



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
2007 Volume II: Voyages in World History Before 1500

---

## Teaching the Epic of Gilgamesh

Curriculum Unit 07.02.01  
by Kristen Grandfield

The journey, the hero, the triumph, the defeat; all elements of some of literature's greatest works. Avid readers yearn to be transported from everyday life into a world where good conquers evil and the hero saves the day. Although learned readers know that the term hero has a multitude of definitions, not all being good, there is something in the journey and the obstacles and triumphs that draws us in and asks us to enter a world unlike our own. The ideas of the journey and the epic as well as the hero itself are the basis for this curriculum unit, **Teaching The Epic of Gilgamesh**. The unit will begin with basics of the epic, the epic hero, and the epic cycle. Then, we will look at the epic of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and its impact historically and literarily. The time spent with *The Epic of Gilgamesh* will also allow for time to be spent looking at Mesopotamia and its impact on early civilizations. In the end, the students will not only read and learn about Mesopotamia and Gilgamesh but will also have a chance to write and act out their own epic adventures.

As a World Literature teacher at Hill Regional Career High School, I am challenged and overwhelmed by the sheer volume of world literature to choose from. In an effort to find a common theme and potentially find something my students can connect to, I began to consider focusing on the hero. The hero was not just the traditional "save-the-day" hero who wears a cape and tights but is the hero of literature including the Hemingway hero, tragic hero, and of course, the epic hero.

## The Curriculum Unit

---

The epic hero is a part of the journey or quest as a component of the epic poem itself. The National Endowment for the Humanities Education Site describes the epic hero cycle as having the following elements: an extraordinary hero who is charged with a journey or quest. The quest itself has obstacles that force the hero to prove himself. In some cases mystical or supernatural beings are for or against the hero and may even lead that hero into the supernatural world, where other humans have never been. Like the tragic hero, the epic hero reaches a low point but rather than die, like the tragic hero, the epic hero resurrects himself and the epic comes to its resolution. Learning about the epic cycle and the epic hero is where the curriculum unit will begin. Students will first learn about the cycle, initially using prior knowledge of epics they may have read (*The Odyssey*, *The Iliad*) or viewed (*The Lord of the Rings*). The class would also be asked to look at how this literary hero differs from the connotations associated with traditional heroes or persons they may call "hero".

Once the students are comfortable with epics and their elements, we would move toward the ancient epic, *Gilgamesh* . Since students take World Civilizations as ninth graders and have spent a varying amount of time on Mesopotamia, we would begin with background information on the geography, time period, and other historical elements necessary for understanding when and where *Gilgamesh* was written. Also, this is a chance to look at a culture and what it valued; this allows for discussion on today's society and its values as well as discussion as we read and where we see examples of cultural values in the text of *Gilgamesh* . Before even beginning the text, students will have literary and historical knowledge to apply to the text.

The heart of the curriculum lessons will be based on reading the *Epic of Gilgamesh* . Translated from twelve stone tablets, *Gilgamesh* details Uruk's king, Gilgamesh and his obstacles, relationships, use (and potential misuse) of power, and his learning that he needs more than strength to be successful . All of these elements become viable topics for discussion and analysis. Also, there is an element of the epic that mirrors the Flood Story of Noah from the Bible and can be used to introduce the Bible as literature with a comparison piece. When the reading nears the end, students will revisit the idea of hero, as defined literarily and traditionally. Does Gilgamesh neatly fit into the definitions we had? I hope to find many areas that my students can relate to and connect to themselves and the world.

Reading *Gilgamesh* also allows for discussion of greater issues in literature and life: roles of women, the use and abuse of power, friendship, and the importance of the epic in a particular society or culture. Students will be given a chance to read and explore other epics if they become interested but this unit will focus solely on *Gilgamesh* .

This curriculum unit will easily align with the literacy standards set forth by the New Haven School District. The Literacy Standards ask that students read, write, speak, listen, view and research; this unit lends itself to accomplishing all six. The unit will utilize a variety of strategies to have students reading, writing, discussing, and analyzing with the potential for oral presentations and research projects. This unit is designed to utilize as much of the 82 minute block class as possible. Career is a magnet school where students follow either a business/computer track or a health/medical track. The tracks are like a "major" with specific requirements for graduation. The make up of Career High School is that of African American, Latino, Asian, Caucasian and many other ethnicities. Students are from New Haven as well as the suburbs surrounding New Haven.

## Rationale

---

The objectives for this unit are:

- 1 Read, write, speak, and listen to construct meaning from the reading of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* ;
- 2 Read with understanding and respond thoughtfully to a variety of materials and writing prompts;
- 3 Students will write before, during and after reading. The writing will have students journaling, answering questions and writing pieces similar to the ones they are reading. Also, they will be revising initial writing and understanding of what is being read;

While teaching this curriculum unit, teachers can use the background information for themselves or to present to students. The unit has a variety of angles. The first being solely literary with definitions of the epic, epic hero, and epic cycle. Then the class can move into the reading of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. The other angle can be teaching *The Epic of Gilgamesh* as a historical document with the teacher providing historical context and then analyzing the literature from a historical perspective. In my classroom, I intend to do both. Students will learn about the epic and the epic hero as part of an overall year theme of "hero" but they will also learn about Mesopotamia as a refresher of what they learned during their World Civilization class.

