The Epic of Gilgamesh: History, Context and Themes

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History

> The Gilgamesh epic is a powerful tale in almost any telling. Rilke once called it the greatest thing one could experience, and many consider it the supreme literary achievement of the ancient world before Homer. It has something of the qualities Henry Moore once said he admired in Mesopotamian Art –bigness and simplicity without decorative trimming. It is about nature and culture, the value of human achievements and their limitations, friendship and love, separation and sorrow, life and death.[1]

The words of a reviewer from the New York Times Book Review capture some of the enthusiasm with which the *Epic of Gilgamesh* (EG) has been received from the 19th century, when it was rediscovered, onward. It is perhaps fitting that one of the oldest and greatest stories about humanity came to light in the era of the Romantics and their search for individualism, rebellion, and a much deeper and darker relationship with Nature. It was love at first sight, backed by the dramatic journey of the text itself.

The rise of archeology in the first half of the 19th century saw excavations happen not only, famously, in Egypt, starting with Napoleon's occupation, but also in the Middle East. A British adventurer, Austen Henry Layard, uncovered the remains of the palace of King Ashurbanipal, an Assyrian ruler from the 7th century B.C. He had discovered the ruins of Nineveh (in the northern part of modern-day Iraq), a city mentioned in the Bible and destroyed in 612 B.C[2]. In 1853, Layard's former assistant Hormuzd Rassam excavated perhaps the most precious part of the palace: a library containing thousands of clay tablets, a collection of texts from ancient empires, which were sent to the British Museum.

In a similar manner as had done before Jean-Francois Champollion with hieroglyphs, a British Army officer and later Member of Parliament Sir Henry Rawlinson deciphered cuneiform script, a form of writing using blunt reeds to create wedge-like marks in clay, which was the prevailing form of writing on the excavated tablets. This allowed actual studies of the tablets and in 1872 Rawlinson's assistant and successor George Smith, a former banknote engraver and self-taught Assyriologist, deciphered a tablet that referred to a "flood and a ship that settled on a mountaintop"[3]. On December 3rd of that year he presented a famous talk for the Society of Biblical Archeology, entitled 'A Chaldean[4] History of the Flood'. The find was thought so important that the British Prime Minister William Gladstone himself attended. This was the first reintroduction to the world of Gilgamesh, since Smith had already started to realize that the fragments he deciphered were passages detailing the adventures of a king (whom he called 'Izdubar', a misreading of the cuneiform version of Gilgamesh), and that there were twelve distinct chapters, each on separate tablets, the eleventh of which was the account of the flood. His talk sparked much interest and funding from the *Daily Telegraph* for another expedition to Nineveh, where Smith almost immediately found a fragment with the rest of the flood story and other additions to the 'Izdubar' story. After having deciphered and put together more fragments, he published a book titled *The Chaldean Account of Genesis* (1875), in which he presented a full account of the twelve tablets.

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[1] qtd in Abusch, Tzvi. 'Ishtar's Proposal and Gilgamesh's Refusal: An Interpretation of "The Gilgamesh Epic", Tablet 6, Lines 1-79', in *History of Religions* 26 (1986), 2, (143-187), pp. 143-144

[2] Ziolkowski, Theodore. *Gilgamesh Among Us: Modern Encounters With the Ancient Epic*. New York: Cornell University Press, 2011, p. 8

Although Smith's main point of interest was the story of the flood and its comparison to its Biblical counterpart, and furthermore, although his first full translation of the Epic differs greatly from the fuller and more detailed Gilgamesh story we know today (which only goes to show how complex the translating of cuneiform script can be), he can be seen as the modern 'father' of EG and the crucial person figuring in its reintroduction into society.

After Smith, interest in Gilgamesh continued to rise as more fragments were deciphered, new translations[5] were published, and the text started to settle as well as become more available to the general public (in the beginning, mostly German speakers, since some of the earliest comprehensive translations were published in Germany). From the interest of historians and religious scholars and who debated the flood account as a possible source for the Bible, to psychologists such as Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav Jung who tested their theories of the unconscious against the mythical material, EG finally captured the imagination of poets and artists and started an incredibly rich and widespread reception: "The spell of Gilgamesh captured many since Rilke so that over the years the story has been variously reworked into plays, novels and at least two operas. Translations have now appeared in at least sixteen languages and more appear year by year."[6]

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[3] Ziolkowski 2011, p. 9

[4] 'Chaldean' is the Hellenistic name for the region of Southeast Mesopotamia

[5] Among others, the main German and English translations: Alfred Jeremias' *Izdubar-Nimrod* from 1891 (first German translation); Morris Jastrow's *Religion of Babylon and Assyria* in 1898 (first partial translation into English; Peter Jensen's German translation from 1900; Arthur Ungnad's *Das Gilgamesch-Epos* from 1911; Stephen Langdon's partial translation from 1917; Hermann Ranke's German translation from 1924; Erich Ebeling's scholarly translation from 1926; R. Campbell Thompson's first complete English translation from 1928; Albert Schott's *das Gilgamesch-Epos* from 1934; Nancy Sandars' *The Epic of Gilgamesh* from 1960; John Gardner's and John Maier's *Gilgamesh: From the Sîn-Lequi-Unninnî Version* from 1984; Robert Temples *He Who Saw Everything* from 1991; Andrew George's *The Epic of Gilgamesh* from 1999, and Stephan Maul's *Das Gilgamesch-Epos* from 2005.

The text we have today is a compilation that encompasses fragments pertaining to different eras, cultures and empires stretching through a history of several centuries. Most of the tablets were found in the region of ancient Mesopotamia, the area around the system of rivers Tigris and Euphrates, covering modern-day Iraq and Kuwait as well as parts of Syria, Turkey and Iran. The earliest text-based findings that can be called literature (albeit in a very basic sense of the term) go back to around 2600 B.C. when two main languages were spoken in the region: Sumerian and Akkadian. Sumerian was the older of the two, while Akkadian slowly became more prevalent, helped by its making of the official administrative language by King Sargon who founded the first great Mesopotamian empire around 2300 B.C., and finally becoming the only spoken language after the rise to prominence of the city of Babylon and its most famous king, Hammurabi, in the 18th century B.C. Sumerian, however, remained as a language of literature and culture (similar to the status of Greek in the later Roman Empire) and a learning tool for budding scribes. As George notes, there existed a proverb that said, 'A scribe who knows no Sumerian, what kind of scribe is he?'[7]

It is through these student scribes that the older, Sumerian, texts about Gilgamesh were preserved into later times and ultimately until the present. The timeline of the formation of EG slowly comes into focus. Although the character of Gilgamesh is a clearly deified and heroic invention, a list of kings of the dynasty of Uruk that was found on some of the tablets has more or less confirmed suggestions that there indeed existed a historic person, a king who went by the name Gilgamesh. He is the fifth king on the list: "Meskiaggasher inaugurated the dynasty of Uruk. Relative chronology allows scholars to date this semi-legendary personality to 2700 B. C."[8] The list also features names such as Lugalbanda and Tummuz, two other deified heroes that feature in various legends and adventure stories from the region. This was a time when myth slowly turned into history: much before the dynasty of Uruk, various lists give us names of the rulers before the great flood, which was survived by only one person, Uta-napishti (a predecessor, or at least analogue of Noah from Hebrew tradition), and his family. One of these, named Enmenluana, supposedly reigned a whopping 46,000 years. As we approach the contemporary time of the scribes documenting royal history, lengths of the king's reigns become more accurate. Gilgamesh is the last king on the list whose reign (126 years) exceeds natural expectations; his successor Ur-Nungal is listed as having reigned for thirty years, the king after that (Udul-kalama), only fifteen.

