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EXPELLED FROM THE SEMIOTIC BLISS: A LACANIAN READING OF THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH

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Abstract

The Epic of Gilgamesh, has been the focus of unmatched attention since its discovery in the second half of the nineteenth century. The epic is so richly composed that it has been the object of critique of scholars from various disciplines and has been evaluated from a wide range of different perspectives some of which are Nietzschean concept of will to power, repressed incestuous desires, the representation of the ideal friendship, the establishment of an ideal state order. However, this study focuses on the linguistic codes and signs employed in the epic that symbolically project the processes of individuation and that have been instrumentalised for the establishment and reinforcement of a certain cultural order. Interpreted under a Lacanian light, Lacanian concepts such as the semiotic, the symbolic, the Big Other and the Real can be traced as represented through the characterization and action that takes place in the text. Therefore, the main argument of this study revolves around the ways in which the codes, signs and characterizations that exist in the text fit in the conceptual framework of Lacanian psychoanalysis in terms of the individuation and culturation processes that are inextricable parts of the human condition.

Key Words: *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, Jacques Lacan, The Semiotic Order, The Symbolic Order, The Big Other, The Real

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SEMİYOTİK CENNETTEN KOVULMAK: GILGAMIŞ DESTANININ LACANCI BİR OKUMASI

Öz

Gılgamış Destanı on dokuzuncu yüzyılın ikinci yarısındaki keşfinden bu yana çok sayıda akademik çalışmanın ilgi odağı olagelmiştir. Destanın zengin dokusu ve derinliği, çok farklı disiplinlerden gelen araştırmacıların çok geniş kapsamlı bakış açılarından metni değerlendirebilmelerine olanak sağlamıştır. Bunlardan bazıları Nietzsche'nin güç istenci kavramı, bastırılmış ensest dürtüler, ideal arkadaşlık kavramı ve ideal devlet yapısının kurgulanması olarak sıralanabilir. Ancak bu çalışma, destanı farklı bir perspektiften değerlendirmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu çalışmada metindeki dilbilimsel kodların ve göstergelerin sembolik olarak evrensel bireyleşme süreçlerine işaret ettiği ve belli bir kültürel yapının kurgulanması noktasında araçsallaştırıldıkları ileri sürülmektedir. Çalışmanın kuramsal çerçevesini ise Lacancı psikoanaliz kuramı oluşturmaktadır. Bu bağlamda destanda Jacques Lacan'ın semiyotik, sembolik, Büyük Öteki ve Gerçek gibi kavramlarının izi sürülmüş ve bu kavramların metinde yer alan karakterler ve olay örgüsü içerisindeki bağlantısal anlamları irdelenmiştir. Dolayısıyla, bu çalışmanın temel argümanı, metinde yer alan kod ve göstergelerin Lacancı psikoanalizin kavramsal çerçevesine birebir uyduğu ve bu bağlamda da insanlık durumunun en temel öğeleri olan bireyleşme ve kültür inşası süreçlerini sembolik olarak yansıttığıdır.

Key Words: *Gılgamış Destanı,* Jacques Lacan, Semiyotik, Sembolik, Büyük Öteki, Gerçek

INTRODUCTION

The Epic of Gilgamesh, the oldest written document of human history, composed in 11th century BC and has survived for three thousand years, can be seen as a triumph won against the test of time. The primary reason why this three-thousand-year-old epic has managed to communicate to the modern reader after its discovery in the second half of the nineteenth century is that it is "the story of everyone" and that "it appeals to our sense of fundamental humanity" (Helle, 2021, p. vii). This is the basic reason why this study aims to trace the central concepts of the Lacanian psychoanalysis that pertains to the human condition. The epic was so richly composed that it has been interpreted in terms of the Nietzschean will to power, repressed incestuous desires, the representation of the ideal friendship, the establishment of an ideal state order among other issues. The focus of this study, on the other hand, will be the fact that the epic inevitably projects certain linguistic codes and signs that symbolically project the processes of individuation and that have been instrumentalised for the establishment and reinforcement of a certain cultural order. Especially when the text is scrutinized through a Lacanian analytical lens, it can be observed that the narrative functions as an unmatched inspiration for the mythological, cultural or the literary textualities of the following centuries on a global, transcultural scale. This influence of the text makes it an indispensable object of focus and critical attention. Therefore, the main argument of this study revolves around the ways in which the codes, signs and characterizations that exist in the text fit in the conceptual framework of Lacanian psychoanalysis in terms of the individuation and culturation processes that are inextricable parts of the human condition.

