

PROJECT -1

- 1- Uta-napishti gives Gilgamesh at least two tests; if he passes either of these tests, he will gain immortality. What are these tests? Does Gilgamesh pass them or fail them? Why? Look closely at the text: what does it tell you, what you infer from it?

In the Epic of Gilgamesh, Enkidu's death triggers Gilgamesh's transformation of being a tyrant shepherd of Uruk to He who saw the Deep. The epic tells, after Enkidu's death, Gilgamesh becomes obsessed with his own mortality. In the search of immortality, he seeks to find Uta-napisti to learn how he became immortal. Gilgamesh's confrontation with Uta-napisti teaches him three important lessons about the cosmos, mortality and his responsibility towards Uruk people. In order to teach these lessons, Uta-napishti tests Gilgamesh in three different ways.

My personal opinion is, the first test is understanding Uta-napisti's explanation of life and his story. Uta-napishti's words are precisely selected phrases to teach Gilgamesh, his place in the cosmos and there is no immortality for humanly creatures unless assembly of God's changes their opinion. Although understanding Uta-napishti's words do not require a physical action like he has been previously tested by Gods, it is a mental test whether he understands or not. It is something totally unique for Gilgamesh since he only used his physical power in previous tasks given by Gods. Therefore, it is clear he will be evaluated by his response. Uta-Utnapishtim explains the cosmos by saying: "Mammitum, maker of destiny, fixed fates with them: both Death and Life they have established, but the day of Death they do not disclose." (87). The given explanation of Uta-Utnapishtim about life and death states there is a balance in the cosmos about life & death created by Gods and be only known by the Gods. Gilgamesh is expected to understand his existence depends on the decision of Gods as he is mortal. However, Gilgamesh fails to understand this test as he insists on asking Uta-napistim's story of being immortal.

Gilgamesh also fails to understand Uta-napishtim's story which also resembles the story of prophet Noah. Uta-napishtim's story differs from Noah's story since he deceives his people by stating there will be a great harvest. Although he achieves immortality as a gift from God's, Gilgamesh doesn't realize Uta-napishtim might be punished by living across Death of Waters only with his wife as an old-wise man. The way Uta-napishti is awarded with immortality but leaving isolated in the distant lands suggests everything comes with a price which Gilgamesh fails to understand as he still seeks to find immortality.

The second test given by Uta-napishti was staying awake for six nights and seven days: "For six days and seven nights, come, do without slumber!"(95). The tests symbolize death is a part of human life and there is no such a thing as being immortal unless assembly of God's make a decision about one's life like they did for Uta-napishtim and his wife. Uta-napishtim knows Gilgamesh can't pass the test since sleep is an essential need for humans to survive like food and water and Gilgamesh is one-third human. Not surprisingly, Gilgamesh fails: "See the fellow who so desired lie! Sleep like a fog already breathes over him" (96). Furthermore, it can be inferred that sleeping is symbolically linked to death in the test. In a sense, both death and sleep are a rest from labor and inevitable as nature of the cosmos. So

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The Epic of Gilgamesh. Penguin Classics, 2016.

staying awake stands for overcoming death. Throughout the epic, human-related actions frequently take place in six nights and seven days. Even in the Uta-napishtim's story, the raven finds a land in the seventh day: "The seventh day when it came, I brought out a dove (...) It did not come back to me" (94). The length of the time that Uta-napishtim asks Gilgamesh to stay awake supports the fact that it is an impossible test for Gilgamesh to pass this test to become immortal since he is partially human. With this test, Gilgamesh learns there is no such a thing as immortality for any human creature.

Although Gilgamesh learns there is no immortality, Uta-Utnapishtim gives another test to Gilgamesh since he knows Gilgamesh will deny his mortality unless he reminds him of his responsibility towards Uruk. Gilgamesh is so driven by becoming immortal and he does not accept his own limits that Uta-napishtim knows he should give him a reason to go back to ruling Uruk. Uta-napishtim gives the secret of how to be young again by eating a magical plant which only grows below the ocean: "There is plant that (looks) like a box thorn (...) if you possess this plant, you'll be young again as you were in youth" (98). Even in this test, Uta-napishtim secretly highlights the fact that there is no way to be immortal but only be young again. Unfortunately, a serpent steals this plant from Gilgamesh as he takes a bath in the pool. In a way Gilgamesh passes this test since he wants to use this plant for the favor of Uruk as he says:

"This plant, Ur-shanabi, is "Plant of Heartbeat",
 With it a man can regain his vigour.
 To Uruk-the-Sheepfold I will take it,
 To an ancient I will feed some and put the plant to the test!
 Its name shall be "Old Man grown Young".

Gilgamesh's words are more responsible now because he wants to use this plant for his people rather than only to postponing his own death. He contemplates he might use this plant for assembly of Uruk's elders to achieve more from their knowledge. Although he can't achieve this goal as a serpent steals the plant, he learns he can't postpone his death but he should use his lifetime wisely for the faith of Uruk. Moreover, the way he returns back to Uruk and protects it by constructing walls suggests he passes this test.

Uta-napishtim's last test also emphasizes Gilgamesh's transformation from one state of mind to another. Just before Enkidu and Gilgamesh kills Humbaba, Humbaba tells Gilgamesh "You are so young(...)" (42) which implies he still does not achieve wisdom though Shepherd of Uruk is powerful enough to beat Humbaba. However, the way Uta-napishtim tells him how to be young again suggests he has reached a certain level of wisdom with their confrontation that he is old enough to be young again. As a result, we can conclude, epic emphasizes Gilgamesh's transformation from being a tyrant king to He who saw the deep.

In conclusion, Gilgamesh acquaintance with Uta-napishtim teaches him three important lessons: his place in the cosmos as a mortal, there is no such thing as immortality

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and his responsibility towards Uruk. While learning these lessons, Gilgamesh fails the first two tests whereas passes the last test as he becomes a wiser king now.”

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The Epic of Gilgamesh. Penguin Classics, 2016.