

# Before You Read

## from *Gilgamesh* retold by Herbert Mason

### LITERARY FOCUS: THE FOIL

What would a hero do without ordinary people to admire his or her extraordinary accomplishments? In literature the hero is often paired with a **foil**—a character of ordinary abilities that contrast with the hero's abilities.

Like Beowulf (page 10), Gilgamesh is an **epic hero**. Gilgamesh is on a quest with his friend Enkidu to battle the monster Humbaba. Despite their close friendship, however, Gilgamesh and Enkidu have different character traits. The character of Enkidu acts as a foil, or opposite, to the character of Gilgamesh. Enkidu's presence helps us recognize the unique characteristics of the hero Gilgamesh and relate to his strengths and weaknesses.

**Foiled Again!** Think about some popular heroes and their foils, or sidekicks. One pairing might be the "Dynamic Duo," Batman and Robin. Another example from literature and film is the famous detective Sherlock Holmes and his trusted colleague, Dr. Watson. In the chart below, list at least two examples of a hero and his or her foil. In the last column, provide details that show how the hero and the foil differ from each other.

Hero	Foil	How Do They Differ?

### READING SKILLS: COMPARING AND CONTRASTING

In this excerpt from *Gilgamesh*, Enkidu and Gilgamesh reveal their differences at several points in their journey. We see the contrast between them in their opinions about whether to fight the monster Humbaba, in their differing states of mind when they reach Humbaba's forest, in their attitudes during the battle, and even in the way the two friends relate to each other.

**Use the Skill** As you read the selection, highlight or underline details that reveal differences between Enkidu and Gilgamesh. Use a different color for each character.

### REVIEW SKILLS

Look for examples of the following literary devices as you read *Gilgamesh*.

#### FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

Words or phrases that describe one thing in terms of another and that are not meant to be taken literally.

#### IMAGERY

Language that appeals to the senses.



#### Literary Skills

Understand the use of a foil.

#### Reading Skills

Compare and contrast characters.

#### Review Skills

Understand characteristics of poetry, including imagery and figurative language.

# from *Gilgamesh*

## A Verse Narrative

retold by Herbert Mason

At the beginning of the epic, we meet Gilgamesh, the king of Uruk. Part god and part human, Gilgamesh is a mighty warrior who performs glorious deeds. He is also strong-willed and treats his people harshly. In response to the prayers of the people, the gods send an uncivilized wild man named Enkidu as a match for Gilgamesh. The two become close friends. In hopes of gaining fame and glory, the friends embark on a quest to a cedar forest guarded by the evil giant Humbaba. There they intend to battle the monster and destroy the forest.

As this part of the story opens, Enkidu is terrified of meeting the monster. Gilgamesh urges him on.

### ANALYZE

Pause at line 10. How does Gilgamesh feel about death?

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### COMPARE & CONTRAST

Pause at line 16. Based on these words of Gilgamesh, in what ways do he and Enkidu differ?

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Why are you worried about death?

Only the gods are immortal anyway,  
Sighed Gilgamesh.

What men do is nothing, so fear is never

5 Justified. What happened to your power

That once could challenge and equal mine?

I will go ahead of you, and if I die

I will at least have the reward

Of having people say: He died in war

10 Against Humbaba. You cannot discourage me

With fears and hesitations.

I will fight Humbaba,

I will cut down his cedars.

Tell the armorers to build us two-edged swords

15 And double shields and tell them

I am impatient and cannot wait long.

Thus Gilgamesh and Enkidu went

Together to the marketplace

From *Gilgamesh: A Verse Narrative* by Herbert Mason. Copyright © 1970 by Herbert Mason. Reprinted by permission of Houghton Mifflin Company.



**VOCABULARY**

**austere** (ô-stir') *adj.*:  
restrained; unemotional.

**PREDICT**

Circle the words of the people that **foreshadow** the coming battle (lines 55–59). Based on their words, what do you predict will happen?

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**COMPARE & CONTRAST**

Pause at line 65. Although Gilgamesh had earlier boasted about his intention of destroying Humbaba, when he reaches the forest's edge he is suddenly afraid. How is his sudden change of heart different from Enkidu's feelings at this point?

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The armorers brought to Gilgamesh his weapons  
And put them in his hand. He took his quiver,  
Bow and ax, and two-edged sword,  
And they began to march.