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[6] George, Andrew. The Introduction to *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. London, New York: Penguin Books, 1999, III (2003), p. xiv. I am using George's translation for all the quotes from EG.

[7] George 2003, p. xv

[8] Sasson, Jack M. 'Some Literary Motifs in the Composition of the Gilgamesh Epic', in *Studies in Philology* 69 (1972), 3, (259-279), p. 260

This distinction establishes the historic reality of Gilgamesh, although it is precisely *because* of the EG and its long life that we know extremely little about the actual king Gilgamesh, and can only venture some guessing hypotheses about his life. One of the principle ones, supported by archeological evidence, would be that he had some part in the building of fortifications of the city of Uruk, as Sasson notes: "Precisely during the 'heroic age of Sumer', a period in which Gilgamesh is presumed to have lived, great fortifications were raised."[9] More importantly however, the lists show us the significance of a king who reigned through a period of change, an element to note once the various interpretations of EG are addressed.

The first stories about Gilgamesh were most likely written down in the 20th century B.C., long after the historic king had died and been deified through legend. It is easy to assume that oral versions of those stories had circulated the region a while before they were set in clay, originating perhaps even just a few decades after the death of the king[10]. There are five of these legends, written in Sumerian, where Gilgamesh is called 'Bilgamesh', functioning as independent stories about the adventures of the king[11]: *Bilgamesh and Akka* (where Bilgamesh successfully defeats the hegemonic claims of Akka, the ruler of the city-state of Kish)*, Bilgamesh and Huwawa* (where Bilgamesh and his servant Enkidu fight the monster Huwawa)*, Bilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven* (where Bilgamesh comes in conflict with the goddess Inanna and defeats the Bull of Heaven)*, Bilgamesh and the Netherworld* (where Bilgamesh's servant Enkidu descends into the Netherworld to acquire some lost objects)*,* and *The Death of Bilgamesh* (where a dying Gilgamesh is judged by the gods and given a special position in the Netherworld as the chief of the shades, judging other dead humans)*.*

While the Babylonian scribes were learning to write with the help of these Sumerian stories, there already existed an Akkadian (which was the official language of the Babylonian empire) comprehensive version of the Epic from around the 18th century B.C. Of this version, from the so-called Old Babylonian period, we possess only a few fragments – just enough to know it had already existed before the Middle Babylonian period, during which the 'Standard Version' of EG, or the version that is still most common today, was compiled. The Standard Version is usually attributed to a master scribe and poet named Sîn-liqe-unninni (the name means 'O Moon God, Accept my Prayer!'[12]), who is supposed to have put it together somewhere in the 13th century B.C. While the Old Babylonian text was already a compilation of the Sumerian stories with name changes from Sumerian to Akkadian (Bilgamesh becomes Gilgamesh, Huwawa becomes Humbaba, Inanna becomes Ishtar and so on), the Standard Version is a heavily edited and revised version with additions and changes. It keeps most of the plot material from two of the five Sumerian stories, *Bilgamesh and Huwawa* and *BIlgamesh and the Bull of Heaven*, and adds more material on the creation of Enkidu, who is promoted from Gilgamesh's servant to his rival, friend, and perhaps equal, as well as Gilgamesh's travels after Enkidu's death. But most of all, it adds the story of Uta-napishti[13] and the great flood, which to most early Gilgamesh scholars represented the most important part of the Epic, seen in connection with the Biblical account of the deluge. The text is taken from another epic, also written down in the Old Babylonian period: the *Atra-Hasis*, named after its chief protagonist who is included as one of the antediluvian kings in the afore-mentioned lists of kings. The *Atra-Hasis* contains the story of creation as well as the first calamities to be brought upon humans by the gods, including and in most detail, the great flood. A slightly adapted version of the latter became tablet XI (the final tablet) of the Standard Version of EG, woven together with the journey of Gilgamesh who decides to try and find Uta-napishti and learn his secret.

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[9] Sasson 1972, p. 262

[10] Sasson 1972, p. 262

[11] In antiquity, these poems were known more by their *incipits*: *The Envoys of Akka; The Lord to the Living One's Mountain; Hero in Battle; In Those Days, in Those Far-Off Days,* and *The Great Wild Bull is Lying Down*. I'm following George's translations of these verses.

Summary of the Epic

In order to achieve clarity in referencing in the literary analysis of EG, it will help to summarize with slightly more detail the contents of the eleven tablets of the Standard Version of EG.

Tablet I opens with an ode to Gilgamesh, praising him as the one who "saw the Deep"[14] or the 'Abyss', the wise one and the one who "brought back a tale of before the Deluge"[15]. Gilgamesh is two thirds divine and one third human, he built the wall of Uruk, he is strong and mighty, and his travails are written down on tablets of lapis lazuli. However, he seems to be too much for his people since he "lets no son go free to his father" and "no daughter free to her mother"[16]. The people therefore ask the gods for help, and the mother goddess Aruru creates a human called Enkidu as a challenger. A trapper spies Enkidu in the forest and the report reaches Gilgamesh. The king tells the harlot[17] Shamhat to seek Enkidu out in order to tame him. She does so by sleeping with him for six days and seven nights. Then she tells him about Uruk and Gilgamesh, who has been having prophetic dreams about Enkidu. These dreams are interpreted by Gilgamesh's mother Ninsun, a minor goddess (the 'Wild Cow') as favorable.

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[12] George 2003, p. xxiv
[13] Also transcribed as 'Utnapishtim' in many translations
[14] EG Tablet I, verse 1
[15] EG Tablet I, verse 8

Tablet II returns to Enkidu who is being taught human culture by Shamhat. She gives him clothes and teaches him how to eat bread and drink ale, whereupon "his mood became free, he started to sing / his heart grew merry, his face lit up"[18], arguably the first description of a drunk person in human history. He learns that Gilgamesh takes the *droit de seigneur*, or right of first night, meaning he sleeps with the brides of Uruk on their wedding nights. Outraged, Enkidu decides to go to Uruk and challenge Gilgamesh. He enters Uruk with a rabble of people and bars the way so that Gilgamesh cannot pass. They fight but the outcome is unclear because of a lacuna in the fragment – when the text resumes, Gilgamesh is kneeling, but it is hard to say if he is doing so because he is pinning Enkidu down or because he has lost the match. In any case, immediately after the fight Enkidu speaks with respect to Gilgamesh and the two become friends. Gilgamesh proposes to slay the monster Humbaba who lives in the Cedar forest. Enkidu is against the idea but Gilgamesh coaxes him into agreeing and together they forge weapons and armor for the trip. The Elders of Uruk advise against trying to conquer the ferocious monster.