1. THE LACANIAN SEMIOTIC AND THE SYMBOLIC

Unlike Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan categorizes the developmental stages of a child as the semiotic and the symbolic, the threshold between which is marked by the mirror stage. Lacan evaluates the first phase of the child's development, the semiotic, which covers the first eighteen months of the child, as an existential space that is dominated by the mother. In this stage the child tends to see itself as not separate from or one with the rest of its surroundings and in this respect the child's mechanisms of identification is free from the domain of the binary oppositions. The child sees itself as one with the objects surrounding it, as an extension of its mother and a sense of self is not yet developed. Therefore, the child's first experiences in

the world take place on a rhizomatic plane, to put it in Derridean terms. Although this lack of a sense of self seems not to be an ideal situation, Lacan argues that this feeling of oneness with the rest of its surroundings, especially the mother, provides a sense of unity, comfort, security and thus peace which is yet to be disrupted by the mirror stage, when the child begins to recognize itself as a separate entity from the rest of the world (Lacan, 2001).

The mirror stage coincides with the child's integration into language and its introduction to the system of binary oppositions which is encrypted into the cultural system that is embedded in language. Therefore, when the child is integrated into this lingual structure, it is also introduced into the Symbolic set of relationships that is attributed to the father. Lacan points out that the child's transference to the Symbolic is accompanied by a feeling of anguish and a sense of 'lack' or 'loss' for the sense of unity and security that the child has in the semiotic is disrupted when the child becomes a self and everything else becomes the other (Lacan, 2007). As a result of this process the child feels like it has been, in Heidegger's terms (1996), "thrown into" the social network of hierarchical relationships, which Lacan conceptualizes as the Big Other within the discourse of which the individual is encapsulated and absorbed. The child becomes the subject of the Other's desire constantly feeling threatened and incomplete in the Symbolic order of the father and it never completely gets over its longing for the semiotic unity and security. Lacan further argues that this longing for the semiotic oneness persists for the rest of its adult life. According to Lacan this disruption that takes place in the child's experiencing of itself moving in from the semiotic to the symbolic is a symbolic castration and the rest of the child's experience from childhood into adulthood is marked by a sense of lack. The real castration complex, therefore, occurs when the child steps into the symbolic, when the bond between the child and the mother along with the rest of the world is broken with the child's integration into language, the father's realm, which is marked by the concept of lack (Lacan, 1988). The individual that goes through this disruption or division is haunted by this sense of lack for the rest of his/her life and endlessly struggles to reconstitute the primary semiotic oneness which has now become an unattainable ideal that is conceptualized by Lacan as the Real. So, the Real is inevitably outside the Symbolic and therefore unrepresentable and appears as uncanny/unheimlich, both homely and unhomely, images as a result of the sublimation process of the author. It is a purgatorial site for the lost connection for the first object of oneness, the mother, which Lacan conceptualizes as '*objet petit a*' in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. *Objet petit a*, in this respect, becomes the object of the unattainable desire and the individual struggles for the rest of his/her life to find substitutes for this first object of desire (Lacan, 1994, p. 168).

2. *THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH* AS A LACANIAN ALLEGORY

The Epic of Gilgamesh, in which Lacanian concepts can be traced as fictionally represented, revolves around the quests of the demi-God, Gilgamesh, and his search for immortality. At the opening of the epic, Gilgamesh is represented as a despotic ruler who makes his subjects suffer. His folk calls out for the Gods to ask for help and be liberated from Gilgamesh's domination. In this respect the representation of Gilgamesh aligns with Lacan's concept of the Big Other. Lacan envisions the Big Other as inscribed into the father's symbolic order through structures such as law and language and unlike Freud he argues that the unconscious is shaped and regulated by these tools of the other (2007). Gilgamesh, therefore, as the all-mighty dominant power of the epic represents the Big Other that regulates the sociocultural structure of this fictional universe.

