CHAPTER 14

A LEVI-STRAUSSIAN ANALYSIS OF *THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH*

G. S. Kirk

Chapter 2 represented the different kinds of uses that scholars find for mythic material. In this chapter, you see the application of the theories of Claude Levi-Strauss, the French sociologist and linguistics scholar. Levi-Strauss, whose theories are elaborated in Chapter 18, finds that mythology helps show the nature of a culture: how it is organized, what its values are, what sorts of issues concern people in that society.

In this chapter, G. S. Kirk, a classics scholar, applies the ideas of Levi-Strauss to *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. You may want to read Chapter 13, the text of the story of Gilgamesh, before this one. Kirk's analysis shows aspects of the relationship between the two main characters, one of whom represents nature and the other culture. As you read, you may want to consider how the nature versus culture motif relates to the mortality theme in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*.

In addition to seeing Levi-Strauss' theory in action, you can get a better sense of his view of myth as a fundamental mode of human communication. As you read Kirk's analysis, compare it to the perspective on the myth provided by Campbell in the marginalia of Chapter 13.

The ideas of Claude Levi-Strauss have had wide influence in a variety of different fields. See Chapter 18 for excerpts from Levi-Strauss' "The Structural Study of Myth" and from Edmund Leach's *Claude Levi-Strauss*. Scholars have applied his methods in their study of the literature and anthropology of a variety of peoples. In the excerpt below, G. S. Kirk, a scholar of Latin and ancient Greek, applies the theories of Levi-Strauss to *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. As Kirk begins with a general view of Levi-Strauss' theories, the resulting analysis provides additional insight into both the Sumerian epic and the theories of the French anthropologist.

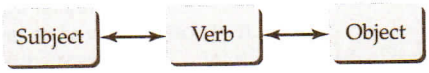
In his analysis, Kirk suggests that in *The Epic of Gilgamesh,* the meaning has to do with the relationship between two characters, one of whom is identified with nature and the other with culture. This relationship is actually a complex one that is described in detail below. Here we can say that Enkidu, Gilgamesh's friend and companion, starts off "close to

nature" but ends up moving toward culture. He va (or Humbaba), the guardian of the cedar forest. As a at he is, a child of nature. In Kirk's view, it is this break with his real nature that causes Enkidu's death.

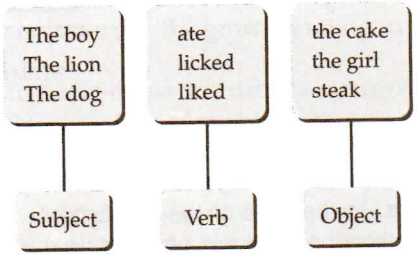
LEVI-STRAUSS' ANALYSIS OF LANGUAGE

Claude Levi-Strauss bases his analysis of myth on the model of the study of language, so it will be helpful to the understanding of his ideas to introduce some terminology from linguistics, the study of languages. Levi-Strauss notes that we determine the meaning of language not only by looking at the meanings of the individual elements or words, but also by noticing their relationship to each other in phrases, sentences, and paragraphs. This is called the syntagmatic relationship; that is, the words in a sentence are related to each other syntagmatically. See "Deciphering a Meal," by Mary Douglas, Ch. 27, p. 431. We define syntagmatic as the relationship of the words in a sentence to each other. By contrast, the words that can be plugged into any specific point in the sentence have a paradigmatic relationship to each other.

Syntagmatic relationship:



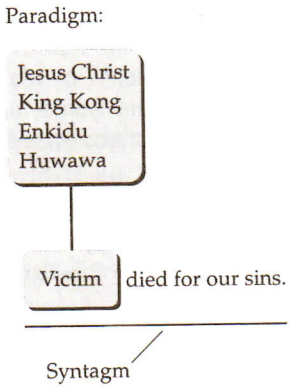
Paradigmatic relationship:



In the example above, the syntagm or chain is the sentence; the paradigms consist of the words that can fulfill the same role, say that of verb, in the sentence. The words "ate," "licked," and "liked" are members of the same paradigm. The paradigms above can produce a variety of syntagms, including "The boy licked the cake" and "The lion ate the girl." You need both syntagmatic and paradigmatic relationships to make up language. Levi-Strauss believes that myth is a kind of language, and its analysis works the same way: we examine not just the individual figures or characters in a myth, but how they are related to each other. These relationships tell us the meaning of a myth.

