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## The Hero Unchained: A Semiotic Analysis of the Epic of Gilgamesh (Tablet V)

### The Hero Unchained: A Semiotic Analysis of the Epic of Gilgamesh (Tablet V)

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#### المخلص

يتناول هذا البحث تحليلاً سيميائياً لملمحة جلجامش، أقدم نص ملحمي معروف في حضارة وادي الرافدين، مع التركيز بشكل خاص على اللوح الخامس. يهدف البحث إلى الكشف عن المستويات المتعددة للمعنى من خلال تطبيق نموذج (مارتن ورينغهام) السيميائي ذي المستويات الثلاثة: الخطابية، السردية، والعميقة. ومن خلال هذا الإطار التحليلي، يُنظر إلى المواجهة الملحمية بين جلجامش، الملك شبه الإلهي لمدينة أوروك، وصديقه أنكيكو، من جهة، وحارس غابة الأرز الوحشي خمبابا، من جهة أخرى، بوصفها تمثيلاً رمزياً للصراع بين التمدن والطبيعة، أو بين الثقافة والبرية. يبدأ البحث بعرض الأسس النظرية للسيميائيات، مبرزاً مفاهيم محورية

مثل العلامة والشفرة والنص والتمثيل، ومؤكداً أن الأدب يُعد نظاماً ثقافياً للعلامات. ثم يشرح نموذج المدرسة الباريسية في التحليل السيميائي، موضحاً قابليته لتفكيك البنى السردية والثنائيات الدلالية. ويطبق التحليل العملي على نص اللوح الخامس من الملحمة من خلال تحديد الحقول الدلالية (الإيزوتوبيات) السائدة، ورسم أدوار الفاعلين السرديين (جلجامش، أنكيديو، خمبابا، والآلهة)، وتوظيف مربع غريماس السيميائي للكشف عن الثنائيات الضدية التي تشكل بنية النص. وتبين النتائج أن اللوح الخامس يجسد رؤية ثقافية يفهم من خلالها انتصار جلجامش وأنكيديو على خمبابا باعتباره رمزاً لغلبة الحضارة على قوى الطبيعة البدائية. ويخلص البحث إلى أن ملحمة جلجامش لا تؤدي وظيفة أسطورية جمالية فحسب، بل تعمل أيضاً كعلامة ثقافية تعكس القيم السومرية المتعلقة بالسلطة والألوهية والمصير الإنساني، مما يؤكد قيمة التحليل السيميائي في ربط النصوص الأدبية الكلاسيكية بالسياقات الثقافية والتاريخية الأوسع.

### Abstract

This study undertakes a semiotic analysis of The Epic of Gilgamesh, the earliest known Mesopotamian epic, with a specific focus on Tablet V. The research aims to uncover the multilayered meanings of the text by applying Martin and Ringham's tripartite semiotic model, which integrates discursive, narrative, and deep structural levels. Through this framework, the epic confrontation between Gilgamesh, the semi-divine king of Uruk, his companion Enkidu, and the monstrous guardian Humbaba is examined as a symbolic representation of the conflict between nurture and nature, civilization and wilderness. The study begins by outlining the theoretical foundations of semiotics, emphasizing key concepts such as sign, code, text, and representation, and situates literature as a cultural system of signs. It then explains the Paris School model of semiotic analysis, highlighting its applicability to narrative structures and thematic oppositions. The practical analysis of Tablet V identifies figurative isotopies in the text, maps the actantial roles of Gilgamesh, Enkidu, Humbaba, and the gods, and employs Greimas's semiotic square to illustrate the underlying binary oppositions that structure the narrative. Results demonstrate that the epic encodes a cultural worldview where the triumph of Gilgamesh and Enkidu signifies the dominance of civilization over the primitive forces of nature. The



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study concludes that The Epic of Gilgamesh functions not only as a mythic tale but also as a cultural sign that reflects Sumerian values regarding power, divinity, and human destiny, thereby affirming the role of semiotic analysis in linking classical literary texts with broader socio-cultural and historical contexts.