55 The Elders gave their **austere** blessing  
And the people shouted: Let Enkidu lead,  
Don't trust your strength, he knows the forests,  
The one who goes ahead will save his friend.  
May Shamash<sup>1</sup> bring you victory.

☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆

60 After three days they reached the edge  
Of the forest where Humbaba's watchman stood.  
Suddenly it was Gilgamesh who was afraid,  
Enkidu who reminded him to be fearless.  
The watchman sounded his warning to Humbaba.  
65 The two friends moved slowly toward the forest gate.

When Enkidu touched the gate his hand felt numb,  
He could not move his fingers or his wrist,  
His face turned pale like someone's witnessing  
a death,

He tried to ask his friend for help  
70 Whom he had just encouraged to move on,  
But he could only stutter and hold out  
His paralyzed hand.  
It will pass, said Gilgamesh.  
Would you want to stay behind because of that?  
75 We must go down into the forest together.  
Forget your fear of death. I will go before you  
And protect you. Enkidu followed close behind  
So filled with fear he could not think or speak.  
Soon they reached the high cedars.

1. **Shamash** (shā'māsh): god associated with the sun and human laws.

80 They stood in awe at the foot  
 Of the green mountain. Pleasure  
 Seemed to grow from fear of Gilgamesh.  
 As when one comes upon a path in woods  
 Unvisited by men, one is drawn near  
 85 The lost and undiscovered in himself;  
 He was revitalized by danger.  
 They knew it was the path Humbaba made.  
 Some called the forest “Hell,” and others “Paradise”;  
 What difference does it make? said Gilgamesh.  
 90 But night was falling quickly  
 And they had no time to call it names,  
 Except perhaps “The Dark,”  
 Before they found a place at the edge of the forest  
 To serve as shelter for their sleep.

95 It was a restless night for both. One snatched  
 At sleep and sprang awake from dreams. The other  
 Could not rest because of pain that spread  
 Throughout his side. Enkidu was alone  
 With sights he saw brought on by pain  
 100 And fear, as one in deep despair  
 May lie beside his love who sleeps  
 And seems so unafraid, absorbing in himself the phantoms  
 That she cannot see—phantoms diminished for one  
 When two can see and stay awake to talk of them  
 105 And search out a solution to despair,  
 Or lie together in each other’s arms,  
 Or weep and in exhaustion from their tears  
 Perhaps find laughter for their fears.  
 But alone and awake the size and nature  
 110 Of the creatures in his mind grow monstrous,  
 Beyond resemblance to the creatures he had known  
 Before the prostitute had come into his life.

**FLUENCY**

Read the boxed passage aloud twice. Use punctuation clues to guide your reading.

**INTERPRET**

Pause at line 86. Enkidu is filled with fear as he and Gilgamesh enter the forest. How does Gilgamesh react?

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**COMPARE & CONTRAST**

Re-read lines 95–98. How does Gilgamesh spend the night? How does Enkidu spend the night?

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*Babylonian sculpture of head of Humbaba carved to resemble intestines (c. 1800–1600 B.C.).*  
British Museum, London. The Bridgeman Art Library.

**INTERPRET**

Re-read lines 115–123, and circle the words and phrases that describe Enkidu’s feelings of paralysis. What might Enkidu’s experience symbolize?

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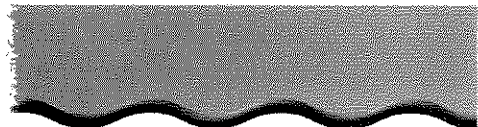
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He cried aloud for them to stop appearing over him  
Emerging from behind the trees with phosphorescent<sup>2</sup> eyes  
115 Brought on by rain. He could not hear his voice  
But knew he screamed and could not move his arms  
But thought they tried to move  
As if a heavy weight he could raise  
Or wriggle out from underneath  
120 Had settled on his chest,  
Like a turtle trapped beneath a fallen branch,  
Each effort only added to paralysis.  
He could not make his friend, his one companion, hear.

2. **phosphorescent** (fās'fə-res'ənt) *adj.*: giving off light after being exposed to heat.

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Gilgamesh awoke but could not hear  
 125 His friend in agony, he still was captive to his dreams  
 Which he would tell aloud to exorcise:  
 I saw us standing in a mountain gorge,  
 A rockslide fell on us, we seemed no more  
 Than insects under it. And then  
 130 A solitary graceful man appeared  
 And pulled me out from under the mountain.  
 He gave me water and I felt released.

