The Epic of Gilgamesh and the Odyssey: An Examination of the Supernatural Elements

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Abstract

This article examines the presence of supernatural elements in The Epic of Gilgamesh and The Odyssey considering the historical context in which both works were written and the way each civilization dealt with non-human powers. As for methodology, a content analysis model is adopted in a bibliographic, exploratory, and qualitative approach. As theoretical support, we will build on the literary scholarship of David Damrosch (2016; 2021; 2022), Shawna Dolansky (2020), David Roas (2018), McNamara et al (2018) and others who have focused on this topic, and in particular, the relationship between men and gods and how this may represent historical and cultural aspects of ancient civilizations. The contributions of these scholars will raise discussion around fantastic narrative and its connection to world literature. In conclusion, we can infer that both The Epic of Gilgamesh and The Odyssey are important literary registers that serve as invaluable windows into the past, offering a multidimensional view of how people lived, thought, and interacted in ancient times. They provide a rich tapestry of cultural, historical, and human experiences that enrich our understanding of the world's history and the foundations of human society.

Keywords: The Epic of Gilgamesh, The Odyssey, supernatural, ancient civilization

A Epopeia de Gilgamesh e A Odisseia: Uma análise dos elementos sobrenaturais

Resumo

Este artigo analisa a presença de elementos sobrenaturais em A Epopeia de Gilgamesh e A Odisseia, considerando o contexto histórico no qual ambas as obras foram escritas e a maneira como cada civilização lidava com poderes sobrenaturais. Quanto à metodologia, adota-se um modelo de análise de conteúdo com abordagem bibliográfica, exploratória e qualitativa. Como suporte teórico, utiliza-se os estudos literários de David Damrosch (2016; 2021; 2022), ShawnaDolansky (2020), David Roas (2018), McNamara et al (2018) e outros que têm se concentrado neste tópico, e, em particular, na relação entre homens e deuses e como isso pode representar aspectos históricos e culturais das civilizações antigas. A partir da análise, é possível inferir que tanto A Epopeia de Gilgamesh quanto A Odisseia são registros literários importantes que servem como janelas valiosas para o passado, oferecendo uma visão multidimensional de como as pessoas viviam, pensavam e interagiam em tempos antigos. Eles fornecem um rico registro de experiências culturais, históricas e humanas que enriquecem nossa compreensão da história do mundo e dos fundamentos da sociedade humana.

Palavras-chave: A Epopeia de Gilgamesh, A Odisseia, sobrenatural, civilização antiga

1 Introduction

The universal fantastic narrative has established itself as an important source of inspiration for all kinds of art, which has frequently incorporated remarkable supernatural themes in its manifestations. The present study aims to analyze some of the Masterpieces of World Literature (Damrosch, 2021) regarding the presence of fantastic elements. Our intention, however, is not to establish these works as examples of fantastic literature, since the presence of the impossible or supernatural does not necessarily indicates belonging to the genre, as suggested by David Roas (2018).

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To this end, we selected The Epic of Gilgamesh and The Odyssey written in different epochs and civilizations. The former was written in Mesopotamia, probably around the years 2150 - 1400 BCE and stands as the oldest piece of world literature; The latter was originally composed in Homeric Greek around the 8th or 7th century BCE. The main question that guides this study is based on the importance of fantastic or supernatural elements in these two pieces of world literature. To what extent did these two literary works reflect on the influence and interference of gods and the other supernatural powers, directly or indirectly, as a significant role in the lifestyles of ancient peoples?

1.1 Contextualizing the Epics

As mentioned before, The Epic of Gilgamesh is an ancient Mesopotamian epic poem, written in cuneiform probably around the years 2150 - 1400 BCE and disappeared around 612 BCE when the Library of Nineveh was destroyed. In 1849, an excavation conducted by the British archaeologist Austen Harry Layard in the region where the ancient Assyrian city of Nineveh was located found a number of items belonging to the Library of Nineveh, including the tablets of The Epic of Gilgamesh.

