

The Concept of Journey: A Semiological Study of Joan London's Novel Gilgamesh

Jinan Abdullah Shafiq
Al-Iraqia University
College of Education for Women
Jinan.a.al-azzawi@aliraqia.edu.iq

Doi: <https://doi.org/10.36473/fh69r324>



Copyright (c) 2025 Jinan Shafiq. This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

[Attribution 4.0 International Licenses](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

How to Cite

The Concept of Journey: A Semiological Study of Joan London's Novel Gilgamesh. (n.d.). ALUSTATH JOURNAL FOR HUMAN AND SOCIAL SCIENCES, 64(1). <https://doi.org/10.36473/fh69r324>

Received date: 18/09/2024
review: 01/10/2024
Acceptance date: 28/10/2024
Published date: 15/03/2025

Abstract

Joan London (born in 1948) is an Australian author of novels, plays and short stories. She is the author of two collections of stories, *Sister A-Ships* (1986) and *Letter to Constantine* (1994). In 2001, she published her novel, which is inspired by the Sumerian Epic of *Gilgamesh* which is a saga novel covering three generations of a family. Mrs. London, however, does not hold her to that epic, she offers it a new reading, and she pours a new wine in an old bottle.

The backbone in Mrs. London's novel is the journey that Edith, the heroine takes in search for Aram, her illegitimate child's father. Inspired by the journey of Gilgamesh, her journey is mainly allegorical. A journey leads to maturity and wisdom. The novel is interesting from a semiological point of view because of the role the signs and symbols in conveying the themes of the novel, the plot and the characters. (156 words)

Keyword : Concept, A Semiological, Joan London, Novel, Gilgamesh.

Introduction:

As a narrative art, novels found affinity in epics whether in form or in content. The early attempts in writing classical novels partake the elements of traditional epics. Examples of this are Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, Henry Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* and *Tom Jones* and Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* which is also a bulky novel belonged to the same period. Henry Fielding regarded the novel a "comic epic-poem in prose" (Burton, 36) These early novels are made up of a series of escapades. In modern literature, epics are mostly intertextualized to communicate extra-meanings. Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, Leo Tolstoy's *War and peace*, J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, Henry James's *Ulysses*, George Saunders' *The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil* and others (Shafiq 2017: 39).

The Problem of the Study :

The present study assumes that Joan London novel *Gilgamesh* is an imitation of the Sumerian Epic of *Gilgamesh* because the two literary works share the same title though they belong to different literary genres and also because of the strong presence of the journey in both works .

At a first glance, the reader may mistakenly assume that Mrs. London in her novel, re-writes the epic in the form of a novel to present a prose epic. But the careful reading of the novel show that despite some similarities in form as well as in content, the two literary works are different. Through the use of symbols and signs, Mrs. London offers a new reading to the original epic .

Questions to be answered:

1. Is London's *Gilgamesh* adapted from the Epic *Gilgamesh*?
2. How the sense of Journey affects the protagonist of the novel?
3. Semiology as a theory, can it be applied in literature as well as linguistic studies?

The Importance of Studying:

Literary text always concentrates on the use of signs and symbols due to their deep and implied meanings that it carries. This study makes a kind of contrastive study between an old Sumerian Epic and a new novel. That proves in literature there is no out of date study, they remain alive since one can see its effects lasts for ages. It is amazing to know that such study shows its importance in the ability to see works from different perspectives. As if it is a journey that keep on developing and adding meaning to old and new works .

Hypothesis:

The Study assumes that Joan London novel *Gilgamesh* is an imitation of the Sumerian Epic of *Gilgamesh* because the two literary works share the same title though they belong to different literary genres and also because of the strong presence of the journey in both works.

At a first glance, the reader may mistakenly assume that Mrs. London in her novel, re-writes the epic in the form of a novel to present a prose epic. But the careful reading of the novel show that despite some similarities in form as well as in content, the two literary works and independent. Through the use of symbols and signs, Mrs. London offers a new reading to the original epic.