Upon the orisons of the common folk, the gods, in turn, create another creature, Enkidu, who is powerful enough to put an end to the people's suffering. Initially being a wild creature, Enkidu is civilized by a priestess, Shamhat. As a result of his experiences with Shamhat, Enkidu is made to become a member of the human community, and he learns what

it means to be a human. Right after he sets foot on the realm of culture, he encounters with Gilgamesh and upon a fight between the two, their rivalry evolves into a friendship that might be interpreted as one of the most widely seen archetypes, a male bond or brotherhood, and they start fighting with other opponents instead of each other. Upon the bonding between these two strong male partners, their aggression turns towards the external objects of domination and their first target is Humbaba, which is known as a fierce monster guarding the cedar forest. Upon this unmatched success in killing Humbaba, Goddess Ishtar offers Gilgamesh her hand in marriage along with promises of unmatched wealth, glory and power, but Gilgamesh, who has run after power, glory and wealth his whole life, surprisingly turns this offer down. It can be argued that the primary reason why Gilgamesh turns down Ishtar's offer is that this marriage would be a violation of the predetermined gender hierarchies which is also obvious in the specific way Gilgamesh refuses Ishtar's proposal. Gilgamesh indicates that he cannot and will not marry Ishtar because she is

... a winter too warm to freeze ice,
a half-door that blocks no wind or draft ,
a palace that crumbles and kills its heroes,
an elephant that throws off its rider,
a lump of pitch that stains the hand,
a flask of water that soaks the cloak,
a block of limestone that weakens the wall,
a ram that wrecks our walls for the enemy,
a shoe that bites the foot of its owner. (2021, p. 55)

Ishtar's power as a female figure exceeds the power of Gilgamesh and such a juxtaposed marriage is unacceptable both by Gilgamesh and the social order that he represents and sustains, in the sense that Ishtar, as a goddess, occupies a hierarchically higher place compared to Gilgamesh. As this would be a kind of relationship that would topsy-turvy the traditional gender hierarchy, this proposal is rendered unacceptable.

As the narrative proceeds, the killing of Enkidu by the Gods, devastates Gilgamesh and he sets out for another quest to look for the secret of immortality. Having overcome a series of obstacles during this journey, he finds Uta-napishti, who survived the flood and is granted immortality. Uta-napishti tells him about the plant of youth and at the end of a challenging journey, Gilgamesh manages to get to the plant but loses it to a snake and returns to Uruk without reaching the secret of immortality.

To begin with, the epic opens with the association of Gilgamesh with several concepts that can be classified as norms of true masculinity, namely ruthlessness, wisdom and power which renders him the embodiment of the symbolic father in the text.

There was a man
who saw the deep, the bedrock of the land,
who knew the ways and learned all things:
Gilgamesh saw the deep, the bedrock of the land,
he knew the ways and learned all things. (2021, p. 3)

Especially the emphasis on his ability to see and know and reveal the secrets of this world to his subjects is highlighted in the opening lines of the epic. So, as the knowing subject, he is attributed with an active agency which is complemented by his physical strength for he is referred to as "that splendid man of muscle" and a man that "surpassed all kings" (2021, p. 4).

Gilgamesh is also represented as the ruler who built the walls around Uruk, separating the outside from the inside (2021, p. 3). Judging by the fact that the image of a fortress or a

stadium is interpreted by Lacan as a symbolic "formation of the I" in "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience", Gilgamesh's desire to construct walls around the city of Uruk also symbolizes the process of moving from the semiotic into the symbolic which will be further discussed in the following pages where Enkidu's individuation process is evaluated (2001, p. 1288). As an embodiment of the true cult of manhood he stands as the symbolic father, or the Big Other. He is represented as the idealized father and is endowed with an epic distance to the hypothetical audience as a mighty king and the protector of his people. He is, in that respect, the symbolic father in Lacanian terms, who is the initiator of the formation of the self and the construction and sustainability of the cultural space.

Adjunctly, Gilgamesh is granted the power and ability to temper with and transform his environment and nature. He is represented with the ability and power to penetrate nature and transform it to fit his needs.

Gilgamesh the great, magnificent and terrible!
He cut passes through the mountains,
he dug wells in the hillsides,
he travelled toward sunrise, crossing sea aft er sea,
he searched in all directions for life without end,
he reached, through his toils, the faraway Uta-napishti,
he rebuilt the temples that the Flood had destroyed
and established the right rituals for vast humankind. (2021, p. 4)

Within this context, as the architect of the cultural space and the binary oppositions that function as the pillars of this cultural space he represents the higher end of the most central dichotomy of this structure, the culture, whereas he sets nature to the opposite end as the lower, less reliable, less desirable and most importantly as a threat to his order. His irrepressible desire to kill Humbaba, in this respect, becomes more remarkable. The representation of Humbaba, the protector of the cedar forest as the "terror of men" when he poses no real threat to Gilgamesh and the city of Uruk becomes more sensible when evaluated from this perspective (2021, p. 25). In Lacanian terms the semiotic monster should be abolished to secure the symbolic structure.

