

Ben Van Overmeire

Lesson Plan *Gilgamesh*

Material: A homework assignment preceding the class will ensure that the students have at least glanced at the text before coming to section. Section will then briefly go over the homework before embarking upon a conceptual workshop, focusing on the worldview represented in *Gilgamesh*, to be reached via an examination of human agency and divine behavior.

Purpose: To make the students familiar with a text that can be very alien at times, and to examine in-depth an ideology represented in said text, that will be taken in turn to stand for environmental circumstances in Ancient Sumer. Thus, students will be able to expand their reading skills with a primary text, in vivid interaction with their classmates, who will force them to formulate arguments. This whole experience prepares them for writing exercises.

Structure:

- a. Introduction and housekeeping (5 min)
- b. Brief examination of the homework (10 min), talk about:
 - a. Repetition
 - b. Fragmentary nature
 - c. Dreams
- c. Conceptual workshop (25 min)
 - a. Split students up into groups of three
 - b. Distribute handouts
- d. Closing discussion, going over group answers (10 min)

Parameters for success: For me: measurable during workshop and final discussion. For students: measurable by seeing their answers interact with the responses of other groups during the final discussion. Knowledge will also be reutilized in the next class

Justification: Primary texts are always great occasions for conceptual workshops, and section is a great frame to do it. Especially in the context of MMW 2, working with concepts instead of just learning them by heart becomes essential, and Finkel's workshop force students to do exactly that.

Homework: Asks relatively simple questions (give examples of...) that nevertheless require students to plow through the text (Sparknotes won't help, since it's the materiality of the text that counts here). The questions are rather long, and this is intentional, as they are also designed to provide information about the *Gilgamesh*, and possible difficulties (repetition, fragmentary nature) the students might experience in reading it.

Homework assignment (to be completed before class)

1. *Gilgamesh* is an oral narrative like the *Iliad* was. One thing it certainly has in common with Homer's war poem is the amount of repetitions that the text contains. Find one example of these for every chapter of the book except for the first and last chapters.
2. During your reading, you'll find that, other than the *Iliad*, things can happen very suddenly in *Gilgamesh*. This is partly due to the fact that we do not have the complete story, but the effect is almost like watching a horror movie: at one point the monster is far away, but a moment later it's standing right in front of the character. Find one example of such a sudden "jump" in the story (it doesn't have to have a monster in it though).
3. Such "jumps", of course, also occur in dreams (as an optional extra homework assignment, try to write down one of your dreams and you'll know what I mean). Try to find one example of a dream in the text, and describe
 - a. the moment when it occurs (e.g. during the forest adventure, back home in Uruk, etc.);
 - b. the contents of the dream.

Handout

1. After Enkidu dies, the story focuses on Gilgamesh' quest for immortality. Along his path, everybody keeps telling him that he will never achieve this in various ways, one of which is the following:

"When the gods created man they allotted to him death, but life they retained in their own keeping" (18).

Jumping forward to the ending, when we know that Gilgamesh does eventually die a human death (as predicted). What does this tell us about man's capability to change things, as represented in the book? Would you call Gilgamesh (and all the other characters) powerful or helpless in this respect? Explain.

2. Immortal in the book are only the Gods and the survivor of the flood, Utnapishtim. Compare the following quotations that all deal with the behavior of the Gods relating to the flood, before, during, and after:
 - a. "In those days [the days right before the flood] the world teemed, the people multiplied, the world bellowed like a wild bull, and the great god was aroused by the clamour. Enlil heard the clamour and he said to the gods in council: 'The uproar of mankind is intolerable and sleep is no longer possible by reason of the babble'. So the gods agreed to exterminate mankind" (20).
 - b. "Even the gods were terrified at the flood, they fled to the highest heaven [. . .] Then Ishtar, the sweet-voiced Queen of Heaven cried out like a woman in

- travail: 'Alas the days of old are turned to dust because I commanded evil; why did I command thus evil in the council of the gods? I commanded wars to destroy the people, but are they not my people, for I brought them forth? Now like the spawn of fish they float in the ocean'" (21)
- c. "When the gods smelled the sweet savour, they gathered like flies over the sacrifice. Then, at last, Ishtar also came, she lifted her necklace [. . .] 'Let all the gods gather round the sacrifice, except Enlil. He shall not approach this offering, for without reflection he brought the flood; he consigned my people to destruction" (22).

If we were to psychologically analyze them as real people, how would you characterize the behavior of the gods here? Is it responsible? Childish? Shy?

3. If the gods in *Gilgamesh* are identified with natural elements (Shamash is the sun, Enlil is the wind, etc.), and they behave in the manner you examined in question 2, and considering man's power to change things examined in question 1, how do you think that the authors of *Gilgamesh* saw their world? What would that imply about living conditions in Ancient Sumer?