

Invitation to World Literature: The Epic of Gilgamesh Video Transcript

Damrosch:

It's really the first buddy story. The first road movie

Starlin:

It's a root source. Gilgamesh is lumped in there in my head with Moby Dick, and Beowulf, and Captain America. Plenty of action,

Gracia:

Sex, romance.

Damrosch:

There's violence, adventure.

Starlin:

Maybe it's survived as long because it can become a little something for everybody

Ashikawa:

This is the epic that includes most important philosophy ever

TITLE CARD GILGAMESH

TITLE CARD IAUMI ASHIZAMA / Choreographer:

My first encounter to the Gilgamesh was in Japan.

TITLE CARD LUDMILLA ZEMAN / Childrens Book Author and Illustrator:

When I read all these versions and translations, I fall in love right away.

TITLE CARD AZAR NAFISI / Author:

The first time I heard of Gilgamesh was through my father, I must have been around five or six.

TITLE CARD JIM STARLIN / Comic Book Writer and Illustrator:

In New York in the 70s. And I would go to cocktail parties and everyone would say, "Hey, we have to do a comic book of Gilgamesh." And I would pretend like I knew what they were talking about.

TITLE CARD YUSEF KOMUNYAKAA / Poet and Playwright:

I had been reading a lot about mythology and the gods.

TITLE CARD CHRIS WHITE / Middle School Teacher:

I was 16 when I first heard the name Gilgamesh, and I was watching a Star Trek episode that featured him.

(clip)

Chris White:

Part of me thought it was just something that they had made up for the episode, and part of me was really interested because the captain referred to it as one of the oldest stories of his planet, meaning Earth.

Damrosch:

The epic of Gilgamesh is the oldest masterpiece of world literature. Four thousand years old in its oldest form. Older than the Bible.

Gracia:

And it tells the quite simple tale of the transformation of a bad king into a good king. And that transformation happens when he is forced to confront his mortality.

Spelany:

the oldest question basically that humans have always had, is what happens when you die?

Azar Nafisi:

Stories connect us as human beings, so we need to know that three thousand years ago, creatures lived on this earth who felt the same way that we did.

Our Hero

Foster:

Gilgamesh was born a king, so he had all the advantages of a king and a certain divinity that hedged a king. // he was two-thirds divine and one-third human, so he's a kind of larger than life figure.

Gracia:

(reads) "Surpassing all other kings heroic in stature, brave sign of Uruk, wild bull on the rampage.

Nafisi:

(reads) "Who dug wells in the slopes of the outlands, and crossed the wide sea to the sunrise."

Gracia:

(reads) Gilgamesh was his name from the day he was born.

Starlin:

He's a tyrant at the beginning of the series. When I did my version I pictured him towering around 8 or 9 feet. Find your modern day Schwarzenegger, your Vin Diesel or something like that. He's fighting all the time. He's busting things up.

Damrosch:

He's arrogant, he's full of himself. He's abusing his subjects. He's sleeping with women on their wedding nights. He's completely out of control. Gracia

And the gods decide to teach him a lesson. They send down a double, and this double is called Enkidu.

Yusef:

Actually, Enkidu is a kind of mirror of Gilgamesh. It's almost like two Gilgameshes.

Foster:

Enkidu is the classic number two. You know, a Sherlock Holmes, Doctor Watson kind of pairing.

Starlin:

When Enkidu and Gilgamesh first meet, they immediately go into a fight. Yusuf

There is this fight that goes on for 40 days, 40 nights// they have tried each other in battle. Coming to a moment and realizing they're equally strong

Starlin:

You know, it's basically about him coming to terms with himself.

White:

As soon as Enkidu comes on the scene, they've had their battle, and that they're now friends, Gilgamesh is no longer a tyrant.

Foster:

He discovered something else, that is instead of just being yourself that there is something wonderful about being engaged with another human being.

Enkidu of the Apes

Azar Nafisi:

Enkidu. He's the natural man like Adam. He is innocent and he has to bite the apple through the divine harlot who seduces him.

Damrosch:

He starts as this wild man covered with hair, the gods send the temple prostitute out to him named Shamhat,

Foster:

Her basic task is to humanize Enkidu. The idea is that sexual contact with a woman will remove him from the animal world and will make him a human being.

Damrosch:

(reads) "While the two of them together were making love, he forgot the wild where he was born. For seven days and seven nights, Enkidu was erect and coupled with Shamhat."