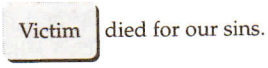
In this language, Enkidu and Huwawa (Humbaba) belong to the same paradigm. We can show that Levi-Strauss and Kirk's ideas are meaningful to our own times by coining the syntagm "Huwawa died for our sins." This saying would be based on the syntagm, "Jesus died for our sins." This referred to the Christian belief that Jesus Christ, who himself committed no sins, died to atone for the sins of others. Thus, he was innocent and he died for the guilt of others. In the 1960s for the environmental movement, this sentence became the basis for the saying: "King Kong died for our sins."

Thus, "King Kong" was plugged into the original syntagm to make a point about the environment. In the new syntagm, environmentalists were suggesting that King Kong, the huge ape in the 1933 movie, was an innocent victim who died because he was taken from his jungle home to provide a profit for his captors. They felt that the greedy "military-industrial complex" was destroying nature for profit. This slogan was also used as a statement about the Vietnam war. War protesters argued that innocent Americans had to go to war because war was "good for the economy." Kirk's view of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* would allow us to add Huwawa and Enkidu to the paradigm for this syntagm. The resulting statements would be "Huwawa died for our sins" and "Enkidu died for our sins."



Being part of the same paradigm does not mean that these characters are the same, any more than the parts of the verb paradigm—"ate," "licked," and "liked"—were the same. In the case of the sentence ". . . died for our sins," each of the choices fits the paradigm because it is a subject. In this case, each of the characters fits the paradigm because in a sense he is an innocent victim. More particularly, the innocence stems from being a representation of a creature in a natural state who was killed by forces associated with civilization. In the same paradigm, Jesus Christ is sometimes called the "new Adam" as a reference to the belief that when the original Adam was created by God, he was without sin.

In the study of myth, we often want to compare the myths of different peoples. One way to do this is to identify an underlying syntagm and look for characters or events from different systems which fill the same paradigms in the syntagm. In the example above we can use the syntagm



to compare the ancient story of Gilgamesh with the modern tale of King Kong. Of course, like any method of analysis, we then must use our own judgment to see if this comparison of paradigms helps us in our understanding of the stories.

Introduction

This excerpt comes from: *Kirk, The Myth Its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures.**

"mode of human communication"—According to Levi-Strauss, myth is a kind of language. See the preceding introduction and p. 272.

René Magritte, La trahison des images, 1929. *The words translate, "This is not a pipe." Kirk's and Levi-Strauss' point about myth is that it (like painting) is a language, and as such is not to be confused with what it represents.*

Codes for the Analysis of Myth

"code"—a set of symbols, each of which has a meaning, like Morse code. The individual elements of a code can be combined to carry messages. Any one myth is likely to contain different codes, or levels of meaning. For Levi-Strauss' analysis of the Oedipus myth, see Ch 18, p. 269.

"relation of life and death"—In the view of Levi-Strauss, myth represents an attempt to mediate between opposites like life and death.

There have been three major developments in the modern study of myths. The first was the realization, associated especially with Tylor, Frazer, and Durkheim, that the myths of primitive societies are highly relevant to the subject as a whole. The second was Freud's discovery of the unconscious and its relation to myths and dreams. The third is the structural theory of myth propounded by the great French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss.

The essence of his belief is that myth is a **mode of human communication.** It is a product of language, which itself, together with music and rhythmical sound, forms a fourth or auditory mode. Just as the elements of language—sounds or phonemes—are meaningless in isolation, and only take on significance in combination with other phonemes, so the elements of myth—the individual narrative elements, the persons or objects—are meaningless in themselves, and only take on significance through their relation with each other. But it is not the formation of mere narrative as such that is significant; rather it is the underlying structure of relations that determines the real "meaning" of a myth, just as it is the underlying structure of a language that gives it significance as a means of communication. Variant versions of a myth may show changes in the surface meaning, but the structure and basic relationships will often remain constant—indeed may even be emphasized by the alteration of the overt symbols and by consequent inversions or other forms of transformation. Yet this significant structure is usually, in tribal societies at least, an unconscious one—which does not prevent it from reflecting popular preoccupations with social or seasonal contradictions, like those presented by sisters-in-law or by the growth and decay of vegetation and men.

