

# *Exploring the Eternal Spirit in the Multiple Identities of Gilgamesh*

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**Abstract:** Gilgamesh is the world's first heroic epic. It is about 3000 lines long in total. The epic tells the story of Gilgamesh's life as a man, a god, a hero, and a king. He has multiple identities, therefore, he is inevitably possessed of a heavy sense of responsibility and mission. This paper combines humanities texts analysis to analyse the topic. The research question is to explore the eternal spirit of Gilgamesh in his four identities. Through analysis, this paper demonstrates the power of a consistent spirit under different identities, both human and God, that is, freedom and courage. Such spirits represents the common will of mankind and God. In the Epic of Gilgamesh, the fate of man is determined by the gods. Everyone will experience the same death fate. Nevertheless, the spirit of freedom and courage in Gilgamesh helps him many times to overcome the fear of death, to cross the distance of space and to fight against his fate. Freedom and courage help you protect your basic rights as human beings. Freedom and courage are the paths to truth without being constrained by anything, including fate.

**Keywords:** Gilgamesh, Courage, Freedom, Ancient Literature

## 1. Introduction

In 3500 B.C., the area between two rivers in western Asia, the Tigris and the Euphrates, was known to the Greeks as "Mesopotamia." The Sumerians established the world's first city-state there, and 1,500 years later, the Amorites conquered the Sumerians and founded the Kingdom of Babylon. The heroic epic of Gilgamesh is considered the highest achievement of Babylonian literature. Zhang in History of World Literature suggests that "during the First Dynasty of Babylon, around the 18th century B.C., the original version of Gilgamesh was already inscribed on clay tablets in cuneiform script"[1].

By analyzing the humanities text, this paper explores the eternal spirit embodied in Gilgamesh's fourfold identity. Fear occupies and controls people's hearts. Besides, the emotion of fear dominates people's behaviour. Kyi suggests the root cause of corruption in Burma. Kyi says, "It is not power but fear that leads to corruption" [2]. People are afraid of losing because of fear and thus passively harm others. Kyi also concludes by suggesting that people should have the freedom to pursue truth without the constraints of fear [2]. Hence, the purpose of the study is finding the eternal spirits of Gilgamesh to address the prevalent fear in society. Also, the behaviours and consequences that come with this emotion.

## 2. Gilgamesh's Four Identities

The epic consists of twelve tablets and the main plot is divided into three main parts. The first part (tablets 1 to 8) tells of Gilgamesh's youthful pursuit of external power. He is half man and half god. He is powerful and tall. He is the king of the city of Uruk. However, his rule is too cruel. God then creates Enkidu to fight Gilgamesh. They become best friends in their fight. When Gilgamesh rejects Ishtar, Ishtar asks her father, the god of heaven, to create bulls to make the earth suffer. The bull's breath can open the ground and eat 200 people. Both Gilgamesh and Enkidu work together to kill the bull. However, the gods decide whether people live or die. Therefore, the gods decide that one of the heroes who kills the bull must die. Twelve days later, Enkidu dies. The second part (tablets 9 to 11) tells the story of Gilgamesh's middle-aged pursuit of inner power: the path to immortality. The death of his best friend makes Gilgamesh fear death. He realises that his fate will be the same as Enkidu's. He searches for human prophets in an attempt to understand the mysteries of life and death. The third part (tablet 12) describes Enkidu's escape from the underworld with Gilgamesh's assistance. Enkidu describes the tragedy of the underworld to Gilgamesh.

### 2.1. God and man

Gilgamesh is two-thirds god and one-third man. He is the son of the goddess Ninsun and Lugalbanda. According to Jacobsen's Table of Sumerian Kings, Lugalbanda is a king of the First Dynasty of Uruk, who is later deified as the god of the underworld [3]. Regarding Gilgamesh's identity as a half-human, half-god, George in *The Epic of Gilgamesh* describes him as "the wild bull of Lugalbanda, the perfect in strength" [4]. The Epic uses metaphor to describe him as a bull. The bull has a divine meaning in the epic. This is because, in the epic, Ishtar's father creates a bull to come down to earth and make people suffer because he indulges her. Comparing Gilgamesh to a wild bull implies his god identity. In addition, bulls have other symbolism during the Mesopotamian period. Harris writes that the bull also represents the moon, the crescent moon, in ancient mythology [5]. It is generally the consort of the sun goddess. Certainly, other myths can help understand the symbolism of the bull, such as the Taurus myth. The Taurus myth is a famous Greek mythology. It focuses on Zeus turning into a bull to seduce Europa into becoming one of his mistresses. The bull in the myth is an embodiment of Zeus [5]. In addition, Gilgamesh's appearance is tall, handsome, and powerful. His feet are three feet and his legs are half a pole long. He can cross six elbow-feet in one step [4]. Both his powers of strength and his tall appearance are blessed to him by the goddess.

