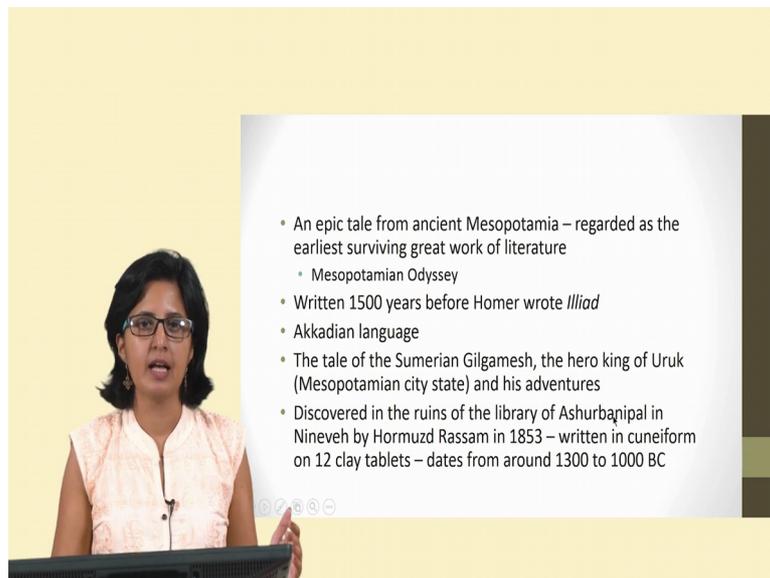


Introduction to World Literature
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Lecture 02
Epic of Gilgamesh

Good morning and welcome to yet another session of NPTEL course, Introduction to World Literature. Today we are looking at this aged iconic text titled The Epic of Gilgamesh.

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The Epic of Gilgamesh is an epic tale from ancient Mesopotamia and is also regarded as the earliest surviving great work of literature. And this is being classified as one of the earliest and one of the greatest works of world literature in its truest sense. And this is even considered as the Mesopotamians Odyssey but this was written about 1500 years even before Homer wrote Illiad. So the text is that ancient. It is an age old text considered as the earliest of world literature.

It was originally written in Akkadian language and it tells the tale of the Sumerian Gilgamesh, the hero king of Uruk, Uruk being one of the Mesopotamian city state, and his adventures. So the tale is entirely about the epic journeys and the great adventures that Gilgamesh, the king of Uruk went through. The manuscript of this text The Epic of Gilgamesh, it was discovered in the ruins of the library of Ashurbanipal in Nineveh by the archaeologist Hormuzd Rassam.

This was in 1853 towards the end of the 19th century. So it is very significant and important to remember that this text gets the attention of the modern audience only from the 20th century onwards. And to be precise, only after the first world war we find critical and historical attention being given to this text, its reception and its circulation during a time which dates back to more than about 3500 to 4000 years.

And when this manuscript was discovered it was found that it was written in cuneiform script on 12 clay tablets and it also dates from around 1300 to 1000 BC. So I wanted to keep in mind that the significance of this text is not just literally, it is not just aesthetic. Beyond that it serves a larger, historical and archaeological function as well.

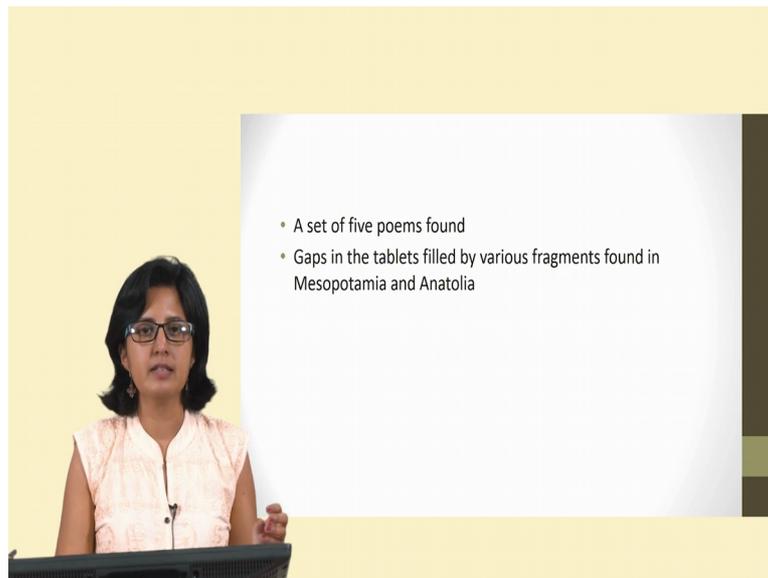
It is in such a context that we begin to look at the Epic of Gilgamesh as an iconic text in world literature which also tells us about the significance of such works even before the term was coined, even before this course on literature or literary tradition or even the world literature came into being.