Within a myth, according to Levi-Strauss, a structure can reveal itself at different levels, or by means of different codes. Among South American myths he distinguishes a sociological, a culinary (or techno-economic), an acoustic, a cosmological, and an astronomical **code.** Any one myth may contain all or most of these. If so, then its "message," and the significant relationships that compose it, will be reproduced more or less analogously in each of the separate codes—assuming, that is, that the myth is complete. In his provisional interpretation of the Oedipus myth he uses the sociological code as a means of revealing something about the origins of men on the cosmological level. His interpretation of the myth's implication is summarized in these words: "Although experience contradicts theory, social life validates cosmology by its similarity of structure. Hence cosmology is true." Similarly his analysis, in the same article, of the Pueblo creation myth claims to reveal a message concerned with the **relation of life and death:** namely that some mediation is possible between the two, in this case through the concept of hunting as a way of getting food. Hunting is a mean between agriculture (which furthers life by producing food without killing) and warfare (a special kind of hunting which causes human death). This mediation is confirmed by a further one: for if grass-eating animals are on the side of life, and predatory animals on the side of death, there is a third kind, namely carrion-eaters, which mediate between the two because they do not kill, but eat raw animal food all the same. In other words, a kind of logic is being elicited from

* Kirk, G. S. *The Myth: Its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures,* excerpts from 41–48, 131–132, 141–151. Copyright © 1970 G. S. Kirk. Used by permission of the University of California Press.

Ben (1935–), Mourir c'est facile, 1979. *The title of this painting, "Dying: that's easy" is a modern commentary on the complexity and difficulty of death.*

certain relationships in nature—one that makes death appear as an acceptable element of human experience.

Kirk Defines his Focus in Levi-Straussian Analysis

Introduction to The Epic of Gilgamesh

I propose to concentrate on Levi-Strauss's non-philosophical—one might almost say non-mystical—side; to assume that his theory of myth can be adequately summed up by his statement (in his preliminary article, "The Structural Study of Myth") that "the purpose of myth is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction."

Epic of Gilgamesh—A literary work composed in ancient Iraq. Gilgamesh was king of Uruk in Sumeria in about 2700 B.C.E. For the text, see Ch. 13, p. 143.

One such contradiction, the theme of mortality and immortality, is brought in the ***Epic of Gilgamesh*** into contact with the theme of nature in relation to the whole of culture. The epic brings the whole Mesopotamian tradition to its emotional and speculative, as well as its narrative, climax. The underlying implication of this poem seems to be associated with the valuation of the sometimes **opposing ideas of nature and culture**—an opposition given modern expression by Jean-Jacques **Rousseau,** but one that Levi-Strauss has shown to be of deep interest to the Indian tribes of central Brazil, and one that also impinged on ancient Greek culture. If so, then the nature-culture relationship is beginning to manifest itself as one of the central and most universal preoccupations of speculative myths, and the relation of different kinds of human, animal, and agrarian fertility. In fact, many myths are speculative above and beyond the straightforward allegory of trivial and concrete etiology.

"opposing ideas of nature and culture"—One of the fundamental pairs of relationships which Levi-Strauss finds underlying mythological stories.

Rousseau—18th-century French philosopher who argued that human beings in the state of nature are superior to those in so-called civilized societies.

Gilgamesh as a Literary Version of the Sumerian Oral Tradition

In one sense this extraordinary poem is a compendium of some of the best-known and most successful stories of the Sumerian narrative tradition, including the myth of the flood, and the tale (which likewise looks like an originally independent poem) of Ishtar's passion for Gilgamesh and his violent rejection of her, followed by the successful disposal of the Bull of Heaven. Many other minor motifs, such as the journey through the mountain of Mashu, the jewelled garden, and the crossing of the waters of death, were possibly incorporated from other poems. Yet **the whole composition** has a life and unity of its own. The main underlying theme, as has long been recognized, is mortality; yet the problem presented is more complex than is suggested by phrases like "man in his search for understanding of death." To perceive the proper emphases of a work that is often allusive and obscure even where it is not fragmentary, it is essential to notice the changes introduced in relation to surviving Sumerian poems. In the Sumerian poem of "Gilgamesh and the Land of the Living" the hero "sets his mind" towards **Huwawa's** precinct in order to establish his own name and the names of the gods. He tells the sun-god Utu that men die in his city, that he has seen their bodies in the river and knows that he too will die; therefore he wants to set up his name, accomplish a deed that will be remembered long after his death.

"the whole composition"—For more on the development of literary versions of myths, see Ch. 23, p. 366.

Huwawa—Another form of the name Humbaba. Huwawa, guardian of the cedar forest, is killed by Gilgamesh.

Bill of sale of a field and one house paid in silver ca. 2550 B.C.E. *This Sumerian terracotta tablet suggests that when it fell to the Akkadians, the Sumerian culture was well developed and prosperous.*

The Akkadian Version Changes the Sumerian Version

"Sumerian and Akkadian versions"—Around 2300 B.C.E. the Sumerian empire, which told stories aabout the great leader Gilgamesh, was conquered by the Akkadians. The conquerors continued the tradition of Gilgamesh stories. The most complete version of the poem that we have is mostly in Akkadian. For a more general discussion of the nature of oral myth, see Ch. 2, p. 18.