### **Part one: basics of the study**

Semiotics, in the general sense, is the theory of signification; it is the study of the nature and function of signs related to the cultural systems in which they are generated. In definition, semiotics is “the study of signs” (Chandler, 2002: 240-1). Chandler (ibid) unravels the nature of the term by saying that semiotics is “not purely a method of textual analysis, but involves both the theory and analysis of signs, codes, and signifying practices. While Sebeok (2001: 156) considers semiotics as “the doctrine of signs.” Chandler (2007:260) defines a sign as a “meaningful unit which is interpreted as standing for something other than itself. Signs are found in the physical form of words, images, sounds, acts or objects .This physical form is sometimes known the sign vehicle.”

Danesi relates the term of meaning and meaning-making. He (2007: 7) thinks that semiotics is the “science of producing meaning.” Danesi goes on to explain the task of semiotics by maintaining that the function of semiotics is to unravel the meanings built into all kinds of human products from words, symbols, narratives, symphonies, paintings and comic books, to scientific theories and mathematical thesorems. Semiotics, in this light, encompasses virtually all the creative and knowledge-making activities that make up human social life. It focuses more narrowly on the use, structure, and function of the signs (ibid). An elucidation as such gives semiotics its global scope: it is not restricted to the investigation of linguistic signs as linguistics does; rather, it penetrates all forms of meaning and all forms of socio-cultural activities performed by man on the planet. But If semiotics is the investigation of nature, property and function of signs, and if linguistics is the study of the human phenomenon of language as a network system of signs, structuralism, then, is mainly devoted to penetrate the human structure as a set of correlated signs. Though rooted in a linguistic model in modern linguistic theory, semiotics transcends the linguistic discipline to interpret the verbal and non-verbs signs. Linguistics, then, is confined to the study of verbal signs. Linguistics, in its general definition, is ‘the science that deals with language a device of communication(Ibid).

In the literature of semiotics, certain terms are circulated of cardinal significance, of which are text, code and representation.



A text is a stretch of language where words are interrelated in the linguistic span to producer meaning proper. From a semiotic standpoint, text is viewed as a larger sign; it is “a composite structure consisting of smaller elements. It is, thus, structurally isomorphic to the smaller signs that composite it” (Danesi, 2007: 144). The text, in other words is that combination that produces senses, either denotative or connotative.

Code refers to a set or system of conventions that are used in communication between an addresser and an addressee. So, codes provide signs for constructing and interpreting texts (Ibid). Codes, according to Chandler (2002:147) “organize signs into meaningful systems which correlate signifiers and signified. The signs that are communicated by and through the messages represent something other than themselves. Sebeok (2001:156) thinks that representation is a “process of ascribing a form to some referent.” The relationship between the signifier and the signified still exists. Representation is “the process by which referents are captured and organized in some way by signs and texts”. All human forms of meaning are stances of representations(Ibid: 142).

Semiotics looks at the imaginatively works of literature as systems of signs So, classical works like myths, legends and epics lie themselves to the semiotic scrutiny. Still, these forms of nation are divergent in certain respects. Myth, according to Dundes (1984:1-3) is “a sacred narrative which explains how the world and humanity evolved into their present form, a story that serves to define the fundamental worldview of a culture by explaining aspects of the natural world and delineating the psychology and social practices and ideals of a society.”

### **Part two: The theoretical Model**

Imaginatively literary works of art are dealt with differently within different frameworks. Being a semiotic quest, Ringham and Martin’s model (2000) is selected for semiotic analysis. It is tripartite multi-component model. Martin and Ringham in their (2000) book, Dictionary of Semiotics, have denoted that European Semiotics, represented by the Paris School (Ecole de Paris) founded by A.J. Greimas, is concerned primarily with the relationship between signs, and the manner in which they produce meaning within a given text or discourse (Martin and Ringham,2000:1).The Paris School premises are not purely theoretical or totally preoccupied with abstract system of signs as that of Saussure; they are practical as well. For this reason, Martin and Ringham have exposed. The Paris School paradigm as their model in theory and practice. The semiotic model of verbal signs construes mainly three levels. The discursive and the narrative levels are basically concerned with the





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surface structure, whereas the deep or the abstract level deals with the underlying parameters of the structure. This composite structure will be explored in details. These three levels of the theoretical model are not looked at separately; they are interrelated ones to build up the whole paradigm of analysis. (Ibid).