## **The Literary Epic**

It is important to note that *The Epic of Gilgamesh* does not exactly fit into the traditional literary definition of the epic and the epic hero. Knowing the literary definition and the various definitions throughout history will help students develop a literary framework *and* spark discussion over whether or not Gilgamesh fits into this definition. All the following information about the epic is drawn from: Merriam Webster Online Database's entry entitled "Hero" and "The Victorian Web" <http://www.victorianweb.org/genre/epic2.html>.

The hero is an element of literature often taught by many teachers. The word itself connotes a variety of images and emotion for students. Heroes range from those in comic books to those found in great tragedies and epics.

The epic poem is a long, narrative poem detailing the adventure or journey of an epic hero. Early epics are the result of oral tradition and have eventually been written down after many years. The author's of the first epics are unknown because of the oral tradition. As time progressed, what is known as a secondary epic style developed and authors went to great lengths to write epics in the style of the early, or primary, epic poems.

The general characteristics of the epic poem are that initially epics were intended to be sung or recited, much like music today. The poems are often generated by times of struggle and adventure. For example, the Trojan War served as inspiration for the writing of Homer's epics. The epic hero is larger than life, even though he possesses normal human characteristics. His personality and abilities, however, are more super than those of everyday man.

The epic poem has a clear set-up and design. The poem begins with an invocation - this invocation calls on a muse or god to inspire divine intervention while telling the tale. In the invocation, the subject and the epic question are introduced.

The epic's language is literary and elevated. The language is used by all in the poem, from king to servant (even though epics rarely detail lives or actions of the servants). Epic conventions include: the invocation, the epic question, the epic or Homeric simile, the epithet, the confrontation between two adversaries, the element of "in medias res", and a battle or combat

"In media res" translates to "in the midst of action". Essentially, the poem begins in the middle or during the action. The audience learns background information and details as the epic progresses. The simile is much like the literary simile using "like" or "as"; however, the epic simile is full of description and helps to move the action along and to build suspense.

The epic hero is not unlike the tragic hero in that he born into greatness or into leadership. However, the epic hero has some characteristics that clearly distinguish him from the others. The legendary hero is "often of divine descent who is endowed with great strength or ability". Gilgamesh shares these traits with other early

epic heroes. The epic hero is in a different class of men based on his "skill, strength, and courage" .It is also no mistake that the hero is referred to as "he" because epic heroes are the central *male* character in the epic itself. ("Hero" Merriam Webster's Encyclopedia of Literature. Merriam Webster's, Inc. 1995 NA. Academic OneFile. Thomson Gale.).

The epic hero's main focus is dangerous activity, essentially a war or battle over an evil force. The epic hero is someone we want fighting on our side as he is cunning, resourceful, instinctive, and skilled. He works well under pressure; he is the leader those around him need. These skills, although possessed by us all, are magnified and shown to be glorious as the hero needs then to lead and save the day

Again, like the tragic hero, our epic hero is not without fault. Often the epic hero has excessive pride (or "hubris") and is not afraid to sing his own praises. Although respected, the hero is not always someone likeable. An interesting dichotomy to analyze with the students: is it better to be a well-liked leader or a well-respected leader? Are both aspects possible? Blinded by his own praises, the hero seeks to enhance his own reputation and may take on foolish, dangerous battles in an effort to continue to add to his list of achievements. These actions not only put him in danger but also risk the lives of those around him. This, however, makes his victory even more glorious and his people, even more grateful. (Landow, George. "Notes on Heroic Poetry." <http://www.victorianweb.org/genre/epic2.html> ).

Bryan M. Davis in his article on the site *The Archetypal Hero in Literature, Religion, Movies, and Popular Culture* ( <http://titan.sfasu.edu/~beenet/resources/heromain.html>) further maps out characteristics of the archetypal or epic hero. He states that the following are common characteristics epic heroes possess. The characteristics are:

- 1 Unusual circumstances of birth; sometimes in danger or born into royalty
- 2 An event, sometimes traumatic, leads to adventure or quest
- 3 Hero has supernatural help
- 4 The Hero must prove himself many times while on adventure
- 5 When the hero dies, he is rewarded spiritually

These characteristics are not unlike modern heroes in movies and in popular culture. Having these characteristics allows students to read literature and look for these elements to determine whether or not a character or "hero" fits into the mold of the epic hero.