The main motive, the establishment of a reputation, is the same in the **Sumerian and the Akkadian versions;** but it is made much clearer in the Sumerian that Gilgamesh accepts the full facts of death, that he has seen the corpses of ordinary men and is aware that he will suffer the same fate. This detail is suppressed in the Akkadian version, since Gilgamesh's grief and despair at Enkidu's death have to be fully motivated—and the motive offered is that now for the first time does Gilgamesh understand what death really means. And yet the change is not quite so straightforward. In the Sumerian poem on "The Death of Gilgamesh," Gilgamesh has a dream that portends his own imminent demise. The manner of its interpretation implies that he has not, after all, accepted the inevitability of death for himself as great king of Uruk: "Enlil, the great mountain, the father of the gods—O lord Gilgamesh, the meaning of the dream is—has destined thy fate, O Gilgamesh, for kingship, for eternal life he has not destined it." One of the purposes of this poem, or the original that lies behind it, was surely to emphasize that even the king, in spite of his divine associations, must die; and to assert that this was no anomaly reflecting on the king's authority on earth, but the result of a solemn divine decree. Echoes of such an emphasis descended into the Akkadian epic, although it is not there made explicit that it is Gilgamesh *as king* who cannot accept his fate as that of all other men.

Sumerian version—Gilgamesh has seen the corpses of ordinary men and now comes to fear death. Even the king must die.

Akkadian version—Gilgamesh understands death fully for the first time, since his friend Enkidu has died. The story deals with each individual's reluctance to believe that he must die.

In the Sumerian poem about the attack on Huwawa, Enkidu plays a lesser part, as it seems, than in the Akkadian version (although he similarly refers Gilgamesh to the sun-god for help, then tries to deter him from the actual encounter with the giant, and finally insists, as in the Akkadian version, on Gilgamesh killing the giant).

Sumerian, ca. 2600 B.C.E. The impression of this cylinder seal shows a warrior usually held to be Gilgamesh on the left, fighting two bulls and a lion.

In all the Sumerian poems where he appears Enkidu is the servant of Gilgamesh and not his near-equal as in the Akkadian epic. The difference is significant. The whole theme of the creation of Enkidu by the gods as an equal and counterweight to Gilgamesh is unknown in the surviving fragments of Sumerian poetry. It may yet appear, or be present in tablets still undeciphered; it is more probable than not that some rudimentary predecessor of the theme was known before the Gilgamesh epic was composed. Even so, it is strange that none of our Sumerian Gilgamesh-poems foreshadows Enkidu as the wild man from the desert, the man who was gradually introduced to civilization and culture. In "Gilgamesh and the Land of the Living" it is made clear at one point that Enkidu has already seen Huwawa—but that is not explicitly related, as it is in the Gilgamesh epic, to his days as the companion of the wild animals, when he roamed at large through the desert places. It would be a reasonable conjecture that the author or authors of the Akkadian composition at the least emphasized the motif of Enkidu's original wildness, gave it a prominence and a point that it does not seem to have had in earlier versions.

The Epic of Gilgamesh and the Acceptance of Death

Sumerian version—Since Enkidu plays a lesser part, his gradual dying is less emphasized. Gilgamesh drops a drum and drum stick into the nether world, and Enkidu dies in attempting to retrieve them.

Akkadian version—Enkidu's death is linked to what he has become, overly civilized. He dies because, by association with Gilgamesh, he has lost his essence as a person of nature.

In the Sumerian poem about the death of Enkidu, of which Tablet XII, appended to the Akkadian epic, is a direct translation, the motive of Enkidu's gradual dying, and of his despair at what association with Gilgamesh has turned him into, simply does not exist. There Enkidu's death is caused by his own heedlessness in not following Gilgamesh's advice. He deliberately challenges the underworld, and as a consequence is finally detained. The poem is in any case rather *mysterious: how did Gilgamesh drop his drum and drumstick into the nether* world, why did Enkidu so readily volunteer to retrieve them and then act so imprudently? When not even the goddess Inanna could escape from the House of Dust without the fullest efforts of the great gods above, how could Enkidu, a mere mortal, hope to do so? Conceivably his function is precisely to emphasize that, for a mortal, death is absolutely irreversible. But what is the implication of the refrain "Namtar did not seize him, Fever did not seize him; the nether world seized him," and so on (e.g. XII, 51)? It is an odd story, part of the purpose of which was to provide another opportunity for a description of the conditions of the dead; but one that confirms the impression that Enkidu's complex role in the Akkadian epic is the result of much new speculation, and does not reproduce a standard Sumerian view.

