

## The Concept of Life in the Epic of “Gilgamesh”

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**Abstract:** “Gilgamesh” (“Bilgamis”) is the oldest example of world epic literature. According to historian and Orientalist Igor Dyakonov, who translated this ancient literary masterpiece from Akkadian into Russian, the plot of the work was formed at the end of the first half of the 3rd millennium BC [1; p. 215]. The epic reflects events typical of the transition from the Stone Age to the Copper Age, as well as the views on life and death characteristic of people from that era. It is known that in this epic genre, extremely important events related to human life, of significance to a country, a nation, or humanity as a whole, are depicted. Additionally, philosophical thought lies at the core of the epic (epopee). It portrays human life as being directly connected to the divine realm. The main character is portrayed as a powerful figure who, with the help of gods, accomplishes great deeds beyond the capabilities of ordinary people, sometimes even appearing as a deity in the eyes of the reader. The artistic world of the epic reflects both the accurate and erroneous perceptions, customs, and efforts of people living in the earliest stages of human civilization. In this article, we developed a concept based on the life-related motifs in the epic.

**Key words:** epic, life, birth, creation, journey, friendship, motif.

**Introduction.** Mesopotamia, known as the earliest center of world civilizations, has always attracted the attention of scholars due to its rich political, socio-economic, and cultural history. Interest in studying the early statehood history of this region through literary sources and in reviving ancient literary works has been growing steadily from the last quarter of the 19th century to the present day. The “Gilgamesh” epic, translated from Uzbek, is a historical written source that embodies unique information about the social life and spiritual world of the Sumerians.

The “Gilgamesh” epic (ša nagba imuru – “the one who saw everything”) is one of the oldest known literary works and initially emerged as independent stories. The heroic epic of Gilgamesh, which illustrates the pursuit of immortality and bravery of kings, is one of the oldest documented writings known to science. The epic is based on mythological motifs rooted in Sumerian religious beliefs and historical legends. The surviving parts of the work have reached us through cuneiform inscriptions and include songs about Gilgamesh written in four ancient Eastern languages – the earliest in Sumerian, followed by Akkadian, Hurrian, and Hittite versions [2; p. 204].

The Sumerians and Akkadians were recognized as passers of customs, rituals, and literary motifs to all the peoples of the Near East. Their legends served as the first repository of historical memory for ancient Eastern peoples, with each culture interpreting these legends from its perspective. Just as the “Gilgamesh” epic represents the earliest form of Mesopotamian poetry, it is also considered the earliest form of entertainment and adventure storytelling. The work was created to celebrate King Gilgamesh's struggles and journeys, acknowledging his heroism. Through this, it aimed to elevate the hero's status among the people, inspire them, and prepare war-weary citizens to defend their country. The people depicted their ideal hero through the character of Gilgamesh.

Many literary critics regard the epic of Gilgamesh as a hymn to friendship. In fact, the epic, in its essence, reflects humanity's thoughts on destiny, life, and death from over three millennia ago. The quest for immortality is the central motif of the epic. Gilgamesh's desire for immortality stems from two ambitions: first, to remain eternally young and vigorous; second, to achieve unparalleled feats that would immortalize his glory in history. These two desires are portrayed in the epic as means of

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extending the hero's existence. Despite the passage of millennia, the epic's complex existential questions, rich imagery, and masterful integration of dynamic characters – along with its exploration of universal principles of human thought – continue to enhance the epic's value to this day.

**Materials and Methods.** Based on the characteristics of the collected materials, the following analytical methods were employed: contextual analysis, sociological, historical-cultural, comparative, and psychoanalytic analysis. These approaches were chosen to provide a comprehensive understanding of the complex themes and motifs present in the “Gilgamesh” epic.