In Tablet III, the Elders give in and commend Gilgamesh to Enkidu. Gilgamesh asks his mother Ninsun for her blessing, and she prays to the Sun god Shamash to help Gilgamesh by arousing the Winds against Humbaba. Ninsun also adopts Enkidu as her son, effectively making him Gilgamesh's brother. The two heroes depart.

Tablet IV describes the journey to the Cedar forest. Both heroes are strong and they travel fast. Only every three days do they pitch camp and rest on the slope of a mountain. When they do, Gilgamesh prays for divine signs and provokes dreams which all describe some sort of disaster. He has five such dreams. Enkidu, however, always interprets the dream as positive in terms of slaying Humbaba. They finally reach the forest, where Shamash urges them to attack Humbaba while he does not have his seven protective cloaks or ‘auras’ on him. The two heroes falter but encourage each other: “Why, my friend, do we speak like weaklings? / Was it not we who crossed all the mountains? / Did not … before us?”[19]

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[16] EG Tablet I, verse 72
[17] Sacred prostitute
[18] EG Tablet II, verse 105

In Tablet V we learn about the fight with Humbaba. The tablet is very fragmentary and by the time the text picks up, Humbaba is speaking to the heroes, insulting them: “Come Enkidu, you spawn of a fish, who knew no father / hatchling of terrapin and turtle, who sucked no mother’s milk! / In your youth I watched you, but near you I went not / would your … have filled my belly?”[20] The god Shamash helps by bringing in thirteen winds and immobilizing Humbaba who pleads for his life, offering himself to Gilgamesh as a servant. Gilgamesh listens, but it is Enkidu who urges him to kill the monster, and the two do so together. They chop down the cedars and make a raft where they put Humbaba’s head.

Tablet VI corresponds to the Sumerian story about Bilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven. Gilgamesh washes and puts on new clothes, and the goddess Ishtar offers him to be her husband, promising great riches. Gilgamesh, however refuses, insulting her and mentioning past lovers that she had destroyed: “You loved the speckled *allallu*-bird, / but struck him down and broke his wing / now he stands in the woods crying ‘My wing!’”[21] Ishtar is furious and demands retribution from her father, the god of sky Anu. She threatens to open the gates of the Netherworld if he doesn’t give her the Bull of Heaven, which he does. She releases the Bull which immediately starts to cause destruction, but Gilgamesh and Enkidu manage to kill it and sacrifice its meat to Anu. Moreover, Enkidu tears a haunch off the Bull and hurls it at Ishtar who mourns the bull.

In Tablet VII, Enkidu has a foreboding dream where the gods decide that he must die as punishment for the deaths of Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven. Feverish, he curses the wooden door they had made from the cedars; the hunter; and Shamhat, but after an intervention by Shamash he calms down and blesses her. He has a vision of death, “A man there was, grim his expression / just like a Thunderbird his features were frightening”[22] who leads him into the ‘House of Dust’. He falls ill and dies after twelve days, bewailing the fact that he is not dying in battle.

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[19] EG Tablet IV, verses 243-245
[20] EG Tablet V, verses 87-90
[21] EG Tablet VI, verses 48-50
[22] EG Tablet VII, verses 168-169

Tablet VIII is a description of the funeral and mourning of Enkidu. Gilgamesh has a long eulogy about his friend, and proceeds to make a funerary statue as well as, amidst prayers, provide his friend with many riches and gold for the Netherworld.

In Tablet IX, Gilgamesh is confronted with his own mortality and his fear propels hi to action: "I'm afraid of death, so I wander the wild / to find Uta-napishti, son of Ubar-Tutu."[23] He arrives at the Twin Mountains of Mashu and is confronted by Scorpion-men, guarding the gates to the passage. Sensing the divine in him, they let him through and he travels for twelve double hours through darkness, after which he reaches a garden of paradise.

In Tablet X, Gilgamesh reaches the sea-shore where a wise old goddess, Siduri (the 'Barmaid') lives in a tavern. After he threatens to break down the door, she lets him in and he relates the story of Enkidu his death. She advises him to enjoy life as much as he can, but at length tells him of Urshanabi the boatman who could take him to Uta-napishti. Gilgamesh finds Urshanabi and with the help of wooden poles, crosses the ocean and the Waters of Death to arrive at Uta-napishti's, who chastises him for his foolishness: "Enkidu indeed they took to his doom. / But you, you toiled away, and what did you achieve? / You exhaust yourself with ceaseless toil, you fill your sinews with sorrow / bringing forward the end of your days."[24]

The final tablet, Tablet XI, is the famous account of the flood. Uta-napishti promises to tell him the secret of his immortality, which is the story of the deluge. The great gods sent down the deluge to destroy mankind, but the god of wisdom Ea, seemingly speaking to a fence made of reed, warned Uta-napishti of what was to come and told him to build a boat. Uta-napishti built the boat in seven days and brings board animals and craftsmen. The deluge came and it was terrible; even the gods were frightened of what they had done. After seven days the storm subsided and Uta-napishti let out three birds. The third one, a raven, did not return, meaning it had found land. Uta-napishti sacrificed to the gods (who gathered around like flies) and the god Enlil who had been the most responsible for the flood, calmed his own wrath and rewarded Uta-napishti and his wife with immortality. But, Uta-napishti tells Gilgamesh, nothing like that will ever happen again. He challenges him to stay awake for six days and seven nights, which the hero fails to do miserably, and sleeps for the same amount of time, during which Uta-napishti's wife bakes a loaf of bread for each day. When he wakes up, Uta-napishti instructs Urshanabi to clean him up and take him home. As Gilgamesh is sailing away, Uta-napishti, to the bequest of his wife, tells him of a plant that grows at the bottom of the ocean, which rejuvenates whoever consumes it. Gilgamesh dives into the water and finds the flower. He intends to take it to Uruk and give it to an old man, then try it out himself. However, as he pitches camp on the way next to a pool of water, a serpent comes, having smelled the flower, and steals it, sloughing its skin. Gilgamesh returns to Uruk without the flower, but contents himself by showing the city's ramparts to Urshanabi, thus concluding the Standard Version with the same image that it begins with: that of the wall, a great achievement which will bring Gilgamesh's name immortality.