The translation of the work was carried out by Henry Rawlinson and George Smith, and it was only possible thanks to the Behistun Inscription, which transcribed cuneiform characters into three languages: Persian, Babylonian and Elamite. According to David Damrosch (2016):

Gilgamesh can fairly be called the first true work of world literature, as it circulated over many centuries far beyond its origins in southern Mesopotamia, and it is the earliest literary text known to have been translated into several languages. Portions of the epic have been found in Hittite and in Hurrian, and the Akkadian original itself is an expansive adaptation of an earlier Sumerian song cycle commissioned by King Shulgi of Ur (r. 2094–2047bce), the world's first known patron of literature. Gilgamesh appears, in fact, to have been the most popular literary hero of the ancient Near East; texts and related artifacts (Damrosch, 2016.p.143).

The narrative follows the story of Gilgamesh, king of Uruk, in his quest for immortality. In the story recounted by the poem, Gilgamesh is presented as a despotic, arrogant king who oppressed his people and raped women on their wedding night. Upon hearing the clamor of Gilgamesh's people, the gods created Enkidu from clay and sent him to meet Gilgamesh with a mission to destroy him. After dueling, the two became friends and began a journey marked by adventure, lessons, and sadness. After Gilgamesh refused to marry the goddess-princess Ishtar and disrespected her, the gods decided to punish him by killing Enkidu. As a result, Gilgamesh then started an arduous journey in search of immortality.

On his journey to immortality, Gilgamesh met Utnapishtim, a hero known to have achieved immortality after surviving a great flood. During this great flood, Utnapishtim had built a large ark at the behest of the gods and housed his family and a large number of animals in it. This hero promised Gilgamesh immortality as long as he fulfilled some quests. However, the king failed these missions and returned to Uruk.

The mention of the flood is a noteworthy part of the narrative because of its similarity to the biblical narrative about the flood and the story of Noah. Historians believe that Sumerian history influenced the formulation of the Hebrew narrative about the flood. These experts further suggest that, in addition to this, there are other aspects of Hebrew culture that were also inherited from Sumerian culture.

The Epic of Gilgamesh, a literary product of Mesopotamia, contains many of the same themes and motifs as the Hebrew Bible. Of these, the best-known is probably the Epic's flood story, which reads a lot like the biblical tale of Noah's ark (Gen 6-9). But the Epic also includes a character whose story bears even more similarities to stories in the Hebrew Bible: Gilgamesh's possession of a plant of immortality is thwarted by a serpent (compare Gen3), he wrestles in the night with a divinely appointed assailant who pro claims the hero's identity and predicts that he will prevail over all others (compare Gen 32:23-32), and he is taught that the greatest response to mortality is to live life in appreciation of those things which make us truly human (compare Eccl 9:7-10) (Dolansky,2020, p. 09).

As pointed out by Dolansky (2020), self-knowledge, immortality and destiny seem to play significant roles in the trajectory of Gilgamesh, which deals with the culture surrounding the concept of identity in Mesopotamian civilization. In a similar way, Homer's The Odyssey deals with cultural and identity issues related to ancient Greek civilization. The epic tells of Ulysses' journey to return home after the Trojan War. During his travels, the Greek hero battles mystical creatures and faces the wrath of the gods, while his wife Penelope and his son Telemachus try to postpone suitors vying for Penelope's hand and Ithaca's throne. The story ends as Ulysses wins a contest to prove his identity, defeats the suitors, and retakes the throne of Ithaca.

Recognized worldwide as one of the premier Greek epics, The Odyssey is studied not only as a literary work, but also as a historical document for its richness of details related to social organization and human behavior:

The author, Homer, and his mythical hero, Odysseus, have, indeed, travelled far and wide since presumably the late 8th or 7th century BCE; they have crossed oceans and were used to literally interpret the geographies, people and experiences of near, and at times, faraway places. In antiquity, the oral poem had already become a cultural artifact, used for schoolboys' grammatical learning, pictured in mosaics on the walls of aristocrats' houses, and told in various social contexts – from gatherings in open air amphitheatres to the dingy atmosphere of port town brothels (Schliephake, 2019, p. 5)

As it turned out, the importance of Odyssey goes beyond its literary characteristics. The didactic value of these poems confers on Homer the title of the educator of all Greece, since for ancient civilizations, aesthetic values were not separated from ethical values. For Roas (2018), the facts presented by Homer's epics, whether they are real, legendary, or a mixture of the two, makes no difference, because what really interests the reader is the verisimilitude that he senses within the stories: exhortation to work, precepts about agriculture and navigation, precepts about life morals, calendars and guidelines on climate and weather, among others.

