

The Role of Death in the Epic of Gilgamesh

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Abstract: Human's fear of death and pursuit of eternal life have long been reflected in literary texts. As a representative of ancient Mesopotamian literature, the epic of Gilgamesh not only symbolizes the peak of Near Eastern epics, but also brings an ultimate proposition into literature for the first time—How to resist the fear of death and how to achieve infinite immortality in a finite life. This paper consists of three parts. The first part is the introduction, which introduces the background and significance of the research. The second part is the text analysis, and the third part is the analysis of the philosophical significance of the image of death by combining the ancient religious view of Mesopotamia and the concept of modern people.

Keywords: Gilgamesh, death and immortality, text analysis

1. Introduction

One of the first narrative poems in history is the Gilgamesh Epic. The ancient Near East contains numerous varieties of it, including Sumerian and Akkadian. It represents the pinnacle of ancient Near Eastern literature and is thought to have influenced numerous later myths, including the Biblical and the Dead Sea Scrolls [1]. Its central idea is complex since it is an eternal epic. It covers topics such as the duties of a monarch, the value of friendship and dignity, the desire for perpetual life, and the denial of death. Thus, although the epic of Gilgamesh has been found in multiple versions, this thesis still chooses the most famous epic version as the only text to analyze. The standard edition, which is generally believed to have been created during the Middle Babylonian period, comes from the Library of Ashurbanipal, and now in the British Museum.

As a world-renowned epic, the study and discussion of Gilgamesh's epic has been continuous. There are many studies compare him to the Iliad in Greece, while others attempt to study the culture of the ancient Mesopotamian people through texts.[2] Some scholars even try to use it to prove that Hebraism evolved from Sumerian culture. Some popular literature involving the study of Mesopotamian civilization has also been published in recent years, for example, *The Stairway to Heaven*.

However, only a few studies have noticed the ultimate question posed by the Gilgamesh epic: How do humans face the inevitability of death. The text of the epic is full of death and metaphors for death, especially in the section after tablet 7. After the death of Enkidu, one of the main characters, death becomes almost the main theme of the epic, and the fear of death becomes the driving force for Gilgamesh. For the first time in human history, a literary text describes death in such intuitive and

detailed way. Therefore, this thesis takes death in the epic of Gilgamesh as the object of study. After all, most people try very hard to avoid thinking about death because it's not a pleasant subject. Through this study, readers can explore the meaning of death in the ancient Mesopotamian civilization, and also ponder the unpleasant essence of death.

2. Death in the Epic of Gilgamesh

2.1. The Arrival of Death and the Shadow of Death

Death is a significant symbol in the Gilgamesh epic, but its significance wasn't fully realized until table 7. Even if the verses before it mention death, they show heroes considering taking other people's lives or putting their enemies' lives in danger.

It started with Enkidu's dream. Ancient Mesopotamians believed that dreams sometimes played a role in foreseeing the future, this type of dream is called prognostic dreams [3]. Having prognostic dreams is also considered a sign of dignity and wisdom. So, when Enkidu dreams that the gods have decided to let him die, and narrates this dream to Gilgamesh, the reader must easily see that this is an omen of his death. The subsequent plot of the article makes this prediction come true immediately. Death began to come upon him, and driven by the fear of death, he fell into delirium. He began to become manic and irrational, so that Gilgamesh admonished him and questioned him "who had understanding and reason now speak madness." [4]

These section all reflect the same thing: Death is a thing that is contrary to glory and undermines dignity. As a companion of Gilgamesh, Enkidu is characterized by bravery and strength [5]. Several times he was described as "a wild ox", which in Sumerian culture symbolized divinity and power. And as he begins to approach death, he exhibits negative traits he never had before. First his body became weak, second his mind became confused, and he began to curse those who had done him good. These actions represent a stripping away of his original identity, in the face of death, he is neither a wise man nor a hero. This not only reflects human's fatalistic inability in the face of gods, but also reveals human's powerlessness in the face of death. The transition from physical weakness to spiritual destruction shows how death destroys people both physically and socially.

Through this episode, the mood of this epic begins to change dramatically. After Enkidu's death, Gilgamesh begins to fear that death will become his inevitable fate [6]. The focus of the narrative shifts from monster conquest to death conquest. As a result, the epic also departs from its usual subject matter—honoring heroes and exalting war—and instead focuses on a deeper, more universal issue. Gilgamesh and Enkidu were frequently compared in the tablet before this one. Enkidu is regarded as Gilgamesh's "counterpart"; Ninsun's adoption and blessing of Enkidu placed the two men closer in patriarchal position, strengthening their likeness. Gilgamesh was concerned that his fate would be entwined with Enkidu's because to their extreme likeness. In order to find a means to live eternally, he decided to depart from Uruk. On the way, he told the boatman what had happened after Enkidu's death: When he saw midges falling out of his nostrils, death struck him so powerfully on a sensory level that he finally realized he had been completely knocked down. He finally passed Ur-shanabi's test and listened to the story of the Great Flood, but just as he finds "the Plant of Heartbeat" and is about to reach immortality, a snake steals his plant. In the end, he chooses to accept the fact that he is human and that all humans will die. He returned to his city and decided to be a virtuous king. Sumerian king list Indicates that his reign lasted 126 years, He became like the embodiment of the ideal monarch image, a righteous man.