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[23] EG Tablet IX, verses 5-6

[24] EG Tablet X, verses 298-300

The eleven tablet version of Sîn-liqe-unninni is the most widespread one still today. There exists, however a Tablet XII. It appears to have been added later and it is in fact a line-by-line translation of part of the old Sumerian story, *BIlgamesh and the Netherworld*. In it, Enkidu descends into the Netherworld, and when Gilgamesh manages to conjure up his spirit, they have a dialogue where Gilgamesh questions his friend about the people he has met on the other side. Tablet XII has been a point of dissention. George argues that, "Though some have tried to show that Tablet XII had a real place in the epic, most scholars would agree that it does not belong to the text but was attached to it because it was plainly related material."[25] The arguments against include those of the Epic already having a clear ending; of broken continuity by Enkidu, who is suddenly alive again; and of the fact that it is a mechanical add-on from the Sumerian poem. Others, however, see the development of the Epic as a shifting in its focus: "The basic conflict is that between the extraordinary and the normal. In the Old Babylonian version, the conflict is that of hero versus man; in the eleven-tablet version, it is that of hero versus king; and in the twelve-tablet version, it is that of hero versus god."[26] Or again some see it as a sort of epilogue, confirming Gilgamesh's final acceptance of his role in the world: "In a manner analogous to (though also very different from) the satyr plays presented following Greek tragedies, the Descent into the Netherworld presents a change in tone and a release of tensions, allowing time for the audience to understand what has transpired"[27]

Themes and motifs in EG

A text stemming so far back and layered by the time, space and people it has traversed, is clearly a bottomless well for someone who wishes to extract its essence and present it in another art form.

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[25] George 2003, p. xxviii

[26] Abusch, Tzvi. 'The Development and Meaning of the Epic of Gilgamesh: An Interpretive Essay', in *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 121 (2001), 4, (614-622), p. 616

[27] Vulpe, Nicola. 'Irony and the Unity of the Gilgamesh Epic', in *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 53 (1994), 4, (275-283), p. 283

Before delving into the process that has created *Gilgamesh: A Musical Epic*, the question that needs to be answered is, what are the themes that EG explores? Why is it important? A brief overview of the main questions posed by the Epic will help with understanding the dilemmas and challenges faced during its adaptation and staging. Most of the motifs and issues covered will fall under two larger categories: a) Identity and Otherness, and b) Shift and Growth; both categories are of course connected: Identity will Change through Growth and Shift when it is confronted by Otherness.

Identity and Otherness

The question of identity is omnipresent in EG. The journey of Gilgamesh is one of self-discovery. Who is he? "For in addition to being a hero, Gilgamesh is also a man, a king, and a god, and he must come to terms with these several identities."[28] He is presented as two thirds god and one third human, a division that puts him neither in one nor the other world completely. When we meet him at the start of the Epic, he is fulfilling a role of the divine warrior of old, a mythological hero. And yet the very same qualities that serve him as a hero are coming in the way of his status as a ruler of people. His endless energy is wearing his subjects out; he is like a child with an Attention Deficit Disorder, or an insomniac: "What Gilgamesh has is not just an inability to sleep, but an inability to stop, or even to see the desirability of stopping."[29] With no thought to the consequences of his actions, he uses Uruk and those around him as a sandbox to play in. This creates a breach between his perspective of the world and that of the audience, leading us to literary irony, "the profound discordance between the hero's view of himself and his world, and the audience's understanding of this world, the audience's foreknowledge of the hero's fate."[30] As in Greek tragedy, we know what he does not know, and we get to watch him struggle as he tries to come to terms with that knowledge. But at the beginning he is blissfully unaware of his own fate.

From a more psycho-analytic approach, he can be seen as the anti-force against the unconscious: "The people, as the indiscriminate many, against the outstanding one, the king, symbolize the unconscious, the instinctive forces, which are here shown in a deplorable state of suppression by an ego possessed by an ambitious self-assigned task."[31] The self-assigned task is achieving great deeds, becoming famous, and living up to the identity of the warrior demigod, such as building the mighty ramparts of Uruk. Right at the very start his identity is already threefold: a mix of god and man, he is also called the "wild bull on the rampage"[32] and identified as the son of the 'Wild Bull' Lugalbanda, and the 'Wild Cow' Ninsun. All three aspects are thus already in him, and the Epic will in fact be a battle between them, a struggle that will bring him from animal-god to man, from hero to king, from the unconscious to individual.

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[28] Abusch 2001, p. 616

[29] Deagon, Andrea. 'The Twelve Double Hours of Night: Insomnia and Transformation in "Gilgamesh", in *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 1 (1998), 3/4, (461-489), p. 469

[30] Vulpe 1994, p. 278

[31] Kluger, Rivkah Schärf. *Gilgamesh: The Archetypal Significance of A Modern Ancient Hero* (ed. H. Yehezkel Kluger). Einsiedeln: Daimon Verlag, 1991, p. 27

As any identity, he is defined by negatives, by the gaze of others. He is described to us by the narrating voice in EG, then by the people of Uruk, then by Shamhat to Enkidu, then by Enkidu himself, and so on. In fact, his speaking role in the first few tablets is limited: he only says one command to the Trapper in Tablet I while the dreams he has been having are narrated by Shamhat. The first time Gilgamesh actually speaks in a more substantial way is in the middle of Tablet II when he urges Enkidu to go and fight Humbaba. A closer look at the whole first half of EG tells us that the moment when Gilgamesh says more than just a verse or two, happens only in Tablet VI, the middle of the Epic, when he replies to Ishtar's offer. Why is that so? How come the presence of the titular hero of the text is barely acknowledged by himself until the narration is already halfway through? It signifies that up until that moment, nothing major has changed for him. Or to be more precise, things have already changed, but he has not been forced to make any real decisions yet. The one thing that has changed, that has been set in motion, is that he has met his Double, his Other – Enkidu.

Enkidu is presented to us as the 'beast-man', the creation of the gods who is more animal than human at the start of his short existence: "All his body is matted with hair / he bears long tresses like those of a woman / the hair on his head grows thickly as barley / he knows not a people, nor even a country."[33] He is a representative of nature against Gilgamesh's culture, the unconscious against the ego, the instinct against rational thought, earth against light, the feminine against the masculine. The first to discover him is the Trapper and after the narrator describes Enkidu, he turns to the Trapper and tells us of his reaction to guide us in our own perception of this new character: "The trapper's shock reflects the beast's alterity, and we too are encouraged to experience that otherness as shocking."[34] Enkidu could therefore be the ultimate Other, the opposite of Gilgamesh in every way. But at the same time, we are told that the whole purpose of his creation is to be a rival to Gilgamesh, and therefore he needs to match him in some ways: "Let her create the equal of Gilgamesh, one mighty in strength / and let him vie with him, so Uruk may be rested."[35] So Enkidu is in fact created as an *equal* to Gilgamesh. Indeed, when he walks into Uruk, the people marvel at him and describe him as similar to the king: “In build he is the image of Gilgamesh / but shorter in stature, and bigger in bone.”[36] He is ‘bigger in bone’, meaning there is more of an earthly element in him than in Gilgamesh who is ‘tall, magnificent and handsome.’ Enkidu is an equal, but also an opposite of Gilgamesh. He is, in fact, his Doppelgänger:

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[32] EG Tablet I, verse 30
[33] EG Tablet I, verses 105-108
[34] Dickson, Keith. 'Looking at the Other in "Gilgamesh"', in *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 127 (2007), 2, (171-182) p. 174
[35] EG, Tablet I, dropped stanza

> Characteristic of this earliest of epics, incidentally, we meet with the rudiments of all subsequent Doppelgänger narratives, very popular in western culture, in which two dramatized personalities are forged into one, ‘two characters (are made) to complement each other both physically and psychologically and who together are projections of the crippled or struggling personalities of a third character with whom the author is primarily concerned’.[37]