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So this was one of the clay tablets that was discovered and it continues to be preserved in its original form in London.

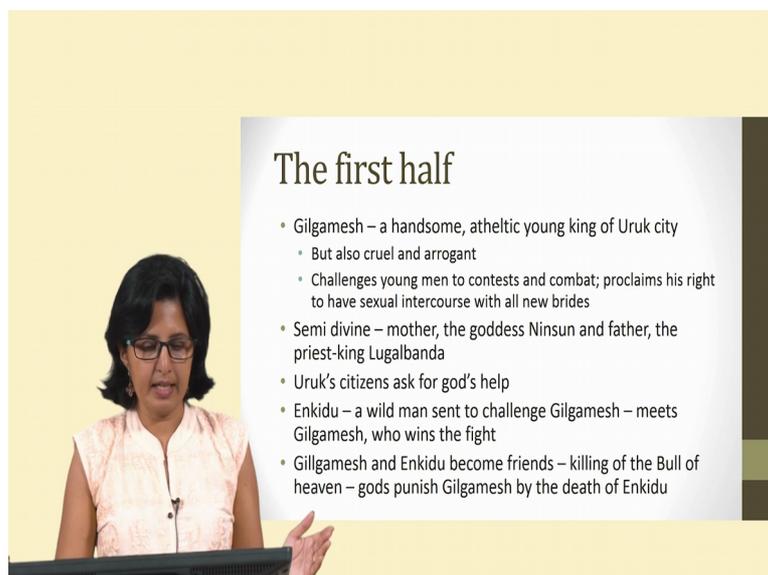
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Along with the epic poem of Gilgamesh, a set of other five poems were also found and the gaps in the tablets they did not really get a continuous set of tablets which had of the original text inscribed. It took a massive effort by various historians, literary people and archaeologist trying to fill in the gaps in the tablets by various fragments found not just in one spot but in various parts of Mesopotamia and Anatolia.

So this text, whatever remnants of text are now available, the ways in which it has been translated also needs to be seen in that context. One needs to be attentive to the vast number of centuries that passed in between the time that it was originally written and it was discovered and translate and circulated again.

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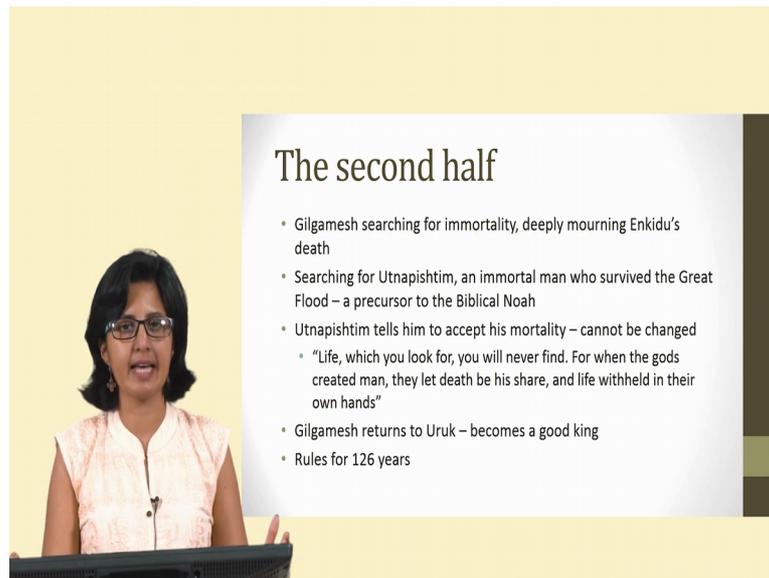
I want to take you through the summary or the important things that are part of this epic poem. In the first half we are introduced to Gilgamesh who is also the central character of this epic poem. He is a handsome athletic young king of Uruk city. But he is also very cruel and arrogant. He does not come across as a good person and good ruler. And he does things like challenging the young man to contest and combat. He even proclaims his right to have sexual intercourse with all new brides.