Theory:

The study adopts the semiological approach to prove that Joan London novel *Gilgamesh* is basically an allegorical work. Semiology in linguistics is the theory of discussing the importance of signs and symbols in a literary work. The theory adopted in this research proves that the novel has a surface and deep meanings. The symbols and signs used to show that the novel does not speak about a common journey from one place to another; it is a journey to search for maturity, wisdom and identity. It is unlike the journey of *Gilgamesh* for immortality. The adaptation of this theory, proves that though the novel and the epic share the same title, but due to the use of signs and symbols they have two different contents.

The Concept of Journey in The Epic of Gilgamesh:

The word epic is derived from the Latin 'epicus' which means a story narrated in a heroic poem. Traditional epics usually partakes some common characteristics that distinguish them from the other literary genres; the protagonist of an epic is usually endowed with supernatural strength and is capable of fabulous adventures and there is also the presence of the super-human deeds necessitates the existence of the supernatural, paranormal forces such as gods, demi-gods, demons, angels, spirits and

witches. Settings of epics is so wide that it is not limited by time and place. The action in epics usually spaces across land and sea and this justifies the episodic nature of the structure of epics. The style with which epics are written is elevated to suitable only for heroic verse. The language of epics is formal and elevated ornamented often with descriptive passages. The plot round which the events of epics are centered usually deals with gallant deeds such as war, immortality, meaning of life....

Epics, as long narrative works, usually begin with an invocation to the muse to help accomplishing the hard task. It is a kind of a prayer for the deities. The oldest known epic is *The Epic of Gilgamesh* from ancient Mesopotamia which tells the story Gilgamesh; a legendary Sumerian king. He leads a reckless life, so the gods send him Enkidu. a wild man to punish him. The plan fails and the two become close friends. This Mesopotamian king and his friend set off on a journey in search for eternal life. Gilgamesh used to oppress his people, defies gods and leads to the death of Enkidu, his friend and companion in his journey to look for immortality. However, Utnapishtim's wife persuades him to inform Gilgamesh about a magical plant that gives youth back just as he is leaving, since he cannot attain immortality. After discovering the plant, Gilgamesh brings it with him with the intention of presenting it to Uruk's elders. However, one night while he was camping, a snake eats the plant. Then it sheds its skin and regenerates as it glides off. Though Gilgamesh lost what was he seeking for yet, he finds satisfaction (Sharif 2019:271). *The Epic of Gilgamesh* touches upon a variety of themes. It is basically a quest for the meaning and purpose of life, the fragility of the human existence and the limitation of mortality. Psychologically speaking, the epic can be read as a journey downward in pursuit for self-discovery. Morally speaking, the epic touches upon such themes as wisdom, arrogance and friendship.

The themes, motifs and narrative elements of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* have influenced subsequent literary traditions. In addition to its historical importance, the story had a significant impact on literature, art and music. Time and again, the character of Gilgamesh is presented under different disguises. The themes of the epic have been explored in many modern works. Yet, in modern times, the reception of the epic of Gilgamesh shows the modern writers own reading when one sets their texts against that of the Sumerian text.

Semiology in Joan London's *Gilgamesh*:

Joan London (b.1940) is a novelist, short story and a screen writer from Australia. London is the author of two anthology collections. *Sister ships*, the first that won "The Age Book of the Year (1986), and the second *Letter to Constantine*, won 'The Steele Rudd Award' & 'The Western Australian Premier's Book Award for fiction (both in (1994). Together, were released as 'The New Dark Age'. Besides she published three novels; *Gilgamesh* (2001), *The Good Parents* (2008), and *The Golden Age* (2014) (Wilde 1994:475-6).

The ancient poem Gilgamesh, is believed to have been written on stone tables approximately 700 BC and is the oldest surviving work of literature, is the source of the book Gilgamesh's title. It narrates the tale of a The ancient poem, which is believed to have been written on stone tablets approximately 700 BC and is the oldest surviving work of literature, is the source of the book Gilgamesh's title. It narrates the tale of a Mesopotamian monarch who embarks on a quest to become immortal.