The journey is the key element of the epic and the epic cycle. The epic cycle, as outlined by Jennifer Foley in the online lesson plan, *Story of Epic Proportions: What makes a Poem an Epic?* ([http://edsitement.neh.gov/view\\_lesson\\_plan.asp?id=587](http://edsitement.neh.gov/view_lesson_plan.asp?id=587))

identifies key elements of the cycle. The elements are:

- 1 the hero must possess supernatural abilities or powers. These can often be magnified qualities we all possess (for example, strength we all possess but the hero's is superhuman).
- 2 the hero is charged with a quest that will test his abilities. This will test his worthiness to be a leader.
- 3 Then is the presence of helpers and companions as well as mythical animals or creatures during his journey.
- 4 The travels of the hero will take him to a supernatural world that ordinary humans are barred.
- 5 The cycle reaches a low point when we think the hero has been defeated but in the end, the hero resurrects himself and regains his rightful place.

In the book, *How to Read Literature like a Professor* , Thomas Foster gives five elements of the journey that readers can analyze. The five elements are

- 1 the quester himself,
- 2 a place to go,
- 3 a stated reason to go there,
- 4 challenges or trials en route during the journey,
- 5 the *real* reason a quester goes on the journey

Many questers set out to kill a beast or do something heroic to continue their reign as king or as someone of high esteem. However, after the journey is over, there is a message or lesson the quester must learn. This absolutely becomes the real reason the quester must take the journey and becomes something universal the students can learn from. ( Foster, Thomas *How to Read Literature Like A Professor*. New York: HarperCollins, 2003)

After learning about the epic, the class will then focus on *The Epic of Gilgamesh* . The poem will be the focus of a considerable amount of this unit. We will begin with some geographical and historical information regarding Mesopotamia.

## Mesopotamia

---

Information about Mesopotamia is drawn from Valerie Hansen's *Voyages in World History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, forthcoming 2009). Students may only need a brief review of Mesopotamia because it is often studied in World History class.

Mesopotamia and Egypt are believed to be the world's first civilizations. Mesopotamia, "between rivers," is the territory located between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, in modern day Iraq. A civilization, according to *Voyages in World History*, is a large urban center with a population of tens of thousands of people. These people had different jobs resulting in specialized labor. Initially, scholars believed a civilization had to have a system of writing, but over time this belief has changed.

The land of early Mesopotamia overall was harsh and hard to farm since the Euphrates and Tigris rivers often flooded during the early summer. Farmers developed an irrigation system and settled into the lower Mesopotamian plain between 6000 - 5000 BCE.

Early villages were small, but by 4000 BCE, villages grew to over 10,000 people. City states began to develop as well. A city-state had a ruler who not only governed the urban center but also the surrounding countryside. The king of the city-state was the intermediary between the gods and the people. The king, it was thought, not only consulted the gods but also, they believed, with temple priests and people of prominent families.

Sumerians were polytheistic, believing in many gods. The gods managed the environment. Within the city-state was a *ziggurat*. The ziggurat is the platform or terrace upon which temples for the gods were placed.

Sumer, which is the term referring to the area of Southern Mesopotamia, is believed to be where the world's first writing system developed. Initially, Sumerians wrote on clay tablets with a stylus. Around 3300 BCE, clay tablets had pictures on them representing different animals. Next to the pictures, there would be tally markings. Eventually, a writing system with over 700 signs emerged. By 700 BCE, a phonetic system had developed. Later Sumerian writing was known as *cuneiform*. Cuneiform is the Latin term for "wedge shaped".

### The Babylonian Collection at Yale University

Yale University in New Haven, CT has a unique collection entitled The Babylonian Collection. With some 45,000 documents and pieces, it is largest collection of Mesopotamian artifacts in the United States. The collection housed at the Sterling Memorial Library was a gift in 1909 from J.P. Morgan and contains ancient treatises, letters and business documents, administrative accounts, and literature starting at 3000 BCE. The collection is open to the public. Curators Benjamin Foster (the translator of the version of *Gilgamesh* referenced in this unit) and Ulla Kastan are available to help with school groups wishing to visit the collection. More information can be found at [www.yale.edu/nelc/babylonian.html](http://www.yale.edu/nelc/babylonian.html).

### Gilgamesh

The epic of *Gilgamesh* examines the quest for eternal life, friendship, abuse of power, and relationships. The epic is divided into twelve tablets each detailing a different aspect of Gilgamesh's adventures. Gilgamesh is the historical king of Uruk during 2700 BCE. Sumerian tablets still survive detailing his adventures. The tablets of this epic were found in the library of Ashurbanipal, the king of Assyria.

Having students read the tablets and then journal before and after will allow them to learn about Gilgamesh but also to learn about what the society valued and how they might react or act in the same types of situations. Each of the tablet summaries is followed by student journal questions to be used before or after reading the tablet. The following summary corresponds with Benjamin Foster's translation of *Gilgamesh* (Foster, Ed., Benjamin R.. The Epic of Gilgamesh. New York, NY: W.W.Norton, 2001). Page numbers also correspond with Foster's translation.

#### Tablet One (p.3-12)

Tablet One begins with Gilgamesh admiring the city walls of Uruk. Gilgamesh is 2/3 god and 1/3 human. He is a king who has superhuman abilities. These abilities are not something he does not know. He is not a kind king because of his youth and excessive pride. The people of Uruk call on the god, Anu, to help them against the rule of Gilgamesh. In response to the people, Anu created Enkidu, a wild beast of a man who lives in the forest. Enkidu is created to rival Gilgamesh and teach him humility and friendship.