The third character in our case would not be another protagonist of the Epic, but one of the identities of Gilgamesh himself, notably that of Man. As Sasson points out, the Doppelgänger became an important figure in later culture, especially in the Romantic tradition; another reason, perhaps, why the discovery of EG in the 19th century created such a stir. Otto Ludwig, defining what he called German *poetische Realismus*, noted that the protagonist and his Doppelgänger were often divided on a moral or spiritual scale: “One character’s actions and personality are directed by carnality and egotism, while his or her opposite is driven by exaggerated spiritual ideals. But a closer observation will reveal that these antagonists are but two sides of one coin.”[38] The Doppelgänger, as per definition, is a double-edged sword. One of the theorists of the Romantic Doppelgänger, Clément Rosset, believes that the need or desire for Doppelgängers stems from a feeling of uniqueness, at once rewarding and frightening. The realization that I am the only me and that I am unique is rewarding; the fact that when I am gone, there will be no more of me, is frightening. However, the creation of a Double or Doppelgänger in fact doesn’t create another me, but another *other* who instead of providing relief endangers the ontological status of the subject, if he or she recognizes “too late in the protecting double the same real which one thought one was protected from.”[39]

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[36] EG Tablet II, verses 184-185

[37] Claire Rosenfeld, qtd. in Sasson 1972, p. 273

[38] Pizer, John. *Ego – Alter Ego: Double and/as Other in the Age of German Poetic Realism*. Chapel Hill, London: University of North Carolina Press, 1998, p. 41. I have researched and written about Doppelgangers in my dissertation production and paper when finishing my MA Text and Performance at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. It is clearly a subject that my own unconscious Doppelganger is constantly feeding me. Here I am paraphrasing a paragraph from that dissertation.

[39] Rosset, Clément. *Le réel et son double*. Paris: Gallimard, 1976, II (1984), p. 125

This is the reason why Enkidu needs to be introduced into Gilgamesh's life. "Seeing the other is transformative; it always brings with it a risk of oneself no longer being the same."[40] Although it seems like the original intention, that of creating someone with equal strength as the king in order to be able to physically challenge him and prevent him from terrorizing his people, has failed since the two become friends, the gods might have been trickier than we would think. The plan in fact does succeed since Gilgamesh stops channeling his abundant and therefore destructive energy at his people and uses Enkidu instead as a catalyst, but the plan also works in a much more subtle way: Enkidu opens Gilgamesh's eyes to the Other which inherently means that he will see himself for the first time, and that sudden new sight will make him change. In fact, after Enkidu's death, the plan works so well that we might suspect it has gone beyond what the gods themselves had predicted – much like what happened in the great flood. The Sumerian and Babylonian gods are far from the perfect all-powerful being of later monotheistic religions; they are a fickle bunch, and much of what they do turns out differently than they'd imagined.

Thus somewhat surprisingly, Enkidu, who comes from the realm of the unconscious, is the one who will pull Gilgamesh up onto a new level of consciousness. In a way, they complement each other. Gilgamesh sees Enkidu (or symbols representing him) in his dreams, in a way helping to create him: "If you are meant, you are seen, and if you are seen you have to see yourself and *have* to become conscious."[41] As the Doppelgängers that they are, they yank each other out of their respective states into new, higher, different ones. Both of them have prophetic dreams while still in their 'static' state, and as Deagon notes, "Nightmare sufferers, when clinically analyzed, tend to show "thin ego boundaries"- a failure to perceive themselves, their desires and inclinations as separate from the being and desires of the rest of the world."[42] Gilgamesh fails to recognize that the rest of the world is different and affected by his actions, while Enkidu in his animal state enjoys a union with the natural world where individuality is completely absent. Meeting each other creates stronger ego boundaries for both of them, and brings them joy and sorrow. As Doubles they belong to the same coin and feel as close friends to each other, but at the same time, "Seeing the other evokes awareness of oneself, and especially of oneself as isolated, finite, and impermanent. Seeing the other makes one see oneself as mortal.[43] Enkidu, and even more so his death, is what will make Gilgamesh realize his own mortality for the first time. On the other hand, Enkidu's gentrification from instinctual animal to more rational man will make him realize the same thing, leading to his curse before death. Together, they form a tangle of identities from animal to man and god: "Here, therefore, we have a parallel case of animal-man and man-god existing side by side; moreover, the man-god is an animal, and the circle is nearly complete."[44] Gilgamesh's mother Ninsun seals their bond by adopting Enkidu before they set out to fight Humbaba: "O mighty Enkidu, you are not sprung from my womb / but henceforth your brood will belong with the votaries of Gilgamesh / the priestesses, the hierodules and the women of the temple."[45]

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[40] Dickson 2007, p. 175
[41] Kluger 1991, p. 47
[42] Deagon 1998 p. 475
[43] Dickson 2007, pp. 175-176

After becoming friends, the two heroes set out to find and kill Humbaba, the guardian of the Cedar forest. The meaning of the forest is manifold; cedars were a precious wood that was highly valued in a region without trees, at the same time the Cedar forest was one of those mythical places which are hard to find and where gods lived. It is a place of the unconscious, of nature and its beasts, belonging to older cycles of mother goddess-type cults. We will have a closer look at the Humbaba episode later when we analyze the great changes and shifts the Epic covers. For now, let's jump ahead to the result of killing the monster: the offer of marriage from the goddess Ishtar, since this is the moment when Gilgamesh faces the first real challenge to his identity. Ishtar (Sumerian: Innana) is the goddess of love and war, the equivalent of Aphrodite but often with a much more dangerous side. Tablet VI, where her proposal is located, was supposedly added to the Standard Version and not present in the Old Babylonian version, which has sparked interest of scholars. Tzvi Abusch has proposed an exciting theory which is quite successful at explaining the episode. In order to review it, it is useful to know that Gilgamesh as a figure remained in Babylonian culture not only as the character of the Epic, but also as an actual deified hero with his place in the myths: after his own death (not described in EG) he was given special status in the Netherworld where he judges the souls of the dead. In a way, he has been granted his wish of becoming immortal, but in a Solomonic kind of way, since he is immortal in death, rather than in life, and still separated from the gods.