### 2.1 The Discursive Level

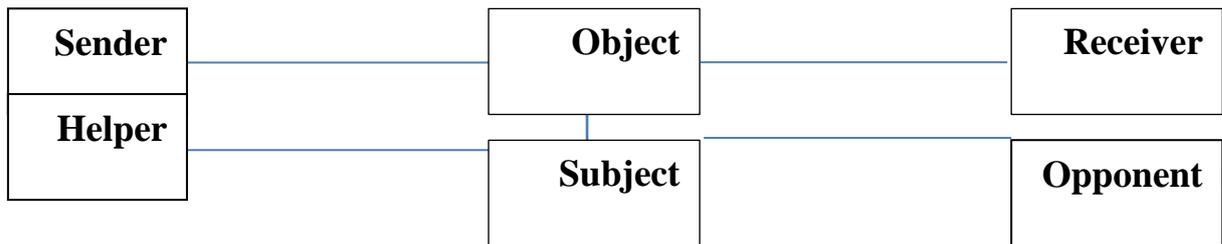
The discursive level is a surface level of meaning or level of manifestation. Here we examine the specific words or grammatical items/structures that are visible on the surface of the text (Martin and Ringham,2000:8-9). So far the semiotic analysis of narrative is concerned, the discursive level relates to “the process of putting the narrative structures into words, that is, of giving them figurative and linguistic shape. It is on this level that the actants/subjects, for example, are named and become actors, adopting thematic roles such as ‘son’, ‘father ‘or soldier. This level construes a set of basic elements: the figurative component and the enunciative component. The figurative component denotes all the elements in the text that refer to the external physical world. This component mainly concerns the speaker/author and the listener/reader in the text. Topics like point of view (i.e. the use of pronouns), the personalized or impersonalized voice, the active /passive choice, which indicate signifying intentionality, are to be anatomized within the scope of the enunciative component(Ibid:51).

### 2.2 The Narrative Level

The narrative level is the more general but more abstract than the discursive level. Here, the concentration, in terms of the Paris School, is on the level of story grammar or surface narrative syntax. A structure, accordingly, underpins all discourse, be it scientific, sociological, artistic, etc., (Martin and Ringham,2000:52). What matters here is the artistic discourse. In this respect, the semiotic analysis will deal with two narrative modes: the actantial narrative schema and the canonical narrative schema, which can be applied to the body of the text. These two models are to be interconnected to each other to form the global narrative programme of the quest. This point requires more exploration.

In semantics, the entities, whether human or non-human, are not only carriers of meaning, conceptual/denotative or (associative/connotative). Rather, they Perform a certain roles or function in the drama of universe. The actantial narrative schema presents six key narrative functions (actantial roles) which together account for all possible relationships within a story. These narrative functions can be presented in Fig 2.





**Fig 1 The Narrative Functions**

The diagram here above depicts the following relationships:

**Subject/object**

A subject, in the general term, is the one or thing who performs the action or the process, while the object is the theme or the patient- the one or thing influenced by the process performed by the actant (Martin and Ringham,2000:18).

**Helper/opponent**

In the course of his/her quest, the subject or the hero is supported by a human or non- human power. Not only that, the heroic quest could be hindered by that helper. So, “a variant of the opponent is the anti-subject. An anti-subject is a subject who, to achieve its goal, obstructs the quest of another subject (ibid).

**Sender/receiver**

An actant is someone or something who or which accomplishes or undergoes an act, situated on the level of narrative syntax, the term describes a narrative function such as that of subject or object (Martin and Ringham, 2000: 18)

**2.3 The Deep Level**

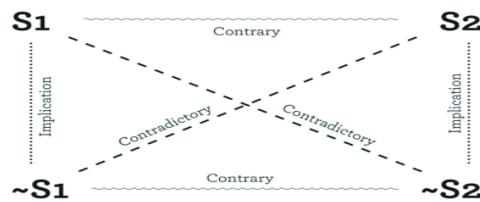
While the visible components of the meaning in the structure have been detected and analyzed, it is the time to penetrate the deep level or the thematic level. The deep level, in reality, is the level of abstraction: it is “the level of abstract or conceptual syntax where the fundamental values which generate a text are articulated. These values can be presented in the form of a semiotic square (Martin and Ringham2000,12-13).

The School of Paris semiotics, represented by its most revealing exponent, Greimas, has introduced the so-called the semiotic square to realize these relations. The semiotic square is figured in Fig. 2-2.