Nafisi:

(reads) "You are handsome, Enkidu. You are just like a god. Why with the beasts do you wander the wild?"

Gracia:

(reads) "Come, I will lead you to Uruk. You too, like a man, will find a place for yourself. "

Gracia:

Sex plays a civilizing role. She teaches him not only the ways of love, but she teaches him language/ how to drink from a cup.

Nafisi:

In many epics, women are the ones who stay behind. In Gilgamesh, they ignite certain things. They motivate the protagonist to go to certain places that he might not have gone.

Damrosch:

And unlike, say, in the story of Genesis, this is a very city-oriented epic. Shamhat tells him, oh, what are you doing out here in the countryside? Come to the city! We have good clothing, we have music, oh and there's also some temples here — come along!

Fiction or Non-Fiction?

Damrosch:

Gilgamesh was an historical figure. He was the king of an early city-state named Uruk in southern Mesopotamia.

Gracia:

Uruk is a few hours' drive from Baghdad, and there was a lot of warfare that went on and continues to this day.

Foster:

The city still exists under more or less the same name, so you can actually go and visit Uruk, and you can trace the outline of the great walls, which in Mesopotamian tradition were attributed to Gilgamesh, you can see the recreation of the great temple of Ishtar, which Gilgamesh at least knew.

Damrosch:

One of the benefits of reading Gilgamesh is to see Iraq in a new way. to understand, this is the cradle of our own civilization.

Nafisi:

I read it in college. It was in the seventies and I was protesting the war in Vietnam. I was protesting against the Shah's regime, and one of the things that struck me at that time about Gilgamesh was the fact that he was so paradoxical. Gilgamesh himself. Do we

empathize with him? Do we hate him? That whole hubris bred of power, and the greed to want to do more becomes very naked.

Damrosch:

Shortly before the second war broke out, Saddam Hussein gave a speech to his generals in which he said, well perhaps like Gilgamesh he would go off and meditate for a while, so that the work has an extraordinary vitality in political life today.

Foster:

I think what fascinated me about the story most was, how is it that this one ancient text, of all the other thousands of ancient texts that we have, exercises such a hold over the modern imagination? What are exactly the factors behind it?

Foster:

An Assyriologist is a person who concerns himself professionally with the ancient languages of Mesopotamia, such as Babylonian, Sumerian, Assyrian. It's the best conversation stopper in the world. If you want someone to drop you at a cocktail party, tell them you're an Assyriologist.

Damrosch:

Gilgamesh survives on a series of tablets. It looks sort of like terra cotta roofing tiles inscribed with this very teensy tiny script called cuneiform script, which means wedge-shaped.

Foster:

It looks as though chickens had walked across clay.

Damrosch:

You can't even work from a photograph of it because these cuneiform tablets are three-dimensional. You have to play with it to see the shadows cast into the little marks. You have to turn it under the light.

Foster:

we almost never have the work complete. Clay tablets break. They often break at the beginning and the end. So what you have is the middle of the text. That's why the first line was one of the last things to be recovered.

Damrosch:

(reads) "He who saw the wellspring, the foundation of the land, who knew the ways, was wise in all things, Gilgamesh... He it was who inspected all things throughout. Full understanding of it all he gained. He saw what was secret, revealed what was hidden. He brought back tidings from before the flood. Take up and read from the lapis tablet of him, Gilgamesh, who underwent many hardships."

Foster:

Anyone who reads a cuneiform tablet has a special experience in front of them. They are reading something which someone else wrote 4,000 years ago. This is their actual handwriting in a piece of clay, and you do feel a kind of communion with these people. The manuscript you're looking at is the only one, and you're figuring out what it was they wrote.

The Heart of the Story

Damrosch:

Gilgamesh and Enkidu go to a distant cedar forest to cut down trees and bring them home for use in building.

Azar Nafisi:

And the keeper of the forest, Humbaba, is ugly and, in a sense, evil.

Damrosch:

Gilgamesh and Enkidu make him captive and then they decide to kill him.

Nafisi:

His mother and the elders of the city and the gods are all against it. And he goes against all the good advice.

Damrosch:

(reads) "Enkidu opened his mouth to speak saying to Gilgamesh 'My friend. Humbaba who guards the forest of cedar - finish him, slay him, do away with his power... before Enlil the foremost hears what we did. The great gods will take against us in anger, establish forever a fame that endures, how Gilgamesh slew ferocious Humbaba.