From this perspective, Homer's works are acclaimed and considered not only a legacy of Ancient Greece, but as true heritage of humanity. Arguably, The Odyssey is a timeless story for both its historical wealth and its approach to themes such as man's deepest feelings, supernatural powers, and mankind's inner strength, which is capable of mastering the most powerful natural and supernatural monsters.

It is not unreasonable to say that The Odyssey and The Epic of Gilgamesh were the first two pieces of written literary works to deal with supernatural themes. This reflects the natural thinking of ancient civilizations regarding the intervention of unknown forces in human actions, as we shall see in the next section.

2 Supernatural Elements in The Epic Of Gilgamesh And the Odyssey

Throughout time, people have sought refuge for the mind in the form of children's fairy tales, legends, cosmological myths, philosophical systems, and fantastic narratives. These function as an escape from the terrifying threats of the real world or simply as a way of understanding what is inexplicable. It is no coincidence that supernatural themes have been a constant in fictional narratives since ancient times. Fantastic stories had already been present since the first oral and written traditions, as can be seen by Mesopotamian, Greek and Roman Mythologies or by literary works such as The Epic of Gilgamesh or The Odyssey.

Mesopotamian civilization embraced supernatural explanations for life's events. Through their oral and written literature, the Mesopotamian people presented themselves as melancholic, pessimistic and enveloped in morbid terrors (Annus, 2010). The oral accounts stressed that there would be no hope of resurrection for man, and the dead would go to Sheol, a desolate and gloomy place where the souls of the dead would remain temporarily, and then disappear eternally. Creation myths from this period portray the relationship between the gods and men as well as man's supposed encounters with demons and monsters in order to maintain cosmic harmony. So, in Mesopotamian literature, we find disturbing and inexplicable elements overshadowing reason.

Analyzing the Epic of Gilgamesh through a fantastic lens, it is clear that Mesopotamian people used encounters between men and gods, and their distinct nature, as a way of addressing the presence of both natural and supernatural powers:

Anu granted him the totality of knowledge of all. He saw the Secret, discovered the Hidden, he brought information of (the time) before the Flood. He went on a distant journey, pushing himself to exhaustion, but then was brought to peace…It was he who crossed the ocean, the vast seas, to the rising sun, who explored the world regions, seeking life. It was he who reached by his own sheer strength Utanapishtim, the Faraway, who restored the sanctuaries (or: cities) that the Flood had destroyed! (Table I)

One can observe that although Gilgamesh is not a god, he is described as having superhuman strength and knowledge, a hero endowed with gifts and abilities that only the chosen ones receive. With this in mind, consider the comments of Karen Sonik (2013), in her study about the Mesopotamian conceptions of the supernatural, where she states:

In the gulf between humans and their gods exists an "other" world, an extraordinary supernatural landscape populated by all manner of "in-between" beings or Zwischenwesen. While alike in their transgressing of those borders and boundaries that delineate civilized human and divine lives and behaviors (as well as in their supernatural origins, qualities, or abilities), Zwischenwesen may be divided into an array of sub-groups that fulfill a range of (sometimes overlapping) cultural and religious roles (2013, p.103).

Not surprisingly, throughout the Epic of Gilgamesh, the reader is introduced to a large number of entities not known to be gods, priests, demons, angels, devils, or something different. This exemplifies the normalization of the presence of non-human beings in Mesopotamian literature and cosmology.

Not unlike Gilgamesh, in the Odyssey, Ulysses has long suffered because of the interference of gods in his life:

So now all who escaped death in battle or by shipwreck had got safely home except Ulysses, and he, though he was longing to return to his wife and country, was detained by the goddess Calypso, who had got him into a large cave and wanted to marry him. But as years went by, there came a time when the gods settled that he should go back to Ithaca; even then, however, when he was among his own people, his troubles were not yet over; nevertheless, all the gods had now begun to pity him except Neptune, who still persecuted him without ceasing and would not let him get home (Book I).

From the above passage, it is clear that the gods intervened frequently in Ulysses' life. Historically speaking, the ancient Greeks believed that gods could meddle with their destinies and interfere in their daily lives (Dolansky, 2020; Araújo, 2021). It is worth noting that, unlike other civilizations that welcomed the fantastic, the ancient Greek civilization partially rejected the fantastic worldview established by the narratives of fantastic literature, since the ideologies proposed by the genre undermined the explanation of the world through reason.