...the savage Humbaba,
Let us kill him, crush his mind!
Let us kill Humbaba in his home,
in the Cedar Forest where he lives. (2021, p. 22)

Humbaba is defined by Gilgamesh as a fierce beast whose "howl is a flood; his voice is fire, and his breath is death. He hears every single whisper for a thousand miles around him, and despair strikes all who step into his forest." (2021, p. 26). However, it is also indicated that Humbaba is created by Enlil as "the terror of men" only "to keep the cedars safe from harm" (2021, p. 25). So Humbaba is only a semiotic image as opposed to Gilgamesh's will to power over and to dominate as the embodiment of the Big Other. The depiction of the cedar forest when Gilgamesh and Enkidu first arrive on the outskirts of the forest is also quite remarkable, in this respect:

They gazed on the Cedar Mountain,
home of gods, throne of goddesses.
Sumptuous cedars grew along the mountainside
and cast their pleasant, joyful shades.
The forest was snarled up in branches, tangled with thorns,
they blocked the path through the cedars and ballukku trees.

For six miles around the forest grew new shoots of cedar,
for four miles around it grew new shoots of cypress.
The trees were webbed with creepers a hundred feet tall,
and the resin that oozed from them fell like raindrops
to be swallowed by the ravines.
The song of a bird went through the forest,
calls came back and song became clamor.
A single cicada set off a chorus,
· · sang, · · chirped,
pigeons sobbed, doves answered.
The stork clattered, filling the forest with joy,
the rooster crowed, filling the forest with resounding joy. (2012, p. 42)

The cedar forest is obviously depicted as a space of semiotic bliss embracing a multiplicity of life forms accompanied by singing birds in a rhizomatic plane, anomalous to the expectations of the reader awaiting to walk into a gloomy space of terror along with the heroes of the epic. However, neither the cedar forest, nor Humbaba pose no further threat than offering a non-hierarchical existence of oneness, unity and security as opposed to Gilgamesh's symbolic space.

The most remarkable part of the epic in terms of its analysis through a Lacanian lens, though, is the part covering the creation and the process of maturation of Enkidu. Enkidu is created by the goddess Aruru to save the people of Uruk from the suffering inflicted by Gilgamesh, as a mediating force. "Enkidu! Born to a gazelle," (2021, p. 71) when he is first created, he is depicted as moving in perfect harmony within the natural order and he is represented as external to the dichotomies of the cultural space. He looks neither like a man nor a woman and then again both like a man and a woman. He is positively portrayed as uncontaminated by the touch of any civilizing effect. His first depiction in the epic is as follows:

All his body was covered with fur,
his hair was as long as a woman's,
and his locks curled thick like ears of corn.
He knew no people and no country.
Naked like an animal,
with the gazelles he grazed on grass,
with the herd he rushed to drink,
with the beasts he quenched his thirst.
One day by the waterhole,
he locked eyes with a hunter, a woodsman.
One day, and a second, and a third,
Enkidu and the hunter locked eyes by the waterhole.
The hunter looked at him and froze with fear,
then he headed home with his catch. (2021, p. 7)

Enkidu's existence here is depicted as in total harmony with nature, free from hierarchy, conflict and aggression. His appearance is also beyond binary standards of manhood or womanhood. As he is not classifiable within the existing cultural system, he has no place in it whatsoever. Furthermore, he is a threat to it because as the hunter protests "each pit [the hunter digs], he fills, each trap [the hunter sets] he breaks. He helps his herd escape [the hunter's] grasp, he will not let [the hunter] do the work of the wild" (2021, p. 8). Enkidu's initial mode of existence in this respect echoes the Lacanian semiotic space in which the newborn baby is not integrated into language yet and tends to conceive of itself as an extension of the mother, nature in this case. It is taken over by this feeling of completeness

and unity which in turn provides a sense of security as it is symbolized through Enkidu's initial experience within nature.

However, Enkidu goes through the Lacanian mirror stage upon his encounter with Shamhat, his opposing mirror image. Shamhat is offered to Enkidu as a civilizing influence in the sense that as a female figure she functions as Enkidu's opposite image. When the hunter reaches out to Gilgamesh about Enkidu Gilgamesh tells him to

Go, my hunter, and bring with you Shamhat, a priestess of Ishtar.