### 2.2. King

Gilgamesh is also a king. The first tablet of the epic explains his identity as a king. Though the epic praises him for surpassing all other kings with extraordinary achievements. However, his rule as ruler of Uruk is very violent and unequal. He never considers equality when wielding his weapons. He tramples his fellows under his feet [4]. He prefers to pursue external power in his youth. He loves to fight. Therefore, he is not a democratic and responsible king in his youth.

### 2.3. Hero

Campbell defines heroes as those who are able to fight against personal and local historical limitations [6]. Gilgamesh is considered a heroic figure because he is brave enough to fight against Humbaba, even though Humbaba's voice is as horrible as a flood and breathing brings death. Gilgamesh is never afraid to fight. He believes that people can be tested in battle. Gilgamesh's heroic identity also hints at his inevitable death in battle. Heroes, war, and death are closely linked. Abusch makes the point

that the valiant warrior tends to exist in times before the developed world. He usually represents the troops and power needed to fight the enemy before institutionalisation [7].

Gilgamesh has four different identities. God gives him multiple identities. He is given a great burden. He is half man, half god, a hero, and a king. As a hero, he has to fight against his enemies. As a king, he has to build the civilisation of the kingdom. As a human, he has to perceive death and the loss of friends. As a half-god, he has tremendous and unparalleled power. His life is busy, and he is born with a sense of mission. He is burdened with the responsibility of protecting the kingdom. He is conflicted within himself. So who is he exactly? He had to choose his identity. He needs to choose his views and actions. With this conflicted self and multiple identities, the qualities of Gilgamesh are enlarged. His eternal spirit of freedom and courage is revealed.

### 3. Eternal Spirits of Gilgamesh: Freedom and Courage

Freedom is defined as every person's speech, behaviour and beliefs not being controlled by others. The Assembly in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights declares that every human being has the right to freedom [8]. Therefore, freedom is the most fundamental right, the inherent right of every human being. Furthermore, Act 18 suggests that every human being is born with the freedom of thought, conscience, and religion [8]. Moreover, each individual is different and separate. Each individual certainly has different thoughts, opinions, beliefs, and behavioural choices. Act 19 suggests that freedom means that each person has the freedom to express his or her thoughts and opinions [8].

Sartre's existentialism asserts that freedom is the freedom to choose, not the freedom not to choose [9]. The eternal spirit of Gilgamesh lies in the fact that he always has the freedom and courage to choose. Many events in the epic prove that Gilgamesh freely chooses what he likes and dislikes. For example, he rejects the love of Ishtar, a god who is greatly worshipped by the Babylonians. She is Inanna in Sumerian. And she is an important god in the epics, her father is the god Anu, and her mother is Antum [10]. She symbolises love and beauty. Stuckey for Inanna's Descend to the Underworld, corroborates Ishtar's identity as a god of love. When Ishtar goes to the Underworld to save her lover Dumuzid, the earth loses its life [11]. People stop falling in love with each other and reproducing their offspring. By losing Ishtar, people lost their ability to love and be loved. In addition, the sixth tablet of Gilgamesh's epic tells of Ishtar, the god of love and beauty, falling in love with Gilgamesh and making a bold marriage proposal to him. After Gilgamesh returns from killing Humbaba, Ishtar falls deeply in love at the sight of him dressed in new clothes, wrapped in a cloak, wearing a belt, and wearing a crown [4]. She asks Gilgamesh to be her husband. She promises that after the marriage she will bring him riches and honour, for example, a chariot made of gold with golden wheels and a horn of amber. The king's ministers and nobles would submit to him. They will bring her a large sheep. It seems like there is an abundance of resources. Instead, Gilgamesh rejects Ishtar without hesitation because he supposes that Ishtar's love is constricting and possessive. He accuses her of loving the bird but beating it and breaking its wings. This type of love relationship is not what Gilgamesh wants to pursue. Therefore, Gilgamesh chooses the freedom of rejection, even if it is followed by Ishtar's revenge.

