

UNDERSTANDING GILGAMESH:

HIS WORLD AND HIS STORY

by

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SUMMARY

Understanding Gilgamesh – brokenly – is to understand life brokenly. *The Epic of Gilgamesh* is the narrative of life. It records the full cycle of the nerve and aplomb of youth, of the doubt and crisis of midlife, of the acceptance and quiescence of maturity. Moreover, this understanding is a broken understanding. It starts with the clay tablets that are broken in a literal sense of the word. Further, the narrative is a narrative of broken-ness – the story ends in tears. A man has lost his last chance of obtaining life everlasting. Yet he manages to recuperate despite his failure.

The first part of this thesis examined the *world of Gilgamesh*. Initially he was known as the Sumerian king Bilgames. He makes his appearance in the form of oral compositions that are recited or sung in the royal courts of kings during the Sumerian period: sheer entertainment, nothing really serious. At his side is his loyal servant Enkidu who supports his master in everything he does.

Akkadian gradually ousts Sumerian as vernacular, yet the latter continues to dominate as the language of culture and court. Bilgames survives the reign of the Sargonic dynasty, and even revives during the glorious Ur III period of Shulgi and of Ur-Nammu. Sumerian Bilgames-poems are recorded in writing.

However, by the time that Hammurapi draws up his legal codex, the Sumerian Bilgames is known as the vibrant Akkadian king Gilgamesh. His servant Enkidu is elevated to the status of friend. Together they defy men, gods, monsters. When Enkidu dies, Gilgamesh goes even further in search of life everlasting. He reaches Uta-napishtim the Distant in order to learn the secret of eternal life.

The optimism of the Old Babylonian Kingdom is replaced by the reflection and introspection of the Middle period. Life is difficult. Life is complex. The *Gilgamesh Epic* is once again re-interpreted and supplemented by a prologue and an epilogue: both begin and end at the same place, at the walls of Uruk. Here Gilgamesh looks back and forward to his life and contemplates about the meaning of life in general.

The second part of this thesis dealt more specifically with the *story* – the literary aspects of the *Epic*. Genette's theory illuminated several interesting literary devices with regards to the rhythm and pace of the narrative. However, much of the reflective nature of the *Epic* was also revealed. There were moments of *looking forward*, and *looking backward*: after Gilgamesh broke down in tears at the end of the *Epic*, he suddenly gained perspective on life. Somehow a broken narrative focused into a meaningful whole that may just make future sense.

Jauss's theory illuminated why Gilgamesh refuses to be forgotten, why he is once again alive and well in the twenty first century. Although he was buried in the ruins of Nineveh for a thousand plus years, he is suddenly back on the scene – and not for academic reasons only. Not only scholars of the Ancient Near East take an interest in the old *Epic*, but also people from all sectors of life. Somehow Gilgamesh seems to respond to questions that are asked even by those who understand nuclear physics – but who grapple with the paradox of living meaningfully.

Understanding Gilgamesh – brokenly – understands life.

LIST OF KEY TERMS

Epic of Gilgamesh, Sumerian, Akkadian, Babilonian, Cuneiform,
Literary approaches, Structuralism, Gérard Genette, Narrative discourse,
Hans Robert Jauss, Reception-aesthetics,
Quest for life eternal, Gilgamesh, Enkidu, Ishtar, Sîn-lēqi-unninni, Uta-napishtim

OPSOMMING

Om Gilgamesj te verstaan – gebroke – is om die lewe as gebroke te verstaan. Die *Epos van Gilgamesj* is die narratief van die lewe. Dit verhaal die volle siklus vanaf die durf en selfversekerdheid van die jeug, die twyfel en krisis van die middeljare tot by die aanvaarding en berusting van volwassenheid. Dit begin by die kleitablette wat letterlik stukkend is. Maar verder is die narratief ook 'n narratief van gebrokenheid – die verhaal eindig in tranen. 'n Man het sy laaste kans om die ewige lewe te bekom, verbeur. Tog slaag hy daarin om te herstel, ten spyte van sy mislukking.