So he is unleashing terror in the city of Uruk. He also has a semi divine origin. This also ties up well in the mythical narrative and the dialogue between gods and human beings throughout this poem. And he has a semi divine origin, his mother being the Goddess Ninsun and father the priest king Lugalbanda. So this is the way in which we are being introduced to Gilgamesh in the first half of the poem and Uruk citizens are very tired of this terrible ruler. They want to get rid of Gilgamesh and they ask for god's help.

Gods play a very significant role in this poem throughout. We find Gods even taking human forms, human attributes and that is what makes this text very enduring in a certain way to the modern audience. And in response to Uruk citizens seeking god's helps they send him Enkidu who is a wild man. He is sent to the city of Uruk to challenge Gilgamesh. He is a wild man. He does not know how to live in a civilized society. He also finds a woman who is teaching him the ways of the civilized world right from teaching him how to eat.

When he meets Gilgamesh and there is a long encounter over there and they get into a fight and Gilgamesh wins the fight. But the tale begins to take a twist from then on and Gilgamesh and Enkidu becomes good friends and they set out on this great adventure which also part significant sections of the first half. So through a series of events which we shall not be discussing now they end up killing the bull of heaven and for this Gods punish Gilgamesh by the death of Enkidu. And this is how the first half comes to an end.

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The second half

- Gilgamesh searching for immortality, deeply mourning Enkidu's death
- Searching for Utnapishtim, an immortal man who survived the Great Flood – a precursor to the Biblical Noah
- Utnapishtim tells him to accept his mortality – cannot be changed
 - “Life, which you look for, you will never find. For when the gods created man, they let death be his share, and life withheld in their own hands”
- Gilgamesh returns to Uruk – becomes a good king
- Rules for 126 years

And in the second half we will find Gilgamesh setting out on a new journey, a new quest and this time it is immortality. He is deeply mourning Enkidu's death. He is asking very pertinent questions about life, about death, about immortality and we find him trying to engage with the philosophical questions that men and women are trying to ask even today. So in the tale we get to know that Gilgamesh is searching for Utnapishtim. He is an immortal man who survived the great flood and the great flood here is presented as a precursor to the biblical Noah.

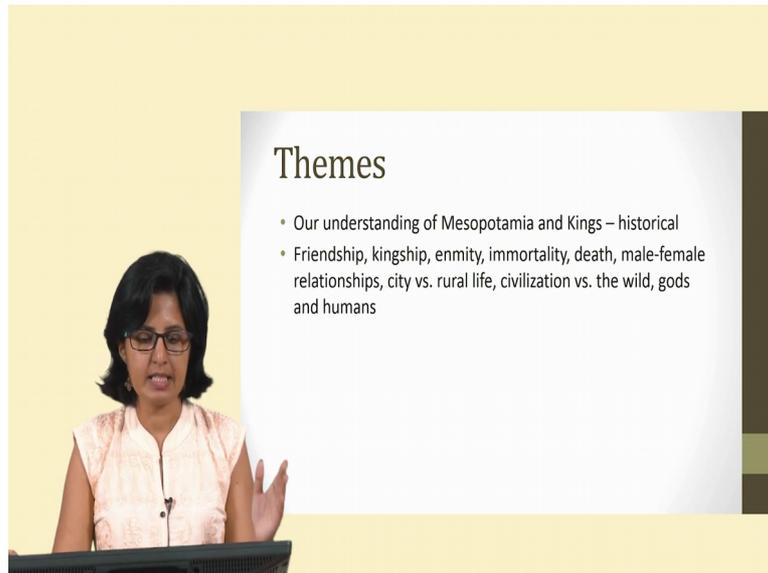
There are also a number of scholars who believe that biblical floods during the time of Noah is also the storylines also inspired by the great flood which gets documented in this work, the Epic of Gilgamesh. So he meets Utnapishtim and Utnapishtim tells him to accept his mortality. And this text assumes a very philosophical and it turns at this point that it stops being just a tale of adventure.

It stops being just the story of Gilgamesh but he begins to ask universal questions which continue to resonate even in the contemporary. When Utnapishtim tells him to accept his mortality and tries to convince him that it cannot be changed, it is a very pertinent section where he also tells him and this is of course from one of the translations, life which you look for you will never find for when the Gods created man they let death be his share and life withheld in their own hands.