London's novel is set in 1937 and it is the tale of a seventeenth-year-old Edith Clark and her son, Jim. The story starts with the previous generation of with Frank and Ada, Edith's parents. They decided to go to Australia leaving their home in London after the

first World War. Frank buys a piece of land in the farming town of Nunderup, in the southwest of Western Australia though he knows nothing about farming.

Frank and Ada have two beautiful girls, Frances and Edith, and a son who unfortunately dies soon after birth. Frank yields to morbidity, fails at work and soon dies while his daughter Edith is still a girl. He leaves his wife in distress and deep depression and leaves his daughters to protect themselves. Edith's sister Frances falls a prey to religious hysteria and become a preacher, then she pulls away that religious sect. Soon after, the Clarks are visited by two men, Leopold he is Edith's cousin and his handsome Armenian friend, Aram Sinanien, attain from the Far East and in their return decide to stay with Ada and the girls. They were in an archaeological mission in Iraq in 1937. They travelled around Mesopotamia (Iraq) in the taxi of Aram imagining themselves to be Gilgamesh and Enkidu.

Frances is less open, more conservative than her sister. Edith, on the other hand, is fascinated by new comers—their costumes, their civil manners and even their smells. This encounter opens her eyes on a different world. It brings her the commotion and glamour of a distant past. Leopold makes her eager to know more about the world "before he came it was as if she'd never learnt to speak" (*Gilgamesh* 31). Edith soon falls in love with Aram who tells her the tragic story of the loss of his parents. He tells her that they were killed in 1935 Turkish massacre and as result he had to spent the rest of his childhood in an orphanage. He talks to her about Armenia which is part of The Soviet Union at that time and about his desire to sacrifice his life to free his country. He tells her about his dream to fight for the independence of his country from the Soviet rule.

Through them, Edith glimpses a distant mysterious world and lifestyle. It is through them that she knows the epic of Gilgamesh the Sumerian king of ancient Mesopotamia. It is through this visit, comes the reference to *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. She knows about his sadness over the passing of his friend Enkidu and about his quest for the mysterious of immortality. Leopold and Aram told the girls about their travels around Mesopotamia and how they fantasied themselves the Sumerian monarch and his young friend Enkidu. Leopold shows them a copy of that oldest known epic. The impact of the visit on Edith is tremendous. It brings about a dramatic change in her life fueling her hunger for the world of wander and adventure.

They begin escorting her to her work at the nearby hotel, the 'Sea House'. As she becomes increasingly aquatinted with them, they become more admirable to her. The passionate, sensitive nature of her cousin's friend touched her heart:

She woke each morning with a start, a leaf tapping at the window, something is waiting for you ... She lay listening out for the sounds of the men. She thought she'd hardly slept and yet she felt washed smooth as a morning beach (*Gilgamesh* 45).

She had seen Aram rise up out of the iron tub on the verandah, his satiny shoulders, his tight boy like buttocks, his whiplash spine. They were strangers and yet she felt close to them, so close she could sense wherever they were and what they were doing. As if now that they ate the same food, breathed the same air, they were part of her. All the habits and needs of their bodies had become familiar'.

The strangers depart to Europe, Leopold leaves to London and Aram to Armenia (which was under Soviet control) Edith, now pregnant, is left alone to miss them in a house that looks empty. She gives birth to Aram's son.

The story of Gilgamesh mourning over his dead friend and his quest for the secret of immortality keeps lingering at the back of Edith's mind opening new horizons for her for a life away from her farm life.

This leads her to think of her own journey to find Jim's illegitimate father in Armenia during the outset of the Second World War. We travel with Edith and see this cast of characters come into her life and help to form her and who she becomes by the end of the story. We watch as her son Jim, grows up and is influenced by his own journey and experiences a type of reverse migration having to come to terms with who he is as he tries to fit into his country of birth.