For example, Plato established the theory of forms, in which two worlds are presented to establish truths: the world of ideas and the sensible world. The world of ideas is the real world of eternal truths, and the sensible world is the image of that world created by our senses. Plato argued that the world of ideas was more important than the sensible world because through reason and truths, everything we wanted could be realized in objective reality. Thus, the sensitive perspective would be a shadow, or imperfect reflection, of the truth established in the world of ideas (Damrosch, 2021).

Other important theme to be discussed is the role of dreams in these two epics. As pointed out by Hughes (2000) and McNamara et al (2018), dream interpretation was regarded by ancient civilizations, like Mesopotamian and Greek, as an art requiring intelligence and divine inspiration. They were thought to come either as clear messages from gods, or as symbols requiring interpretation. This belief is very noticeable in the Epic of Gilgamesh, as suggested by this passage:

Mother, I had a dream last night. Stars of the sky appeared, and some kind of meteorite(?) of Anu fell next to me.
I tried to lift it but it was too mighty for me, I tried to turn it over but I could not budge it....
The meaning of the dream is this. The father of the gods has given you kingship, such is
your destiny; everlasting life is not your destiny. Because of this do not be sad at heart,
Do not be grieved or oppressed … (Table I)

As can be seen, Gilgamesh is completely disturbed by his dream, which is a mode of communication between gods and their chosen ones. According to McNamara et al (2018), some ancient civilization regarded the psychological phenomena of dreams as direct revelations from the gods, provided always that the mental preoccupations or physical condition of the dreamer did not interfere to entangle the soul in mortal influences. In this regard, it is worth mentioning that Cuneiform literature, such as The Epic of Gilgamesh, contains extensive corpus of texts devoted to mystic subjects, such as dreams. In a more contemporary discussion about dreams and their supernatural character McNamara et al (2018) investigate the reason for which people postulate supernatural forces by the dreams. She states that one possible answer is that supernatural agents are real and that people straightforwardly perceive and interact with them. Although science cannot yet speak to the veridicality of such elements, recent researchers can investigate the cognitive mechanisms involved in uncanny agent cognitions.

Based on studies carried out in the last two decades (Barrett, 2008, 2000), McNamara et al (2018) comment that several scholars have argued that our conceptions of supernatural agents are constructed out of the inferential machinery that draws on normal folk-psychological processing routines concerning actions performed by ordinary agents like persons and animals. In other words, supernatural agents are strongly related to our cultural and historical conceptions. That is why supernatural powers are constantly revisited in ancient literature like Gilgamesh.

Likewise, in Homer's The Odyssey, the dream is also presented as a way of communication between gods and their chosen ones. In the book XIX, Penelope is disturbed by a dream and asks for interpretation. In a dialogue with Penelope, Ulysses states that the dream offers the key to its own interpretation; however, Penelope remains skeptical:

Stranger, stories told in dreams are difficult— their meanings are not clear, and for people they are not realized in every detail. There are two gates for insubstantial dreams, one made of horn and one of ivory. Those which pass through the fresh-cut ivory deceive—the words they bring are unfulfilled. Those which come through the gate of polished horn, once some mortal sees them, bring on the truth. (Book XIX)

This passage illustrates human hesitation toward the unknown and the presence of supernatural elements interfering in real life. This is an illustration of the uncanny aspect of dreams for an ordinary person like Penelope who is not familiar with the interference of gods in her life. Analyzing the role of dreams in Homer, Louise Pratt (1994) calls the reader's attention to Penelope's skeptical and cautious approach. According to her:

The problem of the dream-sign's interpretation seems to embody precisely this uncertainty. By one interpretation, she should hold out for Odysseus will soon come home and slay the suitors. By the other, her twenty years of waiting have come to naught; she must mourn her husband and take a new one. That Penelope seems to doubt the interpretation of the bird sign offered within the dream by the eagle and to fear another less positive interpretation is typical of her skeptical and cautious approach in the final books of the Odyssey (1994, p.152).