When the herd comes to the waterhole,
Make her strip and show her charms.
He will see her and run to her,
Then he will abandon the herd of his youth. (2021, p. 9)

The whole passage echoes the Lacanian passage from the semiotic to the symbolic. The moment Enkidu encounters with his other, Shamhat, he goes through the mirror stage, knows himself as a man and steps into the symbolic space of the father. It is not a coincidence in this respect that he is also integrated into language at this point. "For six days and seven nights Enkidu was aroused and made love to Shamhat" (2021, p. 10). This encounter with the opposing mirror image takes the exact same time frame for the creation of the world in several different mythological systems. William Moran also draws attention to this stretch of time arguing that it keeps recurring in different cases such as in the encounter between Shamhat and Enkidu, the mourning of Gilgamesh for Enkidu's death and Gilgamesh's sleeping through this duration of time, failing to remain awake to gain immortality. Each case, Moran argues is a transformative threshold, a mirror stage that provides passage from one state of self into another (in Helle, 2021, Dying, p. 182). Therefore, at the end of this process of symbolic rebirth/individuation/culturation Enkidu steps into the hierarchical realm of the father going through an extraordinary change. And after this, animals start running away from him seeing him as a threat to their semiotic existence. His transference from the semiotic into the symbolic is depicted in the epic through the following lines:

When he had had his fill of her delights,
he turned back to the herd.
But the gazelles saw him and ran,
the herd of the wild fled from him.
Enkidu had sullied his spotless body.
The herd was running, his knees were stuck;
Enkidu was weakened and could not keep up,
but now he could reason and think. (2021, p. 10)

This passage represents Enkidu's symbolic castration to put it in Lacanian concepts. He is cut off from the rest of the semiotic universe and losing his sense of unity through his integration into language. He becomes an "I" and everything else becomes the other. He can feel that his understanding has improved whereas his body is weakened. Shamhat consoles him with these words:

Come, I will take you to Uruk the Marketplace,
to the holy temple where Anu and Ishtar live
and where all men can ply their trade:
you, too, human as you are, will find a place for yourself.
Leave the wild that the herdsmen fear! (2021, p. 15)

As pointed out earlier Enkidu's integration into language accompanies his transposition into the symbolic realm of the father. Upon entering the hierarchical realm of the father, the

symbolic order, he loses his harmony with nature and animals and rather starts to employ an aggressive and confrontational manner and discourse as opposed to his formerly peaceful state. His very first words signify his will to challenge Gilgamesh, fight and subdue him and transcend his power.

> Come, Shamhat, take me with you,
> to the holy sacred temple where Anu and Ishtar live
> and where Gilgamesh is superb in strength,
> overbearing like an aurochs among the young men.
> I will be the one to challenge him, subdue him by force,
> I will stand in Uruk and cry out: 'I am the greatest!' (2021, p. 11)

Upon stepping into the symbolic, he becomes a projection of Gilgamesh the symbolic father as indicated by the herdsmen who resembled Enkidu to Gilgamesh: ""That man—he looks just like Gilgamesh!" (2021, p. 16). Suddenly, he wants to challenge Gilgamesh, and fight, shout and prove his power because as Shamhat tells him, he needs to find a place for himself in the hierarchical structure of the symbolic order. Therefore, he rather takes on an assertive and commanding tone and positions himself to a higher spot compared to Shamhat by choosing to walk in front of her rather than next to her.