Tomorrow you will be victorious,  
 Enkidu said, to whom the dream brought chills  
 135 (For only one of them, he knew, would be released)  
 Which Gilgamesh could not perceive in the darkness  
 For he went back to sleep without responding  
 To his friend's interpretation of his dream.

Did you call me? Gilgamesh sat up again.  
 140 Why did I wake again? I thought you touched me.  
 Why am I afraid? I felt my limbs grow numb  
 As if some god passed over us drawing out our life.  
 I had another dream:  
 This time the heavens were alive with fire, but soon  
 145 The clouds began to thicken, death rained down on us,  
 The lightning flashes stopped, and everything  
 Which rained down turned to ashes.  
 What does this mean, Enkidu?

That you will be victorious against Humbaba,  
 150 Enkidu said, or someone said through him  
 Because he could not hear his voice  
 Or move his limbs although he thought he spoke,  
 And soon he saw his friend asleep beside him.

At dawn Gilgamesh raised his ax  
 155 And struck at the great cedar.

**WORD STUDY**

The verb *exorcise* in line 126 means "drive out or away evil spirits or thoughts."

**CLARIFY**

Re-read lines 133–138. Underline Enkidu's interpretation of Gilgamesh's dream. Why does the dream terrify Enkidu?

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**IDENTIFY**

Gilgamesh has a second dream (lines 143–153). Circle the **images** he describes. How does Enkidu interpret this dream? (*Review Skill*)

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**VOCABULARY**

**decreed** (dē-krēd') *v.*:  
ordered; commanded.

**contortion** (kən-tōr'shən) *n.*:  
twisted shape or motion.

**INTERPRET**

Re-read lines 161–171. Circle the two **figures of speech** that are used to describe Humbaba. What do these figures of speech tell you about him? (*Review Skill*)

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**INTERPRET**

Find the **metaphor** in lines 170–171 that describes Humbaba. What effect does this metaphor have on you, the reader?

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**INTERPRET**

Pause at line 183. What is happening here? What is ironic about Gilgamesh's situation?

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When Humbaba heard the sound of falling trees,  
He hurried down the path that they had seen  
But only he had traveled. Gilgamesh felt weak  
At the sound of Humbaba's footsteps and called to Shamash

160 Saying, I have followed you in the way **decreed**;  
Why am I abandoned now? Suddenly the winds  
Sprang up. They saw the great head of Humbaba  
Like a water buffalo's bellowing down the path,  
His huge and clumsy legs, his flailing arms  
165 Thrashing at phantoms in his precious trees.  
His single stroke could cut a cedar down  
And leave no mark on him. His shoulders,  
Like a porter's<sup>3</sup> under building stones,  
Were permanently bent by what he bore;  
170 He was the slave who did the work for gods  
But whom the gods would never notice.  
Monstrous in his **contortion**, he aroused  
The two almost to pity.  
But pity was the thing that might have killed.  
175 It made them pause just long enough to show  
How pitiless he was to them. Gilgamesh in horror saw  
Him strike the back of Enkidu and beat him to the ground  
Until he thought his friend was crushed to death.  
He stood still watching as the monster leaned to make  
180 His final strike against his friend, unable  
To move to help him, and then Enkidu slid  
Along the ground like a ram making its final lunge  
On wounded knees. Humbaba fell and seemed  
To crack the ground itself in two, and Gilgamesh,  
185 As if this fall had snapped him from his daze,  
Returned to life  
And stood over Humbaba with his ax  
Raised high above his head watching the monster plead

3. **porter** *n.*: person who carries things for other people.





## SKILLS PRACTICE

### *from Gilgamesh*

**Reading Skills: Comparing and Contrasting** Look back over the details that you highlighted or underlined that show the differences between Enkidu and Gilgamesh. Then, read the points of comparison listed in the first column below. Complete the chart by describing how Gilgamesh and Enkidu differ.

Points of Comparison	Gilgamesh/Hero	Enkidu/Foil
Attitude about fighting Humbaba		
Attitude upon arriving at the edge of Humbaba's forest		
Responsiveness to his friend's feelings and opinions		
Courage and determination during the battle		

**Evaluate** Review the details you recorded in the chart above. What **character traits** of Gilgamesh might not have been as obvious if Enkidu had not been part of the story?

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