Stylistically speaking, the serious events of the story take offstage, they are narrated but their consequences keep lingering at the back of the reader's mind. The novel has a quiet tone, similar to many Australian novels, that relies on description and brief dialogue to establish the plot, characters and setting. The story is told simply, its narrative style is realistic and smooth. The sentences are refined and enjoyable and has many realistic beautiful phrases, such as:

'Their breath, raw and vivid, filled the house.' (*Gilgamesh* 47)

'Strange how one small object could seem to hold all the light in a room.' (*Gilgamesh* 134)

'He was a country she'd come home to.' (*Gilgamesh* 166)

I will share with you the stunning description of one of the characters:

Now her hair was silver, swept into a turret at the crown of her head. She was full chested as a dove, and walked with her head held high and her shoulders back. Her skin was velvety and pale and crinkly like the back of an old rose petal.' (*Gilgamesh* 178)

This novel is a magnificent narrative work. It is delightful to read; filled with encounters, adventures and dramatic narrative episodes. It is rich with characters, heroic women, literary and historical allusions. The novel is written beautifully and seems to be a fairy tale and dream-like yet it is believable.

The novel spans a cosmopolitan line of development and rich and colorful cast of characters. London's writing is elegant and combines descriptive meditation with a captivating linear story that is easy to follow.

In her novel, Joan London gives the Epic of Gilgamesh a new rope, she modernizes the classical story. She is not basically concerned with the world of ancient Mesopotamia. The setting of the novel is not that grand settings that are usually associated with epics. The novel is set at the time of the Deep Depression just before the beginning of World War II. It begins in a rehabilitation hospital at the south of London and we move then to a farm in southern Australia. The royal Sumerian court is replaced by a common Australian farm.

Journeys and quests are the core of classical epics. All of the characters in the novel dream of travelling somewhere. They are wanderers in strange lands. When Edith's parents after the First World War, they had the desire to find a distant place in which there is no war. "That's where I'm going!", he screamed one day suggesting to take here to Australia. Leopold and Aram's feet lead them as far as Iraq.

The focus of the novel, however, is on the journey of its heroine, Edith. Like The Epic of Gilgamesh., the early poem, Edith travels the world in search of an adventure that could be tempting yet slippery. She and her child are reminiscent of the two friends of the epic though with a different purpose. a journey from Australia, to England, Armenia, Russia. When she asks about Gilgamesh, Aram associates between him and

them “He’s a mythical figure. He belongs to everyone, everywhere. Take us, for instance. Aren’t we on a heroic quest?” (Gilgamesh 199). She sets out on a voyage with her kid via a dirty tanker to London, Bulgaria, Istanbul and passes through many place to finally reach Yerevan. This a hazardous task and suicidal mission especially with the outbreak of WWII. Prior to the outbreak of the second World War, she and her baby starts an almost impossible quest to Armenia in search of the child’ father. Her journey is a story of romantic love and courage. It is a pilgrimage in search for identity, purpose and a sense of belonging to a family.

Edith’s difficult trip leads her to cross the Soviet borders and succeeds in making a contact with Aram’s friends who prove to be willing to help her in searching for her child’s father. In her journey, the young mother can pass with her infant through the war zones and check points. She could pass without any difficulty without even thinking of the possibility that she and her child might be used as a bait by the fighting armies. She never stops to think of the advantages’ and disadvantages of her quest. In her way to Armenia, Edith encounters an Armenian cloth merchant traveling on the Orient Express. She is admitted to the Soviet Union with the help of that man who takes them to Yerevan to stay with his cold wife. She is not impressed by the scene:

Armenia had become a landscape superimposed over the hills and valleys around her...The full moon was Armenian, and so were the Honeymoon Gardens when no one else was there...The spire of the Anglican church on the outskirts of Torville was very Armenian, because as you saw it from the bus it seemed to promise something ancient and spiritual... (Gilgamesh 206)

In her journey, Edith proves to be courageous, relentless traveler. The meeting point between the epic and the novel is that in both cases we have the presence and the choice of a long journey as a way to face reality according to Edith and to escape from reality according to Gilgamesh. Similar to Gilgamesh, Edith needs to travel far from home, put herself to the test, fall in love, and lose a lot before she can realize he actual potential. She returns home worn out and wise, just like Gilgamesh did.