So this is the kind of profound discussion that we can find in this text which dates back to more than 1500 years even before Homer's Illias. And after this life changing quest and this

encounter with Utnapishtim we find Gilgamesh returning to Uruk a changed man. He becomes a good king and the documents tell us that he rules for 126 years. And this is the way in which the epic poem is structured. So it is about many things ruled into one and if we try to take a quick look at some of the important themes.

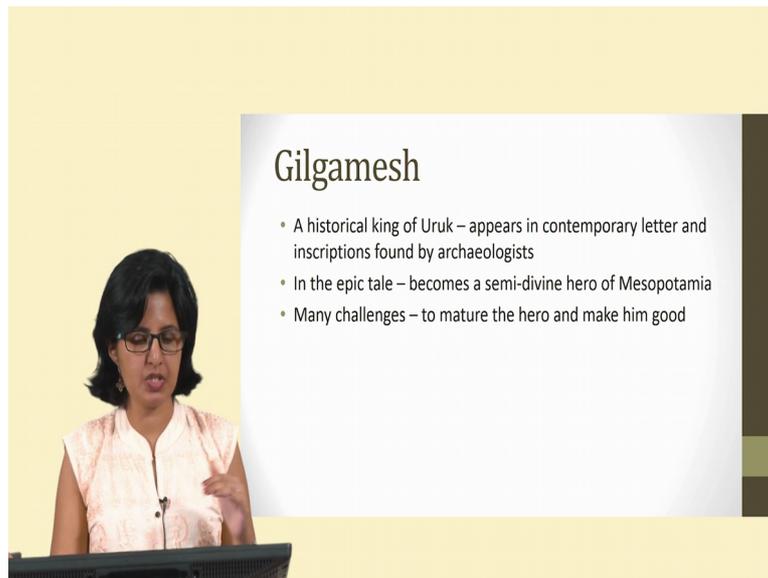
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Firstly this text is important for our understanding of Mesopotamia and Kings. There is a historical significance which is of no doubt. But apart from that there is a timeless universality of friendship, the ideas of kingship, enmity, immortality, death, male female relationships, about the way in which the contrast between city and the rural life is positioned, about civilization and the wild, about this dialogue and this very ambivalent relation between Gods and humans.

We find all that becoming important themes and important elements throughout this text and about the figure of Gilgamesh.

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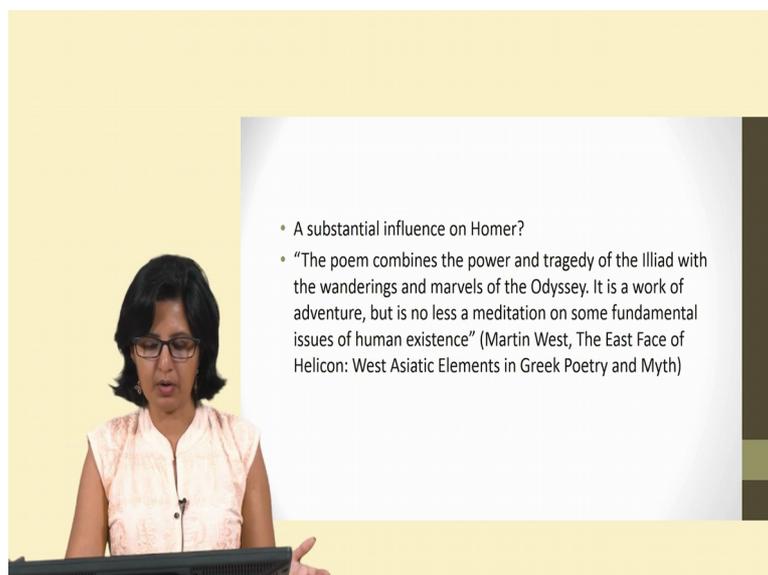
Gilgamesh

- A historical king of Uruk – appears in contemporary letter and inscriptions found by archaeologists
- In the epic tale – becomes a semi-divine hero of Mesopotamia
- Many challenges – to mature the hero and make him good

And he is not entirely mythical imaginative figure. He is historical king of Uruk. He appears in contemporary letters and inscriptions found by archaeologists. There is every reason to believe that there was such a king named Gilgamesh. But of course to suit the aesthetic elements in this epic tale he also becomes a semi divine hero of Mesopotamia.

