Gilgamesh crosses the river of death and swims to its depths in the vain hope of gaining immortality. In *The Odyssey*, Odysseus journeys tirelessly for ten years, fighting off monsters and temptations, in the hopes of returning home. These protagonists have always been on the move, eagerly crossing gardens, deserts, seas, gates, streets, etc. But, with each new journey there is a new discovery. The physical journeys that Gilgamesh and Odysseus undertake serve as a vehicle for a journey of introspection, in which the characters learn a moral lesson and attain self-knowledge.

In the epic of *Gilgamesh*, Gilgamesh takes more than one epic journey. The first journey is with Enkidu in which they leave Uruk to defeat Huwawa, guardian of the Cedar Forest. Gilgamesh proclaims, “The journey I will undergo has never been undergone before” (III: 17). Here, Gilgamesh’s words have a double meaning. The journey that he embarks on has never been performed by any man, but it also implies that he himself has never gone on a journey of self-discovery. This statement serves as an indicator of the more meaningful journey that is to come. In *How to Read Literature Like a Professor*, Thomas Foster explains the real meaning behind a hero’s journey. Foster contends, “the real reason for a quest *never* involves the stated reason” (3). This methodology clearly applies here to Gilgamesh’s first journey. The journey is not important because the men are off to kill Huwawa, but it is important because it concretizes the friendship between Enkidu and Gilgamesh. The strength of this friendship and the love that Gilgamesh has for Enkidu serve as the motives for Gilgamesh’s second and most meaningful journey.
Enkidu’s death is the decoy motive for Gilgamesh’s second journey. The death of Enkidu greatly upsets Gilgamesh, and while grieving for his loss Gilgamesh proclaims, “Enkidu has died. Must I die too? Must Gilgamesh be like that?” (IX: 48). As a result of Enkidu’s death, Gilgamesh becomes afraid of dying. His fear leads him to search for immortality. This search becomes the “stated task” for Gilgamesh’s second journey: “He said to himself that he would seek the son of Ubartutu, Utnapishtim, he, the only one of men by means of whom he might find out how death could be avoided” (IX: 48). Gilgamesh’s determination to find immortality does not falter at the prospect of a difficult journey; on the contrary, Gilgamesh proclaims, “that he would hasten to him [Utnapishtim], the dangers of the journey notwithstanding” (IX: 48). Gilgamesh’s proclamation serves as instance of foreshadowing. Gilgamesh is aware that the journey will be arduous but despite the dangers, he is still determined to face whatever may come his way. Because of the knowledge that Gilgamesh’s journey will be difficult, the reader can deduce that Gilgamesh will have to face many trials in order to achieve his goal of immortality.

Foster explains, “more often than not, the quester fails at the stated task” (3). This failure is ultimately because the “stated quest” is a decoy and it is not what the author wants the hero to learn. Nevertheless, Foster’s statement puzzles the reader; if the hero is doomed to fail on that specific quest, why then does the author make him go in the first place? To this question Foster’s answer is clear: “They go because of the stated task, mistakenly believing that it is their real mission. We know, however, that their quest is educational. They don’t know enough about the only subject that really matters: themselves” (3). Foster’s prediction for the hero’s quest is seen in Gilgamesh. Just as Foster predicts, Gilgamesh does not accomplish what he set out to do in going to see Utnapishtim. Gilgamesh fails at attaining immortality; instead, Utnapishtim teaches
him a moral lesson and as a result, Gilgamesh learns more about himself than when he began.

After a weary voyage, Gilgamesh finally reaches Utnapishtim, whose identity is concealed. He then addresses Gilgamesh: “Your face is bitten by hunger or by sorrow. Why do you look like one who has undergone a terrible journey?” (X: 62). Gilgamesh then retells his story, explains the death of Enkidu, and the reason he embarks on the “terrible journey.” After hearing him out, Utnapishtim explains to Gilgamesh the cycle of nature, most importantly, he states that “the day of death is set, though not made known” (X: 64). This explanation of the cycle of nature and the acceptance of things that humans cannot control is what the author wants Gilgamesh to learn. But, of course the hero is not content with Utnapishtim’s reply because he still believes immortality is the goal of his quest. Utnapishtim then devises two trials that Gilgamesh will have to pass in order to reach immortality. Gilgamesh is only ready to learn his real lesson after he fails Utnapishtim’s tests. Out of pity, Utnapishtim contends that Gilgamesh should be given a prize for at least accomplishing the journey: “Gilgamesh, you who have made the terrible journey, what shall I give you for your return to your city?” (XI: 79). As a gift, Utnapishtim decides to tell Gilgamesh about the “How-the-Old-Man-Once-Again-Becomes-a-Young-Man plant” (XI: 79).

