

Reading Assignment: *The Epic of Gilgamesh*

Welcome to your first high school assignment! In English I, you will be reading through some of the earliest recorded works of Western literature. In my humble opinion, these first works of literature are some of the best stories we have today!

Your summer reading assignment is to read through *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, which is the very first work of Western literature we have today. It's a great story about two powerful individuals who go out and fight monsters in order to win fame and protect their city. If you think this premise sounds similar to the plot of a superhero movie, you're not wrong. Superheroes like the Avengers or the Justice League have many similarities to the heroes of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (and many of the other works you'll be reading in 9th grade. This story also contains the first threat of a zombie apocalypse (if you're reading carefully enough to catch it). So this is far from a "boring" work.

In addition to being an entertaining read, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* wrestles with several important issues concerning what it means to live as a human being. Some of the questions this book raises include:

- What does it mean to be a civilized human being?
- What does it mean to be a hero?
- What does a good friendship look like and how can we find good friends?
- How should we cope with the death of a friend?
- How do we overcome our fear of death?

There are several other questions and themes the story explores, but these are some of the most important ones we'll be discussing in class discussions!

There are many different translations of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. I recommend you use the N.K. Sanders translation of the work, which you can find on Amazon here:

<https://www.amazon.com/Epic-Gilgamesh/dp/014044100X/> Most online booksellers should carry this version, and you may even be able to find it in the library system. Just make sure that you are using the N.K. Sanders translation.

I look forward to discussing the big ideas of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* with all of you come August.

-Mr. DeGraaf

Writing Assignment

Please write a 250-500 word essay (MLA, double-spaced) about one of the two topics below.

1. **Option #1:** Gilgamesh accomplishes many heroic deeds over the course of the story. But he also makes a lot of immoral actions, especially at the beginning of the story. Is Gilgamesh a hero? Why or why not? Defend your claim with evidence from the story.
2. **Option #2:** Toward the end of the book, Gilgamesh decides that he wants to become immortal. Why does Gilgamesh desire immortality, and is this a good desire to have? Why or why not? Defend your claim with evidence from the story.

Project Assignment

Please complete one of the two projects below.

1. **Option #1:** Conduct interviews with one person from three of six age groups. You must ask each person two questions: “What does it mean to be a good friend?” and “How do you try to be a good friend to people in your life?” Record the interviewee’s answers and write detailed notes about them. This does not need to be an essay, but you organize your answers in some way (e.g. a chart or a graph that compares/contrasts response).

Age Group 1: 15-18

Age Group 2: 19-25

Age Group 3: 26-35

Age Group 4: 36-45

Age Group 5: 46-55

Age Group 6: 56+

2. **Option #2:** There are many similarities between the heroes of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and modern American superheroes. In light of that, create a comic strip depicting one of the following events in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*
 - The fight between Gilgamesh & Enkidu
 - The fight between Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and Humbaba
 - The fight between Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Bull of Heaven
 - Gilgamesh’s journey to Utnapishtim

Your comic strip should be between 2 and 4 pages long and include at least 6 panels. Be creative!

9th Grade History Summer Reading

Sumerian School Days

Annotation

This tablet, from ancient Sumer (as early as 2000 B.C.E.), details a day in the life of a school boy. Students learned by copying lessons on clay tablets, memorizing the lessons, and then reciting them for the school's headmaster (the "school father") or other teachers, monitors, and proctors of the school.

The composition translated here, about a day in the life of a budding scribe, was evidently widely known, because scholars pieced together its full text over a period of 40 years (from 1909 to 1949) using 21 tablets and fragments excavated at various places from ancient Mesopotamian sites. The largest fragment (shown here) came from the Sumerian sacred city of Nippur, in present-day Iraq.

The young scribe-in-training described here is repeatedly caned by his teachers for failing to memorize his lessons and for disciplinary problems. The boy then asks his parents to invite the headmaster to their house and to provide him with wine, food, and gifts. Noah Kramer, the scholar whose translation appears here, described it as "the first recorded case of 'apple-polishing' in the history of man." The strategy apparently worked because by the end of the dinner, the headmaster praises the young man to Nidaba, the Sumerian goddess of writing, and predicts that he will become the foremost student in the school.

Primary Source Text

"Schoolboy, where did you go from earliest days?"

"I went to school."

"What did you do in school?"

"I read my tablet, ate my lunch,

prepared my tablet, wrote it, finished it; then

my prepared lines were prepared for me

(and in) the afternoon, my hand copies were prepared for me.

Upon the school's dismissal, I went home,

Entered the house, (there) was my father sitting.

I spoke to my father of my hand copies, then

Read the tablet to him, (and) my father was pleased;

Truly I found favor with my father.

"I am thirsty, give me drink,

I am hungry, give me bread,

Wash my feet, set up the bed, I want to go to sleep;

Wake me early in the morning,

I must not be late, (or) my teacher will cane me."

