

Gilgamesh and Oedipus: Vision of Light and Darkness

Dr. Munzer Muhammad*

□ ABSTRACT □

This research sheds light on one of the many dimensions of Babylonian influence on Greek Mythology. This multi-directional influence exhibiting itself through conceptual, philosophical, theogonic, structural, narrative and dramatic aspects, is too compelling to consider trite or put aside. By projective light on the images of 'Light and Darkness' in the Epic of Gilgamesh and the Oedipal saga, it is hoped that philosophical spheres of influence and presence of Babylonian concern in Greek Mythology are highlighted and authenticated.

* Associate Professor at the Department of English, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Tishreen University, Lattakia, Syria.

الدكتور منذر محمد*

□ الملخص □

يلقى هذا البحث الضوء على واحد من الأبعاد العديدة للتأثير البابلي على الأسطورة الإغريقية. إن هذا التأثير المتعدد الاتجاهات هو من الأهمية بمكان، على الصعد الفلسفية والتكوينية والتركيبية والسردية والدرامية بحيث لا يمكن تجاهله أو إهماله. يتوخى هذا البحث -من خلال تسليط الضوء على فكرتي "النور" و"الظلمة" في ملحمة جلجامش ومسرحيتي "أوديب الملك" و"في كولونوس"- إبراز التأثير والحضور الفلسفيين لقضايا أثارها الفكر البابلي في الأسطورة الإغريقية، وإعطاء مصداقية لهذا التأثير.

* أستاذ مساعد في قسم اللغة الإنكليزية - كلية الآداب والعلوم الإنسانية - جامعة تشرين - اللاذقية - سورية.

Strangely, the long and countless' drift of time
brings all things forth *from* darkness into light,
then covers them once more.

Sophocles, *Ajax*

You called upon the evening, now it falls:
Obscurity envelops all the town,
To some brings peace, to others brings ordeals...

Bandlaire

They give birth astride of a grave; the light gleams an instant, then
it's night once more.

Beckett, *Godot*

A little poetry. (Pause.) You prayed -- (Pause. He corrects himself.) You CRIED for
night; it comes -- (Pause. He corrects himself). It FALLS: Now cry in darkness. (He
repeats, chanting). You cried for night; it falls: now cry in darkness. (Pause.) Nicely
put, that!

Beckett, *Endgame*

The Epic of Gilgamesh is an astonishing poem, and should be
studied with care by every devotee of Greek culture.⁽¹⁾

The conceptual, structural, philosophical and dramatic appeals which
Gilgamesh exhibits with reference to the Oedipal saga are compelling and persistent. A
major aspect of this multi dimensional influence is exerted through Sophocles' use of
the notions of light and darkness which appears to be a replica of the same images in
Gilgamesh.

Images of light and darkness *find* their true and primordial expressions in the
Epic of Gilgamesh where it is clear that- light and darkness as conceptual images are
directly related to divine patrons. Light is affiliated with the notion of historicism and
promotion of the *Principiurn Individuation*. This heavenly originated light is expected
to shed clarity and purposefulness which authenticate human action. In this context,
the credibility of Gilgamesh's action is articulated through the power of divine light
which legitimizes his historicistic quest. In the epic, the divine patron of light is
clearly conceived to be Shamash, Gilgamesh's divine protector:

I have [followed] the heavenly Shamash,
And have pursued the road de[creed for me].
(V. 10-11)

It is quite evident that Sham-ash, the god of light has bestowed historicistic favours
upon Gilgamesh: "Gilgamesh -- Shamash has conferred favor upon him" (I.V.21). It
is also palpable that killing the dragon of the forest and the bull of heaven is meant to
be a sacrifice to Shamash:

When they had killed the bull of heaven,
they to [re out his'] heart
(and) placed (it) before Shamash (VI. 153-54)

The power of divine light articulates Gilgamesh's position positively as a historical figure, capable of investing in time in order to identify himself progressively in relation to past and future.