In Ronald Veenker’s article, “Gilgamesh and the Magic Plant,” Veenker clarifies the history and meaning behind the magic plant in the Gilgamesh epic. Veenker contends that “the episode of the magic plant . . . dramatize[s] the ultimate failure of Gilgamesh’s quest” (200). Utnapishtim tells Gilgamesh that the plant “grows under the waters [and is] thorny to seize” (XI: 79). Gilgamesh’s final trial is to swim down to the depths of the water and retrieve the plant. With great strength and resilient determination, Gilgamesh achieves this task
only to lose the plant to a snake that steals it, eats it and sheds its skin. Here
the reader can see Veenker’s point that the magic plant is Gilgamesh’s “ultimate
failure.” Gilgamesh has failed in all the other trials, but this one signifies his
“ultimate failure” because it shows that the snake, or nature, is victorious, not
man who wishes to cheat nature and the cycle of life. By grasping immortality
only to lose it shortly afterwards Gilgamesh learns the lesson that Utnapishtim
tries to teach him.

Since he has learned his lesson, there is nothing left for Gilgamesh to do
but to return to Uruk. Distraught, he contends, “I descended into the waters
to find the plant and what I found was a sign telling me to abandon the jour-
ney and what it was I sought for” (XI: 81). Here Gilgamesh acknowledges that
the real lesson he needed to learn was to not strive for immortality because
one cannot alter the cycle of life. As a result of the lesson learned, Gilgamesh
gains self-knowledge and returns to Uruk a different person. This transition is
witnessed when comparing the opening and ending lines of the epic. The epic
begins with a marvelous, but superficial description of the city of Uruk that is
given by the narrator, and not by its king. After undergoing his journey of in-
trospection, Gilgamesh returns and has a greater value for his city and his own
accomplishments. Now the descriptive words come from Gilgamesh’s own
voice, which portrays his higher sense of belief of the things around him, spe-
cifically nature, which showcases his newly acquired level of self-knowledge.

The story of Gilgamesh serves to also teach the reader to respect the cycle
of nature. Because of this lesson, in the epic of Gilgamesh the role of thematic
aspect is more important than the fictional aspect. In his essay, “Anatomy of
Criticism,” Northrop Frye discusses the two aspects of literature, the fictional
and the thematic. Gilgamesh’s story is universal and the readers retain a moral
lesson from it. Gilgamesh’s lesson does not solely apply to fictional characters,
but to real people as well. Frye explains that “when a work of fiction is written or interpreted thematically, it becomes a parable or illustrative fable” (53). *Gilgamesh* fits this description perfectly because his story is a parable, which teaches the reader to accept the laws and inner workings of nature. Likewise, Homer’s *Odyssey* also has a more prominent thematic aspect. Frye explains that “the main emphasis of Homeric criticism . . . has been overwhelmingly thematic, concerned with the *dianoia* or ideal of leadership” (53). But, *The Odyssey*’s thematic aspect is not limited to its “ideal of leadership.” On the contrary, *The Odyssey* can also serve as an illustrative fable. Although the many adventures of Odysseus showcase a character with supernatural qualities, the focus of the epic poem is in the numerous obstacles he overcomes in order to get back home. The emphasis is on the thematic aspect because like Odysseus, real people overcome trials and temptations in order to achieve their objectives.

The “stated task” of Odysseus’ journey is to get back home to Penelope, but his journey stands for much more than that. His real task is to learn lessons from his actions and mistakes. The many obstacles and temptations Odysseus overcomes are only part of his learning experience. Odysseus’ trip down to the underworld is the crowning moment in his journey of introspection. The underworld is where Odysseus meets with Teirêsias, the prophet who has knowledge of how Odysseus will return to Ithaka. It is talking to Teirêsias and learning not only the mistakes Odysseus committed in the past, but also the obstacles that he will face that will teach Odysseus his lesson. Teirêsias explains:

Great Captain,
A fair wind and the honey lights of home
Are all you seek. But anguish lies ahead;
The god who thunders on the land prepares it,
Not to be shaken from your track, implacable,
In rancor for the son whose eye you blinded. (XI: 112-117)

Odysseus realizes that it is because of his brash action and haughty nature that his voyage is being punished by the gods. Odysseus recalls that early in his journey he wounds and steals the sheep of the Kyklops, Polyphêmos, who asks his father to curse Odysseus’ voyage. After all this becomes clear to Odysseus, he realizes that in order to arrive to Ithaka he has to change his behavior.

