

Ideology in the Epic of Gilgamesh's Poems

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ABSTRACT

The Epic of Gilgamesh — the oldest epic in the history of Ancient East and rare literary gem not just for its colorful characters but also for its adventure-filled events.. Like other epics, the structure of Gilgamesh was formed from a series of basic units, elevating to a high level a number of events. It developed through a series of engagements that ultimately helped set its thematic and artistic structure. This research is based on the main foundational ideologies that were embodied in, and give power to this work through conflict or conflicts; i.e. extraordinary vs. normal. It became entangled in the pursuit of something mythical and, as a result, it acquired an approach that (in return) provided more meanings and enriched the quest for another set of ideas oriented to the reality of existence, life-death cycles, rebirths, immortality. The results indicate that ideologies underlying the Epic of Gilgamesh are mainly shaped by older Sumerian narratives, social change embedded in Mesopotamian myth-religious practice and kingship ideology over established semantic frameworks.

KEYWORDS: Gilgamesh, Ideology, Poems of the Epic of Gilgamesh

1. Introduction

Humans' beings in prehistory had no choice but to weave the mythos of history into epics as a response to their imaginations that sought to dwindle with whatever — if at all there was one; and tarry from two fronts in possible days ahead: in struggle with nature on one hand every day, and bitter petty-bickering quarrels within the newly developing residential communities on the opposite. If we want to find a similar analogy in modern time, we immediately think of (television series) that draw the highest number of audiences and virtually no family layer at present misses out on the viewing or becomes bonded to its plot and heroes. The myths of the day — right now embodied in expensive American movies — Star Wars, battle of the Titans, Spider-Man's escapades etc: they are still those that draw the biggest ratings and then profits internationally for American cinema. When we think of this phenomenon one example is no different than the myths of the ancients which recounts that story tellers used to perform orally if we explore its content closely it does not differ but rather are almost similar (Tahir, 2016: 5). It is worth mentioning that films are generally based on novels. A novel is said to be a well-structured dramatic composition, written by a single author bestows on it a beginning, a plot, and an end. The particulars are placed in it — and very few conflicts or contradictions fall among them. And because it has always been written, it is inherently subject to the processes of refinement and revision, with the author augmenting or decreasing parts before release: whatever their own vision (Tahir, 2016: 7). Regarding the epic, it is typically generated by one layer after another, with its contents orally articulated to audiences who gauge their responses to how its protagonists and action unfolds. Accordingly, all of them can intervene by including what they noticed to be more influential on their feelings, capturing their consideration or evoking their astonishment. So here the epic can suffer from a plot-lessness, and sometimes from contradiction because the storyteller (in this case) takes over for the author. This happens because the scope of the epic, both spatially and temporally,

can expand and contract to permit this sort of intervention, while a novel must continue down its unique historical avenues in terms of time and place. Still, if we move a bit more down the path of analytical assistance between novel and epic, we might say that the epic is not merely different from the novel in kind but also in collective authorship. Contrary to the novel, which only provides for one author (most of them unknown), and where the audience can only intervene through reading it or making its events and characters according to their temper and culture; both the writer (usually no name) and crowded in his audiences take part in its creation. And what about the epic? The audience might add to, delete from or change the epic with their imagination they like in its atmosphere. Yet all of this occurs in the scenario where the epic has been passed down orally through narrators or entertainers who are masters both at telling tales and at keeping listeners enthralled. But, once written down, the epic is more like a novel: set in stone without any changes or additions. For one thing, as we mentioned earlier, the epic is defined by spatial and temporal beings (heroes) who not only travels from land to land but often hops between heaven and earth whereas a novel, more confined in both space and time than an epic; Its domain would often be land-based, unless sci-fi novels about mechanical beings or some special hybrid entities next to humans in character. These also have an iconic way of being unique from epics with the connections between many gods of ancient times and some select humans who show greatness of heroes, and it typically ends in tragic disasters. (Asi, 2019; George, 1999).

The aim of the this reseach is to shed light on the ideologies in the epic of Gilagmish to gain deep understand on how ancient Mesopotampian's ideologies presented and what influenced them.

1. What is Ideology?

A common definition defined ideology as beliefs, values, principles, attitudes or ideals particularly in politics (Gerring,1997). Because ideologies are prescriptive and not just descriptive, offering a blueprint for action and an effort to transform the world rather than simply reflect on it (Gerring,1997), it is predominantly purposeful and not merely explanatory or descriptive. In some papers, ideology is seen as an idea of how a socially shared representation of a group organizes its identity with norms, aims and relations to other groups (Van Dijk,2005). Other research highlights the fact that ideology is a particularly common mode of political thought and is now considered widespread rather than unusual (Freedden,2006).