While in the forest, a trapper comes across the wild, Enkidu, and Shamhat, a harlot, is sent to "tame" Enkidu with her sexuality. She approaches him and says:

*You are handsome, Enkidu, you are become like a god.*

Why roam the steppe with wild beasts? Come, let me lead you to unramparted Uruk

(Foster. The Epic of Gilgamesh, p.9)

If Enkidu gives in to this temptation, he will lose his strength and wildness, but will gain knowledge and understanding. Once his strength is lost, he is upset but learns he will be able to go into the city to meet Gilgamesh.

During this time, Gilgamesh has two dreams. Both dreams have something (a meteorite and an axe) arrive at his door. Gilgamesh's mother translates these dreams to mean that a great force will come to Uruk but will be a help to him both physically and mentally (Foster The Epic of Gilgamesh, p.10 - 12).

Student Journal Questions:

- What makes a good leader?
- Does Gilgamesh have these qualities yet?

Tablet Two (p.13-22) Enkidu enters the city and finds Gilgamesh forcing all the brides to be in the city to sleep with him first. "He mates with the lawful wife. He first, the groom after" (Foster. The Epic of Gilgamesh, p.15). Clearly, this is an abuse of his power and Enkidu is infuriated by this. They battle and although Gilgamesh wins the battle, he realizes Enkidu's strength and they embrace becoming the best of friends.

After the battle, Enkidu and Gilgamesh spend time in the city becoming lazy and bored by city life. Gilgamesh, always the epic hero, proposes that they take a journey into the Great Cedar Woods and chop down all the cedar trees. This might not be a problem if it were not for Humbaba, the keeper of the Great Cedar Woods.

Enkidu does not think this is a great idea but follows Gilgamesh anyway.

Student Journal Questions:

- Gilgamesh and Enkidu develop their friendship here. What are qualities of a strong friendship? Do you foresee these two men being able to maintain a strong friendship?

Tablet Three (p.23-29)

*Trust not, Gilgamesh, in your strength alone,*

Let your eyes see all, make your blow strike home. . .

We in our assembly entrust the King to you [Enkidu] *On your return, entrust the King again to us .*

(Foster The Epic of Gilgamesh, p.23)

This tablet is not all preserved. This is essentially the pre-journey tablet where we learn that all except Gilgamesh think it is a bad idea to go into the woods. The city elders entrust Gilgamesh's life unto Enkidu and assume Enkidu will be on the front line of the battle to ensure that Gilgamesh does not die.

Student Journal Question:

- Do you think this journey is a good or bad idea? Why?

Tablet Four (p.30-37) The beginning of the six day journey into the Great Cedar Woods begins in Tablet Four. Before beginning, Gilgamesh prays to Shamash, the sun god for protection. He then has six dreams. Many of the dreams were not preserved. One preserved dream is one that Gilgamesh dreams of a bull who splits the ground with its breath. The translation of the dream is that Shamash will protect Gilgamesh in battle.

When Enkidu and Gilgamesh arrive at the entrance to the forest, Gilgamesh becomes afraid and prays to Shamash again to protect him. Enkidu also gets scared and rather than support him, Gilgamesh fights him. Their fighting alerts Humbaba and they finally band together to fight the great Humbaba.

Student Journal Question:

- Analyze the dreams of Gilgamesh. What would you have interpreted those dreams to mean?

Tablet Five (p.38-45)

Gilgamesh and Enkidu enter the forest and begin to cut down the trees. Humbaba comes out and is shocked at what is going on. Enkidu lets Humbaba know that he and Gilgamesh are stronger than he will ever be. The epic battle begins! They fight Humbaba and even Shamash, the god, intervenes to help Gilgamesh and



Enkidu. Humbaba is defeated and with a knife in his neck, begs for his life. Gilgamesh feels a pang of emotion and hesitates while Enkidu tells him to stop wasting time and to kill Humbaba. While dying, Humbaba curses the pair saying that Enkidu will not live a long life and will find no peace in this world.

Student Journal Questions:

- Gilgamesh almost shows compassion toward Humbaba. What would change about Gilgamesh if he hadn't killed Humbaba?

Tablet Six (p. 46-52) After the great battle, Gilgamesh becomes a hero of widespread fame. Ishtar, a goddess, become interested in Gilgamesh and offers herself to him. Because she has been with many men, he refuses her and does so, with great insults. She returns to the heavens and asks Anu, her father, to send the Bull of Heaven down to cause problems for Gilgamesh. Like the dream Gilgamesh had before, the Bull's breath causes great abysses that kill many people in Uruk. Gilgamesh and Enkidu fight and defeat the Great Bull.

Student Journal Questions:

- What do you feel is the most important line from this section? Why?

