Reading guide/study questions – *Gilgamesh*

We’re using the Norton edition rather than the Penguin, which I’ve used for the last few years. The Norton is more accessible to an American audience, I think. Note that the editor of the Penguin edition, [Andrew George](https://www.soas.ac.uk/staff/staff30983.php), appears as a source in our edition. Andrew George is the god of Babylonian studies.

Tablet 1 – Note the praise of Gilgamesh, including the facets of the praise, and note where the tone switches. What does an audience get from the features of good and bad kingship delivered in poetry? Note the details – the whys and wherefores – of Enkidu’s creation, and Shamhat’s seduction. Why do the animals reject Enkidu after he has intercourse with Shamhat? What does their rejection mean? Why does reason and understanding result from Enkidu's episode with Shamhat? How would you characterize Gilgamesh’s dreams?

Tablet 2 – List the features of civilization the poem considers important. Consider connections between Shamhat’s civilizing Enkidu and the crime for which Enkidu challenges Gilgamesh. Why does Gilgamesh propose killing Humbaba? Take note of the literary devices of foreshadowing. Does the poem say why the city elders advise Gilgamesh against his adventure?

Tablet 3 -- What role does Ninsun play in the drama, and what does that choice mean? Note that we get an entire tablet dealing with this issue, ending up, after the elders’ advice, with the young men’s acclaim. Why this arrangement?

Tablet 4 – Note the details of Gilgamesh’s dreams and Enkidu’s interpretation, including action and movement. What distinguishes Gilgamesh from Enkidu? Again, this is an entire tablet mostly devoted to dreaming and talking.

Tablet 5 – It’s appeared before, but repetition is a feature of the epic. Note lines 84 and 99. What are the dominant emotions in this tablet’s poetry? How does repetition enhance and challenge emotion?

Tablet 6 – While we easily emphasize Ishtar’s petulance, there’s more going on in this tablet than a familiar gendered tableau. Remember what Gilgamesh’s predilection had been, and why Enkidu was created. Note that ancient religions sacrificed animals to their gods. Distinguish Gilgamesh from Enkidu in this scene, if you can. Is Gilgamesh afraid of Ishtar? Is Gilgamesh's pride involved? Why does Ishtar want Gilgamesh in the first place? What is Enkidu's role in the rejection and in the death of the Bull of Heaven? How does the Bull of Heaven's death compare with Humbaba's?

Tablet 7 -- The death of Enkidu: note his paired blessings and curses. Note the features in this tablet that seem most familiar, and most unfamiliar.

Tablet 8 – Public mourning for Enkidu: if you know the Greek epics, this sort of scene may seem familiar. Again, although the details don’t intrigue us necessarily, the scene of mourning Enkidu takes the entire tablet.

Tablet 9 – The existential narrative comes to the fore in this book and continues to the end of the epic. “Existentialism” in the Oxford English Dictionary notes the philosophical school of that name, but it also includes the following: “**A philosophical movement or approach which focuses on the analysis of human existence and on individual human beings as agents freely determining by their choices what they will become. Also sometimes applied to other philosophies which lay particular stress on existence as distinct from essence.**” Think about line 4 and Tablet 1’s description of Gilgamesh as the “joy-woe” man. Do note how ironic it is that Gilgamesh’s *evading* light actually means he’s *surviving*. Is this existentialism *avant la letter*?

Tablet 10 – The sublime existential continues, not that Gilgamesh has reached transcendence: notice his attitude towards Siduri. One big statement here is line 303: interrogate this statement and answer whether we do see the face of death or not. Note too "Then, suddenly, there is nothing"-- X, 314.

Tablet 11 – Utanapishti, whom Gilgamesh met in the last tablet (along with his nameless wife) recounts a flood narrative. We will read Genesis Chapter 5’s account of the flood, and the Biblical account dominates in American culture. What features differ here? How do they relate to the rest of the epic? To individuality? The role of the divine, and the divine’s intersection with the human? Keep track of Gilgamesh’s attitudes as the poetry expresses them, and consider why bread would be an important sign for Gilgamesh. Why does Utanapishti’s nameless wife take pity on Gilgamesh? Since death is so much this text's concern, how do you account for the text’s failure to recount Gilgamesh's death?

The Norton appendices in the *Gilgamesh* edition

These appendices remind us that Assyriologists understand the we need a (somewhat) coherent narrative of Gilgamesh – that’s the main text – but we ought be aware of the “Gilgamesh tradition” and what it tells us about stories’ solidity. Comparing the appendices with the narrative we have in front of us can help you see features in our narrative that its creators wanted to emphasize. There is also a wonderful essay, by Rivkah Harris, pp. 207 – 218, on the women characters in the epic. Read this essay for our discussion of Ishtar on Monday, October 2.

*Ozymandias*

By [Percy Bysshe Shelley](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/percy-bysshe-shelley)

I met a traveller from an antique land

Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone

Stand in the desart. Near them, on the sand,

Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,

And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,

Tell that its sculptor well those passions read

Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,

The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed:

And on the pedestal these words appear:

"My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:

Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"

Nothing beside remains. Round the decay

Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare

The lone and level sands stretch far away.

(published 1818)