Abusch notes that there is something strange about Gilgamesh's refusal of Ishtar's offer. "The Gilgamesh that we have met thus far in the epic is surely not the kind of man to fear a challenge or to imagine himself vulnerable to that which might harm a lesser being"[46] He should be tempted by the exquisite and elite nature of the offer, says Abusch: status, power, wealth and the goddess herself! And yet, for the first time in the Epic, he takes a long moment to refuse, naming all former Ishtar's lovers that she's ruined in one way or another, and insulting her at that. What is it that has turned him away? Firstly and quite clearly, this is the peak moment of Gilgamesh the hero and warrior. Although he has met his Other, he has not yet experienced the self-awareness that the gaze of the Other brings; for now, the two sides of the coin are working perfectly together and seemingly successfully spiting the gods. They have killed the greatest monster in the land, Humbaba, and with that they have achieved *the* deed of their time. Cocky is an understating adjective in this moment when Gilgamesh the strongest and most self-sufficient he ever has: "The gods are unwanted; only Shamash (as Enlil in jealous contempt remarks), like 'one of the boys,' shares in the heroes' exploits."[47] However, arrogance is not the only reason he refuses the goddess. When she speaks to him, she says: "Come, Gilgamesh, be my bridegroom! / Grant me your fruits, O grant me! / Be you my husband and I your wife!"[48] Abusch notes that this is a version of the marriage formula in Babylonian culture where the bridegroom would say, 'You are my wife', and the bride would say, 'You are my husband': "The marriage formula was mutual; the divorce formula, on the other hand, was unilateral – for example, 'You are not my wife, I am not your husband.'"[49] The secret therefore lies in the *way* she offers marriage – with a unilateral formulation which means quite the opposite than the mutual one. In fact, Abusch is proposing that hidden underneath the seemingly enticing words of the goddess is an offer to be introduced to the Netherworld[50] in a 'fast-track' kind of way. The elements of the offer include princes and kings kissing his feet, and his chariot being driven by divine creatures. What is hidden behind these images is the land of the dead: it is the dead kings and princes that he would rule over, and the creatures of the Netherworld that would serve him. What she wants is not a simple marriage, but for him to join her in the world of the dead and assume his place as a judging official there. He has the opportunity, the first so far, to choose one of his identities – his divine side – and divorce all the rest of them. But he is at the point where he feels stronger than the gods so the refusal comes easy to him, and in this light makes much more sense.

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[44] Wolff, Hope Nash. 'Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Heroic Life', in *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 89 (1969), 2, (392-398), p. 394

[45] EG Tablet III, verses 121-123

[46] Abusch 1986, p. 147

The choice has a dire consequence: by killing Humbaba, refusing Ishtar and slaughtering the Bull of Heaven (the Big Dipper personified), the two heroes have transgressed against the gods and the punishment, somewhat alleviated by the efforts of their protectors Anu and Shamash, is the death of

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[47] Wolff 1969, p. 397

[48] EG Tablet VI, verses 7-9

[49] Abusch 1986, p. 148

[50] Abusch has found other examples from Babylonian mythology: a similar phrase is spoken by the queen of the Netherworld Ereshkigal to her future spouse Nergal, and by the demon Arad-Lili to a human female. In all occasions, it is an invitation to die a divine death, meaning descend into the Netherworld forever as a partner of a divinity.

Enkidu. This is the real turning point of the Epic and a moment where a choice is thrust upon Gilgamesh: in his mythological warrior identity he feels a very human chill inside him: for the first time in his life, he feels fear and becomes aware of death. The gods add another twist to their stratagem; the introduction of Enkidu, the Other through which Gilgamesh gets to know himself is now complete, and the result is the fall from demigod to man. It happens through the duration of Tablet VIII which represents Gilgamesh's 'public mourning'. His real thoughts become known to us at the beginning of Tablet IX: "I'm afraid of death so I wander the wild."[51] He has declined the offer to be a god (or the closest to that status anyway), and now he cannot accept the decision to be a man. So he responds by running away, with the intention to find Uta-napishti and seeking his own version of divinity – immortality. "With the death of Enkidu, he becomes a human again, but Enkidu's death also renders his human life intolerable. He strips himself of his human form and tries to take on the appearance of a god."[52] The real journey of Gilgamesh starts here, in the second half of the Epic. It is too soon for him to just accept reality, he still needs to go on a journey of self-discovery and pushing his own limits in order to get to the point where he will be able to face Uta-napishti and the ultimate truth. "Without Enkidu's death, there is no development. But without the wandering, there would be no possibility for development, and Enkidu's death would have left Gilgamesh, literally, at a dead end."[53]

The major consequence of Enkidu's death is that Gilgamesh, whom we know as "The one who has seen the Deep"[54], now becomes "the One Who is Seen"[55] – by Siduri, by Urshanabi, and by Uta-napishti; all of them start their conversations by telling him how terrible and haggard he looks: "Why are your cheeks so hollow, your face so sunken / your mood so wretched, your visage so wasted?"[56] A deep fall for the king who was hailed for being handsome and well built. In fact, he has now become the Other and has switched sides. *He* is now the alienating element, feared by some (Siduri), degraded by others (Urshanabi), and chastised by the wise (Uta-napishti). And his "insistent denials of what he is told about himself, about his fate and his choices, by all he meets, only serve to exacerbate the tension between his understanding and the audience's knowledge."[57] The dramatic irony becomes so acute it is hard for us readers or audience members to still care for him. As with most of his aspects, he is in excess also in the confrontation with death: "Death fills the entire field of his sight, afflicting him with a kind of existential blindness, just as it fills his heart with the inconsolable grief that /…/ makes him deaf to Siduri's measured counsel."[58] In reality, if he had accepted Siduri's counsel of enjoying a simple life, it would have been a regression at that moment in his life, because he would inevitably go back to his own definition of a pleasurable life. In order to eventually achieve what she really means, he needs to go further and find real acceptance, because his own definition of immortality is wrong: "If one just hangs on to life, and immortality means only not dying, then the *secundus homo* is not yet born."[59] Kluger is alluding to the Jungian division of *primus homo*, the earthly man, and *secundus homo* or the heavenly man; the second can only be reached by the complete acceptance of the first. In other words, "if one does not accept death, one gets death."[60]

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[51] EG Tablet IX, verses 5-7
[52] Abusch 1986, p. 181
[53] Abusch 2001, p. 616
[54] EG Tablet I, verse 1
[55] Dickson 2007, p. 177
[56] EG Tablet X, verses 113-114
[57] Vulpe 1994, p. 282

He does finally get there through two moments of acceptance: the first, when he fails the test of Uta-napishti and realizes that even Death's little brother Sleep is too challenging an adversary for him, and the second, when the snake steals the rejuvenation plant and he loses even the last little hope of cheating time in any kind of way. In both occasions, he is still despairing ("and wherever I turn, there too will be Death"[61]; "For whom, Urshanabi, toiled my arms so hard / for whom ran dry the blood of my heart?"[62]) and the first positive statement he makes is at the very end of EG, which closes abruptly, in two stanzas, with Gilgamesh showing Urshanabi the wall of Uruk. Even in the very last moment, he still doesn't say it explicitly, but we can understand that he has now finally accepted his identity as human and all that comes with it, from toil to misfortune to death, and the efforts to find something humanly accessible that will guarantee *a* sort of immortality, even if it's not the kind he had been looking for. His story is that of a fall from god to human.

Shift and Growth

The fall from god to human brings us to the second big thematic area that the Epic deals with and that the creation of the musical was inspired by: Shift and Growth. The basic premise is that EG is in fact a text about transition: transition of human society from a shamanistic, mythological culture of a world organized by gods into a human-based society with new values centering from its own ratio rather than solely divine injunctions; a transition from the collective unconscious to the individual ego through the process of individuation; and a transition of an old world, organized by the cyclical time and earthy nature of mother goddess cults into a linear-time dominated, patriarchal hierarchy led by male gods of light and reason.