2.1 Main approaches to ideology :

The term ideology has many methods of approach:

- Neutral View: Ideology is a system of meaning, purpose, and coherence to political life (Vincent, 2004; Zmigrod, 2020)
- A critical perspective on ideology holds that it distorts reality and allows exploitative social arrangements to endure by undermining recognition of exploitation and cooperation towards ending it (Zmigrod,2020; Bianchin, 2020).
- Group view: ideology as something that binds communities together through shared norms, values and identity (Seeck,2018).
- Discursive view: ideology is enacted, recreated and transformed by discourse and language (Van Dijk, 2005; Gerring,1997).

2. The importance of the Epic of Gilgamesh

The Greeks had some of the most famous epics from antiquity, such as the Iliad and Odyssey – the Indians their Rig Veda, the Persians their Avesta (Apastag), and the Egyptians Isis and Osiris; all written down in

1st millennium BC (George,1999; Backer, 2006). The Epic of Gilgamesh, however, is older than them all (not to mention that it survives reasonably intact - the few missing lines are minor and relatively unimportant (Asi, 2019;Tahir,2016; George 1999), as it was recorded in full at the dawn of the second millennium BC. Another characteristic: it has come to us unchanged, that is free of intentional addition or deletion from narrators who first pronounced it orally before it was transcribed. Multiple duplicates of the Epic of Gilgamesh have actually been found in southern of Iraq (Sumer and Akkad), and in north of Iraq (Assyria). A copy had also been found in Palestine (Megiddo, a city mentioned in the Torah) as well (ibid). This suggests that the the epic we had was well known in the arab region from Iraq to Palestine.

The epic offers a great opportunity for students of anthropology and comparative literature to make numerous comparisons with the major world epics that were recorded later, both in terms of events and characters. It is sufficient to observe at this point that its hero, Gilgamesh, has characteristics resembling those of Hercules, Alexander and Dhul-Qarnayn, Odysseus and Samson. Regarding the events, there is part of the epic in which it speaks of (the flood), a topic that we can relate to what is mentioned specifically in the Torah. In the same way, there is the account of what Gilgamesh's friend saw at 'the other side' (the netherworld), especially concerning all kind of torment and punishment for bad behaviour in worldly life. (George,1999; Backer, 2006).

Over four thousand years has elapsed since the Epic of Gilgamesh reared its head from out of obscurity and it still attains such strength, vividness, and profound impact on those who reread it. Several factors lie behind that, among those:

1. How human struggle until that point against the forces of nature, beasts and efforts to conquer it all.
2. The connections of some human heroes and the deities that ruled over worldly matters.
3. Glorifying the art of manipulation.
4. Intimate friendship that almost reaches the point of merging between friends.
5. Respect for motherhood, and absolute obedience to its guidance.
6. Ferociously insist of human desire in glorious deeds.
7. The heroine's seduction of heroes and her win or loss at that.
8. What the woman could do in order to get the guy she wants, then her form of revenge when this goal is not achieved.
9. The gods conspiracy against the humans, and drowning them in order to get rid of them by sending a great flood.
10. Humanity's plan to build a small ship that can save humans from the flood.
11. Human striving to obtain the plant of immortality so that death does not reach him.
12. The epic hero was unable to obtain the plant of immortality and returns to his country under the law of life and death.
13. Finally, the dreams of the sleeper make up a significant portion of the events of the epic and many of them come true.

3. Analysis and Discussion of the main Ideologies in the Epic of Gilgamesh

By examining the key stages of Gilgamesh's character arc, we can peel back the layers on the morals that come through from this epic, as follows;

4.1 Individualism and absolute freedom

Gilgamesh was the only free individual in a slave society. He was a sovereign king, physically the strongest man in body, and most pleasant of countenance and richest in intelligence, abounding with life and action day or night. It might be his physical dominance that convinced the masses of his divine nature,

and his being a son of the goddess Ninsun. However, the wise and eccentric nature that had kept him isolated from the people was wondering even more what to do with absolute freedom? He started doing powerful things to expend his energy, he constructed Uruk, miracle of his time that he lived in and preserved but was unfulfilled, discontented and then grew proud and cruel. He was aloof from the morals, laws and standards of the community and therefore did not know how to handle this exalted position. Peoples of Uruk declared their ruler as 'wise' while itemizing his injustice before the gods.

