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Quotes From The Epic Of Gilgamesh

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Introduction: The Enduring Wisdom of the World's Oldest Story

For more than four thousand years, the story of a king who sought immortality has captivated readers and scholars alike. The *Epic of Gilgamesh*, inscribed on clay tablets in cuneiform script, is not only the oldest surviving work of great literature but also a profound exploration of what it means to be human. Across its twelve tablets, the tale follows Gilgamesh, the tyrannical king of Uruk, and his transformative friendship with the wild man Enkidu. Their adventures, grief, and ultimate search for eternal life give us some of the most powerful and thought-provoking lines ever written. In this article, we will explore the most significant **Quotes From The Epic Of Gilgamesh**, unpacking their meanings and understanding why they continue to resonate in the modern world.

Whether you are a student of ancient history, a lover of mythology, or simply someone searching for timeless truths, these quotes offer a window into the soul of ancient Mesopotamia. They speak of love, loss, mortality, and the joy of simply being alive. By examining these lines closely, we can see how the epic's central themes remain relevant today, long after the clay tablets were buried and rediscovered.

The Power of Friendship: Quotes That Define the Bond Between Gilgamesh and Enkidu

The heart of the epic lies in the relationship between Gilgamesh, the two-thirds divine king, and Enkidu, the man created by the gods to be his equal. Before Enkidu arrives, Gilgamesh is arrogant and oppresses his people. The friendship that develops between them changes both characters profoundly. Several **Quotes From The Epic Of Gilgamesh** capture this transformative bond.

"A friend who understands your tears is much more valuable than a friend who only knows your smile."

This line, though a modern paraphrase often associated with the epic, captures the essence of what Gilgamesh and Enkidu meant to each other. Enkidu was the only being who could truly challenge Gilgamesh, and later, the only one who could share his deepest grief. When Enkidu falls ill and dies, Gilgamesh's lament is one of the most emotionally raw passages in ancient literature. The original text shows Gilgamesh crying out, "Hear me, O elders of Uruk! I weep for Enkidu, my friend. Like a hunter's widow, I mourn." This is not a king speaking to his subjects; it is a man undone by loss, proving that friendship can break down even the highest walls of pride.

"They kissed each other and made friends."

This simple, direct line occurs after Gilgamesh and Enkidu have wrestled fiercely in the streets of Uruk. The fight, which was meant to humble the king, ends not in animosity but in mutual respect. The formal declaration of friendship marks the beginning of their journey together. The epic uses the act of kissing as a cultural sign of peace and brotherhood, effectively turning a violent contest into the foundation of a deep soul-bond. This

moment is crucial because it shows that true friendship often emerges from struggle and conflict, a lesson that remains as true today as it was in ancient Sumer.

Facing Mortality: The Most Profound Quotes on Life and Death

After Enkidu's death, Gilgamesh is overwhelmed by the fear of his own mortality. He sets out on a quest to find Utnapishtim, the lone survivor of the great flood, to learn the secret of eternal life. During this journey, the epic offers its most enduring wisdom about the nature of death and the value of life. Many of the most famous **Quotes From The Epic Of Gilgamesh** arise from this existential crisis.

"The life that you seek you will never find. When the gods created mankind, they set aside death for them, and kept life for themselves."

This line is spoken by Siduri, the tavern keeper, when Gilgamesh arrives at the edge of the world. It is a blunt, compassionate, and utterly realistic statement. Siduri does not offer false hope; she tells the king the truth that divine law is fixed: humans are mortal. This is one of the central philosophical pillars of the epic. The quote teaches that the search for physical immortality is futile. Instead, Siduri advises Gilgamesh to embrace the simple pleasures of life: to eat, drink, dance, and take joy in his family. This advice is echoed in countless wisdom traditions across the globe, from the Book of Ecclesiastes to Buddhist teachings, underscoring the universality of the message.

"Should a man live forever? No. We are all destined to die. But we can die well."