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[58] Dickson 2007, p. 179

[59] Kluger 1991, p. 155

[60] Kluger 1991, p. 160, quoting Jung

[61] EG Tablet XI, verse 246

[62] EG Tablet XI, verses 311-312

Some argue that a change in society was the very reason why epics[63] were written in the first place: "But the grand epics like Gilgamesh or the Iliad, whether oral or written, introduce a note of tragedy; For /…/ they reflect upon the poor fit between the values of power and war and those of the present moment"[64] Abusch suggests that the development of the epic itself from the Old Babylonian to the Standard Version and finally the addition of Tablet XII is a revealing journey. In the (supposedly oral) Old Babylonian, the focus is on the acceptance of a simple familial life and Siduri is the closing character of the story; in the Standard Version, the emphasis shifts to wisdom and securing a cultural future for a community, with the introduction of Uta-napishti as the closing character; and in the twelve-tablet version, Gilgamesh is finally ready to transcend his human life and become a god (albeit of the Netherworld)[65]. Similarly, Vulpe posits that the Descent into the Netherworld in Tablet XII is a way of reconciling the chasm of dramatic irony that has been deepening through the eleven preceding tablets:

> A more complete view of the Gilgamesh Epic includes this argument: along with death, such everyday things are all we have, and they are what bind us together as human beings. Evaluated in the context of this argument and in view of the poem's teleological construction: the genesis of Gilgamesh from consciousless god to man, and the architectural movement from irony to epiphany and synthesis, the final Descent into the Netherworld becomes not an awkward and embarrassing appendage to an otherwise flawless narrative, but a necessary and elegant conclusion.[66]

That being said, this might be the same reason why other scholars deny the twelve-tablet version as progression, since it could be interpreted as falling back into the chthonic world of older shamanic structures.

What is common to both interpretations is the shift that happens through EG. Gilgamesh learning to become just a man is a symbol of human society as a whole learning to become human, as in conscious of its own humanity. The adventures our hero goes through can be seen having one central idea as a through line: "to emphasize again and again the essentially human nature of the hero in contrast with supernatural types of the past."[67] Indeed, Gresseth finds EG "the first statement, at least in germinal form, of the idea of humanism, a belief we ordinarily associate with the rise of Greek culture."[68] Seen through this point of view, the fact that Gilgamesh as the historic king is last on the royal lists to still seemingly belong to an older, mythological world, makes much more sense. To put it in more dramatic terms, while reading and researching EG we are in the presence of the exact point in time when Myth ended and History began. Gilgamesh breaks through the mythic cycles and becomes the first to step into a new world, no longer belonging to the gods, but to people. Myths, says Kluger, can "be considered as *milestones in the development of human consciousness*", and the hero as the "anticipation of a development of ego-consciousness ", an "an indication of the process of moving toward the wholeness which is implicit and innate in the psyche; the individual, the individuation process."[69] Gilgamesh is the first individual in human history to step out of the collective and say, 'I am'. In this light, the challenge that he undertakes can be revealed for its monumentality. It is easy to look back on EG today and scoff at its seeming simplicity, as nothing else but a 'Bildungs-epos', one of the thousands of stories where young men need to grow up and accept some basic truths about the worlds, which are accepted by everyone else. In a way, that's what the Epic is – but its hero is the *first* who did that, and therefore a symbol not only of the maturation and initiation process of individuals, but of the birth of all humanity. The fall from god to man is the birth of conscience and Gilgamesh a cross between a Luciferian and a Promethean type of character – but older than both of them:

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[63] The term is of course anachronistic: not until the Greeks would EG have been called an epic, and by then it had already mysteriously disappeared from the radar of the civilizations in the region.

[64] Abusch 2001, p. 615

[65] Abusch 2001, p. 622

[66] Vulpe 1994, p. 283

> All of this comes together and 'gels' for the first time primarily as a result of cultural factors: the collapse of older mythic formulations and the consequent rise of a certain disillusionment, perhaps bitterness even, in this realization; but also the consequent birth, almost unconsciously perhaps, of the idea that humans are separate by and for themselves.[70]

No regime has ever gone down without a fight, and the same can be said of the old chthonic world in EG. Its leader is the mother goddess, here incarnated in the form of Ishtar and her earthly natural monsters: Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven. Its opponent is Gilgamesh as the first consciousness to become aware of itself and develop an ego, and his protector, the Sun god Shamash, a precursor of the monotheistic all powerful patriarchal God. In more psycho-analytic terms, this is the first freeing from the Mother. The war begins stealthily, with the introduction of Enkidu as a secret weapon against Gilgamesh. The stratagem seemingly fails, and evolves into a proxy war between the two heroes and the monster Humbaba, a representative of the old regime. When the monster is defeated, he bargains for his life through material values, offering timber, and in some versions gold. It's also a clash between a material culture and a culture of pride, and as Kluger points out, "*material* comes from *mater.*"[71] On their way to Humbaba, Gilgamesh has several dreams that Enkidu interprets. The interpretations are all tuned towards the success of Gilgamesh in the fight with the monster, but looking past that, we see that the dreams are mostly about disasters, cataclysmic events, mountains falling and storms going on. Besides being positive prophecies for Gilgamesh (and negative for Enkidu since he is not featured in the ones that he interprets as success), they are also foretelling the shift that is about to happen: an old world dying, and a new world arising.

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[67] Gresseth, Gerald K. 'The Gilgamesh Epic and Homer', in *The Classical Journal* 70 (1975), 4, (1-18), p. 12

[68] Gresseth 1975, p. 13

[69] Kluger 1991, p. 17

[70] Gresseth 1975, p. 18

It is fitting that Gilgamesh, the poster child of the new era of humanism should go and seek out Uta-napishti, another man who started a new era. There is a difference though: Uta-napishti was chosen by the gods to be the only survivor of the flood, and immortality simply happened to him, while Gilgamesh is the rebel who started the revolution by himself. In both cases, however, the involvement of the gods is somewhat erratic. When Gilgamesh finds Uta-napishti, the old man says to him: "Let me disclose, O Gilgamesh, a matter most secret / to you I will tell a mystery of the gods."[72] What is this secret? In assuming that it is the story of the flood we are right, but the secret is a particular *aspect* of the story, namely that of the gods' actions. After causing the catastrophe, the gods themselves get scared and 'curl up like dogs', waiting for the destruction to stop. And while some of them are causing all this damage, others are saving Uta-napishti and the little there is left of mankind. After the world calms down again, they gather 'like flies' at Uta-napishti's sacrifice. Without men, gods are left starving and poor, except that they are not aware of this, or at least hide it from humans. "Thus the secret of the gods is man's rescue from the danger of themselves. Man had to be saved from the gods!"[73] That is what Uta-napishti has realized and what he is passing on to Gilgamesh; appropriate information for the start of the era of humanism. Uta-napishti himself has been in a way neutralized by having been given immortality and put to live somewhere at the end of the world in solitude, but his descendent Gilgamesh, the only one ever to have made it all the way to him, will make use of this realization.