And the story also makes him go through many challenges, face many challenges and come out successful through that to make him the mature hero that he becomes at the end of the story and also making him good. So that is a dramatic element that is being infused into the historic, into the real so that it continuous to remain fantastical universal and has to have an appeal in multiple ways.

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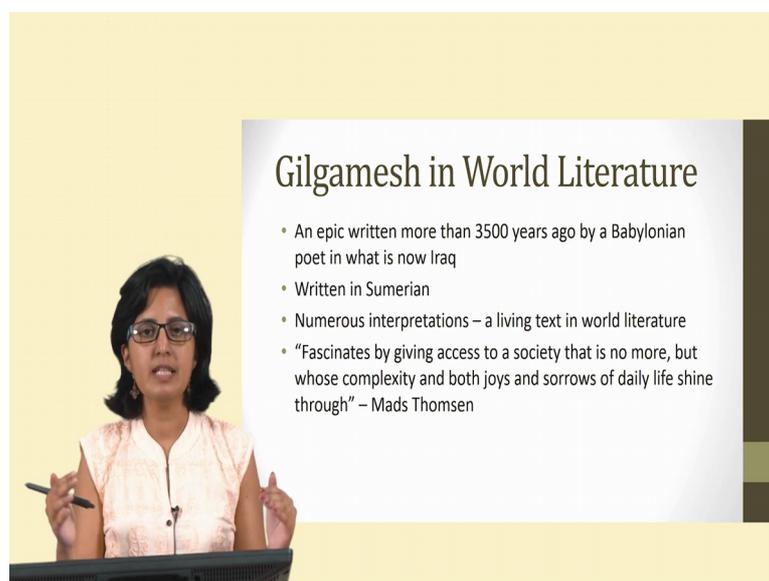


- A substantial influence on Homer?
- “The poem combines the power and tragedy of the Illiad with the wanderings and marvels of the Odyssey. It is a work of adventure, but is no less a meditation on some fundamental issues of human existence” (Martin West, The East Face of Helicon: West Asiatic Elements in Greek Poetry and Myth)

Some critics are of the opinion that this work had a substantial influence on Homer. If you are interested in knowing more about this you are welcome to read a Martin West work, *The East Face of Helicon - West Asiatic Elements in Greek Poetry and Myth*. There he argues that the poem combines the power and tragedy of the *Illiad* with the wanderings and marvels of the *Odyssey*.

It is a work of adventure but it is no less a meditation on some fundamental issues of human existence and this is one of the elements that also make the Epic of Gilgamesh a world literature a world literary text in the truest sense.

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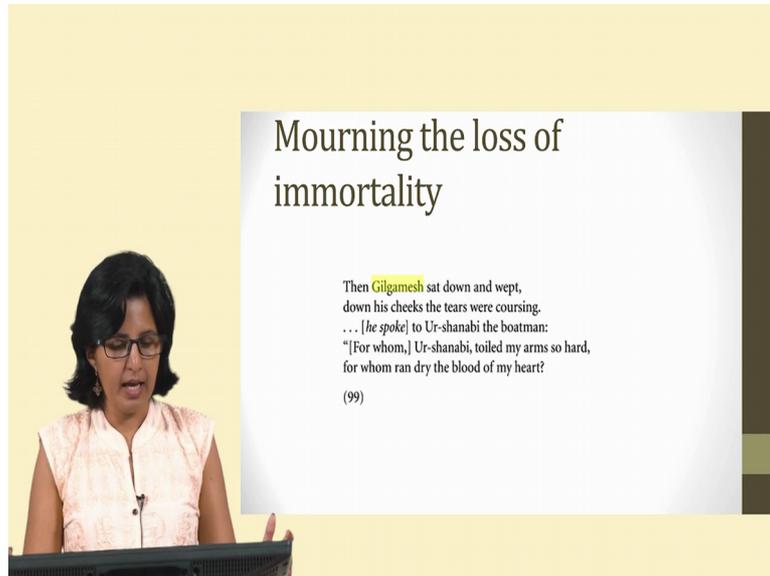


More than a many parts that make this text the Epic of Gilgamesh what I find very fascinating and interesting is the positioning of Gilgamesh in world literature. Here we have an epic written more than 3500 years ago by a Babylonian poet. This is in what is now Iraq and this was originally written in one of the Sumerian languages. There are numerous interpretations and this is perhaps the greatest living text in world literature which continuous to undergo translations and multiple interpretations.