The human cognitive process of death had at this point developed in the text. Gilgamesh initially has no knowledge of or interest in death, but after seeing the deaths of others, he begins to fear it and strives to find a way out. But eventually, after realizing that death is unavoidable, he decides to make peace with it. This transformation represents not only the epic hero's mental activity but also the

progressive development of human thought as it approaches death: Humans are never completely conscious of death until someone they have a social contact with passes away. After that, an instinctive aversion to death makes them choose to avoid it. In the immature mind, a strong desire for eternal life arises, and soon, reality will reveal to them the impossibility of eternal life. After the reconstruction of the concept of death, humans will overcome their fear. This paradigm applies not only to the hero of the epic, but also to every human.

2.2. The Concept of Death and Immortal in Ancient Mesopotamia

According to ancient Mesopotamian religious beliefs, one of the important factors that distinguished humans from gods was immortality [7]. Moreover, unlike other religions with more karmic notions, ancient Mesopotamians had a more pessimistic view of afterlife. Traditional Chinese religions believe that people's good and evil determine their status in afterlife, and the Western Christian tradition also divides heaven and hell according to human virtues.

But in ancient Mesopotamia, there is no sufficient evidence of a strong link between human character and afterlife. This idea seems to be more acceptable to modern people, because the situation it describes is bleak and absurd. Although life in the underworld has a rough scale, in general, everyone must live in this wet and dark place, everyone must live with dust and loneliness.

Furthermore, there were significant class inequalities between God and humans in the ancient Mesopotamian worldview. The Sumerians held the view that people were the gods' slaves and would suffer consequences if they disobeyed them. Numerous myths and narrative poetry claim that the gods sent natural calamities because they were aggravated by humans. Citizens are almost discouraged from challenging religious beliefs by this legend. Death is another key indicator that sets humans apart from gods. Man will inevitably pass away, however the gods are immortal and capable of resurrection. Giving the irresistible gods the qualities of immortality reinforced the ancient Mesopotamians' negative attitude toward death.

The epic is not a reflection of the real life in Mesopotamia, but it internalizes people's powerlessness in the face of death. What is particularly tragic is that, as key characters in epic, heroes are endowed with extraordinary strength and courage, which further highlights their weakness at the time of death. As early as Enkidu's death, readers can see the attitude of the two protagonists towards death from his words:

one who falls in combat make his name, but I, I do not fall in combat, and shall not make my name.

This is his last sentence and his last word in the whole text. His final exclamation is both about his own death and about the unglorified nature of his death. From this the reader can see that although the epic of Gilgamesh is the earliest epic in human history, its depiction of death is iconoclastic. In other epics, heroes who are given positive traits often die honorably. Achilles and Patroclus died in the Trojan War; Chanson de Roland died in battle with the heretics.

The ignominiousness of Enkidu's death fits neatly into the cultural ethos of Mesopotamia. No non-divine creature can live forever, and all creatures that do not live forever have to face terrible death. When he rebelled against the gods he was doomed to die, and his death, like the death of most people, had no solemn and stirring significance. It is precisely because he did not die in battle that his death becomes a more universal proposition. The nature of death lurks in this episode.

In later passages, Gilgamesh's words to the boatman are in response to this episode. When he confided his troubles to the boatman, he described,

my friend Enkidu, whom I love so dear, who with me went through every danger, the doom of mortals overtook him.... Then I was afraid that I too would die, I grew fearful of death, so wander the wild.

In addition to the mourning for Enkidu, there is also a deep fear of death in his diction. He uses this word "mortals" to describe Enkidu's situation, which implies that he had fallen to a vulgar,

universal fate. Gilgamesh is defined as two-thirds God and one-third man, while Enkidu is a creature created by God and has powers higher than humans. Thus, at the beginning of the epic they don't seem to be paying attention to death. But, with Enkidu's death as the limit, Gilgamesh's two delusions are shattered.

He used to think that he is a god, and he used to despise the gods, but after witnessing how the gods punish Enkidu, he realized that he was in a different class from them, and never did anything disrespectful again. He used to think that he was different from ordinary people and could have eternal life, but after witnessing how the gods punish Enkidu, he realized that one day he will die too.