While this specific phrasing is a modern adaptation, it captures the spirit of the original text. Gilgamesh eventually learns that true immortality is not about living endlessly but about leaving a legacy. As he returns to Uruk, he gazes at the city walls he built. He realizes that the clay bricks and the well-ordered city are his true monument. The epic closes with Gilgamesh understanding that the meaning of life is found in what we create, whom we love, and how we serve our community. This shift from desperation to acceptance is the emotional and intellectual climax of the story.

Wisdom from the Flood: Utnapishtim's Words on the Nature of Man

The story of Utnapishtim, the Mesopotamian Noah, is recounted within the epic. When Gilgamesh finally finds him, Utnapishtim shares a story of divine wrath and human survival. The wisdom he imparts is harsh but necessary. One of the most memorable **Quotes From The Epic Of Gilgamesh** comes from this part of the narrative.

"The flood is coming: build a boat. Let no one know of your plan."

This direct instruction from the god Ea to Utnapishtim carries a deeper meaning. It suggests that survival often requires secrecy and wisdom, as well as quiet obedience to divine warnings. In the context of the epic, it reminds Gilgamesh—and the reader—that some knowledge is too dangerous for the masses, and that those who are favored by the gods must act with both courage and discretion. Utnapishtim's tale serves as a caution that nature can be merciless, but that humanity can endure through foresight and craftsmanship.

"The gods smelled the sweet savor of the sacrifice and gathered like flies."

This visceral, almost comical image appears after Utnapishtim offers a sacrifice upon leaving the ark. It humanizes the gods, showing them as creatures driven by appetite and emotion. The line is a stark reminder that the divine beings of the epic are not all-powerful or perfectly wise—they are jealous, petty, and easily swayed. This nuance gives the epic a sophisticated theological perspective, questioning the fairness of the gods while still acknowledging their ultimate power. For the modern reader, it is a humbling thought: if even the gods are flawed, then human striving for perfection is both noble and impossible.

The Return to Uruk: Finding Meaning in the Ordinary

In the final tablet of the epic, Gilgamesh returns home, changed. He no longer seeks to conquer death. Instead, he finds peace in the tangible world. The final lines of the epic direct the reader to look upon the city walls of Uruk. One of the closing **Quotes From The Epic Of Gilgamesh** urges:

“Go up, Urshanabi, onto the wall of Uruk and walk around. Examine its foundation, inspect its brickwork. Are not its bricks made of fired clay? Did not the seven sages lay its foundations?”

This is the final image of the epic. Gilgamesh invites his boatman—and by extension, the reader—to appreciate the work of human hands. The wall is solid, enduring, and real. Unlike the elusive plant of eternal youth that Gilgamesh lost to a snake, these bricks will stand for generations. The quote is a powerful argument for finding purpose in lasting contributions rather than in infinite personal survival. It is a call to be proud of what we build, teach, and leave behind.

Modern Relevance: Why These Quotes Speak to Us Today

The continued fascination with **Quotes From The Epic Of Gilgamesh** lies in their raw honesty. In an age of digital noise and fleeting fame, the ancient words remind us of eternal truths. We still struggle with grief, with the fear of death, and with the desire to leave our mark. Gilgamesh’s journey from arrogant king to wise ruler mirrors our own potential for growth. The lines about friendship, especially the unfiltered mourning of Enkidu, show that even four millennia ago, people understood the depth of love and the pain of loss.

Moreover, the epic offers a view of masculinity that is refreshingly complex. Gilgamesh learns that true strength is not in domination but in vulnerability and compassion. When he weeps for his friend, he is not diminished but elevated. This message is profoundly relevant in contemporary discussions about emotional health and authentic relationships.

Conclusion: A Timeless Legacy Etched in Clay

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* is far more than a historical artifact. It is a mirror held up to the human condition, reflecting our deepest fears and our highest aspirations. Whether we are moved by the lament for a lost friend, the bitter truth of mortality, or the quiet pride in a city well built, these **Quotes From The Epic Of Gilgamesh** continue to inspire, challenge, and comfort. They remind us that while the gods may keep eternal life for themselves, the capacity for love, creativity, and wisdom is the truest form of immortality available to us. In reading these words, we connect with a voice from the dawn of civilization—and we realize that some stories never grow old.

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