And in Mads Thomsen's words it fascinates by giving access to a society that is no more but whose complexity and both joys and sorrows of daily life shine through. So this is something extremely fascinating and incredible about this text Gilgamesh. The original literary tradition within which it was part of, the original context within which that was part of the society which produce this text in the first place is no more and we get an access to the story and to that context and to that tradition which is no longer there.

And at the same time many elements from that context, from that life which continues to be shared in this text, it remains very relevant and almost universal.

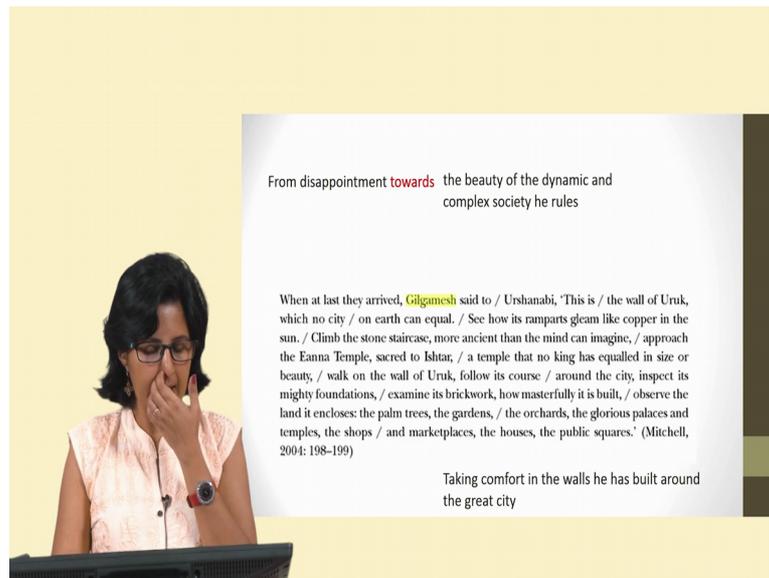
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And there is a section where we find Gilgamesh mourning the loss of immortality when he is also mourning the death of Enkidu. He is asking very pertinent questions about life, about death and he is searching immortality because death strikes him as a reality that the life that is leading, the simile adventurous, the simile powerful and even the wicked live that is dealing it, it seems to be of no work if it is not immortal.

And this is the section which tells us about the way in which Gilgamesh is mourning the loss of immortality. Then Gilgamesh sat down and wept, down his cheeks the tears were coursing. He spoke to Ur-shanabi, the boat man for whom Ur-shanabi toiled my arms so hard, for whom ran dry the blood of my heart? So totally very sensitive epic, it is very emotional in many of its segments.

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And very soon we find King Gilgamesh moving from feelings of disappointment of not achieving immortality because he is also convinced that death is part and parcel of this life. From that we find him moving towards the beauty of the dynamic and complex society that he rules over and he begins to see his position as a ruler from a different perspective, in a truly different light altogether.

And this is the change, this is the magnificent shift that we face in the second part of the poem, the Epic of Gilgamesh. In the first half we find Gilgamesh taking almost a wicked kind of pleasure from ruling his people, from completely suppressing them and taking charge of things which he ethically should not, controlling things and overpowering things in a way that he should not. But in the second half we find.

This is the section which comes towards the end of the poem and we find him taking comfort in the walls that he has built around the great city. I read you a brief excerpt. When at last they arrived, Gilgamesh said to Ur-shanabi, this is the wall of Uruk which no city on earth can equal. See how its ramparts gleam like copper in the sun. Climb the stone staircase more ancient than the mind can imagine. Approach the Eanna temple, sacred to Ishtar, a temple that no king has equalled in size or beauty.

Walk on wall of Uruk, follow its course around the city. Inspect its mighty foundations. Examine its brickwork, how masterfully it is built. Observe the land it encloses, the palm trees, the garden, the orchards, the glorious palaces and the temples, the shops, the marketplaces, the houses, the public squares. This is how it goes.