Die eerste gedeelte van hierdie tesis het die *wêreld van Gilgamesj* ondersoek. Oorspronklik was hy bekend as die Sumeriese koning Bilgames. Hy verskyn in die vorm van mondelinge gedigte wat voorgedra of gesing is in die koninklike hof van konings in die Sumeriese periode: blote vermaak, niks wat regtig ernstig opgeneem word nie. Aan die sy van die koning is sy lojale dienskneg Enkidu wat sy meester ondersteun in alles wat hy doen.

Geleidelik verdring Akkadies Sumeries as spreektaal, maar laasgenoemde domineer as die taal van kultuur en van die hof. Bilgames oorleef die regeringstydperk van die Sargon-dinastie, en herleef selfs gedurende die glorieryke Ur III-periode van Shulgi en Ur-Nammu. Die Sumeriese Bilgames-gedigte word neergeskryf.

Teen die tyd wat Hammurapi sy wetskodeks opteken, staan die Sumeriese Bilgames bekend as die lewenskragtige Akkadiese koning Gilgamesj. Sy dienskneg Enkidu se status word verhef tot dié van vriend. Saam daag hulle mense, monsters en gode uit. Wanneer Enkidu sterf, gaan Gilgamesj selfs nog verder op 'n soektog na die ewige lewe. Hy bereik Uta-napishtim die Veraf-Een in 'n poging om uit te vind wat die geheim van die ewige lewe is.

Die optimisme van die Ou Babiloniese Koninkryk word vervang met die nadenke en selfondersoek van die Middel-periode. Die lewe is moeilik. Die lewe is ingewikkeld. Weer eens ondergaan die *Gilgamesj Epos* 'n her-interpretasie en word voorsien van 'n proloog en 'n epiloog: albei begin en eindig op dieselfde plek, op die mure van

Uruk. Van hier af kyk Gilgamesj terug en vooruit na sy lewe en hy dink na oor die sin van die lewe oor die algemeen.

Die tweede gedeelte van hierdie tesis het meer spesifiek gehandel oor die *verhaal* self – die narratiewe aspekte van die *Epos*. Genette se teorie het etlike interessante literêre aspekte uitgewys wat betref die ritme en die pas van die narratief. Maar ook het die peinsende stemming van die *Epos* aan die orde gekom. Daar was oomblikke van *vooruitskouing* en *terugskouing*: nadat Gilgamesj in tranes uitbars teen die einde van die *Epos*, kry hy skielik perspektief op die lewe. Skielik fokus 'n gebroke narratief tot 'n betekenisvolle geheel wat dalk net in die toekoms mag sin maak.

Jauss se teorie het aangetoon waarom Gilgamesj weier om vergete te raak, waarom hy weer eens springlewendig is, selfs in die een en twintigste eeu. Alhoewel hy vir meer as twee duisend jaar lank begrawe gelê het in die ruïnes van Nineve, is hy skielik weer terug op die toneel – en nie slegs weens akademiese interesse nie. Navorsing met betrekking tot die Ou Nabye Ooste is nie die enigste rede waarom kundiges in die ou *Epos* belang stel nie, mense vanuit alle sektore van die samelewing word daardeur aangespreek. Op die een of ander wyse reageer Gilgamesj op vrae wat gevra word selfs deur diegene wat alles weet van kernfisika – maar wat worstel met die paradoks van 'n sinvolle lewe.

Om Gilgamesj te verstaan - gebroke, is om die lewe as gebroke te verstaan.

LYS VAN SLEUTELTERME

Assiriologie, die Gilgamesj-epos, Sumeries, Akkadies, Babilonies, Spykerskrif, Literêre benaderings, Strukturalisme, Gérard Genette, Narratiewe diskoers, Hans Robert Jauss, resepsie-estetika, Soektog na die ewige lewe, Gilgamesj, Enkidu, Ishtar, Sîn-lēqi-unninni, Uta-napishtim