Meanwhile, Gilgamesh dreams about Enkidu prior to his arrival in Uruk. He tells his mother Ninsun about these dreams in which Enkidu appears in the form of a meteorite and an axe and in each case, Gilgamesh wraps his arms around him, loves him like wife and declares him his equal (2021, p. 13). Goddess Ninsun interprets these dreams as the coming of a strong ally, "a friend in times of need, a man all muscle, the mightiest of the land, as mighty as a meteorite fallen from the sky" (2021, p. 13). Martin Worthington argues that Gilgamesh's two dreams metaphorically represent Enkidu's transformation. He is represented as a meteorite in the first dream and as an axe in the second which are "a raw and reworked version of the same material—iron in its natural form, iron hammered into a weapon—symbolizing Enkidu's journey from brute to urbanite" (Helle, 2021, Kings, p. 215). This transformation can also be interpreted as his irreversible contamination by the civilizing touch. Whereas Enkidu was initially protecting the natural order against the forces of the culture, after his initiation into the symbolic, after learning how to eat bread and drink beer, rubbing himself with oil, putting on clothes and turning "into a man ... he picked up his weapons to fight off lions. While the herdsmen lay down for the night, he butchered wolves and battled lions" (2021, p. 16). Enkidu's transformation from a peaceful and wholistic mindset into an aggressive and competitive one can also be observed in the part where he challenges Gilgamesh, the symbolic father. Right before Gilgamesh was about to take a bride before her husband in their wedding night as his birthright, Enkidu "went up and stood before him, /the two men locked eyes in the streets of the land./Enkidu blocked the door with his foot/ and he would not let Gilgamesh into the wedding house./ They took hold of each other, butting like bulls:/ the door broke, the walls shook" (2021, pp. 18-19). The part entailing this scene is partly lost but from what survives, the two men acknowledge each other's strength and worth at the end of the fight and shortly after this "they kissed and became friends" (2021, p. 19). Specifically, this part of the epic obviously signifies the passage from the semiotic into the symbolic as a culturation process and the process of becoming a 'man' as epitomized in the transformation of Enkidu. Therefore, the relationship between Gilgamesh, the symbolic father and Enkidu begins with a fight, but they become the closest allies in no time, which is symbolic of the completion of the culturation process.

However, the transference of the individual into the symbolic is always accompanied by a feeling of lack and loss. This feeling of loss is represented in Enkidu's designated death after he kills the bull of heaven with Gilgamesh. Enkidu is informed about his upcoming death through a coded message that comes to him in his dream, and he feels a nostalgic longing for the peace

and comfort of the semiotic, which is conceptualized as the Real in Lacanian psychoanalysis. His curses towards Shamhat accompany his deep regret for stepping into the symbolic and his longing to go back to the rhizomatic embrace of the semiotic.

He cursed the hunter till his heart was full.
It then told him to curse Shamhat as well.
"Come, Shamhat, I will fix a fate for you,
a fate that will last forever.
A mighty curse I will work on you,
may it catch you straight away!
"You will never build a happy home,
or be surrounded by your children,
or sit with the girls in their room.
...
"Because you weakened my untouched body,
my untouched body you weakened in the wild!" (2021, pp. 64-65)

He blames Shamhat for contaminating and weakening him by civilizing him representing his unquenchable will to return to the semiotic, which is the Real, an unreachable ideal as indicated by Lacan.

The Lacanian Real is also signified in Gilgamesh's will to overcome death and his quest for immortality after the death of Enkidu. Immortality is a sign of one's desire to overcome his own mortal nature above anything else in Lacanian concepts. Therefore, his quest for immortality is an unreachable ideal and a never-ending quest that is doomed to failure. In his search for immortality Gilgamesh goes through a long and challenging journey, and finally he manages to get in touch with Uta-napishtim, the only person alive who is known to have achieved immortality. Uta-napishtim tells him that he can only become immortal if he can resist sleep upon which Gilgamesh sleeps for six nights and seven days. Having failed the test, and right before he sets out for his return, Uta-napishtim's wife tells him about a plant that would bring back his youth, his *objet petit a*. He somehow manages to get the plant from the bottom of the sea but on the way back he loses it to a snake which comes out of the bottom of a pool of cold water:

Gilgamesh found a pool with cool water,
he went down to swim in the pool.
A snake smelled the scent of the plant,
it slid up in silence, it snatched it away
and shed its skin as it slithered back. (2021, p. 111)

The appearance of the snake in this scene is especially remarkable in the sense that Gönül Alpay Tekin interprets the snake as signifying Dumuzi the Sumerian god of vegetation and regeneration (2022, p. 28). As Alpay Tekin argues further Dumuzi is a divine figure representing the circularity of the natural order and its perfect harmony who is also frequently referred to as a cedar tree in ancient Sumerian hymns (2022, p. 226). In this light, just like Humbaba, the protector of the cedar forest, he can be thought to represent the semiotic. Therefore, Gilgamesh's inability to keep the possession of the plant and his losing it to Dumuzi that appears in the form of a snake represents his irreversible castration from the semiotic oneness. Sophus Helle argues that Gilgamesh is not a typical epic hero in the sense that "the most significant event in his life is not a heroic triumph but a resounding defeat: his failure to achieve immortality" (Introduction, p. ix). In this respect Gilgamesh's failure to achieve immortality can also be thought to represent the Lacanian loss, whereas his quest for immortality signifies his will to return to the semiotic, the Real.