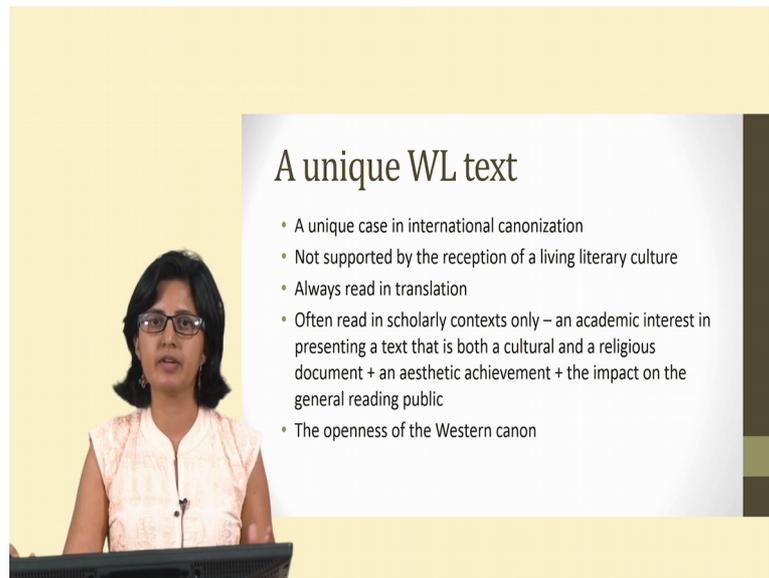
So towards the end when his perspective has entirely changed when he comes to terms with the immortality that is part of his life that the knowledge that death is part of the very life that he has, he becomes to appreciate the work of his hands. He begins to appreciate what he can see as the outcome of his life and when he is admiring and taking comfort in the walls that he has built it on the great city. The Epic of Gilgamesh is also telling us that there is another way in which immortality can be achieved.

It is through the works that you leave behind and here Gilgamesh is looking at the walls, the staircase, things magnificent and small and he is even looking at very minute things like brickwork and masterful plan that has gone into it and the nature around it and how organically he has managed to put everything together.

And this is perhaps the greatest message that the Epic of Gilgamesh also leaves us towards the end that immortality is in the works that you produced in the societies and the lives and the many things that you build around you whether they are in the form of walls or in the form of relations or in the form of the legacy or the value system that you leave behind. That is the way to immortality and we find Gilgamesh a changed person and a good ruler and a mature person truly emerging as a hero with this realization.

And to think that such a profound text existed about 3500 years back that itself is a very unique contribution and that itself is a very unique way to approach world literature from the contemporary.

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The slide is titled "A unique WL text" and lists the following points:

- A unique case in international canonization
- Not supported by the reception of a living literary culture
- Always read in translation
- Often read in scholarly contexts only – an academic interest in presenting a text that is both a cultural and a religious document + an aesthetic achievement + the impact on the general reading public
- The openness of the Western canon

And this text Gilgamesh has been increasingly seen as a unique world literature text. It is a unique case in international canonization because this is one such text which is now cannot be supported by the reception of a living literary culture. One is not even aware of the literary culture in which it was produced and how it was received and circulated then.

There are only certain conjectures which lead us to assume that perhaps the text was translated and circulated at least in some parts in and around Mesopotamia and Sumeria. This work in the modern times what makes it very unique and significant is that it has been read always only in translation.

So this also brings us to some of the questions about translation, about the original text and the role that translated text plays. And we find these texts and the ways in which these texts are being brought back to life. We find them asking newer questions, interesting questions and more challenging questions about the idea of translation and the practice of translation.

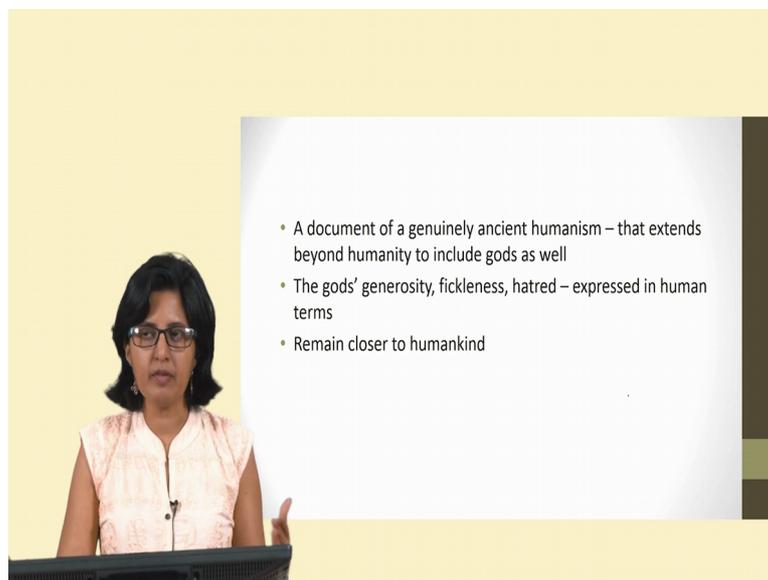
What makes it all the more unique in the case of Gilgamesh is that this text is often sometimes not even often almost always read only in scholarly context and it is a text which is primarily of academic interest and through this academic interest the (())(18:23) is scholarly academic for sure but through this it also makes it possible to present a text that is both a cultural and religious document and also an aesthetic achievement. So this is a unique way in which the Epic of Gilgamesh is being presented.