As far as characterization is concerned, the characters in London’s novel, though at times echo those of the epic, are not epic scale. There is nothing mythical or supernatural about them. They are common and down to earth. Instead of having a hero who has superhuman strength and valor that can accomplish marvelous deeds.

Here the heroine of the novel is Edith; a young Australian who falls in romantic love with Aram, the Armenian friend of her cousin. She gets pregnant and starts a journey following her lover’s illegitimate father. Unlike the descriptive passages that characterize the scenes that are usually associated with epic journeys. In her novel, Mrs. London describes the patterns of the family life; she washes clothes, forages for food, tends the sick, looks after the old and after her own son. In her adventure, the novelist touches upon the common details of a trip of a mother and her boy on the Orient Express; her infant’s scream, his dirty nappies and her exhaustion.

The journey that Edith takes is not the only thing that links the novel to the Epic of Gilgamesh. It is the friendship of Aram and Leopold which echoes the relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu. Leopold works as an archaeologist and used to live in the Middle East. Aram, the young Armenian was his driver at that time whom Leopold regarded as his best friend. Though they seem to be different; one is full and blond and the other is dark and thin. yet they complete each other “Aram was stronger and more deft, Leopold had more knowledge” (Gilgamesh 31). They both wear long black coats and black hats with narrow brims that they both purchased from the same Arab tailor.

However, by the book's end, Edith, Leopold, and Jim are all like Gilgamesh, eking their lives without Arab, their Enkidu.

On the other hand, there a thematic analogy between the epic and the novel to a certain extent. Like the epic, the novel is a quest for wisdom and a meaningful life. Both works revolves around the human quest for a meaning and purpose in life. The novel is also a quest for wisdom and self –realization. Through her confrontations with various people along her journey, Edith comes to gain profound insights into the nature of life, death and human existence.

It is also a story of friendship. Friendship appears as a redeeming power that celebrates the power of the human relationships. Prostitutes play a clear role in the epic and in the novel sex and adultery are always alluded to and explored through various relationships. As in the epic, the war always serf as a background. As in the epic also, there is the fear of death. Edith's parents, for example, who go as far as Australia because of the fear of war and therefore, death.

Like the Epic of Gilgamesh, Mrs. London's novel deals with the pain and disappointment of lost dreams. Frank's dream of building a socialist utopia in Australia, away from Europe comes to an end with his sickness and death. Edith has a Romantic vision of Armenia and keeps clinking to that dream and eventually consumed by that ideal dream.

Nevertheless, the novel does touch upon themes typical of the epic and its world. It does not, for example, touches upon such themes as fame and the importance of the human achievements. There is no pursuit of glory and immortality here.

Conclusion:

On the surface, Gilgamesh seems to be story of a mother's search for the father of her child but this adventure or heroic act is the first thing that links the novel to the Epic. What links the novel to Epic is the continuous reference to both Iraq and the allusion to story of Gilgamesh. The Epic is the story of a young man's search for identity and purpose and this also the core of Mrs. London's novel. Like the original story, Gilgamesh follows the story of two friends travelling the world looking for adventure. In both cases also the theme of war serves as a background that gives momentum to the action. In both works, the protagonist matures with the passage of time and eventually finds wisdom. In both cases also, the characters are mostly dreamers who cannot attain their dreams. This is true for Gilgamesh, Edith, her parents and even Jim, her son.

Despite these similarities between the novel and the epic, there are also differences that make it impossible to regard the novel as a reworking of the epic. Joan London Gilgamesh can be read as a modern version of the original epic whose shadows lurk behind its events. The setting of Mrs. London's novel is more suitable for a novel than for an epic. The style adopted to write Gilgamesh is more suitable for a novel than to an epic. It is simple, a matter of fact and realistic.

The characters are common and down to earth; there is nothing mythical about them as it is the case with epics characters, the best example of this is the contrast between the characters of Edith and that of Gilgamesh.

Despite the similarities in some themes between the novel and the Epic, yet the major theme of the Epic is to search for immortality which is not the main concern for Mrs. London.