**Results and Discussion.** An in-depth analysis of each word, line, character, and motif in epics, particularly in the “Gilgamesh” epic, reveals the high artistic value of the work. The epic is rich with life-related motifs that highlight its unique characteristics. One of the traditional motifs is the supernatural birth of the epic hero, symbolizing the divine origin of his existence [3; p. 27]. Mesopotamia is considered the birthplace of myths, and although they were created in a specific era, they spread across the world. In this context, the motif of the hero's birth in literature originates from Gilgamesh. Although the standard version of the epic does not provide details about his birth, insights can be found in Sumerian poems and in the work “Animal Stories” by the Greek writer and historian Aelian, who lived around 200 BCE. Based on these accounts, the legend of Gilgamesh's birth is as follows: “A soothsayer once foretold to King Enmerkar of Uruk, who was two generations before Gilgamesh’s grandfather, that his daughter’s son would be born, and when he grew up, he would kill the king – his own grandfather – and take the throne from him. To prevent this danger, Enmerkar imprisoned his daughter in a fortress. To ensure she never left, he assigned a guard to watch over her. Despite all precautions, the girl became pregnant. After nine months, she gave birth to a son. Seeing the baby, the guard knew that the king would not spare him. Fearing for his own life, he threw the infant out of the fortress. At that moment, an eagle flying near the tower saw the baby, caught him in its claws, and carefully placed him at the edge of a date orchard. A gardener, witnessing this event, approached to see what the eagle had left behind. He discovered a beautiful infant. Immediately, he took the child home. Together with his wife, they decided to name him Gilgamesh, wishing that he would grow up to be a person who “sees and knows all things.”

As the child grew into adolescence, he left the gardener’s home. He wandered through rivers and hills, traveling from city to city. Throughout these journeys, he learned to read and write. Staying true to his name, he mastered various sciences. He shared wisdom with those who sought knowledge and guided those who needed direction.

During his travels, he eventually arrived at the city of Uruk. Uruk was a grand city. As he gazed in wonder at the streets, the people who saw him realized he was a stranger and followed behind him, asking, “Where are you going?” Eventually, he found himself in the city's largest marketplace. For some reason, a crowd began to gather around him.

Gilgamesh stood still like a statue, observing the people, while they stared back at him. The elders of the city whispered among themselves, saying, “Our king has died. He left no heir. This young man, with his strong build and handsome appearance, seems worthy to be our king. Let us make him our ruler.” One after another, people repeated these words, and everyone agreed. The elders approached Gilgamesh and presented their thoughts. Would Gilgamesh refuse such an offer? Of course not! He immediately accepted. They led him to the palace, dressed him in royal garments, adorned him, and seated him upon the throne. Thus, he became the king of Uruk.” Aelian mentions that Gilgamesh was saved by an eagle, adding, “Even though I have studied this matter as much as possible, if someone considers it a legend, I have nothing to say. I also learned that the eagle was the mentor of the Achaemenid, the ancestor of Persian nobles” [4; p. 21].

Concepts such as tranquility, love, advice, alliance, communication, consent, unity, harmony, solidarity, camaraderie, and togetherness help to further reveal the essence of friendship. The various aspects of friendship are vividly portrayed in literature through different narrative techniques. Friendly relationships often form the core of literary works, and each writer explores this theme from different perspectives, providing various arguments and interpretations. The “Gilgamesh” epic is considered the



first and most profound example of friendship in literature. This theme is portrayed through the relationship between the main characters, Gilgamesh and Enkidu, whose bond is based on equality, strength, and spiritual harmony. Their friendship contributes to their personal growth. In the first tablet, the reasons for their eternal brotherhood are explained, and throughout the seven tablets, the narrative explores their love and heroism. Enkidu is created as a rival but begins his literary journey in the epic as a being whose mercy surpasses his wrath. From the earliest Sumerian tales, he aids Gilgamesh, and over time, he rises to the status of an epic hero. When the stories transformed into epic poems, Enkidu's role profoundly changed. More than a loyal servant, he became Gilgamesh's lifelong companion, brother, equal, and even his conscience. Although Enkidu starts as a wild man, he transforms into a civilized human due to his friendship with Gilgamesh. This illustrates that the form of friendship is less important than its transformative impact on the individuals involved. It doesn't matter if you're white or black, rich or poor, an animal or a human. What matters is the presence of divine conscience and love.