Tablet Seven (p. 53-59) Enkidu becomes ill and learns that he has been chosen to die by the gods because he killed Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven. He is outraged that he was the one chosen and initially curses the trapper and the temple priestess who brought him out of the forest. Shamhash reminds Enkidu of his great friendship with Gilgamesh and how it is worth an untimely death (Foster 56). He thanks her for this knowledge and dies twelve days later.'

Student Journal Questions:

- What do you feel is the most important lesson that Enkidu has learned?

Tablet Eight (p.60-65)

*Hear me, O elders of [Uruk], listen to me!*

I mourn my friend, Enkidu, I howl as bitterly as a professional keener.

(Foster The Epic of Gilgamesh, p.61)

This tablet is essentially a lament for Enkidu by Gilgamesh and how Gilgamesh builds a monument for him in Uruk.

Student Journal Questions:

- If your friend were writing a "lament" about you, what would you want included?
- What do you feel is the most important line from this section? Why?

Tablet Nine (p.66-71) Gilgamesh is distraught that Enkidu is dead. He will not bathe, eat, or sleep. Enkidu's death makes Gilgamesh realize his own mortality and that frightens him. This is the impetus for him taking his next great journey.

Gilgamesh decides he needs to obtain eternal life and undertakes the most difficult journey of all to Utnapishtim and his wife. Utnapishtim is the only mortal who is granted eternal life and lives in the "Far Away". Utnapishtim survives the Great Flood which mirrors that of Noah's flood in the Bible.

When Gilgamesh arrives at Mount Mashu en route to Utnapishtim, the guards at Mount Mashu warn him against the journey as it is dangerous and will prove futile. Gilgamesh ignores this and travels twelve leagues into Night, eventually emerging into Day and into a brilliant garden of gems (Foster The Epic of Gilgamesh, p. 70).

Student Journal Questions:

- Would you want eternal life or eternal youth? Why?

Tablet Ten (p.72-83) Gilgamesh continues on toward Utnapishtim and again is warned that the journey is going to prove futile; however, his reaction is that of arrogance and violence. In order to get to Utnapishtim, Gilgamesh must cross the Waters of Death - if anyone touches the water, he will instantly die. After a difficult journey across the water, Gilgamesh arrives on the shore where an old man tells him seeking eternal life is pointless. Death is necessary because it is the will of the gods and whatever humans do will never be a permanent solution.

Student Journal Questions:

- Do you agree that seeking eternal life is pointless for Gilgamesh? Why or why not?

Tablet Eleven (p.84-95)

Gilgamesh realizes that the old man he meets is Utnapishtim himself. Utnapishtim reveals the secrets given to him as a result of the Great Flood. He gives Gilgamesh all the information about the Flood which then results in his gaining eternal life.

The Great Flood:

- took place in the city of Shuruppak, on the banks of the Euphrates
- gods decided to destroy the world and all the humans; they made a pact to tell no mortals of

this plan to flood the world.

- Ea, the god who created humanity, went to Utnapishtim and told him to build a boat, put his wife and all living things onto it. This was his way to get around actually telling someone about the flood.

- Although the gods were upset that Utnapishtim knew to save himself, he is granted eternal life as a result.

After hearing this story from Utnapishtim, Gilgamesh is offered immortality by Utnapishtim if he can stay awake for six days and seven nights. However, Gilgamesh falls asleep but lies saying he did stay awake. Instead of eternal life, he is given a plant to make him young again. Because Gilgamesh does not trust the plant, he plans to bring it back to Uruk to use on an old man. En route, a snake eats the plant and leaves Gilgamesh with nothing.

The story ends with Gilgamesh returning to Uruk and looking at the city walls. He takes a moment to take it all in and then begins to write his journey on tablets.

Student Journal Questions:

- What do you know of the Flood Story of the Bible? How does it compare to the story told by Utnapishtim?

- What do you predict for Gilgamesh after all his adventures?

## **The Story of the Flood from the Bible**

"The Lord saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thought of his heart was only evil all the time" (Genesis 6, Verse 5).

In the well known Biblical story of Noah and the Flood from Genesis, Chapters 6-9, the Christian God is saddened by the wickedness of man. He is saddened by how evil man is to one another and this fills Him with pain. To rid the Earth of this wickedness, God decides to wipe mankind from the Earth with a Flood; however, God found favor with Noah and instructs him how to survive.

Noah was righteous and had not fallen into the corrupt ways of the others on Earth. God said to Noah that He was going to put an end to all people and their wickedness. God instructed Noah to build an ark. On this ark, he was to put himself, his family, and two (male and female) of every living thing. The Lord instructed Noah that there would be forty days and forty nights of rain. God made a covenant with Noah to save all those on the ark.

After the flood, Noah opened a window in the ark. He first sent a raven to see if the flood waters had receded;

with no answer, he then sent a dove who eventually returned with an olive branch signifying the end of the great flood. After the flood, God vowed to never gain curse the Earth in this way.