The skeptical and cautious approach highlighted by Pratt regarding Penelope does not represent Ulysses' approach to dreams. Although he recognizes the difficulties of interpreting dreams, he believes they contain real messages from gods. It seems he appreciates his experiences with supernatural interventions for transforming him into a prudent and cunning man. Apparently, the intensity of a supernatural event depends on how opened man is to supernatural intervention. For McNamara et al (2018), a central element for these proposals concerning supernatural manifestations is the issue of agency.

The idea of agency in humans implies the sense that one is the author of one's own action and that one has the power or capacity to cause things to happen and to implement desired or planned actions. Normal agents are organisms whose behaviors are partially caused by or influenced by their mental beliefs and desires… we will define a super-normal or supernatural agent as any conceived being (embodied or dis-embodied) that is thought to possess mental agentic powers outside the normal range of human agentic powers or experiences (2018, p. 430).

By way of explanation, one can infer that supernatural events or the way it is the way it is conceived by man depends on his mental state or his ability to deal with the subjectivities of the human mind. In this regard, as a literary genre, the fantastic has been characterized as presenting breaches of reality. This rupture with the real is, therefore, a fundamental effect of fantastic narratives which emerged and gained notoriety since ancient Egyptian civilization. The notion, for example, that the universe is governed by a supernatural mind or being appears in the works of the priests and sages of Egyptian civilization, as the historian Der Manuelian (2019) points out. For example, the ancient Egyptian *The Book of the Dead* was permeated by references to a supernatural universe, seeking different ways of explaining the world, life and human beings.

In both Gilgamesh and The Odyssey, the natural and supernatural cohabitate. In the Odyssey, beings such as Circe, Calypso and the Cyclops, who, despite being immortal and descendants of gods, do not fully enjoy the divine condition, but are subordinated to the will of the gods.

Lord Alcinous, most illustrious of men, it is a fine thing, in truth, to hear a bard such as this, with a godlike voice […] Calypso, the lovely goddess, kept me there in her echoing caves, because she wished me for her husband, and in the same way Circe, the Aeaean witch, detained me in her palace, longing to make me hers: but they failed to move my heart (Book IX)

Although they are supernatural, the interference of these entities in Ulysses' life is limited, suggesting that the hero also has his own natural power. Such a power is mainly internal, manifested in the form of wisdom, resilience, cunning and fortitude. Ulysses' wisdom consists largely in his cunning in dealing with the supernatural, gods and demigods. He has a natural gift for persuading gods to act in his favor. As well known, ancient Greek people believed gods controlled nature and guided their lives. Such god shad the power of ruling over some aspect of life and had their own way to communicate with man (Bremmer 2010; Denova, 2019; Ulanowski, 2020).

Some scholars have examined the relationship between ancient Greek and gods by the perspective of myths. Under which conditions did the Greeks" believe" in their myths? In order to answer this question, Carbon and Pirenne-Delforge (2012) raises connections to religion. For her, the Greek myth can be described as narratives rooted in the knowledge shared by a society or a community. These stories refer to the representation of the shared past by that specific human community and to the representation of the gods and the world that frame their present life. Such narratives are transformed during oral performance or written composition, but these variations are not random. They are restricted within certain limits and such adaptability is a measure of their vitality. The critics go on to state that the expressive power of "myth" and its capacity to illustrate the truth in one way or another survived the early Classical period, when its cultural and religious relevance began to be called into question. Furthermore, "mythical narratives seem to have incited critical debate as early as their first appearance in our Greek literary heritage" (39). The poem of Hesiod's Theogony is an important example of that. In this regard, Abd El Hak (2022) approaches that

The distinction between literature and myth is difficult in that myth cannot exist apart from literature and literature does not collapse in myth, there are both similarities and differences between literature and mythology. They are both significant human creations that will continue to play an essential role in the intellectual world. Literature will always have some element of myth, which will continue to impact our current world in the same manner that it has in the past. in addition, in many ways, these genres; folktale, legend and fable are tied to mythology with similarity and differences (2022, p.27).

For a long time, literary critics considered mythological narratives an element outside the literary universe because they were oral expressions with little artistic value. Now myths are pointed out as important resources to analyze man's relationship with supernatural or fantastic forces. Todorov (2012) approaches the thematic aspect of fantastic narratives by grouping them into two formal classes: the themes of the Self and the themes of the Thou. One of the themes of the Self is metamorphosis, which may include the existence of supernatural beings and their power over men and the unknown causality of change that he calls pandeterminism. According to this conception, everything must have its cause, even if the explanation is supernatural, and there is no such thing as chance, coincidence, or luck. The connection between metamorphosis and pandeterminism lies in breaking the boundary between the physical and the mental, between matter and spirit, between thing and word. In this aspect, Todorov seems to be in accordance with what McNamara et al (2018) have postulated regarding mental beliefs, desires and the religious aspects of ancient civilizations.

