

LECTURE 2, Intro to the Environmental Humanities Ecocriticism, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*

A) The Epic of Gilgamesh

- 1) He had seen everything, had experienced all emotions, from exaltation to despair, had been granted a vision into the great mystery, the secret places, the primeval days before the Flood. He had journeyed to the edge of the world and made his way back, exhausted but whole. He had carved his trials on stone tablets, had restored the holy Eanna Temple and the massive wall of Uruk, which no city on earth can equal. See how its ramparts gleam like copper in the sun...
- 2) Climb the stone staircase, more ancient than the mind can imagine, approach the Eanna Temple, sacred to Ishtar, temple that no king has equaled in size or beauty, walk on the wall of Uruk, follow its course around the city, inspect its mighty foundations, examine its brickwork, how masterfully it is built, observe the land it encloses: the palm trees, the gardens, the orchards, the glorious palaces and temples, the shops and marketplaces, the houses, the public squares.

B) Uruk, Gilgamesh's Capital City

- 1) After taking an imaginative walk around the city, which has nicely been laid out for us by our author(s), let's consider how the city of Uruk is described:
- 2) Like many ancient cities, Uruk is surrounded by a wall (in this case the greatest so far in Western history) designed to protect it both from other human beings and the environment - *both of which are seen as a threat*. In the West, the environment has been seen as a danger throughout its long history.
- 3) With respect to the wall, "observe the land it encloses: the palm trees, / the gardens, [and] the orchards," as the city is, even agriculturally, a modified, built environment - which is clearly boasted of here.
- 4) This distinction, between the country and the city (which, as the Epic of Gilgamesh makes clear, was obviously in place 5000 years ago) is still a part of our cultural memory, as it very much shapes what we mean by "nature."
- 5) This is a good example of how a modern concept, in this case what is understood as "natural," first began to emerge long ago, in this case as a distinction between the country and the city, which has in part shaped our modern conception of what is "natural" & "unnatural."
- 6) It is important to note that this distinction between natural and unnatural did not necessarily exist in other cultures across the world. Arguably, it did not exist in most cultures.

- 7) Interestingly, in the past 5000 years (and in this course we will see exactly when this happened; it is more recent than you might think) this binary structure has become largely inverted, as we now tend to privilege the “natural” (country) over the “unnatural” (city).
- 8) Walk into any market (especially one that sells specialty food, like Whole Foods) and you will find hundreds and hundreds of products being sold with the label “natural,” which is meant to distinguish them from products that have been modified by human action. If you think about it, I am sure that you can come up with scores of similar examples (i.e. not just food) where the natural is preferred over the unnatural. Consequently, it is clear that the binary structure between natural and unnatural, which was already solidly in place 5000 years ago in the West, is alive and well today.
- 9) However, it is important to note that in the Myth of Gilgamesh, the city (the work of human artifice, hence the “artificial” or “unnatural”) is clearly privileged:
- 10) Walk on the wall of Uruk, follow its course around the city, inspect its mighty foundations, examine its brickwork, how masterfully it is built, observe the land it encloses: the palm trees, the gardens, the orchards, the glorious palaces and temples, the shops and marketplaces, the houses, the public squares

C) The Character Gilgamesh (**Trigger Warning: this section makes reference to rape**)

- 1) Gilgamesh was likely an actual person, a Sumerian king, who lived 4600 years ago. Like other great epics, such as the Iliad, Odyssey, & Beowulf, The Epic of Gilgamesh was spoken (sung) before the appearance of written language.
- 2) Outside of the Epic, we know very little about Gilgamesh, other than a few stone inscriptions.
- 3) How would we describe Gilgamesh as a king? Was he a good king? What, for example, was his attitude toward his people, especially women, at least early in the epic?
- 4) The city is his possession, he struts through it, arrogant, his head raised high, trampling its citizens like a wild bull. He is king, he does what he wants, takes the son from his father and crushes him, takes the girl from her mother and uses her, the warrior’s daughter; the young man’s bride, he uses her, no one dares to oppose him.
- 5) “[U]ses her” is a reference to institutionalized rape, the so-called “right of the lord.” Note that part of the objection here is that the daughter and bride are the possessions of some other man. Obviously, like the distinction between natural

and unnatural, patriarchy and often horrific institutionalized misogyny were clearly in place by the time of the Epic of Gilgamesh.

- 6) The fact that Gilgamesh abuses power in general, and is moreover a rapist, is altogether ironic given that he is called “protector of the people”.
- 7) By the conclusion of the epic (which we did not read) the character Gilgamesh will be (someone magically) reformed and truly become a protector of the people.
- 8) As a consequence, Gilgamesh is especially interesting when compared to his double (doubling is a literary convention), Enkidu, who repeatedly seeks out and takes on the role of protector.