However, Gilgamesh will come to realize that the power of light will not operate parallel to his own desire. In other words, Shamash, the god of light and the patron of life, can only temporarily bestow, but not permanently maintain his privileges on Gilgamesh. He realizes that the human condition exhibits a duality of light and darkness or, to be more precise, life and death. This new vision instigates a forceful emergence of the second half of the equation which balances the human condition through a dual experience. Light is allowed to operate almost exclusively but temporarily as a guide for Gilgamesh's historicistic experience. The durational nature of the power of light is demonstrated through the emergence of the vision of darkness which constitutes an antithetical formula to Gilgamesh's historical quest. First, it appears as a warning which anticipates a future devolutionary change. The warning appears through a dream which will be later transformed into reality. Here, the image of darkness is associated with 'night'. The dream is Enkidu's:

[My Friend], I saw a dream this night" (VII.14). The images of darkness and night are synonymous with the notion of death. A mysterious figure, most probably, the messenger of the goddess of death.

... looks at me (and) leads me to the house of darkness, to the dwelling of Erkalla;⁽²⁾

To the house from which he who enters never goes forth;

On the road whose path does not lead back;

To the house whose occupants are bereft of light;

Where dust is their food and clay their sustenance;

(Where) they are like birds, with garments of wings;

(Where) they see no light and dwell in darkness,

(VII. 33-39)

This dream is fulfilled through Enkidu's death which creates a new vision for Gilgamesh. The horror of darkness which begins to threaten Gilgamesh's historical achievements can not be acceptable at this point. This dark vision motivates him to take a position of tragic defiance of it. At this juncture's, darkness and murk of the underworld seem to situate light in their shade, as it were. Gilgamesh's tragic defiance of darkness begins as a prayer to his divine patron of light:

To the [light(?)] of the gods my prayers ascended.

[Also now, O Sin], preserve me! (IX.I, 11-12)

The second step in this process is materialized by the journey; the conclusion of which will hopefully reconcile his position within the antithetical visions of light and darkness. He makes this purpose very clear:

[For the sake of] Utnapishtim my father, [have I come],

Who entered the assembly of [the gods...].

Concerning life and death [I would ask him].

(IX. III 3-5)

The consequences of this journey are not at all promising for Gilgamesh

because as the scorpion man tells him:

There has not (yet) been anyone, Gilgamesh,
[Who has been able to do that].
No one has (yet) [traveled] the paths of the mountains.
At twelve double hours the heart: [...].
Dense is the darkness and [there is] no [light].
(IX.III 8-11)

But these warnings will not dissuade Gilgamesh who insists to continue his pursuit. Tragic defiance boosted by tragic stubbornness keeps Gilgamesh incentive going, although it will be full of pain and sorrow (IX. IV. 33-50). The Light of Day is a quick flash in the middle of Dark Night. The significance of these images is brought about by the fact that they symbolize an alternation between historicism and archaism. Here, light appears to fail as a healer from the terror of darkness. Moreover, this light masks rather than terminates impending darkness. Gilgamesh's journey in darkness is a representation of Enkidu's dream because it is indicative of a chronological deformation from historicism to archaism, from light to darkness or from life to death.

Gilgamesh, the champion of Shamash, tries to link his fate to that of his divine patron. The inexhaustibility of the sun-lord is determined by this eternal recurrence. He plunges into darkness only to rise again. This movement constitutes a perpetual process of self assertion. The association which Gilgamesh seeks with Shamash originates in the optimistic nature of the deity and the desire of Gilgamesh to be fixed to this optimistic cosmological notion. "The rising of the sun" will be followed by "the setting of the sun" (IX. [II. 12-13).