Out of the incompletely homogeneous Sumerian background the Akkadian authors seem to have created a consistent picture of change and development in Gilgamesh's view of death. At the beginning of the epic he is carefree and extroverted, uncontrolled and autocratic. The provision of a companion and equal turns his mind elsewhere, to the making of a name. He knows that men must die, and determines to achieve a kind of immortality by a deed of prowess. Enkidu, who knows Huwawa, tries to deter him, but Gilgamesh presses forward in spite of an unfavorable dream. When the monster is slain they are both irrepressible, and insult Ishtar; this results in the gods decreeing Enkidu's death. The loss of a close companion, someone he loved, makes death very much more real to Gilgamesh; so do the lingering nature of Enkidu's death and his graphic predictions of what awaits him below. His statement that in the underworld even kings act as servants may have had some special effect, and reproduces a motif outlined in the Sumerian "Death of Gilgamesh." When at last Enkidu dies, Gilgamesh cannot understand it until the visible sign of corruption, the worm, appears. Then he behaves like a madman—carries grief to exceptional extremes, and allies it with new fears about his own death. He, too, he now perceives, will completely die; his body, too, will be corrupted. This causes him to set off on the lonely journey to Utnapishtim, to face every kind of danger, despite all warnings that Utnapishtim is a special case who cannot be copied. This message is repeated by Utnapishtim himself; the test of wakefulness, miserably failed, finally persuades Gilgamesh to depart. The unexpected information about the plant of rejuvenation (a folktale-type motif) and his consequent joy and sorrow, together with the sign glimpsed beneath the sea, complete his acceptance of failure in his quest, and he returns to Uruk. The myth exemplifies, through a single legendary figure, the **various attitudes to death** that humans tend to adopt: theoretical acceptance, utterly destroyed by one's first close acquaintance with it in someone loved; revulsion from the obscenity of physical corruption; the desire to surmount death in one's own private case, either by means of a lasting reputation or by the desperate fantasy that oneself could be immortal. Finally, a kind of resignation—but before that, perhaps, an attempt to delay death by emulating youth.

Royal portrait head, "Head of Sargon the Great." Akkadian, ca. 2300–2200 B.C.E. *This portrait of a ruler shows that the Akkadian culture had also achieved a high degree of artistic skill in the period when it conquered the Sumerians.*

"various attitudes toward death"—Humans come to terms with the inevitability of their own deaths in a series of stages.

Nature and Culture in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*

The interpretation offered so far depends on neglecting several details of the tale that cannot be reconciled with the scheme of consequential action. Closer examination suggests that this kind of more or less literal interpretation is seriously incomplete—that some of the most fantastic and apparently arbitrary components are probably significant, and give the story a more fully mythical (because less directly allegorical and logical) status.

"fantastic elements of fairy-tale . . . origin"—Kirk believes that to find meaning in a myth, we must look beyond many of the details that simply make it an exciting story.

Leaving aside **fantastic elements of fairy-tale or folktale origin**—like the garden of jewels, the waters of death and the means found to cross them—which add greatly to the richness of the narrative but little to its central subject, we find that the main unexplained element is the insistence on Enkidu as a wild man from the desert. This at first sight arbitrary theme, inconspicuous in the Sumerian versions, is emphasized, not only in the earlier part of the poem, but also, by reminiscence, up to Enkidu's death. What is its point, does it serve any real purpose in the epic as a whole, and how did it become so prominent a motif in the Akkadian elaboration?

This idea comes from: Claude-Levi Strauss' *The Raw and the Cooked*, page 143.

One of the main preoccupations of the Central Brazilian Indians was seen to be the relationship between nature and culture, the untamed and the tamed, the raw and the cooked, and the tensions, contradictions and paradoxes that operated between these extremes. I believe the Gilgamesh epic in its developed Akkadian form to be partly concerned with exploring, **consciously or not,** something of the same polarity. Men have always been preoccupied with status: with their relations as individuals to families, as families to clans, as clans to tribes—more generally still with their own society's relation to the whole world outside. That world extends from its broadest cosmological aspects (sky and heavenly bodies, for many the abode of gods or spirits) to the **immediate terrestrial environment.** It is here that the nature-culture contrast is seen at its most striking, in differences between the organization of the village and its surrounding fields or the whole cultivated area and the enfolding forest or desert; between the customs and rules of men and women and those applied between animals; between human cultural techniques and the natural processes they seem either to imitate, as Aristotle put it, or to counteract. At all events the investigation, in some sense, of the relationship between nature and culture is not improbable for the Mesopotamian peoples, especially since their myths certainly dwelt on the difference between the irrigated and the barren and on the gods who were responsible.