This story should be read directly from the Bible itself (or a copy) by the students. After reading *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, students can use a graphic organizer to compare the two stories. An interesting question student can address is the message that the Christian god was trying to send to his people and the message the gods were sending to the people in Uruk. Students can also compare one God vs. the multiple gods of *Gilgamesh*. (Women's Devotional Bible: New International Version. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1995)

### **Other Twists on the Tale of Gilgamesh**

The Great American Novel by Philip Roth

Author Philip Roth decided to tackle the reincarnation of Gilgamesh in his *novel The Great American Novel*. This novel is about Gil Gamesh, pitcher of a fictional baseball team in the Patriots League. Gil feels he is the best baseball player around and even says he is amazing "because I'm Gil Gamesh! I'm immortal." During the 1933 baseball season, the star pitcher, filled with incredible rage, tries to kill an umpire and is banned from baseball. Gil immigrates to the Soviet Union and trains as a spy; eventually, he comes back to the United States as a spy for Stalin. Gil becomes the manager of his former team and his way to inspire his players is to make them hate their opponents. Gil then begins a witch hunt to find the Communists; while the league begins to turn on itself, Gil goes back to the Soviet Union.

This novel has very some small similarities to the epic of Gilgamesh. It is a work that can be used to compare to the McCarthy era of Communist finding. Excerpts can be taken to compare to the epic and/or to *The Crucible* or similar works. Teachers will want to give the students some information about this novel so that they can get a sense that the epic was not confined to the BCE time and that its themes and ideas are still finding their way into modern literature (Damrosch, David. *The Buried Book* New York: Henry Holt & Company, 2006. p.254-257).

*Zabibah wal-Malik (Zabibah and the King )* by Saddam Hussein

When one hears the name Saddam Hussein, author is normally not the first word that comes to mind. However, the dictator tried his hand at writing and produced a novel (although thought to be written by "ghostwriters") that parallels Gilgamesh. Interestingly, Saddam himself identified with Gilgamesh when he decided to leave Iraq in a search for "immortality" (254). Saddam had wanted to eventually rebuild Ashurbanipal's library in Nineveh, plaster casts of tablets and all. Saddam not only was interested in the great epic poem but was also interested in Iraqi history. In a 1978 essay, Hussein wrote, "the history of the Arab nation extends to the ancient ages, and that all the major civilizations which were born in the Arab world are expressions of the characteristics of [its] inhabitants" (259).

*Zabibah and the King* begins with a long prologue outlining Iraq's magnificent history. The story is of Zabibah, a prominent citizen who is married to a undesirable man, and the ruthless Assyrian king who falls in love with her. Zabibah brings humanity and compassion into the rulers life and teaches him ways to become a more just ruler

The novel serves as political propaganda in that it portrays the ruler in a kinder, gentler light and as being kind and fair to women. These images can only help Saddam look better in the eyes of his people.

This novel resembles Gilgamesh in that Zabibah is often compared to Enkidu who comes into Uruk to show

Gilgamesh his ruthless ways and in turn, seeks to make him a kinder ruler. Zabibah does this for the Assyrian king. Later analysis in *The Buried Book* went a step further and compared Hussein to Humbaba and George Bush to Gilgamesh who comes into the forest looking to destroy it. Teachers can use this novel as a reference for themselves and as an example for students to clearly see that the epic of *Gilgamesh* has affected various civilizations and reemerges in different forms throughout history. ( Damrosch, *The Buried Book*. p. 257-269).

## Strategies/Assessments

---

This unit lends itself to a variety of educational strategies. In a relatively homogeneous classroom, it is necessary to utilize a variety of strategies to reach *all* learners. The material in the curriculum unit provides a multitude of information in which a teacher can reach in, extract information and decide which strategies would work best to convey the information at hand. The use of PowerPoint to present some of the background information would work great because not only can the students get the information and potentially fill in graphic organizers but can also see maps and other visuals to enhance their understanding of Mesopotamia and/or the literary epic.

Students will also do text analysis. For me, text analysis is a combination of different writing techniques, especially the method of text rendering promoted by the Connecticut Writing Project. Text analysis will have students reading and responding in a journal. Journaling is a strategy to be used throughout the reading of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* . After reading each tablet, students will go into their journals and write down their thoughts and ideas about what is happening. The journal becomes a place to jot down ideas, ask questions, and look at key lines or events in the text. The journal also becomes a place students can refer back to when writing a final essay about the epic. Students will also write questions for the authors as well as for each other. For example, students may ask "why" a character made a certain choice or may begin a journal with "I wonder. . ." and make predictions about what characters may do.

Analysis of philosophical passages or important quotations is a skill and strategy that is becoming increasingly important in teaching literature. A philosophical passage is an important line or description from a text that will tell us what motivates a character or begins to tell us about a particular theme in the piece. During the reading of *Gilgamesh* , we will look for important passages and also look at how best to analyze them.

Direct instruction is a strategy often learned in education classes but often a tactic teachers are quick to shy away from because of the fear of "telling" students information rather than having them discover it themselves. In teaching about rhetoric and its history and/or teaching persuasive techniques, direct instruction can be used if the teacher involves the students. Doing K-W-L (Know, Want to Know, Learned) charts before and after a presentation, the students become involved rather than just sitting and listening.