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**Fig 2 Greimas's semiotic square**

The semiotic square, in Martin and Ringham's words (2000:12-13) is a visual presentation of the elementary structure of meaning. Articulating the relationships of contrariety (opposition), contradiction and implication, it is the logical expression of any semantic category. Martin and Ringham (ibid) unravel the kind of relations the semiotic square exposes.

Martin and Ringham show the validity of the semiotic square in semiotic analysis by marinating that the semiotic square is a useful tool to illustrate the basic thematic oppositions underpinning a text. It also makes it possible to show textual dynamics by plotting essential stages of transformations in a story and to follow the narrative trajectory of the subject (ibid). This fully elaborated semiotic schema may serve as an indicator to analyze the systematic network of the verbal signs as encoded in The Epic of Gilgamesh (Tablet V).

### Part three: The semiotic analysis

#### 3.1 The worldview of the Epic

Being the oldest epic in the worlds of literature, The Epic of Gilgamesh is the story of immortality pursuit the vanity of immortality. Gilgamesh, the godlike hero, is the King of Summer, built a magnificent city with topless towers and great Ziggurats (worship temples). Though handsome in body, but he rules his people severely, that make hid subjects complain him to the gods. In response, the god created Enkidu, the savage creature who lived with the animals in the wilderness. A harlot leads him to the gates of the city. After a horrible combat between the two heroes, Gilgamesh defeated Enkidu who becomes a friend of him. The two men set a perilous journey to the forest of the cedar to kill Humbaba, a terrifying monster and the devoted servant of Enlil. After a godly fight, Gilgamesh and Enkidu defeated Humbaba with the support of Shamash the god of the sun. Then, they cut down some forbidden trees and made a raft to return back to Uruk, the city of vast gardens and high walls.

#### 3.2 The semiotic analysis

Martin and Righam's semiotic model, as illustrated, is composed of three levels with sub-components. While the Discursive level deals with the surface structure, the Narrative level with the story- structure proper, and





the deep Level or the thematic Level with abstraction, The Epic of Gilgamesh (Tablet V) the selected literary data will be systematically scrutinized in terms of the chosen model.

### 3.2.1 The Discursive Level

To analyze the discursive level is to analyze the surface level of meaning or the level of manifestation. Specific words will be explored by and through the figurative comment, one of the components of the discursive level. It is the component which is fundamentally concerned with the lexical (semantic) field.

#### The Figurative Component

The vocabularies of The Epic of Gilgamesh have shown that they fall into specific groups or figurative isotopies. The basic denominators of the isotopies can be distributed into the following taxonomies. The semiotic analysis of Tablet V, pp. 39-42 systematically shows the dominance of the characters or the actors on the Discursive level. Below down are the dominant figurative isotopies on the surface structure.

#### Actors (characters)

Gilgamesh (26x) Humbaba (20x) Enkidu (16 x) Shamash (4x) Enlil (5x) Gods (3x)

#### Place

Cedar / cedar Mountain / Forest (23x) Nippur (3x) Sippar (2x) Uruk (1x) Lebanon (1x) Mt.Hermon (1x ) The Euphrates (1x) Urmazallau (1x)

**Natural phenomena** → Wind (x10) Bilzarrd (x1)

**Weapons** → Swords (x4)

**Birds** → vulture/eagle (x4)

**Time** → hour (x3)

Penetrating Tablet V, The Epic of Gilgamesh, as one whole unit of meaning, shows the dominance of the signs of actors on the stage of the mythic combat. Semantically speaking, the agent is someone or something that performs the act, while the theme or patient is the entity that is affected by the act. The agent and the theme are common semantic roles (yule, 2014: 112)

In modern semiotic theory, an actor (actant) is something that acts or to which the activity is granted by others (Wikipedia, 2025).

The actor (actant) is not necessarily to be a human being to perform the action. Still, an "actant" is not simply a character in a story, but an integral structural element upon which the narrative revolves. An actant can also be described as a binary opposition pairing, such as a hero with a villain, a dragon paired with a dragon-slaying sword, a helper paired with





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an opponent (ibid). The dominant component or the main actor (actant) in Tablet V, is Gilgamesh, King of Uruk.

The character less in number of frequent accordance is Humbaba, the guardian of the Cedar forest. So, Gilgamesh and Enkidu, on their trail “saw the Cedar Mountain, the Dwelling of the Gods, the /throne dais of Imini (The Epic of Gilgamesh, Tablet V).” Here lies the connection between the theoretical framework and the semiotic analysis.