D) The Character Enkidu

- 1) Who is Enkidu?
- 2) In addition to being a wild man, Enkidu is a protector. In order of their appearance, let's consider what Enkidu protects:
 - 3) 1. Animals: he “tears out / the traps” and “frees the animals,”
 - 4) 2. A Bride: “When Gilgamesh reached the marriage house / Enkidu was there. He stood like a boulder, / blocking the door.”
 - 5) 3. Gilgamesh:
 - a. “The elders turned to Enkidu and said / ‘We leave the king in your care. Protect him.’”
 - b. He repeatedly “sprawled like a net across the doorway” to protect Gilgamesh.
 - c. He protects Gilgamesh in the fight against Humbaba.
 - 6) 4. And, immediately after being fed by the shepherds...
 - 7) Enkidu went out with sword and spear. he chased off lions and wolves, all night he guarded the flocks, he stayed awake and guarded them while the shepherds slept.
 - 8) Note that Enkidu is policing the boundary between the natural and the unnatural. When he makes the transition from wild to human, he inverts the role of protector, now protecting human beings and their world from animals (i.e. the artificial from the natural) rather than the other way around.
 - 9) Regardless of whether the artificial is privileged over in the natural (as it was in Gilgamesh) or the natural is preferred over the artificial (which is what we do today when we buy “natural” products), we still imagine human beings and the worlds that we create as somehow diametrically opposed to “nature,” which is

defined as precisely that which is untouched by human hands. Enkidu is important, first, as he crosses the boundary from natural to human and, second, as he then polices the boundary to protect human beings from nature.

- 10) Gilgamesh is not the only double for Enkidu in the epic, which is especially interesting, when we consider that Enkidu is--and Gilgamesh should be--first and foremost a protector...

E) The Character Humbaba

- 1) Who is Humbaba?
- 2) Humbaba is the protector of the Cedar Forest, placed there to protect the forest, which is home to the temple of the goddess Ishtar.
- 3) In many ancient religions, certain features of the environment, such as rivers, mountains, and forests, had a "protector of place," a genius loci, appointed to guard the place. Humbaba is such a genius loci.
- 4) Interestingly, a genius loci does not protect a place against animals or gods, but rather against human beings who would violate it, which again assumes a binary between human beings and certain places ("nature").
- 5) Consequently, a genius loci is a conspicuous feature of religions that call for the worship of the earth, rather than the worship of a metaphysical god.

F) Genius Loci Figures

- 1) From an environmental perspective, the belief in genius loci figures is profoundly important, as it reflects a belief in deities that very much belong to, and are part of, the earth, rather than some sort of metaphysical realm.
- 2) Because in religions of this type the earth and all its many features (rivers, mountains, forests, etc) are in fact sacred, they are protected from violation and exploitation by human beings.
- 3) Typically, in these religions human beings could use the resources of the place, but only to a limited extent, after paying homage or tribute to the genius loci of the place.
- 4) As genius loci, Humbaba made sure that the Cedar Forest was not destroyed.
- 5) (In fact, this was a real cedar forest, which is also referenced in the Hebrew Bible, that remained intact until it was actually clear cut in Gilgamesh's era.)

G) The Cedar Forest

- 1) "They cast huge weapons that ordinary men could never carry; axes that weighed two hundred pounds each, knives with cross guards."
- 2) Note that the principal weapons that Gilgamesh and Enkidu carry into battle are not swords or spears, as one might expect, but axes.
- 3) While the trip to the Cedar Forest is described as a battle, literally (and historically we know that this actually happened) it is an expedition to cut the forest. Hence the need for axes.
- 4) Consequently, the Epic of Gilgamesh is the story of a how a genius loci protecting a place was defeated so that a great forest could be cut and exploited.
- 5) They took their axes and penetrated deeper into the forest, they went chopping down cedars, the wood chips flew, Gilgamesh chopped down the mighty trees, Enkidu hewed the trunks into timbers. Enkidu said... "We have chopped down the trees of the Cedar Forest, we have brought to earth the highest of the trees" (p. 32).
- 6) This is not the description of an epic battle, but rather of a logging operation, which sent the logs of the Cedar Forest "down the Euphrates" River to Uruk (p. 32). Gilgamesh cut the trees down, while Enkidu processed them on site by hewing them into square timbers, which was standard logging practice.
- 7) The heroes here are not just two men, but stand for the thousands of men who historically took part in the deforestation operation, which as Gilgamesh noted, brought wealth and fame to Uruk. This is not unlike the Trump administration's plan to open up the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska to oil and gas development or the Biden administration's Willow Project.
- 8) In short, the battle is a metaphor for - and in some sense a cover story that conceals - deforestation.
- 9) "Gilgamesh...yelled, he lifted his massive axe, he swung it, it tore into Humbaba's neck...and at the axe's third stroke he toppled like a cedar and crashed to the ground."
- 10) Throughout the epic Humbaba is repeatedly associated with the Cedar Forest. By the end, he is toppled like one of the cedars. Making clear that his defeat not only makes the cutting of the forest possible, but also that Humbaba is the forest's double.
- 11) Incidentally, the epic makes clear that this was an old-growth forest; Enkidu, "We have chopped down the trees of the Cedar Forest, we have brought to earth the highest of the trees, the cedar whose top once pierced the sky."