"The gods of heaven, the lords of initiative
'A savage wild bull you have bred in Uruk-the-Sheepfold,
he has no equal when his weapons are brandished.
His companions are kept on their feet by his contests,
[the young men of Uruk] he harries without warrant.
Gilgamesh lets no son go free to his father,
by day and by [night his tyranny grows] harsher.
'Yet he is the shepherd of Uruk-the-Sheepfold,
Gilgamesh, [the guide o the] teeming [people.]
Though he is their shepherd and their [protector]
powerful, pre-eminent, expert [and mighty,]
(George, 1999:4)

The heroic adventures of Gilgamesh emerge from personal human dilemmas like his quest for glory and anxiety in the face of mortality. The emotional struggles in the poem are presented as that of an individual, not a group (Rohrer,2017). Alternatively, one line of interpretation describes him as always 'evermore restless', 'not finished yet', ever seeking 'more' and thus persuades the reader that he is a figure for individuation rather than merely a static heroic type (Akşehir, 2025).

Some papers also read Gilgamesh as a figure for choice and self-assertion. It explicitly argues that his spirit lives on in freedom, and courage, and that he continues to exercise freedom of choice, including in rejecting Ishtar's proposal (Feng 2024). Similarly, modern reception Studies highlights Gilgamesh confronting death as a solitary (Al-Hadi & Gao 2024).

The most powerful limit is that absolute freedom is denied from being realised: fate, after all the gods together decide and all man actually dies. Gilgamesh pushes back against that limit, but the epic presents this push back as an effort to struggle with fate instead of demonstration that fate can be eliminated altogether (Feng 2024). The social limit is equally as vital. Gilgamesh is depicted at the beginning as an overbearing ruler who oppresses his reigning people and here, if autonomy does not translate into freedom but misuse of power (Akşehir,2025;Degnin,2016). The later ethical readings are fairly consistent that Gilgamesh's individuality is ultimately transformed rather than erased. He lives for himself in early life, and concludes by valuing care, service, and a concern that others be safe (Degnin,2016). One paper summarizes that movement as resisting authority courageously and then accepting mortality and meaning with responsibility (Ess,2020).

Therefore, individualism is true in Gilgamesh, but not as a stamp of approval on absolute liberty. This is the great contradiction of the epic, an assertive individual who challenges boundaries but whose narrative core is that human freedom is always restricted by fate, morality and relationship.

4.2 The ideology of dreams:

Dreams in the Epic of Gilgamesh function ideologically as a legitimate and publicised channel of knowledge relating to the gods, the future and on human-destiny not as private fantasy (Konstantopoulos,2022; Isayev 2025).

In such texts whenever the hero is having prophetic dreams, he looks for a dream reader—often one that has familial ties and/or affiliation with the dream sage (Konstantopoulos,2022), i.e.: Gilgamesh was seeing absurd dreams about a screeching meteor crashing into him from high above, and of an odd axe sitting in the streets of Uruk. His mother Ninsun reads them to mean he would gain a companion from the wild wilderness (George, 1999:10-11), within the Epic of Gilgamesh this job is also taken by Enkidu, who interprets his own dream and Gilgamesh's dream with an epistemological power over a meaning Gilgamesh cannot altogether read alone (Konstantopoulos,2022; Tqemaladze, 2026).

Comparative papers claim that dreams have authority because many cultures validate them, particularly concerning futures inaccessible to ordinary perception (Hong,2021;Mittal,2024). Simultaneously, dream traditions cyclically draw boundaries separating significant dreams from nonsensical or untranslatable dreams and helping clarify why meaning-making with the ur-dream of Gilgamesh is selectively determined instead of assuming automatic (Surya,2025). The whole text also has an ideological component: few epic dreams have no significance to the plot, and many fit between inner experience and larger narrative components (Khoo,2019;Qizi,2025). Some other studies claim that dream scenes can confound the boundary of story and revelation, which implies in Gilgamesh dreams create a world where fate, myth and private psychology are at play all the time (Garofeanu,2024 ; Qizi,2025).

The underline meaning of the ideology of dreams in the Epic of Gilgamesh is that dreams are authoritative but coded revelations: they disclose fate, and bind humans to an order inspired from on high; and in revealing salvation through a dream state also show that even a great king requires interpretation, counsel, and wisdom to navigate his life.