At the very end of Gilgamesh's journey, there is rather a confusing reference to the walls of the city of Uruk. As Gilgamesh and Ur-shanabi approach the walls of the city, Gilgamesh forgets all about his failures and tells Ur-shanabi to examine the walls of the city.

"Climb the wall of Uruk, Ur-shanabi! Walk its length.
Survey the foundation, study the brickwork.
There—is it not made of oven-baked bricks?
Did the Seven Sages not lay its cornerstone?
"Look: Two thousand acres for the city,
two thousand acres for the orchards,
two thousand acres for the pits of clay,
and one thousand acres for the temple of Ishtar.
Seven thousand acres is the size of Uruk." (2021, p. 112)

The narrative is concluded with Gilgamesh highlighting the walls or borders of his territory, which is a symbolic depiction of the self as argued earlier in Lacanian terms. The city itself, in this sense, is represented as the symbolic self, castrated from the rest of the universe and doomed to a feeling of loss and an irreversible feeling of lack.

CONCLUSION

As Helle argues, that Gilgamesh is not a typical epic hero in the sense that he is not "a fully finished and completed being." He goes on to point out that the epic hero is mostly represented with a fixed fate and personality that does not change throughout the narrative. However, the representation of Gilgamesh is of a very different nature. In Helle's own words "Gilgamesh is always beside himself, always restless and changing, moved and moving, unsatisfied and unfinished. Readers experience him as a person and not as an epic hero precisely because he persistently refuses to be "equal to himself." He wants more, always more." (Helle, 2021, Dying, p. 200). In this light, this study argues that the epic represents the human condition as conceptualized by the Lacanian psychoanalysis. Whereas Gilgamesh is the representative of the symbolic father, Enkidu's transformation signifies the passage from the semiotic being with his sexual ambiguity and peaceful and harmonious coexistence with nature and animals into the symbolic order of the father after his encounter with his opposing image, Shamhat. With their disappointments, defeats, failures, losses and rebirths these epic characters represent the human condition which makes the narrative a never-ending story of the human psyche. The Epic of Gilgamesh, as one of the most enduring narratives of human civilization, presents a profound and multi-layered engagement with the processes of individuation and cultural formation that align seamlessly with the Lacanian framework of psychoanalysis. Through the epic's structural and thematic elements, one can observe the interplay of Lacan's semiotic and symbolic orders, particularly in the character arcs of Gilgamesh and Enkidu. Their respective journeys encapsulate the inevitable transition from a pre-linguistic, undifferentiated existence to one shaped by cultural codes, power structures, and an ongoing struggle with the Lacanian 'lack' that defines human subjectivity.

At its core, the epic functions as a narrative allegory for the shift from the semiotic unity of the maternal realm to the symbolic order dictated by the law of the father. Enkidu, originally existing in an unmediated, almost primordial state of nature, undergoes a transformation that parallels the entry into the symbolic order through his encounter with Shamhat. His initiation into civilization, marked by his acceptance of social norms and language, mirrors Lacan's mirror stage, wherein the subject recognizes itself as a distinct entity yet remains haunted by the fragmented loss of its former unity. This process is further reflected in Gilgamesh's own development, particularly in his evolving understanding of power, mortality, and the unattainability of absolute wholeness—a condition that Lacan conceptualizes as the Real.

Moreover, the epic's engagement with hierarchy and gendered power dynamics underscores the role of the symbolic order in maintaining sociocultural structures. Gilgamesh, as the embodiment of the symbolic father, wields authority through the codified norms of kingship and law, positioning himself as an agent of the Big Other. His rejection of Ishtar's marriage proposal, which would disrupt the established gender hierarchy, further reflects the mechanisms by which the symbolic order sustains itself through the exclusion of abject elements that threaten its coherence.

Furthermore, the epic's climax—the quest for immortality—serves as a poignant metaphor for the fundamental human struggle against the condition of lack. Gilgamesh's futile attempt to obtain the plant of youth and his ultimate acceptance of mortality epitomize the Lacanian assertion that the subject's longing for the unattainable (*objet petit a*) is what fuels the continuous drive of desire. The loss of the plant to the serpent symbolically reiterates the impossibility of reclaiming the primary unity of the semiotic; instead, Gilgamesh is left with the realization that meaning and legacy are constructed within the confines of the symbolic order rather than through transcendence of it.