H) Genius Loci in Gilgamesh

- 1) What is provocative about the Epic of Gilgamesh is that the title character (who stands for the city of Uruk) attempts and succeeds at nothing short of sacrilege, at defacing a sacred site, an ancient forest place protected by a genius loci.
- 2) Even though Gilgamesh is a reformed rapist (as he comes to understand by way of the genius loci Enkidu that he too must protect rather than violate his people) his forced entrance into the Cedar Forest clearly echoes rape.
- 3) In fact, even the language of the epic suggests forcible penetration: "Gripping their axes, their knives unsheathed, / they entered the Forest... They took their axes and penetrated / deeper into the forest."

I) Earth Deities

- 1) Eco-feminists have long argued, with varying degrees of success, that a shift from female (often a trinity of maiden, matron, & crone, such as the Greek Persephone, Demeter, & Hecate) to male deities occurred sometime before the Epic of Gilgamesh was composed.
- 2) From a feminist perspective, the Epic of Gilgamesh reveals a shift from a matriarchal deity (the Cedar Forest is home to the temple of the goddess Ishtar) to a male one, Gilgamesh's champion, the sun god Shamash.
- 3) Moreover, as in many early religions, it is a female deity, Aruru, that is (not surprisingly) given the power of creating life, as she fashions Enkidu out of clay. (This is an early version of the creation myth that will appear Genesis, though recast with a male deity fashioning Adam out of clay.)
- 4) Even without the eco-feminist perspective, the Epic of Gilgamesh records a decisive moment in human history when earth deities were, in the metaphorical imagery of the epic, "defeated" by human beings with the aid of a metaphysical deity.
- 5) When human ambition (which Gilgamesh has in abundance) and needs became strong enough, earth deities, such as the genius loci characters, protecting the environment were cast out. In their place came metaphysical gods, such as the sun god Shamash, Gilgamesh's champion.
- 6) Read in this sense, the Epic of Gilgamesh is truly an environmental epic; however, one that records how a desire to use the resources of the environment overcame an earlier religion based on the earth.
- 7) In short, this is the moment when human beings proclaimed that they were stronger than the environment - and the deities protecting it.

J) Epilogue to the Myth of Gilgamesh

- 1) Deforestation followed Western civilization out of Mesopotamia 5000 years ago to sweep through Europe and then into North and South America.
- 2) (John Perlin's *A Forest's Journey* provides an excellent history of this phenomenon.)
- 3) It was often the case that this deforestation was made possible by first displacing or eradicating the people who originally inhabited those areas. People who often had earth-based religions with genius loci figures protecting places like forests. In this sense, deforestation (and, generally speaking, the over exploitation of the planet by Western cultures) went hand-in-hand with colonial expansion.
- 4) It's important to note that many of these traditional, indigenous cultures lived sustainably for thousands of years in the places that they inhabited.

Because the natural/unnatural dyad has been in place in the West since before the time of the Epic of Gilgamesh, it is tempting to believe that human beings are simply opposed to nature. Consequently, it has actually been suggested that we should, for the good of the planet and all the rest of the life on it, consider letting our species die out. However, human beings can – and, for thousands of years, did all over the planet – live sustainably on earth.

- 5) This is not to say that these traditional, indigenous cultures had perfect relationships with the planet (for example, as is portrayed in the garden of Eden in the Hebrew testament of the Bible). To argue that is to project the ancient West's belief in a perfect place onto those cultures, which does them a disservice. Nonetheless, it is clear that many - arguably most – traditional cultures lived far, far more sustainably on the Earth than has Western culture.
- 6) In some sense, the history of Western culture, as it swept out of Northern Africa, through Europe, and then into the Americas and the rest of the world, is a history of deforestation. Like Gilgamesh, Western culture has had an insatiable hunger for power (wood not only supplies lumber, but was also the primary energy source on Earth prior to the fossil fuel economy). Consequently, since at least as early as the Epic of Gilgamesh, Western culture has been unsustainable. Hence, colonial expansion, where both people and the places that they inhabit were colonized, has been a hallmark of Western culture, which has not just been unsustainable since the industrial revolution, but has been for at least 5000 years.
- 7) Incidentally, deforestation significantly contributes to the climate crisis, as trees (and in fact all plants) are highly efficient at carbon sequestration.
- 8) The good, and somewhat surprising, news is that for over a century now we have been experiencing reforestation in certain parts of the globe. New England, for example, has far more forests now than it did 100 years ago. This

largely began in the Renaissance, in part through reforestation practices introduced in places like France and England.

- 9) Unfortunately, in other parts of the world, like the rainforests in the Amazon Basin and Indonesia, deforestation is still rampant. Every year, the number of rainforests lost is about half the size of California.