As a result of this lesson, Odysseus’s ten-year journey in *The Odyssey* is most likely one of the most introspective journeys of all time. The changes that occur in Odysseus’ character are seen throughout the poem in each new island that he lands. Upon leaving Troy, Odysseus first lands on the island of the Kikonês where he claims to have “stormed that place and killed the men who fought. Plunder we took, and we enslaved the women to make division, equal shares to all” (IX: lines 47-49). In the beginning of his journey, Odysseus is a disrespectful brute who is fresh out of war and has little to no respect for anything. Throughout the course of his journey and with every obstacle that he overcomes, Odysseus learns to control his impulses and to heed warnings. His newfound respect is witnessed in Hêlios’ island. Before arriving at the island, Odysseus is instructed to not meddle with Hêlios’ cattle and when he lands he informs his men: “Old shipmates, our stores are in the ship’s hold, food and drink; the cattle here are not for our provision, or we pay dearly for it” (XII: 407-410). Because Odysseus does not meddle with the cattle, it proves that he has learned Teirêsias’ lesson. Odysseus is now ready to return home.

In Nanno Marinatos’ article “The Cosmic Journey of Odysseus,” Marinatos attempts to understand the logistics of Odysseus’ journey. Marinatos offers the view that “Odysseus’ journey spans the two cosmic junctures of the universe:
East, where Circe resides, and West, where Calypso lives” (381). By placing Circe in the east and Calypso in the west, Marinatos concludes that Odysseus moves in a circular motion like the path of the sun. With this conclusion, Marinatos states that “reaching Helios signifies the end of the journey; one cannot go much further. It is also the place where all men perish except Odysseus” (401). Marinatos’ believes that Odysseus cannot go any further because he has completed the cycle of the sun. For Marinatos, the island of the sun symbolizes the west where the sun sets. Coincidentally, it is in the island of the sun where Odysseus proves that he has learned his lesson. Here, Odysseus does not defy any god or boast of his cunning tricks. He humbly accepts that he is unable to meddle with the cattle. He passes the test and as a reward is spared, unlike his men who kill the cattle and lose their life.

The circular depiction of Odysseus’ physical journey serves also to illustrate his metaphorical journey. Marinatos contends that “it is difficult to imagine Odysseus’ journey as anything but a circular one” (400). This is so because he travels in a circular motion to arrive back where he started. Odysseus’ true starting point is Ithaka because he left Ithaka, sailed to Troy and then he leaves Troy homebound to Ithaka. In this respect, Odysseus is very similar to Gilgamesh. Both heroes leave their cities in search of glory and fame, but return with something more: self-knowledge. Marinatos explains that:

The Phaeacian ship, which conveys Odysseus to the world of men, must be destroyed (it is turned into stone). The journey is irreversible. The raft, which brought Odysseus to Scherie, is also destroyed: all vehicles to and from the Phaeacians must be annihilated for the cosmic journey cannot be undertaken twice . . . neither Odysseus nor anyone else can ever re-enter the cosmic circle. (402)
This statement not only suggests that Odysseus will not be able to retake the physical journey, but also the metaphorical journey. If he were to retake the journey he would not learn the same lessons he learned this time around because he would not be the same person. Ultimately, this exact journey can never be duplicated.

Gilgamesh and Odysseus undergo incredible journeys in order to learn moral lessons and attain self-knowledge. The two protagonists manage to return back from where they left in the beginning of their journey. The question then arises, why must they go back to the same place? T.S. Eliot writes in “Little Gidding”: “We shall not cease from exploration, / And the end of all our exploring, / Will be to arrive where we started, And know the place for the first time.” Eliot’s quote perfectly explains why the protagonists need to return to their original place. With their newly gained self-knowledge the characters are able to fully appreciate their respective places and realize that they will never cease from learning something entirely new.

Works Cited