When we put the text of Joan London's novel against that of the Epic we realize that Mrs. London does not intend to imitate the Babylonian epic. We can rather see that Gilgamesh has a clear symbolic dimension. The main journey in the novel is of an

allegorical nature, so are the major characters, and places have symbolic importance, they are stations in Edith's way towards her final destination; Armenia.

Gilgamesh is clad in a completely different robe by the Australian author. Modern circumstances affected the reception of the Epic, though the modern writers kept holding the original text against their intertextualized one since they still find a vital link between the Babylonian past and the modern times. Joan London's novel has nothing to do with the ancient world; it focuses on the new. Joan's London's Gilgamesh is not a reworking of the epic so much as a quest for its modern shadows. Her novel is basically an allegorical piece of work, the journey has a surface and deep meanings; it a search for a father in Armenia but actually it is search for the self; for wisdom.

The first journey in the novel can also be read as an allegorical one; the journey of Edith's from London to Australia. It is a journey from war and the sophisticated, civilized European society to a primitive, peaceful life of a quit farm in south Australia. Edith at the end of the novel is not the passionate and the romantic at the beginning. The places along the journey; Australia, England, Bulgaria, Turkey, Syria, Russia, Armenia ... can be viewed as signs or stations along the way. The characters have an allegorical significance, the stand for love, friendship, despair and they are also reminiscent of characters in the Epic. Armenia is a prime symbol in the novel. It stands for love and hope along the journey of Edith but at the end Edith and Jim decide to plan for a new journey in the opposite direction in search for his roots.

References:

- Burton, Felicita. (2020). "Why is Joseph Andrews defined as a "comic epic-poem in prose"?" edited by eNotes Editorial, 26 Dec. 2020.
- London, Joan. (2010). *Gilgamesh*. Australia: Random House Australia.
- Shafiq, Jinan A. (2017). *King Arthur's Legend Intertextualized: A Study In Selected Modern American And English Novels*. Iraq: Al- Adab Journal Press. p. 39.
- https://www.researchgate.net/publication/370205384_KING_ARTHUR'S_LEGEND_INTERTEXTUALIZED_A_STUDY_IN_SELECTED_MODERN_AMERICAN_AND_ENGLISH_NOVELS
- Sharif, Azad Hamad, Birzo Abdulkadir Mohammad, & Ismail Mohammed fahmi Saeed. (2019). *Nature's Retaliation in the Sumerian Epic Gilgamesh: An Ecocritical Study*. Tikrit: College of Languages, University of Salahadin. <https://doi.org/10.24271/garmian.196232>.
- Wilde, William H., Hooton, Joy, Andrews, Barry. (1994). *The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature*. 2nd edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press p. 475-6.

مفهوم الرحلة : دراسة سيميائية للرواية كلكامش للكاتبه جوان لندن

جنان عبد الله شفيق

الجامعة العراقية | كلية التربية للبنات

Jinan.a.al-azzawi@aliraqia.edu.iq

الملخص:

أن جوان لندن هي كاتبة أسترالية كتبت المسرحيات والروايات والقصص القصيرة. وقد قامت بتأليف مجموعتين قصصية. "السفن الشقيقة و قصص خرى" (1986)، "رسالة الى كوستانتين" (1994). وفي عام 2001 قامت بنشر روايتها "كلكامش" والمستوحاة من ملحمة كلكامش السومرية وهي رواية تغطي تاريخ ثلاثة أجيال من العائلة. لكن السيدة لندن لم تلتزم حرفيا بالملحمة وتطرح قراءة جديدة. ان العمود الفقري لرواية السيدة لندن هي الرحلة التي تقوم بها أديث وهي بطلة الرواية للبحث عن آرام وهو والد أبنها الغير شرعي. لقد ألهمت رحلة كلكامش الكاتبة لتقدم رحلة رمزية مماثلة في روايتها. تقود هذه الرحلة الى بلوغ النضج وأيجاد الحكمة من وجهة نظر سميولوجية. فأن هذه الرواية ممتعة الدور الذي تقوم به الاشارات والرموز لأيصال فكرة الرواية وتقدم الحكمة والشخصيات.