Gilgamesh's freedom and courage also lie in the fact that he never resigns to fate. He is free to pursue the truth. Courage is defined in the Cambridge dictionary as "the ability to control your fear in a dangerous or difficult situation." Firstly, Gilgamesh's behaviour against the Humbaba proves his spiritual strength. Everyone is against him fighting Humbaba, including the elders and Enkidu. The elders try hard to prevent Gilgamesh, they think that he is young and easily carried by enthusiasm. Enkidu reckons that Humbaba was powerful and dangerous. He says that Humbaba's voice is as horrible as a flood, and that breathing will bring death. But Gilgamesh believes that his life is limited and all that exists is nothing. Besides, man will grow by trial and error in dangerous battles. He also advises Enkidu not to be a coward. He believes that Enkidu has the power of the wilderness. Enkidu

was born in the wilderness, and even the lions were afraid of him. In the end, he overcomes the Humbaba. Thus, Gilgamesh has the freedom and courage to pursue the truth without fear.

Secondly, when the epic enters its second part (tablets 9-11), many of Gilgamesh's actions in his pursuit of immortality express that he does not want to be constrained by fear. They reveal his freedom and courage. Gilgamesh's heart is transformed due to the death of his best friend, Enkidu. The character of Enkidu is created by God to fight Gilgamesh. Enkidu exists in the wilderness because of Gilgamesh. As they combine their efforts to kill the bull of heaven, they disobey God's will. The god decides that Enkidu should be punished by death. Gilgamesh realises that a man's fate is determined by the gods. He realises that he will suffer the same fate of death as Enkidu. He begins to fear death as well as being controlled by fate. However, he does not follow his fate. He seeks the truth of immortality. He keeps searching for the end of the world. He travels across all the earth, crosses all the barriers to the place where the sun sets, and races against it. There is darkness all around. The guard tells him no one can cross the darkness. Gilgamesh does not hesitate to walk towards the place with the light. He walks out before the sun, and the light reappears. Gilgamesh then goes back to the goddess Siduri and convinces her to show him the way to cross the ocean. Gilgamesh then goes to the forest and cuts down 300 trunks. It takes him a month to cross the Sea of Death. Also, he sinks himself to the bottom of the ocean to find the plant of life (the plant as possibly being a type of spiky coral. It used to have healing effects) [12]. That grass can make people younger.

Thirdly, Gilgamesh brings Enkidu's soul back to earth from the underworld. This action embodies the spirit of freedom and courage. The whole of the epic expresses the idea that death is inevitable and that God creates life as well as death. No one can live forever. But Enkidu dies, Gilgamesh begs the sun god to hide it from his father. Let him open a crack in the world of hell. So that Enkidu's soul can return from the underworld. Gilgamesh does not find a way to immortality. He knows that his best friend's death is irreversible. But he still travels to hell to bring Enkidu's soul back to the real world. God's control is so powerful that he creates human beings and also creates a bull to make the earth suffer. Gilgamesh bravely fights fate and redeems Enkidu against the will of the gods. The last tablet of the epic is incomplete. Perhaps Gilgamesh will be punished again for going against the will of the gods to bring Enkidu back to life. But he would never resign himself to fate.

#### 4. Conclusion

In a nutshell, under four different identities, Gilgamesh expresses the eternal spirit of freedom and courage through his actions. He is unwilling to accept fate, he chooses to pursue immortality and bravely explores the unknown truth. He wants to fight for his own honour, so he fights the Humbaba. Furthermore, he fears death, so he pursues the path of immortality. He goes to the end of the world and races against the sun. Though the path is full of darkness, he never gives up the pursuit of light. In his pursuit of immortality, he crosses all the lands, crosses the oceans, and sinks to the bottom of the sea. He searches the world for the answer to life. Everyone tells him God creates not only life, but also death. Death is inevitable. Man's fate is determined by God, as in Enkidu's death. Nevertheless, in the last tablet of the epic, Gilgamesh goes against God's rules and redeems Enkidu's soul from the underworld. Bringing his soul back to life. Even though he knows that man's fate is determined by the gods, he still follows a path that can break his fate.

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