However, this phenomenal process is self redemptive because it indicates an eternal process of self-repetitiveness. Gilgamesh is supposed to travel along the solar line which is East-West in order to affiliate himself with his divine patron. He travels in light and later, through darkness. After 'four double-hours' he begins to plunge into darkness which gradually increases and thickens to a blinding proportion. As he plunges deeper and deeper into darkness, nothing remains articulated, and blindness becomes the alternative:

Nine double-[hours *he* traveled, and he feels (?)]
the
north wind.
[...] his face
[But dense is the darkness and there is no] light;
[Neither what lies ahead of him nor what lies behind
him .[does it permit him to see]. (IX. V. 3K-41J

The journey in darkness which Gilgamesh has sought gives him a false impression of association with the sun lord because he is permitted to experience light once more:

[After he has traveled eleven double-hours], the dawn breaks.
[After he has traveled twelve double-hours], it is light;. (LX.V. 45-46)

However, this new light is different from the original light because the latter has boosted his individuation and historicism whereas the new light leads him to a new

vision which is shrouded by darkness. Gilgamesh's desperate pleas to Shamash to twist his condition into a positive *form* of permanence are futile:

Gilgamesh said to him, to valiant Shamash: "After walking (and) running over the steppe,
Shall I rest my head in the midst of the earth
That I may sleep all the years?
Let my eyes see the sun that I may be sated with light.
(Banished) afar is the darkness, if the light is sufficient (?)
May he who has died the death, see the light of the sun." (X.I, 9-15)

But Shamash is emphatic about the human condition because the lot of man is different from that of the gods. If Gilgamesh is given that unique opportunity to experience light after darkness, it is simply because he is intended to open his eyes and see the messy and chaotic dark where nothing stirs because death in silent darkness is the ultimate human fate. So, bound by time, Gilgamesh's journey is futile and absurd:

Shamash felt distressed, he went to him
(And) said to Gilgamesh:
"Gilgamesh, wither runnest thou?
*The life which thou seekest thou wilt not find.*⁵⁵
(XII. 5-8)

Another dark blow to his quest for an eternal life comes about when he realizes that Utnapishtim's paradigm is an exception which will not and must not be repeated. Subsequently, Gilgamesh's tragic defiance degenerates into tragic humility when he resignedly returns to Uruk and waits upon his final journey into eternal darkness.

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Perhaps the strongest indication of Gilgamesh's multidimensional influence on Oedipus⁽³⁾ can best be discerned through the latter's persistent references to the images of light and darkness. As has been the case with the Babylonian epic, Sophocles' fondness for these images, in my judgment, amounts to a tendency on his part to anthropomorphize these terms in their Apollonian - Dionysiac dualism.

Closely related to the images of light and darkness in both contexts is the notion of time: Gilgamesh's and Oedipus' perceptions of their finite, linear and changeable positions in infinite, circular time distill a peculiar attitude towards light and darkness. Between the two ultimate corners of darkness and void, life constitutes a brief flare of light which deceives both characters into the real nature of that light.

Light and darkness are the most important images in the extant tragedies of Sophocles. His handling of these images reveals an interesting parallel with the Babylonian attitude. The Epic of Gilgamesh seems to have set the pattern for Sophocles' Oedipus because Oedipus' approach can be seen within the same context. The images of light and darkness have divine extensions. Apollo is, among other things, the divine patron of light. Dionysos is viewed as the god of darkness. Apollonian light and Dionysiac darkness exhibit a duality which functions negatively in human experience. Dionysiac darkness temporarily gives way to the light of Apollo. However, the deceptive power of light cheats Sophoclean- characters to the darkness