4.3 Ideology of Commitment:

In fact, commitment in the Epic of Gilgamesh (i.e., to friendship, civic duty and virtue, personal growth, destiny) is still not commitment to one abstract principle. In the literature surveyed, commitment starts out with heroic ambition and personal honor, and then transitions into caring for others already in relation (Abusch,2001; Degnin,2016; Smith,2005). But the epic does not consider all dedication to be good. This could be seen clearly in early Gilgamesh when he was enslaved by power, tribute and self-importance, and that commitment turned to tyranny over his beloved people (Degnin,2016;Smith, 2005;Rohrer,2017). This has led several papers, therefore, to read the poem as a condemnation of misplaced loyalty: heroic values and royal might must take second place behind larger human and social considerations (Abusch,2001;Capps,2018).

We could summarize the key aspects of commitment as follows :

- Friendship is the clearest form of commitment within the epic, as Gilgamesh and Enkidu match each others' strength and change a large part of what shapes Gilgamesh's life (Kynes,2023; Smith,2005).
- Higher-order notions of loyalty and devotion operate as epic virtues that are more broadly foundational, making sense of why Gilgamesh endures as a moral model in later readings (Kadhim;Ibraheem;Idan & Mejbel,2026).
- Late in the work you begin to see a commitment to community when Gilgamesh returns to Uruk, with what is revealed as an orientation around benevolence, the impoverished and the needs of the city. (Degnin,2016; Smith,2005).

- Commitment to reality implies giving up on omnipotence (Türkarslan, 2020);(Cholbi & Timmerman, 2020).

Thus, the ideology of commitment in the Epic of Gilgamesh is movement from self-centered determination to relational and civic accountability. In the end the poem celebrates commitment not as obstinate ambition or thirst for power/immortality, but rather as fidelity and service and tenderness in dealing with human frailness.

4.4 The Concept of gods in The Epic of Gilgamesh

In Gilgamesh, gods are mighty but not perfect in morality. An emerging human–god conflict took place between immortality (gods) versus limits and resistance (humans). In the Epic of Gilgamesh, gods do not passively govern from a distance as vapid abstractions, but they are real judges ruling over fate, kingship, and cosmic order whereas humans are defined by dependence beseeching, vulnerability and apotheosis through death (Ballesteros,2024; Ponchia 2019; Almeida 2019.) The central tension of the humanity versus gods, is expressed in the fact that Gilgamesh is a demigod–divine near-human but still mortal: whether god-like power can be put up against divine purpose and prevail (Ponchia,2019; Feng,2024; Rohrer, 2017).

The gods control the universe as a pantheon divided internally rather than a solitary will (Ballesteros, 2024). It is this divine order by which Gilgamesh's own status derives, for Mesopotamian kingship is rooted in an analogy between the human king and the gods (Ponchia,2019; Feng,2024). In fact, the epic makes that connection particularly clear in depicting Gilgamesh as two-thirds god and one third man (Feng,2024; Ashrafi,2008). This hybrid identity situates him between the worlds of divine and animal, making him an experimental model for what humanity might approach becoming in the cosmos. (Ponchia,2019; Wolff,1969).

4.4.1 Human Versus Gods

We can summarize the all-important element of human and gods conflict in Epic of Gilgamesh as follow:

- The mortality is the most evident difference between humans and gods (Almeida,2019; Dern,2012)
- Gilgamesh's quest is a rebellion against death, but not against religion (Wolff, 1969; Rohrer 2017).
- Depicting how the gods can take offense on a personal level and use punishment as a revenge by Ishtar after being rejected (Stewart,2020).
- The deserved death of Enkidu reinforces that gods have the ultimate authority for human life (Feng,2024).

Nevertheless, the most persistent interpretation is that humans cannot beat the gods over what is a fundamental decree: mortality. Utnapishtim's survival is exceptional, and ordinary humans are "snapped off like a reed," and the poem continues to be a meditation on that limit (Stewart,2020; Dern,2012; Rohrer,2017).

It is worth mentioning that some approaches read the epic as moving from a god-dominated world to a human-centered revolt against divine determinism (Chun-Lan, 2008; Dern, 2012). Yet the end, rather than depicting the triumph of humanity over the gods, characterizes acceptance that meaning must be sought within our ephemeral lives through liberty, legacy and human nature (Tqemaladze, 2026; Stewart, 2020; Diogo,2021).

In other words, in the Epic of Gilgamesh gods are both cosmic superiors who create destiny and emotionally legible and sometimes off-course characters. The human-god struggle is important because it shapes the ultimate question of the epic: not how to be a god, but what it means to live as a human.

