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Psychiatry In Literature

Grief in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*

Karrish Devan

The Epic of Gilgamesh is an Ancient Mesopotamian text chronicling the adventures of Gilgamesh, a demi-god and king, and Enkidu, his faithful companion. The work is often considered to contain great themes of love, war and faith but central too is one of grief. After the pair insult the Gods, Enkidu is cursed and he later dies. Despite being written thousands of years ago, Gilgamesh's experiences fit contemporary understandings of the grief process.

Immediately after learning of Enkidu's death Gilgamesh:

'began to rage like a lion, like a lioness robbed of her whelps. This way and that, he paced round the bed, he tore out his hair and strewed it around. He dragged off his splendid robes and flung them down as though they were abominations.'

A deep depression follows as Gilgamesh sits with Enkidu's body for a week, neglecting himself and his duties. He only leaves when the body starts to rot:

'Seven days and nights I sat beside the body, weeping for Enkidu beside the body, and then I saw a worm fall out of his nose. Must I die too? Must Gilgamesh be like that?'

To avoid confronting this inner turmoil and anxiety, Gilgamesh decides to embark on an epic quest to find immortality – to deny death itself. A lengthy journey follows which cumulates in Gilgamesh being set a seemingly impossible task by a wise sage. Our hero fails and, returning home, he is left only with the sage's words:

'There is no permanence. Do we build a house to stand for ever, do we seal a contract to hold for all time? Do brothers divide an inheritance to keep for ever, does the flood-time of rivers endure? It is only the nymph of the dragon-fly who sheds her larva and sees the sun in his glory. From the days of old there is no permanence.'

On seeing the walls of his city, Gilgamesh realises in a moment of introspection that the journey has changed him profoundly. In processing his grief, he understands that everything on earth is ephemeral and that, eventually, we all will die.

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