of Didnyos. Apollonian – Dionysiac duality persists in the experiences of many Sophoclean characters through the images of light and darkness. These images alternate, overlap and at times, can be seen fused with one another. Apollonian light in Sophocles' drama practically functions in conjunction with Dionysiac darkness. The former is illusive and thus it leads man into an equally illusive vision. It is power and significance are both. tactical, and strategic, so to speak. They are tactical in the sense that they encourage a brief thrust of light. At this point, the character is at the peak of illusive clarity concerning, its historicstic position. On the other hand, their strategic implications lie in the fact that this illusive light ultimately and invariably leads to the darkness of Dionysos. The two contradictory effects of Apollonian light are repeatedly exhibited in Sophocles' drama. Oedipus and Teriresias are a strong case in point in this connection. The latter is blind. He is shrouded, by darkness. Yet, he has a unique vision: "You have no eyes, but in your mind you know" (*O.K.*, 303). Oedipus who acknowledges this fact is at this stage Teiresias' antipode. Later in the play, Teircsias warns Oedipus: "You have your eyes but see not where you are" (*O.K.*, 413). The prophet of Apollo, the god of light, is under Dionysiac dark vision while Oedipus exalts in Apollonian light even though he is practically — albeit, unconsciously in total ignorance of the fact that: he is under Dionysiac influence. The deceptive Apollonian light leads Oedipus to his Dionysiac ruin. That is why when he discovers the unbridgeable gap between what' he has been and what he has become, he realizes that the tight he had been living in was in fact masking truth away from him. *At* this stage, Oedipus seems to take a step further than Gilgamesh. in his attitude towards this vision. His disillusionment with Apollonioan light is accompanied by a psychological drive towards the darkness of Dionysos. Oedipus is very anxious to be disjoined from any Apollonian characteristic; since their tacncal Significance demonstrates an alarming betrayal of their expected nature. Oedipus shows a unique and peculiar yearning for a different kind of vision:

Light of the sun.,
Let me look upon you no more after today.
(*O.K.*, 1181-82)

The chorus describes the process of Oedipus' physical deformation from light into darkness — a process which is paralleled by a psychological one:

He tore the brooches -
... and lifting them up high
dashed them on his eyeballs, shrieking out:
such things as: they will never see the crime
I have committed or had done upon me!
Dark eyes ... (*O.K.*, 1276, ff.)

The physical and psychological implications of blinding himself appear most probably as a violent protest against illusive Apollonian light which has worked out his own destruction. The irony for Oedipus is that Apollo's light is the inevitable vehicle of Dionysiac vision. It is the

horror of darkness enfolding, resistless,
unspeakable visitant sped by an ill wind
in haste! (*O.K.*, 1314-15)

Apollonian 'light which is responsible for Oedipus', dark and "bitter bitterness" (*O.K.*, 1329-30) reveals only a Dionysiac vision. It has shown him no sweet reality:

Why should I see
Whose vision showed me nothing sweet to see?
(*O.K.*, 5334-35)

Light and darkness operate simultaneously in Oedipus' experience. His eyes never helped him to see the truth even though they were "those bright eyes you knew once" (*O.K.*, 1483). These 'bright eyes' were bestowed upon Inn by Apollo, "our lord the sun", (*O.K.*, 1426) a power which turned him from a brother to "a father seeing nothing, knowing nothing" (*O.K.*, 1484). The impact of Apollonian light on Oedipus is both ignorance and blindness of vision. That is why when he resorts to switching off his eye-sight, he simultaneously switches on an insight of a different kind: the insight into the Dionysiac –a tragic insight which both unifies his experience with that of Teiresias, and dissolves his historicism and individuation in favour of the original oneness. It is an insight which brings Oedipus much closer to the real vision concerning the truth about the human condition. This tragic insight is crucial because until we are ready for (such) an insight, we are blind."⁽⁴⁾