4.4.2 What is the Bull of Heaven?

The Bull of Heaven episode is generally interpreted not so much as a random monster segment as an intensification of discourse about royal and divine power. To the literature supplied, "the bull it is Ishtar/Inanna and heave, it sent, following Gilgamesh rejection of the goddess and as ways in ridiculous public cataclysm convert human defiance to divine power" (Stewart, 2020; Ponchia, 2015). The retribution of the bull is an immediate ideological response to Gilgamesh's rejection of Ishtar as it was sent down by her against Uruk (Stewart, 2020; Soltysiak, 2018). Thus, the conflict stages a contest of wills not only between hero and beast here but human kingship and divine sovereignty, especially since this episode is explicitly framed within the nature of Mesopotamian gods (Stewart, 2020; Ponchia, 2015). Moreover, the bull is representative of heavenly ruler rather than a simple beast. In the epic the bull of heaven is connected to 'An', heaven's deity, and the portal of An's celestial palace thus making its descent into Uruk a palpable incursion of divine sovereignty on city life. This association with Inanna/Ishtar and the heavens is furthered by its direct reference to Taurus and to the planet/goddess Venus (Soltysiak, 2018). The episode in the book has been interpreted by several papers as a positional battle to control power signified through Ishtar. The proposal of marriage indicates that Ishtar indirectly offers power and goods, yet it also concedes her lack of actual authority which Gilgamesh denies with resentment to that power (Fernandes 2025). That reading transforms the bull into a divine symbol of an ongoing gendered power contest, with Ishtar being further humiliated through her shame at evoking masculine dominance and then insulted after the bull is vanquished (Fernandes, 2025). Fernandes (2025) suggests that the manner in which Enkidu throws the bull's shoulder at Ishtar as an act of immoderation against a divine superior, and not plain heroism. This is important because insulting Ishtar was costly: Enkidu's death as a revenge to her dignity (Stewart, 2020).

In essence, the Bull of Heaven represents divine and cosmic power turned against human hubris. The episode experiments with the nature of kingship and gendered power and resistance to divine authority—but the message in its conclusion is not that there is freedom from heaven; it is that defying heaven has a price.

3.5 The ideology of immortality

Enkidu's death changes the course of the poem from heroic adventure to facing the problem of mortality (Yu, 2023; Stewart, 2020). After that loss, Gilgamesh's fear of death drives the plot and makes it more than a story of conquest but one that looks at human finitude (Cholbi, 2020). Based on a Mesopotamian context, some scholars contend that the poem expresses a specifically Mesopotamian basic belief in which the gods reserved immortality for themselves, while they allotted death to humans (Örstan 2015; Walford 1982). Thus, while the epic stages a rebellion against cosmic limits, it concludes by demanding that beings face mortality— not triumph over it (Stewart, 2020; Örstan, 2015). Consequently, Gilgamesh fails the tests of immortality and has to forsake the revitalising plant, arriving back at Uruk without gaining anything. This outcome is often read as a moral lesson in coming to terms with mortality, but some papers have also noted that the epic suggests directing immortality away from bodily continuance and toward memory, literature, honor, or civic legacy (Kline, 2016; Landa 2008; Tqemaladze 2026).

A subset of scholars argues that wider and simpler readings can oversimplify acquiescence, as to the ancient audience the poem may have had stronger religious or mystical undertones (Kline, 2016). Nevertheless, prevailing opinion throughout the papers is that tales of Gilgamesh represent traditions rendering death ineluctable, fame impermanence and immortality finally impossible for most mortals (Lushnevskaya, 2025; Garcia, 2002).

Conclusion

This research takes into account the different ideologies that are embedded in the Epic of Gilgamesh. The result shows that many layers of Mesopotamian traditions influenced its development. The formation of its textual composition is a testament to the interlacing of Sumerian mythological elements, Akkadian literary creativity, religious cosmology, political concepts of kingship and prolonged scribal editing over time and languages. It highlights both systematic changes in personality structures implicated over time, and a tendency towards increasing complexity and similarity to current models of personality strength in more recent periods. Also, it reveals a perpetual struggle of heroic values versus existential values, emphasizing the role of the hero's identity in the culture of Mesopotamia. The Epic of Gilgamesh depicted the relation between human and divine, as king of Uruk, and the connection between common man and everlasting life. This could be observed clearly in Mesopotamian religion how it integrated public and private dimensions, with superheroes active in state pantheons and family life, and the Epic of Gilgamesh reflects this.

What the Epic of Gilgamesh proposes, from the literature of ancient Mesopotamia is: resisting the fear of death — and attaining infinite immortality during a finite life. It offers a new metric for genuine strength: dynamic, hard-won wisdom shaped by relationship, loss, and creative disagreement with mortality.

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