Damrosch:

Enkidu says, We better kill him right now. Get ahead of the news cycle. Kill him before the gods realize we've got him as a captive and they cut off his head.

Zeman:

Gilgamesh was able to cut his head

Azar Nafisi:

And the gods were angry and they decided that someone should pay, And the person that was chosen to pay was Enkidu.

Damrosch:

and after Enkidu dies, he waits by his body for seven days and seven nights, not willing to accept that he's died, until finally a worm crawls out of Enkidu's nose. It's a really shocking physical detail. It's meant to make your flesh creep.

Starlin:

If I was gonna do a movie, that would be the scene.

Gracia:

(reads) "Six days I wept for him, and seven night, I did not surrender his body for burial until a maggot dropped from his nostril. Then I was afraid that I, too, would die. I grew fearful of death, so I wandered the wild. "

White:

(reads) "How can I keep silent? How can I stay quiet? My friend Enkidu, whom I loved, has turned to clay."

Starlin:

"Shall I not be like him and also lie down, never to rise again, through all eternity?"

Zeman:

When you love someone so much, you feel that this cannot happen. That you cannot lose someone you love so much.

Zeman:

My daughter, she was hit by car, and she was in coma, unconscious and I said my life is over, I don't know how to deal with this pain. I was holding her when she was unconscious in the hospital and I said, you have to be alive. You want to hold this person and transfer your life to this person. Your heart is broken. That time I really start to search for Gilgamesh story. I couldn't read anything else. Thanks she recover.

Linda Zeman / Filmmaker:

That picture, when I look at that picture, I couldn't believe my mother was able to express this emotion, the pain, the hopelessness that he experienced.

Damrosch:

It's probably not a coincidence that I came back to work on this book quite soon after the death of my parents. This is, this is a work that speaks so deeply to the sense of loss, the sense of recovery, then so what do you have, what's left after someone you love has died?

Zeman:

This is the human life that you have to overcome this kind of pain.

Gracia:

When Gilgamesh realizes that his friend has died, the first question he asks is, is this my fate as well? And so he sets off on a journey to the edge of the world, to seek immortality.

Damrosch:

Literal immortality. He doesn't want to die. He hhas heard that an ancestor of his, Utanapishtim and his wife, survived the great flood that destroyed the world centuries before. And he goes to seek out Utanapishtim.

Damrosch:

And Utanapishtim is a kind of figure that we know as Noah in the Bible. Foster The tales of the two stories are unmistakably the same story.

Damrosch:

Very similar, he builds an ark, saves the animals, they sail on it for days and nights,

Foster:

“Adad's awesome power passed over the heavens, whatever was light was turned into darkness, he flooded the land, he smashed it like a clay pot.”

(Foster reads text in Babylonian language, Nafisi reads in Farsi, Izumi reads in Japanese).

Nafisi:

Somehow the mood comes through the words, the echoes in the words. I did not really understand the glory of it till I read it out loud.

Raiders of the Lost Tablet

Foster:

We don't know when the standard version that we have now was brought to fruition.

Damrosch:

It was used as a school text. People would learn how to write by copying passages of Gilgamesh, probably because like teachers today, teachers then realized, this is a cool story, this will grip the students, and it's got good vocab.

Foster:

It was copied and studied for nearly two thousand years, but then ancient Mesopotamia became a battleground, and in one of its wars, the last person was killed who could read cuneiform.

Gracia:

Around 100, 200 A.D. it was entirely lost. It's rare that a piece of so much importance is gone, and then comes back. Imagine if we lost Shakespeare, all the plays were gone, and then 2,000 years, someone uncovered an old dusty copy of the plays. That's what happened with Gilgamesh.

Foster:

It was first discovered by an adventurer, who went out to Nineveh and dug up a whole mass of antiquities.

Damrosch:

They found statues, they found carvings. In one place in particular, a hundred thousand fragments of tablets.

Gracia:

They sat at the British Museum, with these tablets for decades, just scratching their heads.

Damrosch:

George Smith was a young curator at the British Museum. He'd been hired to clean tablets. So he finds a tablet on which there is a flood, there is an ark, there is a figure who is sending a raven and a dove, to find out if the water has dried up. When he found this, he said I am the first person to read this story after 2,000 years. He was so excited, he started undressing himself.

Foster:

I should say that most of us know the thrill of discovery of one kind or another when we're deciphering tablets, but we don't usually take our clothes off.