Oedipus' journey and wanderings in the darkness blindness strongly recalls that of Gilgamesh. In both cases, light is switched off, as it were. Through darkness however, a new vision emerges. This can be described as dark vision which switches on a new reality. Darkness and blindness switch off Gilgamesh's and Oedipus' sights; but concomitantly, they switch on their insights into the nature of their conditions. Both come to understand that the joy of historicism which is introduced by daylight is replaced once and for all by the terror of archaism enhanced by night darkness. Through Oedipus, Sophocles envisages a duality rather than dichotomy between light and darkness. In *Oedipus At Colonus*, Sophocles reiterates that the visual firm contrariness between light and darkness conceals a deeper parallel and unity between them. The contrast between the two images which constitutes the greater bulk of *Oedipus the King* leaves Oedipus in the darkness of ignorance surrounded and instigated by Apollonian light. But his consciousness of the real nature of the relationship between these two seemingly contrasting features leaves him no option other than identifying himself with a new vision: The Dionysiac dark vision. The divinities -- both old and new -- have to maintain certain visual oddities. But they also maintain an undercurrent harmony. The way to the Dionysiac vision of darkness is lit by Apollonian light Oedipus is pushed towards the darkness of Dionysiac eddy by the mighty hand of Apollo. In this context, *Oedipus At Colonus* becomes illustrative of this concept. Oedipus' "resting place" (*Colonus*, 89) in the grave of the Furies, the agents of Dionysos and the "sweet children of original darkness" (*Colonus*, 106) is determined by Apollo, the god of, "light. The "daughters of darkness and mysterious earth" (*Colonus*, 40) will be ready to receive Oedipus through Zeus' thunder: "God's beating thunder... will clap me underground" (*Colonus*, 1460- 61). Likewise, his physical side has a mental and psychological extensions which parallel his physical experience with his metaphysical one. Thus, the lightning of Zeus merges with mysterious earth. It is in fact, (he "sword of darkness" (*Colonus*, 1481). Oedipus' mental vision is a dark one. It runs parallel to the physical darkness he lives in and under which he will be buried. He comes to discover the deceptive nature of

Apollonian Light and historicism. Apollo's light becomes a power of delusion. In fact, Apollo is "the sunlight of no light" (*Colonus*, 1459), Oedipus resignedly and tragically gives it up in favour of Dionysiac darkness:

I go to shed my ending day
in the dark underworld. (*Colonus*, 1551-52)

The same duality also appears in Polyneices' new vision: "the dark road is before me" (*Colonus*, 1433). Darkness here as elsewhere in the play does not denote or evoke any mental or physical confusion in Polyneices' conception. On the contrary, it is indicative of clarity and exactitude of a peculiar insight which is beginning to shatter all Apollonian shreds of his individuation. The 'dark road' is Polyneices' path to Hades and the nether gods. It is now as clear in his own mind as his father is clear in his. Thus he takes 'the dark road' "with open eyes to death" (*Colonus*, 1440).

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For both Gilgamesh and Oedipus, the terror of dark truth shatters the veil of illusion and redemption. The shreds of their individuations which characterize them as individuals are shattered; thus paving the way for the indestructible power of original oneness. Oedipus' tragic humility at the end of *Oedipus the King* and throughout *Oedipus At Colonus* recalls that of Gilgamesh at the end of the epic.

Oedipus who has tried to assimilate his condition to the divine one is the tragic offshoot of the Gilgamesh saga. His dilemma — much like that of Gilgamesh himself — is reflective and expressive of the human condition. Like its Babylonian predecessor, the Oedipal saga tackles the same issues, sometimes with a striking exactness, especially in connection with notions related to man's position in the cosmos.

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* antedate the Hesiodic, Homeric, Aeschylean and Sophoclean texts by a few millennia. Yet it still speaks nakedly to the human condition. Moreover, far from seeming archaic and unrecapturable, its images and gestures are strikingly pertinent to the ancient Greeks and more significantly, even to our present condition. This is a paradigm of the game of life: it is just this "old game lost of old, play and lose and have done with losing".⁽⁵⁾

Endnotes

1. G.S. Kin, *Myth*, Cambridge Univ. Press, 1970, p. 133.
2. Erkkila is the queen of death. See Heidel, *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels*, Univ. of Chicago Press, Chicago, Illinois, 1949, Note 126.p. 60.
3. See Munzer Muhammad's "Babylonian Dimensions in Greek Mythology" *Tishreen Univ. Journal*, Vol. 14., Issue, 2, 1992, pp. 20R-235.
4. Walter Kaurmann, *Tragedy and Physosophy*, Princeton Univ. Press, 1979, p. 139.
5. Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*, Faber, London, 1976, p.51.

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