and one hundred young men of  
Uruk fell into it.

(81)

This “weapon” brings death and destruction wherever it goes . . .

At its second snorting another chasm opened up,  
and another hundred young men of Uruk fell into it,  
Two hundred young men, three hundred young men fell into it.  
At its third snorting a chasm opened up,

And Enkidu fell into it.

(81)

But Enkidu gets hold of it, grabbing hold of it by the horns, yanking its neck back, and Gilgamesh sinks a sword in between the base of the horns and the neck tendons, and they kill it and pull out its guts.

Enkidu spun round [to] the Bull of Heaven,  
And seized it by its thick tail,  
And []  
Then Gilgamesh, like a but[cher (?)] heroic and []  
Plunged his sword in between the base of the horns  
and the neck tendons.  
When they had struck down the Bull of Heaven  
they pulled out its innards.

(82)

Think of this. The gods sent this terrifying and powerful creature to teach human beings (two in particular) a lesson. Gilgamesh and Enkidu are getting a little too high and mighty, forgetting their place (from the gods' perspective), no matter how powerful they are on Earth. They've defied the gods, and so the gods have sent punishment, but what do these two human beings do? They don't just lie down and take it: "Mysterious are the ways of the Anunnaki." No. They face right up to it, hold it back by the horns, and kill it. They took the gods' punishment, crumpled it up, threw it away, and dared the gods to do something about it. Here, the distinction between Gilgamesh and the gods is being particularly emphasized. Again, Gilgamesh is learning – slowly – that cruelty and violence toward those weaker than oneself is the mark of *inhumanity* rather than the mark of wisdom and justice. But he will also learn (as so many of us continue to learn to this day) that standing up against such inhumanity always comes at a tremendous cost.

## **Gilgamesh's *Bildungsroman*: The Loss, Leaving, Learning, and (Eventually) Living**

Many of our stories, especially when we get to modern storytelling, involve that element of defiant resistance. It is almost as if, as Oscar Wilde once observed, "[d]isobedience, in the eyes of anyone who has read history, is man's original virtue. It is through disobedience that progress has been made, through disobedience and through rebellion" (Wilde 1986, 17–54, here 22). In *Atrahasis*, it is a god, Enki, who stands up and says no, defying the will of the assembled gods – and this may well be the narrative pattern behind what become the tales of Prometheus in the later Greek tradition (on this idea, see West 1994, 129–49). But by the time of *Gilgamesh*, it

is a human being standing up and saying no – and this is perhaps Gilgamesh’s first recognizably human moment in the poem. *We’re not going to be manipulated. We’re not going to be turned into toys for the gods. Why should I be turned into the sexual plaything for a god just because that god wants it, and then when I say “no,” be retaliated against? No, you send your Bull of Heaven down here, and we’re going to send it back to you in little pieces.* But this is, of course, what causes all the trouble in the later parts of the story. Authority (especially divine authority) doesn’t like to be defied, doesn’t like to be told “no,” and there’s always a price to be paid for defying that power and for telling that power “no.”

And Anu said to Ellil, “As they have slain the Bull of Heaven,  
So too they have slain Huwawa, who [guarded]  
the mountains pla[n]ted with pines.”  
And Anu said, “One of them [must die].”  
Ellil replied: “Let Enkidu die, but let Gilgamesh not die.”

(83-84)

Now, why kill just the one of them? Why inflict death on just the one of them? Based on what we know about the characters, what must the logic be here? Which one of them is entirely from Earth? Entirely clay? Enkidu, and he’s the one that will be killed. Gilgamesh, the one who was partly clay, partly divine, partly human, will be the one who’s left alive to suffer. This is Gilgamesh’s great Loss, that which will drive his Leaving (his epic journey), his Learning (his coming to accept his limitations), and his Living (his taking up the role of wise man and just king to and for the people of Uruk).

Which of us has not lost someone by this point in our lives? Had someone die? Attended a funeral? The grieving that goes on really isn’t exactly for the person who has died. Some of it is, of course, but a lot of it – and this explains why this is one of our oldest rituals, the funerary ritual<sup>22</sup> – is for ourselves. It is for the ones who are left behind. And when we’re in the position of having been left behind, how do we compensate for that? How do we grieve for that? Gilgamesh describes holding on while the body of Enkidu is beginning to rot, even to the point where a worm crawls out of the nose, before he’s willing to accept the fact that his friend is never coming back. What can he do? *What can any of us do?* At this point, Gilgamesh, who has always had his way in everything, is not about to (willingly) suffer the same fate that has befallen Enkidu – so the very first thing Gilgamesh tries to do is to find a way to cheat death.