When I awoke early in the morning,

I faced my mother, and

Said to her: "Give me my lunch, I want to go to school."

My mother gave me two "rolls," I left her;

My mother gave me two "rolls," I went to school.

In the tablet-house, the monitor said to me: "Why are you late?" I was
afraid, my heart beat fast.

I entered before my teacher, took (my) place.

My "school-father" read my tablet to me,

(said) "The . . . is cut off," caned me.

I . . . d to him lunch. . . lunch.

The teacher in supervising the school duties,

Looked into house and street in order to pounce upon someone, (said) "Your . . . is not . .
.," caned me.

My "school-father" brought me my tablet.

What was in charge of the courtyard said "Write," . . . a peaceful place.

I took my tablet, . . .

I write my tablet, . . . my . . .

Its unexamined part my . . . does not know.

Who was in charge of . . . (said) "Why when I was not here did you talk?" caned me.
Who

was in charge of the . . . (said) "Why when I was not here did you not keep your head
high?" caned me.

Who was in charge of drawing (said) "Why when I was not here did you stand up?"
caned me.

Who was in charge of the gate (said) "Why when I was not here did you go out?" caned
me.

Who was in charge of the . . . (said) "Why when I was not here did you take the . . .?"
caned me.

Who was in charge of the Sumerian (said) "You spoke. . .," caned me.

My teacher (said) "Your hand is not good," caned me.

I neglected the scribal art, [I forsook] the scribal art,

My teacher did not. . . ,

. . . d me his skill in the scribal art.

The . . . of words, the art of being a young scribe,

the . . . of the art of being a big brother, let no one. . . to school."

"Give me his gift, let him direct the way to you,

let him put aside counting and accounting;

the current school affairs

the schoolboys will. . . , verily they will. . . me."

To that which the schoolboy said, his father gave heed.

The teacher was brought from school;

having entered the house, he was seated in the seat of honor.

The schoolboy took the . . . , sat down before him;

whatever he had learned of the scribal art,

he unfolded to his father.

His father, with joyful heart

says joyfully to his "school-father":

"You 'open the hand' of my young one, you make of him an expert,

show him all the fine points of the scribal art.

You have shown him all the more obvious details of the tablet-craft, of counting and accounting,

You have clarified for him all the more recondite details of the. . ."

"Pour out for him . . . like good wine, bring him a stand,

make flow the good oil in his. . .-vessel like water,

I will dress him in a (new) garment, present him a gift, put a band [a ring] about his hand."

They pour out for him. . . like good date-wine, brought him a stand,

made flow the good oil in his. . .-vessel like water,

he dressed him in a (new) garment, gave him a gift, put a band about his hand.

The teacher with joyful heart gave speech to him:

"Young man, because you did not neglect my word, did not forsake it,
May you reach the pinnacle of the scribal art, achieve it completely.
Because you gave me that which you were by no means obliged (to give),
you presented me with a gift over and above my earnings, have shown me great honor,
may Nidaba, the queen of the guardian deities, be your guardian deity,
may she show favor to your fashioned reed,
may she take all evil from your hand copies.
Of your brothers, may you be their leader,
Of your companions, may you be their chief,
May you rank the highest of (all) the schoolboys,
. . . who come from the royal house.
Young man, you "know" a father, I am second to him,
I will give speech to you, will decree (your) fate:
Verily your father and [mother] will support you in this matter,
As [that] which is Nidaba's, as that which is thy god's, they will present offerings and
prayers to her;
the teacher, as that which is your father's verily will pay homage to you;
in the ... of the teacher, in the ... of the big brother,
your ... whom you have established,
your manly [kinfolk] verily will show you favor.
You have carried out well the school duties, have become a man of learning.
Nidaba, the queen of the place of learning, you have exalted."
O Nidaba, praise!

Source

Samuel Noah Kramer, "Schooldays: A Sumerian Composition Relating to the Education of a Scribe," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 69, vol. 4 (Oct-Dec 1949): 199-215.

Kramer's extended commentary is also in his book, *History Begins at Sumer: Thirty-Nine Firsts in Recorded History* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), 3-13.

Image: *The largest fragment of the text*, at the University Museum of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia (p. 215, Kramer, "Schooldays"). Annotated by Susan Douglass.

History assignment:

Please answer in complete sentences and with detail. **These paragraphs will be due on the first day of school. They can be typed or neatly hand-written, and will be turned in to your history teacher.**

1. This interesting primary source discusses the life of a student in the ancient civilization of Sumer. Read through it first to gain an understanding of what it is saying. After that, read through it again and tell me which section sticks out to you the most and why? What can you learn about the culture of the Sumer civilization? Is this what you had in mind before you completed this reading?
2. What do you think about this schoolmaster's style of molding his young student's mind? What did the student learn in the end?