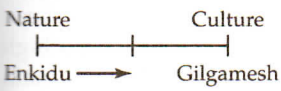
"consciously or not"—People who create and tell myths may not be intentionally trying to include the "truths" that we discover as part of the myth.

"immediate terrestrial environment"—Culture is represented by the village and its cultivated fields. Nature is seen in the forest and in the desert.

I want now to reconsider the poem, selecting for notice those phrases and actions which suggest that a contrast between nature and culture, primarily through Enkidu but also though his counterpart Gilgamesh, is implicit in the whole composite story; a meaningful contrast, in which positions are being opposed or reversed in order to explore and illuminate their full relationships. First, it is emphasized that Enkidu is created "on the steppe"; moreover he is shaggy all over, like an animal. And it is as an animal that he lives: he feeds and drinks like animals and in their company; he not only runs with the gazelles, but he also jostles with the wild beasts at the watering-place. But in some ways he behaves more craftily than they, since he tears up the traps set by the hunter. So Enkidu, although a man, is also the very antithesis of man and his works. Then comes the harlot, who introduces him not only to love—which the animals, too, can practice—but also, later, to shelter, company, clothes, cooked food, strong drink, and all the benefits of culture. But first, when he has grown tired of love for the

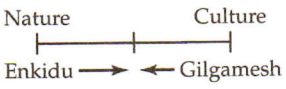
Start of the poem:

Enkidu encounters the harlot:



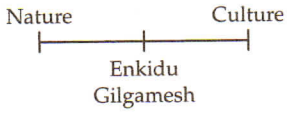
time being, he tries returning to the animals, who reject him and with whose running he can no longer keep pace. The harlot consoles him by telling him that he is now "like a god"; it is no longer fitting that he should roam the steppe. She tells him, too, of Gilgamesh back in Uruk, who lords it "like a wild ox." Enkidu immediately feels the need for a friend, especially perhaps for one with some of his own latent wildness. Already there is an element of mutual reversal of roles: in the desert Enkidu has rejected the animals and become wise like a god, while in the city Gilgamesh, who is king and should be wise, behaves like a wild beast. Meanwhile Enkidu proves that he has indeed "forgotten where he was born" by taking a weapon and chasing off, or capturing, the lions and wolves, so that the cattlemen and shepherds may rest in peace. He has become one of them, has turned utterly against the world of wild animals, just as they have rejected him.

Gilgamesh misbehaves in the city:

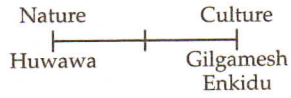


He wrestles with Gilgamesh and they become fast friends. Now Gilgamesh conceives the Huwawa project; Enkidu (who seems uncomprehending of Gilgamesh's motive) is dismayed, since he had learned all about the cedar forest "in the hills, as I was roaming with the wild beasts." That implies that the cedar forest represents the steppe, the wild; and it certainly lies, as is proper for a monster's lair, beyond the civilized world. Admittedly there is probably more to it than that. Why is it called "the land of the living" in the Sumerian version? To be sure, it belongs to Enlil, who has set the giant there to guard the cedars; but Huwawa himself is hardly a vivifying force, and rather his forest, which lies in the mountains—the Kur, the name that also means the underworld—may represent death, and give a presage of its power by paralyzing Enkidu's hand (Akkadian version), or sending Gilgamesh into a death-like sleep (Sumerian version). At all events, in order to make a name, to overcome death in a modified way, Gilgamesh has to move from culture and the city into the mountain wilderness, to overcome the savage Huwawa, and to bring back the cedars to Uruk.

Enkidu's friendship with Gilgamesh:



With respect to Huwawa, the extremes seem different, however:

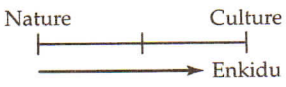


The details of the penetrating of the forest and the slaying of Huwawa are too uncertain to form the basis of further speculation. After the slaughter, Gilgamesh washes himself and puts on clean clothes. In rejecting Ishtar's love he adduces some remarkable reasons; for **what the goddess seems to have done to most of her previous lovers is to reverse their position as between nature and culture.** The lion, the embodiment of power and freedom, through having been loved by her is liable to be trapped and confined in the hunter's pit; the stallion has been subjected to the whip and spur. Conversely the herdsman has been turned into a wolf, and Ishullanu, Enlil's gardener (who had insultingly rejected Ishtar's love), has been turned into a mole, or some animal that is stuck, perhaps in a burrow, and can go neither up nor down. Being turned into one's opposite is a drastic punishment, and perhaps that is why these pairs seem to fit the nature-culture reversal so well—only Tammuz, changed into a wounded bird, somewhat obscurely, remains apart. Even so the grouping by pairs (nature-culture twice, and culture-nature twice) is remarkable.