The concepts of journey and travel are among the fundamental issues in human history. Throughout history, wars, disasters, and famine have led to migrations and the search for new settlements. Thus, the motif of travel and journey has become one of the main themes and tools in epic works, serving as an expression of people's hopes and aspirations. In Eastern culture, travel is considered a spiritual quest derived from Sufism, while in Western culture, it represents invention, escape, confrontation, struggle, and return. A traveler embarks on a journey in search of either their life's purpose or their destiny. The hero undergoes trials, endures hardships and suffering. Although the path of travel is difficult, turning back is impossible – the destination calls the hero forward. The journey motif is one of the fundamentals of literature, and it's impossible to imagine an epic without it. Although the first epic traveler was Gilgamesh, literary scholars recognize Odysseus because the “Odyssey” is considered a unique encyclopedia of ancient Greek geographical descriptions. The root of the hero's journey motif begins with Gilgamesh. Literature is filled with heroes like Gilgamesh, who longed for immortality and lived in fear of death.

According to Joseph Campbell, every hero's journey consists of three parts: [5; p. 40].

1. Departure.
2. Initiation.
3. Return.

In “Gilgamesh” the journey has two destinations:

1. A physical journey with Enkidu to an ordinary world;
2. A spiritual journey with an uncertain destination in search of immortality.

In the “Epic of Gilgamesh” the journey motif plays an essential role in developing the narrative, revealing the characters' inner worlds, and introducing themes. It also serves as a driving force, creating dramatic tension, developing characters, and exploring eternal themes such as fate and death. Enkidu's companionship, sent by the gods, carries symbolic meaning. His presence was meant to divert and calm the excessively proud and unrestrained Gilgamesh. Thanks to Enkidu's influence, the arrogant king learned virtues like humility, loyalty, and compassion.

What is death? The sorrow of death and the desire to understand its essence led Gilgamesh to contemplate his second journey. When a force disrupting the hero's peace emerged from the ordinary world (the death of Enkidu), Gilgamesh attempted to solve the problem by journeying to another extraordinary realm. Before reaching his destination, Gilgamesh passed through several significant stops:

**1st stop** – The path led toward Shamash, as the twin-peaked Mashu Mountains belonged to Shamash and were considered sacred, connecting the earth and sky. Due to his sincerity, Gilgamesh gained the favor of the scorpion-men who guarded Shamash during the day and night and received permission to proceed to the next destination.



**2nd stop** – The dwelling of the life-giving woman, Siduri. Before reaching this stop, Gilgamesh had to pass through a 12-league-long path of darkness.

**3rd stop** – Water is a crucial symbol in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. As a metaphor, water and crossing the sea represent a major step toward enlightenment in life.

**4th stop** – Here, Gilgamesh meets Utnapishtim. The eleventh chapter of the epic is entirely dedicated to this encounter.

The journey motif in *Gilgamesh* results in both positive and negative outcomes.

**Conclusions:** As the first epic, the birth motif in “Gilgamesh” aligns with birth motifs worldwide. Almost all heroes are noble-born men (Gilgamesh is the son of Ninsun, the goddess of Ku city, and the protector of shepherds and livestock). Their fathers are usually not mentioned (historical records indicate that Gilgamesh was the son of Lugalbanda, the ruler of Uruk). Typically, they are hinted to be sons of gods. After birth, heroes are abandoned in baskets, chests, rafts, or glass boats by the riverbank or thrown from a mountain (Gilgamesh was thrown from a cliff where his mother was imprisoned). Enkidu's creation is directly linked to Gilgamesh. His creation was inspired by Gilgamesh, so Enkidu's existence cannot be explained independently of Gilgamesh. The study analyzes the journey motif in the “Epic of Gilgamesh” using Joseph Campbell's model, dividing it into three stages (departure, initiation, return). The detailed descriptions throughout the journey provide insights into the culture and regional characteristics of that era. Gilgamesh's character evolution – from an ordinary man to a wise sage – teaches moral lessons, emphasizing the value of justice, compassion, and other positive virtues. The force that drove Gilgamesh forward was beyond rational understanding—it was mysterious, extraordinary, and led him toward the unknown. This mystery was called *perfection*. At the beginning of his journey, Gilgamesh did not yet comprehend this mystery, but he sought to attain eternal happiness and tranquility by becoming a person with supreme wisdom and consciousness.

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