This is the first example of an entering-the-underworld story that we have, and this kind of story has been told and retold many times since. We see it later in the *Odyssey*. We see it in Christian tradition as the Harrowing of Hell, and we see it in medieval European literature in Dante’s *Inferno*, which is entirely a story of the entry into and then the ascent out of the underworld. The next two parts of that great epic (*Purgatorio and Paradiso*) are moving up and toward heaven, so that the

reader gets a survey of everything – the Underworld, the Middleworld, and the Overworld.

It is in the attempt to get into the underworld and back that we have imagined how we get hold of the things that are denied us, the knowledge that has been denied us, the secrets that are kept from us. If we cannot find them in this world, we will find them in another world. Whether we must symbolically die and be reborn, shed an old life and take on a new life, or shed an old identity to take on a new identity, all these are different ways of reimagining this early motif. We must leave behind the familiar and enter the unfamiliar to figure out what's really going on *and who we really are*.

Gilgamesh must take this same trip, though he is told that what he would attempt is impossible:

The Scorpion-man made his voice heard and spoke,  
He said to Gilgamesh,  
'It is impossible, Gilgamesh, []  
Nobody has passed through the mountain's  
inaccessible tract.  
For even after twelve leagues []  
The darkness is too dense, there is no [light.]

(97)

We see next a description of Gilgamesh doing what the Scorpion-man warned him was "impossible" and taking his trip through the underworld:

When he had achieved one league  
The darkness was dense, there was no light,  
It was impossible [for him to see] ahead or behind.  
[. . .]  
[. . .]  
[When he had achieved] four leagues, [he hurried on (?)];  
[The darkness was] still dense, [there was no light],  
  
It was impossible [for him to see ahead or behind].  
[When he had achieved] five leagues, [he hurried on (?)];  
[The darkness was] still dense, [there was no light],  
It was impossible [for him to see ahead or behind].  
[. . .]  
[When he had achieved] nine leagues, the north wind []  
[] his face  
[But the darkness was still dense, there was no] light,  
[It was impossible for him to see] ahead or behind.  
[When he had] achieved [ten leagues]  
[] came close.  
[] leagues.  
[he] came out in front of the sun.  
[] brightness was everywhere.

All kinds of [thorny, prickly], spiky bushes were  
visible, blossoming with gemstones.  
Carnelian bore fruit  
Hanging in clusters, lovely to look at,  
Lapis lazuli bore foliage,  
Bore fruit, and was delightful to view.

(98–99)

When he finally comes out into the light, into this new place he had never seen before, what he encounters there is Siduri the Alewife. (Apparently, this new place has been just like the old place.) Siduri serves as a kind of gatekeeper. She is there to tell Gilgamesh what he must do in the next stage of his journey. Because in going through the underworld, he's only reached the beginning, the threshold stage of what he needs.

Many of our oldest stories and a goodly number of our newer stories have this figure, the gatekeeper, the helper along the way, the person who gives significant advice to allow various protagonists to overcome obstacles, decode the map, understand the complicated situation, and then send them on their way to where they need to be.<sup>23</sup> Siduri listens to Gilgamesh describe his grief:

My friend whom I love has turned to clay:  
Enkidu my friend whom I love [has turned to clay].  
Am I not like him? Must I lie down too,  
Never to rise, ever again?

(101)

Siduri then sends him on his way, telling him to talk to the boatman Urshanabi, another familiar figure from later stories – this will become the ferryman Charon who takes the dead across the River Styx into the Greek underworld or into Dante's vision of Hell. This is the person who physically assists you in traversing the distance between where you are and where you need to be.

But what does Gilgamesh do when he encounters this figure? He hits him over the head. Why? Because he is still, at this point, an immature and reactionary boy. He's learning, slowly and painfully along the way, but his first reaction to seeing the man who is going to help him get across this body of water is to hit him over the head and break his equipment, and it turns out that some of that equipment was necessary – the “things of stone” (104) – for making the trip.

When Ur-shanabi the Boatman wakes up and they have the “OK, what was that all about?” conversation, Ur-shanabi then tells Gilgamesh that because he has broken the necessary navigation equipment, the only thing he can do now is make a bunch of poles. Gilgamesh is going to have to push himself through this water on them, and he has to make these things very long and slender so that he can push his way through without the water ever touching him, because the water is poisonous. This water will kill him if it touches him.

Ur-shanabi spoke to him, to Gilgamesh,  
'Stay clear, Gilgamesh, take one pole at a time,  
Don't let the lethal water wet your hand!  
[Hold (?)] the knob!  
Take a second, a third, then a fourth pole,  
Gilgamesh,  
Take a fifth, a sixth, then a seventh pole,  
Gilgamesh,  
Take and eighth, a ninth, then a tenth pole,  
Gilgamesh,  
Take and eleventh, a twelfth pole, Gilgamesh.'

(105)

By the time he gets across, he encounters Utnapishtim, the same figure that we see in *Atrahasis* (by the name *Atrahasis*). And Utnapishtim has a story to tell him and then a secret to give him. Utnapishtim tells him the story of the flood, using details that look a lot like what we see in Genesis.

When the seventh day arrived,  
I put out and released a dove.  
The dove went; it came back,  
For no perching place was visible to it, and it turned round.  
I put out and released a swallow.

The swallow went; it came back,  
For no perching place was visible to it, and it turned round.  
I put out and released a raven.  
The raven went, and saw the waters receding.  
And it ate, preened (?), lifted its tail and did not turn round.  
Then I put (everything?) out to the four winds,  
and I made a sacrifice.

(114)<sup>24</sup>

Now, Utnapishtim gives Gilgamesh one more secret, and this is the most tragic part of the story. Utnapishtim asks him: "Gilgamesh, you came, weary, striving, / What can I give you to take back to your country?" (118). This is one of the oldest literary motifs in the world. The guest receives a gift from the host. The guest pays respect to the host, and the host pays respect to the guest. It's called the host-guest obligation, or ξενία [*xenia*]. This idea is broadly familiar from Greek literature as well as the Bible – especially in the books of Genesis and Judges. It's one of the most widely shared motifs of the region. It serves as a form of loose international law, an early version of what we have come to call the Golden Rule (or the Categorical Imperative). If a guest comes to you, treat that guest the way you would want to be treated if you were a guest. As host, Utnapishtim offers his guest Gilgamesh a great secret. Utnapishtim is immortal, but he's been given immortality by the gods, and



he's the only human that has been given that gift: no other human has it. So Utnapishtim tells him "the secret of the gods":

There is a plant whose root is like camel-thorn,  
Whose thorn, like a rose's, will spike [your hands].  
If you yourself can win that plant, you will find [rejuvenation (?)].

(118)

In attempting to find the plant, Gilgamesh ties great boulders to his feet and sinks to the bottom of the ocean. He finds the plant. He pulls it up. It cuts his hands while doing it, but it's well worth the sacrifice. He grasps it tightly, cuts the boulders off his feet, and swiftly ascends back to the surface.

When Gilgamesh heard this, he opened the pipe,  
He tied heavy stones to his feet.  
They dragged him down into the Apsu, and [he saw the plant].  
He took the plant himself: it spiked [his hands].  
He cut the heavy stones from his feet.  
The sea threw him up on to its shore.

(119)

He then comes up onto the beach, salt-encrusted, the same way that Odysseus will in his later story, and washes himself to prepare for the journey home. But while he's distracted with that task, a serpent comes and takes the plant – the plant that would have offered Gilgamesh and all of us something like practical immortality: perpetual rejuvenation, the ability to go from being old to being young, the ability to continually stave off age, the ability to shed one's skin in the way that a serpent does.

A snake smelt the fragrance of the plant.  
It came up silently and carried off the plant.  
As it took it away, it shed its scaly skin.  
Thereupon Gilgamesh sat down and wept.

(119)

Now, we see these motifs elsewhere: the serpent, the idea of a plant, or in Genesis, the idea of the Tree of Life (ingesting the fruit of which offers human beings immortality). That prospect is always held out as a kind of tease in these old stories. We see it offered to Odysseus, too. But we never get it. Many of us may grasp after it and want it, but just like Gilgamesh, we never get that immortality. (But one of the great things about the later poem, the *Odyssey*, is that Odysseus turns immortality down on purpose, because there's a greater value – the value of love and home and all the pleasures of ordinary, if mortal, life.<sup>25</sup>)

The very last part of *Gilgamesh* doesn't appear to be related to the overall narrative, but it is generally added to the end in most modern translated editions.

It's also something that we see in many later stories, the idea of wanting to cross the veil between life and death. If only we could talk to the person who's gone and find out what the afterlife is like, find out *if* there's an afterlife, find out if there's anything other than unconsciousness and cold dark death. Gilgamesh talks to Enkidu briefly, and Enkidu tells him (much like Hamlet's father will tell him) that he can't really tell Gilgamesh the secrets of this place because they're too awful:

'Tell me, my friend, tell me, my friend,  
Tell me Earth's conditions that you found!  
'I can't tell you, my friend, I can't tell you!  
If I tell you Earth's conditions that I found,  
You must sit (and) weep!

(123)

And then both Gilgamesh and his story move into a kind of sadder but wiser acceptance. What *Gilgamesh* leaves us with is this: as ordinary mortals (no two-thirds divine here), there are all kinds of struggles we can have in life and all kinds of victories we can win. But ultimately, we can't kill that final Bull of Heaven. Ultimately, we can't kill that final Humbaba; that one's going to kill us, no matter how many victories we have. And that, I think, is the way poetry has always been trying to illustrate the human condition. We're a mix of the high and the low, and life offers many opportunities, but ultimately, it's temporary, and everything we win is eventually lost again.

This, then, is Gilgamesh's Learning: we are all – even the mighty king of Uruk – mortal. We cannot and, indeed, will not live forever. So, what do we do with the time we have? What do we value? What do we prioritize in the relatively few years we have in the light? Gilgamesh seems to answer these questions and move at last into the Living phase of his *Bildungsroman* by pointing to the walls of Uruk:

Go up on to the wall of Uruk, Ur-shanabi, and  
walk around,  
Inspect the foundation platform and scrutinize the  
brickwork! Testify that its bricks are baked  
bricks,  
And that the Seven Counsellors must have laid its  
Foundations!

(120)

By the end, it seems that what Gilgamesh has learned to value is the city itself, its structures, and – by extension – its people and his role, not as their oppressor but as a king whose duty is to nurture and protect the people who had once complained so bitterly to the gods about him. But in the end, *what has made Gilgamesh a better king is that he has become a better man* – perhaps fully human for the first time, acknowledging that just as he, too, must die, that he, too, is vulnerable, so also are his people. That insight, which comes from his shock and grief at the death of Enkidu, elicits

something like empathy in the giant man who once played the role of boy tyrant. Human mortality and the kinship of all humans therein becomes his most profound insight:

Enkidu my friend whom I love has turned to clay.  
Am I not like him? Must I lie down too,  
Never to rise, ever again?

(104)<sup>26</sup>

And this insight is what brings Gilgamesh to his humanity, his justice, and his most mature kingship. Where once “[i]n Uruk the Sheepfold he would walk about, / Show himself superior, his head held high like a/wild bull” (51), now, Gilgamesh finally plays the role of shepherd rather than predator to the people of Uruk. Through his early version of what we have come to call the *Bildungsroman* pattern, Gilgamesh has now become, in the fullest sense, a “wise and virtuous man,” and as a result, he can begin to be, finally, a good and just king.

## Notes

1. See also Damrosch 2007; Smith 1876a, 1876b.
2. This term is often defined much too literally, in my view, and is the subject of some critical controversy. And while I do not want to be sidetracked from the main topic of this chapter, some remarks on the variances at work in the scholarship may be appropriate here. The scholars included in Sarah Graham’s edited collection (Graham 2019), despite their differences, all seem to agree that the *Bildungsroman*, or “novel of formation,” is essentially a modern and European artifact, at least in its origin, and that it inhabits a genre that can be expanded (to postcolonial subjects, to female subjects, to LGBTQ subjects, etc.) as long as that expansion *looks forward, but never back, from the 18th century*. Along different if complementary lines, Todd Kontje, one of Graham’s contributors, grounds his case by taking the literary term itself as if it were to be regarded as a straitjacket (or at least as a set of rigid and inarguable parameters):

Two factors delimit the genre to a considerably narrower focus from the outset [. . .]: first, as the name of the genre indicates, the *Bildungsroman* is a “Roman,” a vernacular prose novel of the sort that arose in early modern Europe and became widely popular only in the course of the eighteenth century. Second, the personal development of the individual takes place against the backdrop of a world that is changing as well.

(Kontje 2019, 11)

What can one say? As for the first “factor,” one might wonder at the logic required to sustain this sort of question-begging definition, which takes as

proof of European origin the existence of a European term (as if the specifically *German Bildungsroman* came along before stories of growth and change in individuals young or old, or as if the term “novel” could be limited to the sphere of the modern and European by insisting on tacking the term “vernacular” onto it whenever it makes an appearance – thus cleverly eliminating the possibility of Greek or Latin novels, while keeping the “novel” clearly walled off from any non-Greco-Roman-derived linguistic cultures as well. No, Lady Murasaki, your *Tale of Genji* need not apply – and by such definitions, it would seem that Dostoevsky and Tolstoy are in some difficulty as well). It is akin to the kind of argument – often heard in English departments – that the novel arose in England, because all of the features used by the prominent critic (Ian Watt) to define the “novel” just happen to derive from literature written in English, in England, under specifically English social/political conditions. It would not be difficult, using such a procedure, to define all cooking as “French” by using as examples of “cooking” always and only procedures and techniques derived from Lyonnaise kitchens of the 18th and 19th centuries. If only Foucault had written a cookbook. The second “factor” is both emptier of substance and yet somehow more intriguing (and not at all bolstered by a citation of Bakhtin): what world – in any given place or time – is not “changing” in some way? Or is it being suggested that only *European* worlds (and “modern” ones at that) change, while Middle Eastern, Asian, and Global South worlds (not to mention worlds of the past) remain (or remained) static, frozen in a kind of benighted sameness which renders novels of formation impossible?

I also think it is deeply telling that the Cambridge University Press collection is so relentlessly Presentist and Eurocentric (though with a single chapter that gestures toward the postcolonial) while it pays short shrift to (and even essentially replicates the title of) an earlier book by Petru Golban, a Romanian scholar working in Turkey, whose book *A History of the Bildungsroman: From Ancient Beginnings to Romanticism*, argues that this genre can be seen as having deep roots as far back as “the works of Heliodorus, Apuleius, and Longus in antiquity” [the latter, especially in light of works such as *Daphnis and Chloe*, seems an embarrassing omission for those determined to defend the turf of European and modern origin], while also having roots in “*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Sir Thomas Malory* in the Middle Ages; *Francois Rabelais*, *Miguel de Cervantes*, *Mateo Aleman*, *Thomas Nashe*, and *Vida de Lazarillo de Tormes in the Renaissance*” (Golban 2018, 51), and a host of other authors in the 17th and 18th centuries *before* Goethe. But, perhaps predictably, the arguments found in the more “prestigious” publication will carry the day (academics are nothing if not status conscious), while the work published elsewhere (whose title was all but hijacked) will languish in obscurity, perhaps *because* its arguments challenge the dominant paradigm.

3. Arguments of this type look back to Franco Moretti's *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* in their emphasis on looking exclusively to the future (while disregarding the past) and privileging the idea of youth over *formation* or *development* in literary characters. For Moretti, "Youth is [. . .] modernity's 'essence', the sign of a world that seeks its meaning in the future rather than in the past" (1987, 5). Such an argument also looks back to Erich Auerbach's insistence that "Odysseus on his return is exactly the same as when he left Ithaca two decades earlier" (1953, 17), while taking Auerbach to mean that Odysseus was unable to change, not because he is a flat and two-dimensional character (he most certainly is not, and Auerbach does violence to the character in regarding the Odysseus who weeps on Calypso's island as incapable of change) but simply because he is no longer young. It is a form of bigotry raised to the level of a critical principle.
4. As Milton's character Jesus expressed the idea:

Yet he who reigns within himself, and rules  
Passions, desires, and fears, is more a king  
Which every wise and virtuous man attains.

(Milton 1957, 2.466–68)

5. According to Cicero, in his remarks on literary education, maturity and humanity may well be much the same thing. As he reminds us, literature can serve, and often has served, as part of those "arts by which the young are accustomed to humanity" [*artibus quibus aetas puerilis ad humanitatem informari solet*] (Cicero 1923, 3.2–3.10), helping us to "regulate our studies," not by external dictates or in reference to values outside ourselves but by "the measure of our own nature" [*studia nostra nostrae naturae regula metiamur*] (Cicero 1913, 1.110.31).
6. See Andrew George's translation and edition for the much older extant Sumerian texts – in which the character is called *Bilgames* – which lie behind what is now referred to as the Standard Version (Akkadian), which is the basis of modern-day translations.
7. See (and hear) a modern reconstruction of what the opening lines of the Sumerian poem that Andrew George renders as "Bilgames and the Netherworld" might have sounded like: <https://youtu.be/QUcTsFe1PVs>.
8. See Chris Pelling (Regius Professor of Greek, Oxford University) explain this idea at <https://youtu.be/nXvwbW64EaI>.
9. It is a fairly new (and still contested) idea that literature is something you just get off the page, or that literature is something that is not performed, or even sung, in some way. Even when we move into the early history of theater with the Greeks, that involves actors and performance, but many of the lines even on the Greek stage were still being sung to the audience, not really spoken out to the audience. Modern-day poetry and modern-day

novels – at least in most “Western” societies – have moved away from this root quality of literature as music.

10. Her translation of the Greek term πολύτροπον [polytropon], which is often rendered fairly literally as “many-turned” or “twisty.” Wilson’s less-literal translation better captures, in my view, the sense of Odysseus as having many sides to his character and the ability to present many different faces:

Tell me about a complicated man.  
Muse, tell me how he wandered and was lost  
when he had wrecked the holy town of Troy.

(Homer 2017, 1.1-3)

11. *Richard II.* 5.5.49. All citations from Shakespeare are from *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works* (Orgel and Braunmuller 2002).
12. A dynamic perhaps best captured by William Shakespeare, in lines he gives to Hamlet:

What a piece of work is a man! how noble in reason!  
how infinite in faculty! in form and moving how  
express and admirable! in action how like an angel!  
in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the  
world! the paragon of animals!

(*Hamlet* 2.2.295–99)

13. All quotations from *Gilgamesh* are from the translation by Stephanie Dalley (2009). They are referenced parenthetically, by page number.
14. This term appears in Genesis 38:21–22, Deuteronomy 23:17, and Hosea 4:14.
15. This term appears in Deuteronomy 23:17, 1 Kings 14:24, 1 Kings 15:12, 1 Kings 22:46, 2 Kings 23:7, and Job 36:14.
16. For the classic description of what is called the *hieros gamos* in the scholarly literature, see Kramer 1969.
17. The American film *Ghostbusters* (1984) offered a comic take on a similar phenomenon, using the terms “Gatekeeper” and “Keymaster” with Sigourney Weaver and Rick Moranis, respectively, in the ritual roles.
18. Though such scholars as Daniel Arnaud (1973, 111–15), Julia Assante (2003, 13–47), and Stephanie Budin (2008) have cast doubt on the idea of what might be called sacred prostitution, this revisionist take has been criticized as agenda-driven scholarship (notably by Vinciane Pirenne-Delforge; see Pirenne-Delforge 2009).
19. For Shamhat’s civilizing influence on Enkidu, see Harris 2003, 122–23.
20. See Groneberg 1986, 25–46.
21. The tales of Europa, Callisto, Antiope, Alcemene, Danae, Aegina, and Ganymede (among others) amply illustrate this trend.
22. For a thorough analysis of such rituals in the nearby Levant in c. 900 BCE, see López Bertran 2019, 293–310.

23. For a thorough and accessible analysis of this pattern, see Campbell (1949).
24. This is almost exactly what we read in Genesis 7:6–12, where Noah releases a raven, then a dove, then finally another dove that comes back with an olive branch in its mouth. He then releases another dove which does not come back because it has found land and the waters have receded. At this point, Noah finally emerges from the ark and makes a sacrifice.
25. The choice Odysseus makes, when offered immortality by Calypso, is determined by his desperate longing to return to Penelope, whom the goddess describes as “σὴν ἄλοχον, τῆς τ’ αἰὲν ἐέλδεται ἥματα πάντα” [your wife, she that you ever long for daily, in every way] (Homer 1919, 5.210).
26. In what Heidegger calls *Sein-zum-Tode* or Being-toward-death, we achieve an authentic perspective on ourselves and the world into which we have been thrown (for the English-language reader, see Heidegger 1962, 290–311). By the end of his exhausting epic journey, Gilgamesh has achieved that *Sein-zum-Tode*, that authentic perspective on himself and his world. And that is why his last words are a celebration, not of himself but of his city – and the implied achievements and ongoing duties that city represents. *Sein-zum-Tode* understands the inevitability of death and understands that Death has always already been part of Life, thus answering Gilgamesh’s question (Must I lie down too, / Never to rise, ever again?) in the affirmative while also affirming the life that must precede that inevitable end.

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