Jigsaw activities involve students breaking out into smaller groups and performing a task (possibly an inquiry based task). After working with small groups, each of these groups chooses a speaker or presenter and conveys the findings to the entire class. Teachers can use the jigsaw technique to analyze a long speech (dividing it into sections and having groups analyze a section) or shorter speeches where each small group would have a different speech rather than analyzing parts of a larger one.

Assessment of the students' progress will be on-going. The two major assessments will be the student

presentations of selected tablets of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* . Students will work in groups to act out the tablet and discuss its importance.

## Classroom Activities:

---

The following lesson plans are designed to work in an 82-minute block. However, the teacher can add or subtract elements to suit his/her needs on any particular day.

### Activity #1: I Need a Hero

*Introduction to Lesson :*

Journal: What is a hero? List five to six qualities and two examples of a hero.

*Class Discussion :* Teacher will ask students for their examples and list all ideas on the board. Once this is done, students will return to their journals and choose the top three characteristics of a hero and explain why they chose those. Once done, students are to share with a partner.

*Direct Instruction:* Using PowerPoint, present the characteristics of the epic poem, the epic cycle, and the epic hero (information found in section labeled *The Literary Epic* ) .

*Group Work:* In small groups, students will complete a chart to begin creating their own epic hero and epic journey. Students will complete the following:

- 1 Name of Hero
- 2 The Force the Hero will battle
- 3 The Journey (specifically where will the journey start and finish)
- 4 Obstacles the Hero must overcome
- 5 How will the epic end
- 6 Theme or Real Reason hero took the journey

*Conclusion:* Groups will put information on chart paper and present to the class.

*Extension Activity:* Groups can create a children's book detailing the hero's journey. Students can also act out their mini-epic.

## **Activity #2: Woe is Me**

*Introduction to Lesson:*

Journal: "I wish I could see \_\_\_\_\_ again" - fill in the blank and write for three minutes

*Pairing Activity:* In pairs, students will share journal prompt. Partner will then write a letter to the other person in which they react to what was read.

*Direct Instruction:* Ask students what emotions they felt as they remembered someone they had not seen in awhile. Ask why they chose that particular person. Teacher will then explain what it means to lament and why people might write a lamentation for another person.

*Group Work:* In small groups, students will reread Tablet Eight of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* . Groups will choose the line that stands out the most and the line they feel expresses Gilgamesh's true emotion over the loss of Enkidu. When groups are done, a representative from the group will come to the board and write their chosen lines. Class will discuss findings and what these lines reveal about Gilgamesh and reveal about loss in general.

*Conclusion:* Students will write a ten line lament for someone they lost.

## **Activity #3: Gilgamesh Theater**

*Lesson Outline:*

- 1 Students will be put into groups of three or four, depending on class size. Each group will be assigned one of the eleven tablets from Foster's translation of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* .
- 2 Groups will read the tablet and develop a play to act out their particular tablet. Groups must use some lines directly from the text as well as paraphrasing lines to make the action move along.
- 3 Groups will also analyze their particular tablet and how it relates to the major themes in the epic.
- 4 Performances will be 5 minutes in length and will begin with a reading of the groups' analysis of the tablet. Points will be given for costumes, creativity, and adherence to requirements.

Note: Teachers can be as creative as the class will allow. Some teachers may wish to bring students to the auditorium to perform on stage. Others may allow students to bring the epic into modern times.

Written Assignments: 1. The Journal of Gilgamesh: Journal questions will be done each day. The answers to the questions will help students participate in the discussion as well as get thoughts and ideas on paper. At the end of the unit, students will choose their best seven or eight entries, type them, and hand them in as a test grade.

2. The Essay of Gilgamesh: Teachers can choose to assign one or all of the topics listed below:

- 1 Analyze the role of women in the text.
- 2 Analyze the friendship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu. Does this type of relationship mirror any others in literature?
- 3 Discuss Gilgamesh and whether or not he fits into the mold of "epic hero".
- 4 Compare and contrast the Flood story of Gilgamesh to that of Noah in the Bible.

## Annotated Bibliography

---

### Resources for Teachers and Students

#### *Books:*

Damrosch, David. *The Buried Book* New York: Henry Holt & Company, 2006. Besides being an incredible resource for the epic of *Gilgamesh* and its various reincarnations in literature, *The Buried Book* is a narrative detailing the discovery of the epic and its impact throughout history

Foster, Benjamin. *The Epic of Gilgamesh: A Norton Critical Edition*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001. This is a translation of Gilgamesh from various sources. The book also contains analogues, literary criticisms, and essays addressing the epic poem. It is the translation used for this curriculum unit and serves as a valuable resource.

Foster, Thomas *How to Read Literature Like A Professor*. New York: HarperCollins , 2003 . This book is a valuable resource for not only teachers but students looking to analyze literature. It is a way to "read between the lines" looking for hidden meaning and symbolism within the literature we read.