Gilgamesh therefore makes it from god to warrior to man, and as Wolff notes, each shift is marked by a seven day period of transition, birth and death: the seven days of Enkidu lying with Shamhat mark the death of an Enkidu from the unconscious and birth him into the world of man, successfully channeling

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[71] Kluger 1991 p. 179
[72] EG Tablet XI, verses 9-10
[73] Kluger 1991, p. 198

Gilgamesh's divine energy into heroic exploits; it takes seven days of mourning after Enkidu's death (which itself takes twelve days) for Gilgamesh to finally realize that he is a man too; but after trying to escape that knowledge, it takes another seven days of Gilgamesh's 'mock death', his slumber at Uta-napishti's, to make him accept it. In short, "These three divisions by time separate innocence from knowledge, and knowledge from acceptance, in the life of Gilgamesh, the hero whose adversary is evil in general, and in particular, death."[74] On an individual scale, this is the pattern of human life: "In his youth, he is socialized and becomes a functioning member of society; in middle age, he takes on positions of leadership; and finally, in old age, he accepts death."[75] On a larger one, it marks the development of human consciousness, moving away from the collective unconscious into a historic individuation, and focusing on man, "a being greater even than his gods, a being only too conscious of the limits of his powers, but also a being able to transcend his own, immediate interests."[76]

The story of Gilgamesh is therefore one of the basic narrative patterns of humanity, and despite its late (re)arrival into Western consciousness, the oldest of such stories. Not counting Tablet XII it ends very abruptly, not in a very satisfying way for a modern reader. It is hard to say what the historic reasons for this quick cut-off are, but within interpretive limits we could say it marks a new beginning: Gilgamesh is the first human consciousness that becomes aware of itself and accepts its own condition, and that is as far as it gets. The breakthrough is huge, but only the start of a history of thought spanning several millennia; a history of religion progressing from the squabbling pantheon of a group of gods into a unified God that is the beginning and end, and further into a world without any god; a history of human consciousness dipping in and out of the unconscious, alternately focusing on itself or its surroundings; a history of small and large narratives being challenged and overthrown; a history which will eventually claim its own end and then wonder at the fact that it's still going on, in a self-imposed post- post- post-atmosphere. And despite the break from mythological time into a seemingly linear progression, the cyclical aspect of the world and therefore its inhabitants never quite goes away, it is as much a part of humanity as the other end of the coin. Which means that the Epic of Gilgamesh keeps returning to us in key moments of Change and Shift as the original pattern that continues to be relevant. It feels like we are in one of those moments now and that we need to learn a lesson that we have stubbornly ignored for far too long; whether that be a realization about climate change, an overall re-haul of our values, a break away from meta-cynicism back into basic narrative, a hard look at the way we govern ourselves and the world, we are the childlike semi-divine heroes of our society, and at some point we will have to grow up.

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[74] Wolff 1969, p. 398
[75] Abusch 2001, p. 622
[76] Vulpe 1994, p. 278

The inspiration of Gilgamesh

What we covered here are just some of the main themes and issues in EG. The text holds many more, and has been an inspiration for artists since its discovery and translation. The translations, retellings, adaptations and 'inspired-bys' range widely in languages, geographical locations, genres, thematic approaches, and correspond to the particular spatial and chronic conditions and environments of their authors or creators.

In the last almost 150 years, there have been numerous retellings of the epic, amongst them: Rudolf Pannwitz's *Das namenlose Werk* from 1920; Józef Wittlin's *Gilgamesz: powieść starobabilońska* in 1922; Frank Laurence Lucas' *Gilgamesh: The King of Erech* from 1948; Anita Feagles' *He Who Saw Everything* from 1966; Tilo Prückner's and Roland Teubner's *Gilgamesch and Enkidu* from 1981; Anne-Marie Beeckman's *Gilgameš* from 2008, and many more. Authors wrote historical novels about Gilgamesh, such as Robeer Silverberg's *Gilgamesh the King* from 1984; Thomas Mielke's *Gilgamesch. König von Uruk* from 1988; Jose Ortega's *Gilgamesh y la muerte* from 1990; Jacques Cassabois' *Le roman de Gilgamesh* from 1998; Paola Capriola's *Qualcosa nella notte* from 2003; and others.

Carl Sagan's novel *Contact* from 1985 mentions Gilgamesh, while Marek Żuławski created a series of graphic novels called *Gilgamesh* in 1987. Jim Starlin wrote a comic book series based on Gilgamesh, and Jo Bannister a murder mystery, both in 1989. Charles Olson wrote several poems inspired by Gilgamesh; Zabelle C. Boyajian wrote the first dramatic version of Gilgamesh in 1924, called *Gilgamesh: A Dream of the Eternal Quest*, followed by a dramatization in 1950 by Fred Poeppig, *Gilgamesh and Eabani*; a radio play in 1954 called *The Quest of Gilgamesh*, by Douglas Geoffrey Bridson; a poetic drama by Michel Garneau in 1974; a dramatic poem entitled *Lebewohl, Gute Reise* by Gertrud Leutenegger in 1980; dramatizations by Ralph Blasting and Mahmood Karimi-Hakak in 1991, and one by Andrew C. Ordover in 1995; and many more, including perhaps the most brilliant dramatization so far, Derrek Hines' *Gilgamesh: The Play* from 2007.

Abed Azrié composed a cantata about EG in 1977; Per Nørgård, Rudolf Brucci and Franco Battiato all created operas called *Gilgamesh*, in 1972, 1985 and 1992, respectively; Raoul Schrott composed an epic oratorium in 2001.

Gilgamesh has featured in the TV series ‘Star Trek’ (episode ‘Darmok’ in 1991), ‘Highlander’ (1992) and ‘Xena: Warrior Princess’ (1995); there is a Japanese anime about Gilgamesh with 26 episodes, and there have been several video games created after the Epic, the first one most likely in 1984 called *The Tower of Druago*, not to mention a whole slew of adaptations, illustrated books and retellings aimed at children or young audiences, including a children’s musical, *Gilgamesch macht Ärger*, by Hans Zimmer and Wolfgang Bartel in 2003[77]. There is a music band in New York city called Gilgamesh, as well as, even though this example falls out of the artistic field, an anti-cancer research society.

I have listed these artists and their works as an illustration of just how widespread the influence of EG has been, and continues to be, in the artistic and scholarly world. Each of them finds its own focus and topic, from the questions of mortality and the human condition, to themes such as friendship, kingship, coming to terms with one’s sexuality, growing up and finding oneself. Gilgamesh has been approached from historicizing, rationalizing, psychoanalytic, queer theory[78], deconstruction, ecological, ritual and political contexts and points of view, to list just a few. The list represents a small portion of the works that have been created with the thought of Gilgamesh.

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[77] I have gathered all these titles with the help of Theodore Ziolokowski’s *Gilgamesh Among Us*, a book on the reception of Gilgamesh in the Western world.

[78] In the 1970s, the Epic became an iconic text for the gay community and there exist numerous adaptations and retellings where Gilgamesh and Enkidu are lovers and the story centers on their relationship.

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