Mental characteristics of an individual and his beliefs in supernatural help is also present in The Epic Gilgamesh. The hero calls for helping in an expressive dialogue with Shamash:

Then Gilgamesh called to Shamash and his tears were flowing, 'O glorious Shamash, I have followed the road you commanded but now if you send no succour how shall I escape? Glorious Shamash heard his prayer and he summoned the great wind, the north wind, the whirlwind, the storm and the icy wind, the tempest and the scorching wind; they came like dragons, like a scorching fire, like a serpent that freezes the heart, a destroying flood and the lightning's fork. The eight winds rose up against Humbaba, they beat against his eyes; he was gripped, unable to go forward or back (Table IV)

Through the given examples, one can perceive a certain normalization of supernatural interference in human life, although such interference is possible only for the chosen ones. Like the Mesopotamian civilizations, the Greek produced mythological literature as a way to explain the inexplicable. Considering mythical or fantastic aspects, which appeal to transcendental or supernatural solutions to problems that human consciousness cannot solve, Greek culture developed what Todorov (2012) calls the everyday fantastic. For this civilization, behind the physical world, individuals and things possessed the power and influence of supernatural entities.

Also important for this discussion is the desire for immortality. This theme has passed through all civilizations throughout man's history and seems to be at the center of man's conflict with his own nature. Gilgamesh believes that immortality would give him a real meaning for life and his purpose in earth would be fulfilled. Even though he was created greater than all mortals, if he could not escape death then life would be worthless.

I have not established my name stamped on bricks as my destiny decreed; therefore, I will go to the country where the cedar is felled. I will set up my name in the place where the names of famous men are written, and where no man's name is written yet I will wise a monument to the gods. Because of the evil that is in the land, we will go to the forest and destroy the evil; for in the forest lives Humbaba whose name is "Hugeness", a ferocious giant…(Table II)

The existential conflict that Gilgamesh goes through moves him to challenge the monsters. Analyzing this passage from a historical perspective, it is possible to observe a connection to the Babylonian lifestyle which was submerged in the superstitious world of the inexplicable. These peoples practiced worship of demons and supernatural monsters. Human relations with supernatural forces became mandatory, as gods such as Nergal, the god of plague, and his demons and malevolent spirits lurked in the darkness to attack those who did not offer sacrifices and magic spells. (Der Manuelian (2019; Pirenne-Delforge, 2020). Belief in and worship of cosmic forces are important manifestations of the fantastic in these societies.

When comparatively analyzing Homer's Odyssey and The Epic of Gilgamesh, it is possible to notice different perspectives when it comes to the hero's perception of immortality. While Ulysses refuses the possibility to become immortal by rejecting Calypso's love, Gilgamesh's quest for immortality is his driving motivation throughout the narrative. Although both heroes seem to be in constant search for their essence, only Gilgamesh questions his mortal human nature. Such a difference could provide insight into the way each civilization dealt with supernatural forces and their interferences in everyday life.

According to the critic Brian Hoggard (2022), when one seeks to investigate supernatural forces in literary works, one is confronted with a number of elements present in everyday activities that go unnoticed. Such perception is important because it validates the premise that, in an eerie way, the fantastic narratives reflect our own memories, feelings and experiences through the characters' internal human struggles. For example, when the hero feels restless or hesitation before acting, this resonates with the reader, who surely has felt that familiar feeling before.

For the Chinese-born American geographer Yi-FuTuan (2005), throughout history, human consciousness of the supernatural has led to an immeasurable and intensified increase in horror or fantastic narratives throughout the world. Human minds have been permeated with ghostly beings, gods and monsters, which represent the fear of the unknown. Such supernatural beings and forces act as a metaphorical confrontation of an uncertain and unexplained existence. The fear of the unknown is evident in Gilgamesh: "Then Gilgamesh called to Shamash and his tears were flowing" (Table IV). