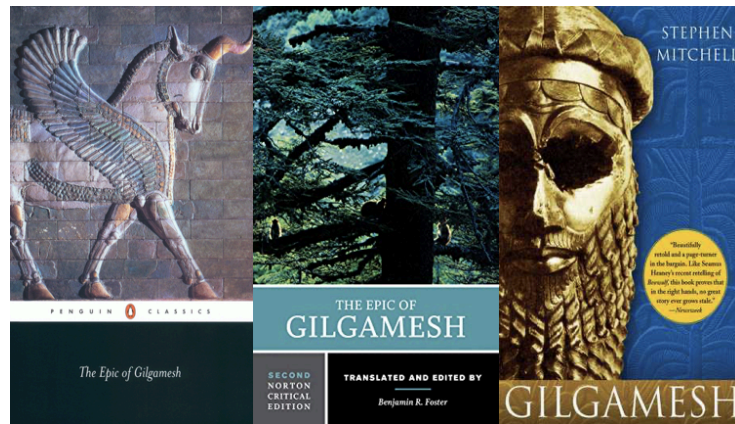




The Epic of Gilgamesh. Trans. by B.R. Foster. **Second** Norton Critical Ed. W.W. Norton, 2019. ISBN: [9780393643985](https://www.wwnorton.com/9780393643985)

Gilgamesh rewards our group precisely because it's the root from which Homer's world grew—composed thirteen centuries before the *Iliad*, in the same eastern Mediterranean cultural sphere that later fed into Greek epic. Reading it after Homer reverses your chronology but sharpens it: you'll see Bronze Age Mesopotamia's fingerprints on the tradition you've just spent months with.

The parallels are striking and substantive. Gilgamesh's grief over Enkidu—his wild, civilized companion whose death sends him fleeing into the wilderness—echoes Achilles' grief over Patroclus so closely that scholars have long debated direct influence. Both heroes rage against mortality; but where Achilles accepts his fate and seeks glory instead, Gilgamesh refuses to accept his, journeying to the ends of the earth to defeat death outright and failing. That failure, and his eventual return to build and accept his city, offers a different resolution than Homeric kleos—one worth discussing against Odysseus's own homecoming.

The poem's flood narrative predates and illuminates the biblical deluge and Greek myths of Deucalion alike, useful for tracing how ancient Near Eastern stories traveled and transformed. And Enkidu's transformation from beast-man to civilized companion mirrors the nature-versus-culture tension running through the *Odyssey*'s encounters with Cyclopes, Circe, and the Lotus-Eaters—humanity's oldest surviving epic asking whether love or glory matters more against oblivion.

The Epic of Gilgamesh: Summary and Discussion Questions

(Based on the Standard Babylonian version, as presented in Foster's Norton Critical Edition)

Tablet I Summary: Gilgamesh, tyrannical king of Uruk, oppresses his people. The gods create Enkidu, a wild man raised among animals, to be his equal and rival. Enkidu is civilized through union with the priestess Shamhat, then journeys to Uruk to confront Gilgamesh.

Discussion topics:

1. What does Enkidu's transformation from beast to civilized man suggest about the epic's view of "civilization" versus "nature"?
2. Why do the gods respond to tyranny by creating a rival rather than removing Gilgamesh?
3. How does Shamhat's role complicate or reinforce ancient Mesopotamian attitudes toward sexuality and civilization?

Tablet II Summary: Enkidu adjusts to city life, eating bread and drinking beer. He confronts Gilgamesh, and the two wrestle to a standstill, becoming devoted friends. Gilgamesh proposes an expedition to the Cedar Forest to defeat the monster Humbaba.

Discussion topics:

1. Why does a physical contest, rather than diplomacy, form the basis of Gilgamesh and Enkidu's friendship?
2. What motivates Gilgamesh's sudden desire for the Cedar Forest quest—glory, boredom, or something else?
3. How does this male friendship compare to Achilles and Patroclus in the *Iliad*?

Tablet III Summary: The elders of Uruk and Gilgamesh's mother, Ninsun, express concern over the expedition. Ninsun performs rituals appealing to the sun god Shamash for protection and ritually adopts Enkidu as her son.

Discussion topics:

1. What role do maternal and divine intercession play in an epic largely about male heroism?
2. How does the community's anxiety about the quest shape our reading of Gilgamesh's kingship?
3. Compare Ninsun's ritual pleading to Thetis's intercessions for Achilles in the *Iliad*.

Tablet IV Summary: Gilgamesh and Enkidu travel to the Cedar Forest, experiencing a series of ominous dreams along the way, which Enkidu interprets favorably for Gilgamesh despite their unsettling content.

Discussion topics:

1. What function do the dream sequences serve structurally and thematically?
2. Why does Enkidu consistently reinterpret bad omens as good ones—loyalty, denial, or narrative necessity?
3. How does dream interpretation here compare with its use in Homer (e.g., Penelope's dreams in the *Odyssey*)?

Tablet V Summary: The pair reach the Cedar Forest and confront its guardian, Humbaba. With Shamash's help, they defeat and kill him despite his pleas for mercy, then fell the great cedar trees.

Discussion topics:

1. Is the killing of Humbaba, who begs for his life, portrayed as heroic or as a moral transgression?
2. What does the deforestation of the Cedar Forest suggest about ancient attitudes toward nature and resource exploitation?
3. How does this scene compare to Odysseus's encounter with Polyphemus—another guardian figure who pleads and is refused?

Tablet VI Summary: The goddess Ishtar proposes marriage to Gilgamesh; he refuses, cataloguing her mistreatment of past lovers. Enraged, Ishtar sends the Bull of Heaven to attack Uruk. Gilgamesh and Enkidu kill it, and Enkidu insults Ishtar further.

Discussion topics:

1. What does Gilgamesh's catalogue of Ishtar's former lovers reveal about male anxiety toward powerful female/divine figures?
2. Is Gilgamesh's rejection of Ishtar an act of wisdom, hubris, or both?
3. Compare Ishtar's wrath here to Aphrodite's or Hera's interventions in the *Iliad*—how do slighted goddesses drive epic plots?

Tablet VII Summary: The gods decree that Enkidu must die for killing Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven. Enkidu curses those responsible for his civilization, then reconsiders and blesses them instead. He falls ill and dies, describing a bleak vision of the underworld.

Discussion topics:

1. Why does Enkidu curse, then bless, his own civilizing—what does this reversal suggest about the poem's ambivalence toward "progress"?
2. How does the underworld vision in this tablet compare to Achilles' famous statement in the *Odyssey* (Book 11) that he'd rather be a live slave than king of the dead?
3. What is the narrative function of Enkidu's death for Gilgamesh's character arc?

Tablet VIII Summary: Gilgamesh delivers an extended lament for Enkidu, organizes an elaborate funeral, and commissions a memorial statue.

Discussion topics:

1. How does ritualized male grief function here compared to Achilles' mourning for Patroclus in *Iliad* Book 18?
2. What does the lament reveal about Mesopotamian funerary customs and beliefs about memory and legacy?
3. Is Gilgamesh's grief primarily about Enkidu, or about his own mortality—and does the distinction matter?

Tablet IX Summary: Terrified by Enkidu's death, Gilgamesh abandons his throne and journeys into the wilderness in search of immortality, eventually reaching Mount Mashu and the Scorpion-beings who guard the sun's passage.

Discussion topics:

1. How does Gilgamesh's flight from kingship complicate the epic's earlier concern with civic responsibility?
2. What is the significance of the liminal, monstrous guardians (Scorpion-beings) at the threshold of Gilgamesh's quest?
3. Compare this quest structure to Odysseus's journey to the underworld to consult Tiresias.

Tablet X Summary: Gilgamesh meets the alewife Siduri, who advises him to embrace mortal pleasures rather than pursue immortality. He then crosses the Waters of Death with the ferryman Urshanabi to reach Utnapishtim, the flood survivor granted eternal life.

Discussion topics:

1. Does Siduri's advice to "eat, drink, and be merry" represent wisdom or resignation? How does the poem seem to judge it?
2. What is the significance of Gilgamesh needing a ferryman to cross into a death-adjacent realm, and how does this compare to Charon in later Greek tradition?
3. How does Siduri's carpe diem philosophy compare with themes of moderation and pleasure elsewhere in ancient epic (e.g., the Phaeacians in the *Odyssey*)?

Tablet XI Summary: Utnapishtim recounts the Flood story and his own attainment of immortality as a unique, unrepeatable gift from the gods. He tests Gilgamesh with a sleep challenge, which Gilgamesh fails, then offers him a plant of rejuvenation, which is stolen by a serpent on the way home. Gilgamesh returns to Uruk, finding meaning in the city's walls, his enduring legacy.

Discussion topics:

1. How does the flood narrative compare structurally and morally to the biblical account and Greek myths of Deucalion?
2. What is the significance of Gilgamesh losing immortality twice (failing the sleep test, then losing the plant)—is this fate, folly, or fitting?
3. Does Gilgamesh's final acceptance of mortal legacy (the city walls) represent genuine wisdom or defeat, and how does it compare to Odysseus's hard-won homecoming and acceptance of a mortal life with Penelope?

Note: Tablet XII is a later Akkadian appendix (a partial translation of an earlier Sumerian poem) not integrated into the main narrative arc, and is often treated separately or omitted in discussion.

Tablet XII Summary: A later addendum, not part of the poem's core narrative and largely inconsistent with it (Enkidu is alive again, and their relationship reads as master-servant rather than equals). Gilgamesh loses two objects, a *pukku* and *mekku* (variously translated as drum and drumstick, or ball and mallet), into the underworld. Enkidu volunteers to retrieve them but violates the underworld's taboos and becomes trapped there. The god Ea allows Enkidu's spirit to rise briefly and describe the bleak conditions of the dead to Gilgamesh, with the fate of the deceased tied to how many sons survive them and whether proper funerary rites were performed.

Discussion topics:

1. This tablet is a fairly direct translation of an earlier, independent Sumerian poem ("Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Netherworld") appended to the Standard Babylonian version. Why might ancient editors have preserved this inconsistent coda rather than smoothing it into the main narrative, and what does that tell us about how these texts circulated and were assembled?
2. Enkidu's underworld report ties the comfort of the dead directly to the number of surviving sons and proper burial. How does this transactional, family-centered afterlife compare to the more uniformly bleak vision of death Enkidu gives in Tablet VII, and to the underworld Odysseus visits in *Odyssey* Book 11?

3. Given that Tablet XII contradicts Enkidu's death in Tablet VII, how should a reading group approach it—as a flawed appendix best set aside, or as valuable evidence of the epic's oral and compositional history? What does its inclusion suggest about ancient versus modern expectations of narrative consistency?