Gilgamesh's journey, when analysed through a Lacanian lens, is emblematic of the subject's perpetual struggle within the symbolic order—a struggle marked by castration from the semiotic and an unattainable desire for the Real. As the architect of the cultural space, Gilgamesh embodies the power of the symbolic, imposing hierarchical structures that subdue the fluidity and multiplicity of the semiotic realm. The destruction of Humbaba and the Cedar Forest, despite their lack of direct threat to Uruk, reinforces the necessity of eliminating the semiotic to sustain the symbolic order. Humbaba's depiction as a monstrous guardian echoes the Lacanian notion that the semiotic must be cast as the "other," the abject, to secure the subject's identity within the symbolic. Yet, in doing so, Gilgamesh paradoxically reveals the very instability of his constructed reality—his relentless quest to dominate nature exposes his own latent anxieties about the limits of cultural authority and the irreversibility of symbolic castration.

Enkidu's transformation from an unmarked being in harmony with nature to an assertive agent of the symbolic order further underscores the inescapability of the father's law. His initial existence mirrors Lacan's concept of the semiotic Chora—a space of undifferentiated unity, free from hierarchical distinctions. However, his encounter with Shamhat serves as the mirror stage, propelling him into the symbolic and, in turn, forcing him to define himself through opposition. His subsequent alienation from the natural world, his newfound aggression, and his eventual rivalry with Gilgamesh signify his full integration into the hierarchical structures of culture. Yet, his symbolic entry is accompanied by an unquenchable sense of loss. His eventual lament, cursing Shamhat and longing to return to his pre-symbolic state, epitomizes the tragic realization of the Lacanian subject: once integrated into the symbolic, the semiotic becomes an irretrievable ideal, an impossible home to which one can never return.

Gilgamesh's pursuit of immortality can thus be read as the ultimate expression of the subject's desire to transcend the limitations imposed by the symbolic order. Death, in Lacanian terms, represents the ultimate lack—an absence that no signifier can fully capture. The failed quest for immortality mirrors the unattainability of the Real; no matter how relentless the pursuit, the subject remains bound to the symbolic and its inherent insufficiencies. The scene in which the rejuvenating plant is stolen by a snake is especially telling—it signifies the inaccessibility of the Real, reinforcing the notion that once the subject has been inducted into the symbolic order, the possibility of absolute wholeness is forever lost. Gilgamesh's final act—his prideful assertion of the city walls—stands as a metaphor for the subject's ultimate reconciliation with his symbolic self. The walls of Uruk, built from "oven-baked bricks" and measured with absolute precision, symbolize the rigid boundaries of the symbolic order. Even

in the face of his existential defeat, Gilgamesh clings to the constructed reality of Uruk, affirming its permanence as a counterbalance to his own impermanence.

Thus, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, when viewed through Lacanian psychoanalysis, becomes not merely a tale of heroism but a profound meditation on the fundamental structures of human subjectivity. Gilgamesh's odyssey mirrors the trajectory of the Lacanian subject—his transition from the semiotic to the symbolic, his struggle with loss and desire, and his final resignation to the structures that define him. His tragic realization—that the Real is always out of reach—encapsulates the human condition as theorized by Lacan: the subject is always barred from ultimate fulfilment, forever caught in the web of signifiers that shape their existence. In the end, Gilgamesh's epic is not a story of triumph, but one of inevitable lack—a narrative that resonates through the very foundations of psychoanalytic thought.

Considering these insights, the Epic of Gilgamesh emerges as a timeless reflection on the foundational processes of human identity formation, social order, and existential longing. By employing a Lacanian lens, this study has illuminated the ways in which the epic encodes fundamental aspects of psychoanalytic theory, demonstrating its continued relevance in contemporary discourse on literature, philosophy, and cultural studies. The epic's narrative, rich in symbolic codes and archetypal constructs, not only bridges the ancient and the modern but also reinforces the universality of the human condition as one perpetually navigating the dialectic between presence and absence, desire and prohibition, unity and fragmentation. As such, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* remains an invaluable text for understanding the intricate dynamics of individuation, cultural inscription, and the inexorable quest for meaning in a world structured by the ever-elusive symbolic order.

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