But this does not take away the impact on the general reading public either. That is what makes this text a unique kind of a text in international canon and also in the traditional world

literature. And the Epic of Gilgamesh is one of the very few texts which also showcases the openness of the Western canon and it also tells us that it is not very important to know about the original literary edition to be able to appreciate a work at a different point of time.

And this text is again one of those texts where one does not bother about the source from where the text came, whether it was the handy work of one person or a group of writers, whether it was handed down as an oral tradition and then noted down by various people. It really does not matter and this tells us about inclusiveness and the openness of canon which at some level is one of the important ideas that world literature should celebrate as well.

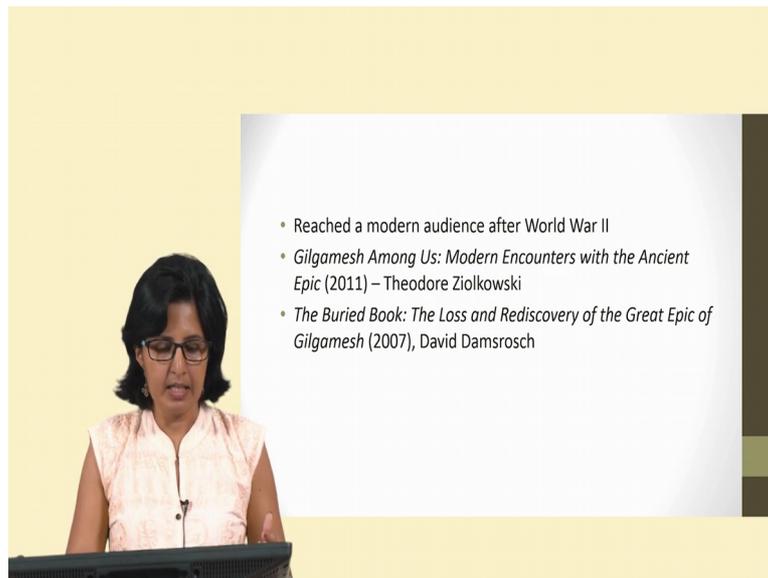
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So as we wrap up this discussion I also want you to stay alert to the fact that this document, this text Epic of Gilgamesh is also seen as a document of a genuinely ancient humanism and this is a kind of humanism that extends beyond humanity to include Gods as well. That is what we see in this text. That is what we see in its presentation and its framework.

And in that context when we read through the text we are also being introduced to the God's generosity, fickleness, hatred and almost all expressions are expressed in human terms and it remains closer to mankind for that reason and for the universal, the timeless appeal that it makes in terms of life, death and questions immortality.

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This being a text that reached the modern audience after the Second World War, there is a lot of contemporary work which could be accessed on Gilgamesh.

If you are interested in reading more about the context within which Gilgamesh was found and how it made its way to become one of the greatest literatures as part of world literature you may want to take a look at these two books, a more recent one being Theodore Ziolkowski's work which came out in 2011, *Gilgamesh Among Us - Modern Encounters with the Ancient Epic*. Some of the excerpts can be accessed online and there is also this work by David Damsrosch, David Damsrosch also being one of the theorist of world literature in the contemporary, one of the most renowned theorist of world literature.

His 2007 work, *The Buried Book - The Loss and Rediscovery of the Great Epic of Gilgamesh*. I hope this lecture will also encourage you to access the text and also look at the ways in which texts are not just translated and circulated but they are also being made accessible through these different modes of practices, different sciences like history or archaeology or even translation practices. And therein lies the significance of a text like the Epic of Gilgamesh. I thank you for listening and I look forward to seeing you in the next session.