Geraldine McCaughrean,. *The Epic of Gilgamesh* Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans Books for Young Readers, 2003 . A retelling of the epic for ages nine and older. The story is the tale of Gilgamesh written in language for younger students. It includes illustrations and is a valuable resource for struggling readers or as an introduction to the epic.

#### *Internet:*

The British Museum (<http://www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk/default.aspx>). The website has a variety of materials and visuals pertaining to all aspects of world history. There are different visuals students can look at including the tablets of Gilgamesh and examples of cuneiform.

The Hero's Journey (<http://www.mcli.dist.maricopa.edu/smc/journey/>) - This website is designed to have students analyze and write a story using the structure of the mythical "hero". The site takes students and teachers on a "journey" to analyze and learn about different myths and epics.

The Hero's Journey: A Resource for Educators, Teachers, and Students (<http://www.yourheroicjourney.com/Curricul.shtml>). This website is a companion to the book, *The Hero's Journey: Guide to Literature and Life*. The author is quoted as describing the



book/site as "a 10 chapter, 12-unit curriculum which uses the pattern of the heroic journey as a foundation for studying and understanding literature, film, and experience." The website has links to different articles and essays as well as ways to purchase the book. Some of the information may prove valuable in teaching this unit.

Outta Ray's Head Lesson Plans (<http://home.cogeco.ca/~rayser3/litera1.htm>): This website has a wealth of writing activities. Some of the activities can be fine tuned and used within this curriculum unit.

Purdue University: Online Writing Lab ([http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/general/gl\\_logicon.html](http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/general/gl_logicon.html))- Website with information for persuasive writing as well as all types of writing. Helpful to students as they write their final essays.

### *Materials for Classroom Activities:*

- Copies of Benjamin Foster's *The Epic of Gilgamesh*
- Journals
- Excerpts of the Flood Story from the Bible
- Chart paper/poster paper
- Markers, glue, other art supplies
- Computers

## **Appendix**

---

The curriculum unit addresses the following Language Arts Standards from Grades 9 --12 for the City of New Haven

### Content Standard 1.0: Reading:

- Students will interpret the text - construct interpretation and/or explanation of the text and connect text to outside knowledge.
- Students will move beyond the text - reflect, make judgments about its quality and meaning.
- Students will construct meaning through analyzing, elaborating, and responding critically.

### Content Standard 2.0: Writing

- Students will write daily for different and varied purposes.
- Students will compose essays, stories, and other pieces about a variety of cultures.

## Content Standard 4.0: Listening

- Students will continue to construct meaning through initial understanding and interpretation.
- Students will construct meaning through analyzing, elaborating and responding critically.

Standards from *New Haven Public Schools Curriculum Documents* ([www.nhps.net](http://www.nhps.net))

## Bibliography

---

### Books

Damrosch, David. *The Buried Book* New York: Henry Holt & Company, 2006.

Foster, Benjamin. *The Epic of Gilgamesh: A Norton Critical Edition*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001.

Foster, Thomas *How to Read Literature Like A Professor*. New York: HarperCollins, 2003.

Valerie Hansen, *Voyages in World History* Boston: Houghton Mifflin, forthcoming 2009.

Women's Devotional Bible: New International Version. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1995.

### Internet

Davis, Bryan M. "The Archetypal Hero in Literature, Religion, Movies, and Popular Culture." 11 Oct 1997: 12 pp. Stephen F. Austin University. <http://titan.sfasu.edu/~beenet/resources/heromain.html>>.

Foley, Jennifer. "A Story of Epic Proportions: What Makes a Poem an Epic?." 20 Aug 2004. National Endowment for the Humanities. [http://edsitement.neh.gov/view\\_lesson\\_plan.asp?id=587](http://edsitement.neh.gov/view_lesson_plan.asp?id=587)>.

Hooker, Richard. "Mesopotamia: Gilgamesh." . *World Civilizations*. Washington State University. <http://www.wsu.edu/~dee/MESO/GILG.HTM>>.

Landow, George. "Notes on Heroic Poetry." *The Victorian Web*. 13 Sept 2003. <http://www.victorianweb.org/genre/epic2.html>. >.

"Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations: The Babylonian Collection." Yale University. Yale University. <http://www.yale.edu/nelc/babylonian.html>>.

"Writing of Mesopotamia." The British Museum. [http://www.mesopotamia.co.uk/writing/story/sto\\_set.html](http://www.mesopotamia.co.uk/writing/story/sto_set.html)>.

Databases (These can be accessed through the Thomson Gale Database <http://www.galegroup.com/> or via [www.iconn.org](http://www.iconn.org))

"Critical Essay on The Epic of Gilgamesh." *Epics for Students*. Ed. Marie Lazzari. Detroit: Gale Research, 1997. Discovering Collection. Thomson Gale. Wallingford Public Library. 16 Apr. 2007

"Hero" Merriam Webster's Encyclopedia of Literature. Merriam Webster's, Inc. 1995 NA. Academic OneFile. Thomson Gale.

---

<https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu>

©2019 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University

For terms of use visit <https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu/terms>