From a semiotic point of view, the meaning proper is produced by the intersection of the syntagmatic pole and the paradigmatic pole. The syntagmatic pole represents linearity, while the paradigmatic pole represents opposition or binary relationship. While the Epic takes the linear structure, the combat between the King of Uruk and the Guardian of the Cedar forest represents the paradigmatic dimension in the selected data. In addition, there is a sort on substitution. Gilgamesh is called the King of Uruk, and the offspring of Rimnr- Ninsun. Humbaba, on the other hand, is addressed as Guardian of the Cedar Forest.

Reading the figurative isotopies once more, indicates that the place of the mythic combat comes next in importance. The combat, according to the mythic narrative context takes place in the Cedar Forest. The Forest /the Cedar Forest is recurred frequently with rather different isotopies, such as /The forest edge / The Cedar Tree/ The Cedar/

But if the Cedar and its alternatives is a common noun, the Epic displays other proper nouns like Nippur, Sippar, Uruk or (Urmazallau), and the river Euphrates, in addition to the flood. These names are not without relevance to the culture and the reality where The Epic of Gilgamesh was born, as we shall see.

In this narrative mythic setting comes the supernatural phenomena. The wind and the storm are given a frequent occurrence though in different expressions, like

-south wind//North wind//East wind//Whistling wind//Piercing wind//Blizzard// -Bad wind//Wind of Simurru// Demon wind// Ice wind

So, thirteen winds rose up against him and covered Humabab’s face. This narrative description may indicate the gigantic struggle between the two-third semi – god (Gilgamesh) and the Guardian of the Cedar Forest (Humbaba).

The supernatural phenomenon of the winds is accompanied by the presence of the birds, especially the wild bird, i.e. the vultures. So, in his rage, Humbaba threatens Enkidu, roaring, “ I would feed your flesh to the screeching vulture, the eagle, and / the vulture”( The Epic of Gilgamesh). The combat between the Sumerian hero and the divine monster is horrible that “the ground split open with the heels of their feet” (The Epic). No

combat is set without weapons, the signs like swords, sheaths and axes are scattered on the fabric of the Epic. Still, time is an important aspect of the myth narrative. Here, time is mentioned but in less frequency, such as twice three times and for an hour. Behind the mythic scene of the combat hides the divine indicators, i.e. the gods, either by their proper names or common ones. So, the Sumerian Gods are referred to such as, Shamash, Enlil, where they govern, Enlil is in Nippur, Shamash is in Sippar. This grammatical structure is repeated twice throughout the narrative mythic context(ibid).

### **3.2.2 The Narrative Level**

In the Narrative Level, the six key narrative functions (actantial roles) are disclosed. These roles together account for all possible relationships within The Epic of Gilgamesh.

#### **Subject/object**

Applying Martin and Ringhan's semiotic model to the Tablet V states that Gilgamesh, King of Uruk is the sender or the one that performs the action of defeating Humbaba, the Guardian of the cedar forest. On the other hand, Humbaba is the object or the entity that is affected by the act of defeat. The head of the monster, at the end of the combat is held on a raft to the city of Uruk.