In the Sumerian worldview, death and immortal is inseparable from divine authority [8]. It can even be said that there is a dualistic relationship between the death of human and the immortality of the gods. And any binary opposition structure, in fact, include a hidden superiority and oppression of one side to the other. The contrast between man and the gods, and the contrast between death and immortal, hide the despotic rule of the gods over man. It is because these two facts have similar meanings that Gilgamesh's dual concerns are coherent. His worries were essentially about the value of his own existence, about how he would reconstruct his identity after losing the opportunity to become a god, and about how he would face the absurdity of death. As a matter of fact, such identity and cognitive crises are common emotions when human think about death.

2.3. The Philosophical Significance and Practical Significance of the Epic of Gilgamesh

Although imagery and allusions to death did not appear frequently before tablet7, it can still be considered the core theme of the whole text. The name of Gilgamesh, the protagonist, means a person of eternal life, which seems to indicate the main theme of the text.

Throughout the whole article, if readers think that there is a typical epic narrative in tablet1 through tablet6, they must also admit that starting with tablet7, it betrays this narrative structure. It no longer describes the main characters' successes, and the failures it depicts are not necessarily setbacks on the way to success, but the eventual result. Its mood has shifted from grand to somber. And the problem the protagonist has to face has changed from a physical monster to some invisible and ubiquitous thing. At this point, the tone of the story is the same as the tone of death: Despair, full of coincidence, can't be avoided. It can easily destroy a powerful hero, People witness it, deny it, try to run away from it, but they end up facing a defeat that is already certain.

In this sense, the front part of The Epic of Gilgamesh is a classic epic, but its latter part is a betrayal of common epic. It gives the hero many qualities that are not a hero, making him worried, weak, unable to achieve his goals and reconcile with failure. His helplessness is frequently shown in the text. He cried when Enkidu died, trying to ignore his death and treat him as if he were alive; He had behaved scruffy and tired during the journey, that Ur-shanabi said to him.

Why are your cheeks so hollow, your face so sunken, your mood so wretched, your visage so wasted?

The frequent questioning and reiteration of dialogue highlight his emotional state. The events that befell him amounted to a profound disenchantment. It moves the epic into a more expansive field and leaves heroism out of the picture. The protagonist, Gilgamesh, thought he could accomplish anything up until this point, but since reality destroyed his initial knowledge, he had to rebuild his values. This process has something in common with the dilemmas faced by modern people. In a world where sacredness has disappeared, people no longer believe in grand narratives. The destruction of traditional narrative brings them more sense of confusion. How to reconstruct the world view is also a problem that modern people must solve Because of this, the loneliness and fear of modern people in the face of death are amplified. Gilgamesh left the city in search of a solution and eventually accepted the inevitability of death. If readers see this process as a metaphor for the reconfiguration of

values, they may realize that modern people also need to go through such a stage. That long journey of self-discovery is like an epic for everyone.

At the end of the article, Gilgamesh's attempt at immortality fails, all his efforts were in vain when his herbs were stolen by a snake. From a textual point of view, his story ends in a dramatic failure, but all epics seem to serve a moral purpose [9]. His struggle against God and his struggle against death were unfulfilled. However, he himself is regarded as a moral icon and praised by later generations. In this sense, he achieved what was probably the first great success in human history and achieved another level of immortality by being remembered by posterity. This idea of accepting death and then creating the value of life is similar to existential philosophy: The first thing is accepting absurdity, chaos, randomness, the next thing is search for meaning in an absurd, chaotic, random world.

At the end of tablet10, Ur-shanabi, the man of wisdom, concluded

The abducted and the dead, alike is their lot!

But never was drawn the likeness of Death.

He assumed the role of guide in the text. His words reflect his wisdom and a summary of the ancient Mesopotamian conception of death. Death is mysterious and deep, unpleasant and sometimes even taboo. But because it cannot be explored and cannot be experienced by the living, the only way out for humanity is to reconcile with it. When eternity in the physical sense is forgotten, eternity of the soul is achieved [9].

3. Conclusions

Through the study and analysis of the image of "death" in the epic, death has multiple meanings in the whole text. After research, its meaning can be broken down into three parts.

It demonstrates a sort of incomprehensible and bizarre character throughout the entire poem. This is supported by a number of episodes, including Enkidu's final words before passing away. It is a representation of failure and disgrace in these plots of the article, and it also serves as the main focus of the subsequent section. Death, when combined with Mesopotamia's old religious philosophy, is what separates humans from gods. The epic's depiction of mortality can still strike a chord with modern readers, and one could even argue that existentialism shares a similar perspective on the process of coming to terms with death. This epic not only represents the highest level of ancient Mesopotamian literature, but also contains some ideas that are in line with modern thought. The discussion of death sublimates this epic poem and makes it an immortal masterpiece in the world of human spiritual civilization.

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