"what the goddess seems to have done . . . is to reverse their position as between nature and culture"—As the story of Ishtar shows, there are other transformations in the story that reflect the nature-culture dichotomy.

Enkidu sickens and curses three instruments of his downfall: the gate, the hunter and the harlot. It is perhaps significant that two of these three are directly associated with his passage from nature to culture. Why does he mention both the hunter and the harlot, when just one of them would have adequately represented that whole stage in his history, and the third curse could then have been directed (for example) at the Bull of Heaven or his own rash hurling of its thigh at Ishtar? I believe it to be a legitimate conjecture that Enkidu takes the main

The full movement of Enkidu:



"Typical *rite de passage* inversion"—The story of the hero's adventure is often related to a society's rituals, especially to the initiation ceremony that marks the passage to manhood. On this link, see Part 4 on Ritual and Myth, and the analysis by Joseph Campbell of the hero myth, Chapter 12, p. 12.

reason for his lingering death to be his passage from the desert into the world of culture; and that is why he stresses the two similar incidents. At least two of these curses, against the hunter and harlot, are eventually reversed under the persuasion of Shamash, who points out the benefits of culture—especially the friendship of Gilgamesh and the lamentations to be received from the whole of Uruk and from Gilgamesh himself, who will let his hair grow, clothe himself in a lion-skin, and roam over the steppe (in other words, will simulate nature in a **typical *rite de passage* inversion**). At this thought Enkidu grows quiet and changes his curses into blessings. Once again, however, he claims that he is accursed, because he is dying not like someone who falls in battle but, presumably, slowly and from illness. Therefore it is death by disease, as much as dying itself, that Enkidu seems to resent; and disease may well be something he associates with culture and civilization. Is this, then, the reason for his cursing the hunter and the harlot—not so much because they had introduced him to Gilgamesh (the thought of whose friendship, after all, assuages his wrath against them), but because they enticed him into a world of disease and slow death, away from the world of the steppe in which death tends to come suddenly and before the onset of old age and corruption?

Gilgamesh refuses to accept the reality of Enkidu's death—dresses him like a bride (a symbol of culture, or rather fertility: a *rite de passage*, but the wrong passage). Whether or not he hopes to preserve his friend by asserting his connection with culture, Gilgamesh himself finally responds to the situation by moving over to the world of nature and rejecting culture entirely. First he storms over the body like a lion deprived of its whelps, then he tears his hair and his garment (perhaps no more than regular signs of mourning), finally he does what Shamash had predicted to Enkidu, by roaming over the steppe clad in skins. It is true that any act of mourning is liable to involve an alteration of clothing and of the length of one's hair (either by cutting it off or by letting it grow). The motives are complex, although the rejection of the world of culture by the mourner, and on his own behalf, is probably not part of them. But by any standards **Gilgamesh's actions are extreme,** and they are heavily stressed in one aspect: he himself, the embodiment of culture, now rejects the cultured world and roams like an animal in the wild—not only like an animal, but also clad in a wild animal's skin.

"Gilgamesh's actions are extreme"—As Gilgamesh mourns Enkidu, he rejects culture in favor of nature.

It is not altogether easy to see why, either in his own mind or in the minds of those who created his mythical *persona*, Gilgamesh resorted to the desert. For at this point in the composite epic a drastic piece of rearrangement takes place. At one moment the hero is roaming the steppe, clothed in skins because of the death of Enkidu; at the next he is beginning his journey to Utnapishtim dressed in ordinary clothes—or so we may infer, since he specifically tells Utnapishtim on arrival that "I had not reached the alewife's house, When my clothing was used up"; and that only at that point did he slay "the wild beasts and creeping things of the steppe," eat their flesh and wrap their skins about him. There is an undeniable change of viewpoint here: clearly the whole episode of the journey to Utnapishtim has been joined on to the description of Enkidu's death and Gilgamesh's subsequent grief, and that accounts for the inconsistency. In its way the conversion of Gilgamesh's reason for being clothed in skins, from an act of mourning to an act of necessity, is very neat. Yet it tends to obscure the significance of his resort to the wilderness, and may be responsible for a further confusion about what Gilgamesh is wearing as he crosses the waters of death in

Urshanabi's boat; for he takes off his cloth and uses it as a sail, whereas on any explanation he is dressed only in skins by this point.