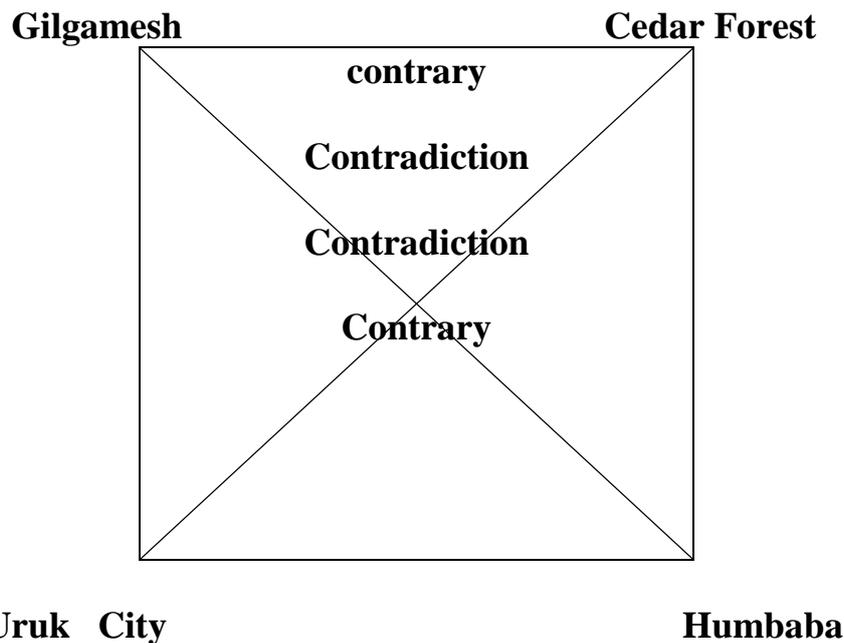
#### **Helper/opponent**

In his mythic journey to defeat the divine monster of the Cedar forest, Gilgamesh is accompanied by Enkidu, the wild creature. In terms of figurative isotopies, the animal- human sign, Enkidu, has recurred 16 times all over Tablet V. He is created by the gods due to the complains of the people from the Gilgamesh's harshness to his subjects. But after a demonic struggle between the two men, Enkidu is defeated and becomes the friend of Gilgamesh. After killing the Guardian of the Cedar, Enkidu's fate is destined he is destined to death.

### **3.2.3 The Deep Level**

The deep Level, as mentioned 2-3, is "the level of abstract or conceptual syntax where the fundamental values which generate a text are articulated. These values can be presented in the form of a semiotic square (Martin and Ringham2000:12-13). The values of The Epic of Gilgamesh (Tablet V) can be represented in terms of Greimas's semiotic square, as follows.





**Fig. 3 The semiotic analysis of Tablet V**

The semiotic analysis clearly shows that the values are based on paradigmatic relationships. Sebeok (2001:155) defines paradigmaticity as “a structural relation between signs that keeps them distinct and therefore recognizable.” These relations are fundamentally based on binary opposition. The mythic combat is between two different entities: human (Gilgamesh) and non-human (Habana). Not only that. The dwelling-place of Gilgamesh is Uruk city, while the place of Humbaba is the Cedar forest. From a cultural point of view, Gilgamesh, being a king, and his city with its powerful topleless towers and vast gardens represent the era of civilization. On the other hand, Humbaba with his dwelling – forest, represents the era of wild primitive world. So, the opposition is not only between the gender (human vs, non-human), but also between nurture and nature. The triumph of the King of Uruk with the support of his friend, might represent the triumph of the civilized world on the primitive one.

### 3.3 Micro and macro universe

Being a “larger verbal sign” (Danesi, 2007: 82), the text is not without relevance to the culture where it is generated. Tyler (1871) defines culture as ““that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (Tyler, 2025:30). This definition may include the patterns of thinking of a specific cultural group; the human behaviors, and the creative products of the group. These works of creativity, such as

imaginatively literary works of art can be interpreted in terms of the semiotic theory.

Accordingly, the text, i.e. a semiotic sign, is the micro verbal universe which serves as the representation of the macro universe, namely, culture and society. In other expressions, the micro verbal unit is tied up to the macro world where it is generated. The combat between Gilgamesh and Enkidu, on one side, and Humbaba, on the other side, is not only a mythic verbal scene in The Epic. Rather, it stands for the perils of the supernatural phenomena that humans encounter in reality. Of these perils, for instance, is the flood in Mesopotamian territories, "To send the Flood, to crack the Whip" (Tablet V., *ibid*). Therefore, semiotics is mainly concerned with the exploration of creative products of man on the planet during the various epochs of history. Here resides the omnipresent relation of the Epic of Gilgamesh to the Mesopotamian culture, the cultures that generates the setting of the epic.

### **Concluding remarks**

The semiotic analysis has shown the triumph of Gilgamesh over Humbaba, in the selected mythic data which means the triumph of human civilization (nurture) over the wild primitive life (nature). In addition, the study has shown that the mythic text is not written, only for delight. Rather, the larger sign (text) stands for the ways of thin inking and the patterns of behavior that the Sumerians, as a human group, believe in. In this context, the Epic of Gilgamesh is a sign of the Mesopotamian life. The semiotic analysis. Based on the multi- theoretical model has realized the function of the Epic, i.e., the construction of the great cities, like Uruk, in history, and the necessity of the combat, for human progress.

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