Damrosch:

Within days of his report, there were front page articles around the world, The New York Times has an article debating, what's the meaning of this? Does it prove that the story of the flood is true? Or does it prove that it's just a legend?

Gracia:

On the one hand you had the Christians, the religious groups, that said a-ha, here is proof that the Bible is true. On the other hand, you had the secularists, who said, aha, this is proof that the Bible is just a collection of stories that were circulating around in the Middle East, and in Mesopotamia at this time.

Damrosch:

Crowds flocked to the museum to see these tablets, to probe for themselves the question of this history. Did this confirm the truth of Biblical history, what can they trust of the Bible? After all if the flood never happened, if Eden never happened, well, what about the resurrection of Jesus?

Foster:

We're still missing some big pieces and some very important episodes,

Damrosch:

Typically, translations now will use series of dots or brackets or just white space to try to give a sense of what's missing and how much is missing.

Yusuf:

I don't know if it would be as intriguing if there weren't a hundred ellipses. There are these great silences in the piece. So we can negotiate within those silent spaces. We can imagine, within those spaces.

(White singing song) White:

I wrote a song about the epic of Gilgamesh to liven the atmosphere and to permanently stick the story in their head. And I will walk around the school and hear them singing snatches of the song here and there and I'm like, yes! Cuz I've got it in their heads. It's there and it'll stay there.

TITLE CARD: As GILGAMESH has circled the globe for centuries...each reader creates his own version of GILGAMESH.

Starlin:

(he draws) There's Gilgamesh, basically. He's all square angles, even his jaw. Where on the other hand, with Enkidu, everything is round. More organic, more the animal, more natural than Gilgamesh. a reflection, a shadow of Gilgamesh himself. All right. That's the way I sort of picture the two characters.

Izumi:

Our performance of Gilgamesh was mainly focused on the conflict between civilization and nature. (Footage of dance performance; Izumi does dance with masks in studio)

Zeman:

In my picture, Enkidu, his arms are covered by feathers because Sumerians believed that when a person die, he change into a bird.

Yusuf:

Gilgamesh is speaking here I glimpsed a star falling from the sky and attempted to grab it up in my arms. But my knees buckled because I was too weak, I was dying in my dream.

Izumi:

It's almost made me possible to create in a way a dream world

How it all ends

Damrosch:

One of the most poetic expressions of the brevity of existence comes in the old Babylonian version in which the old tavern keeper Siduri gives him some advice. (He reads) " 'Oh Gilgamesh, where are you wandering? The life you seek you never will find.

Ashikawa:

When the gods created humans, they also created death. They kept eternal life only for themselves

Damrsoch:

But you, Gilgamesh. make merry each day. Let your wife enjoy your repeated embrace. For such is the destiny of mortal men.”

Ashikawa:

That phrase just struck me really strongly. Men were born, they live, and they die. But, until the last moment comes, live your life with joy. It is Zen idea, right there.

Damrosch:

I find the end of the epic very meaningful. Utnapishtim tells him how he can find a little plant that will give him immortality and rejuvenate him. But Gilgamesh fails because on his way home, a serpent steals it.

Damrosch:

(reads). “As the snake turned away, it sloughed off its skin. Then Gilgamesh sat down and wept. Down his cheeks the tears were coursing.

Damrosch:

Instead of actually getting immortality what he finds is the best thing he can have, which is knowledge of the past and a return home to his city. This is the kind of immortality that he can have.

Damrosch:

(reads) A square mile of the city, half a square mile of the temple of Ishtar, three square miles and a half is Uruk's expanse

Damrosch:

The epic ends on those lines. The city is the consolation for the brevity of existence.

Nafisi:

The city survives the king. It is like the song surviving the singer.

Damrosch:

This is the cradle of our own civilization. It's really one civilization that we're all part of.

Yusuf:

There isn't really an end to Gilgamesh. It has been embellished along the way. That's what endurance is about, I suppose.

Foster:

And to me it's inspiring that whether it's in Czech or whether it's in Arabic, painting or book art, it continues to live in a way that other compositions from the ancient world don't.

Gracia:

People are doing cartoons, people are writing plays, people are doing poems, people are doing dance - all because of something that was created 4,500 years ago and that was entirely forgotten for two millennia.

Yusuf:

It beckons. It beckons us into it. And very few pieces can do that.

GILGAMESH