In spite of this, those who thrust Gilgamesh upon Utnapishtim seem to have remained aware, for most of the time, that **his clothing was an important index** of his state of mind. So much is suggested by the emphasis placed by Utnapishtim, in his instructions to Urshanabi, on taking Gilgamesh to the washing-place as he leaves for his homeward journey, so that he may wash himself thoroughly and cast his soiled skins into the sea. Utnapishtim carefully specifies the dirt of Gilgamesh's limbs, the skins that have distorted them, the need for the sea to carry off the skins, the putting on of a completely new cloak. One might also ask why Utnapishtim and his wife tolerated Gilgamesh's foul condition for so long, including his seven days' sleep in their house. That sounds like an absurd piece of pedantry that pushes the evidence, and the obviously loose narrative techniques, too far. Yet there would be no conceivable reason for reintroducing the motif of Gilgamesh's being clothed in skins, after the natural assumption that on arrival in Utnapishtim's house he would be treated in the normal way of hospitality, were it not remembered that this was an important part of his characterization after the death of Enkidu. In short, the theme of Gilgamesh's becoming like an animal has been partly, but not completely, overlaid by the accretion of the popular Utnapishtim story.

"his clothing was an important index"—Kirk believes that some of the paratactic elements of this section come from the conflicting need to tell a "good story" and yet retain the important theme of the conflict of nature and culture. On parataxis, see Ch. 2, p. 19.

Why does Gilgamesh withdraw from the world of culture into that of nature after his friend's death? Why is that idea so important that it runs even through the elaborated theme of his visit to Utnapishtim in search of personal immortality? It is not merely an exaggerated form of mourning; it is too emphatic for that, and the stress on the mode of clothing, and its relation to his return to Uruk, too pronounced. Does he hope to restore Enkidu to a kind of life? I doubt it; his concern seems to be more for himself, at this stage, than for Enkidu. It is his own preoccupation with death, as much as guilt for Enkidu, that he is expressing by these means. If so, then I suggest that **his rejection of the world and of the appurtenances of culture is a rejection of death itself.** Just as Enkidu blamed his acculturation for the manner, if not the inevitability, of his dying, so Gilgamesh rejects the actuality of Enkidu's death by seeking out the world of nature, of the animals who were Enkidu's companions and seemed to symbolize freedom, lack of restraint, lack of corruption—and yet some of them he slaughtered, much as Enkidu had attacked them after his initial assimilation to culture. Later, in returning to Uruk, washed and dressed in clean clothes, he not only signifies his resignation to death, but he also seems to imply that culture is not, after all, to blame for disease and the lingering aspects of mortality—or at least that man cannot avoid them, that there is no point in altering one's life because of them. Culture is in many ways questionable, and in the end it did Enkidu little good; although Enkidu had been comforted by Shamash's listing of its benefits (living like a king, being Gilgamesh's friend) in his own case. Wisdom, too, he had gained, as the harlot told him, like a god. And so this whole myth, revealing a persistent preoccupation that overrides the mechanical complexity of narrative accumulation, explores the relations of culture and nature, resignation and despair, disease and sudden death, mourning and madness. It balances one against the other, investigates ways out of the confrontation, and **achieves, as a myth perhaps should, a valuation that is complex,** ambiguous, emotional, and personal.

"his rejection of the world . . . is a rejection of death itself"—Gilgamesh's journey to Utnapishtim represents a rebellion against the very notion of death, just as he rejected civilization. It was civilization that brought about the death of Enkidu.

"achieves . . . a valuation that is complex"—The relationship between nature and culture is many sided. Kirk sees the Gilgamesh story as emphasizing this complexity rather than providing easy answers.

According to the interpretation here suggested, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* is something more, on the speculative plane, than an investigation of man's attitude to death; and the investigation of death is itself more subtle than had been supposed. Once again the question must be posed, Is the epic mythical in essence? Incorporated in an ancient setting and touching matters of universal concern, it possesses many of the characteristics of myth. Yet is the underlying speculation, such as it is, **"mythopoeic,"** conducted by developing intuitive associations and images arising out of the tale itself, or is it primarily the result of more rational processes? No final answer can be given, but I venture one conjecture: that the confrontation between nature and culture at least, with its effects on the assessment of death, is primarily intuitive. The more overt sides of Gilgamesh's obsession with mortality, on the other hand, may suggest a more deliberate elaboration of motifs and attitudes implicit in Sumerian predecessors like "The death of Enkidu" and "The death of Gilgamesh."

"mythopoeic"—This term literally means "making myth," but it implies a particular view of the origin of myth. Here Kirk assumes that myth arises only out of subconscious processes. He wonders whether *The Epic of Gilgamesh* is a rational meditation on death or a myth that arose from the poet's intuitive mythmaking.

FURTHER READING

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Levi-Strauss, Claude. *The Raw and the Cooked.* Trans. John and Doreen Weightman. New York: Harper & Row, 1969.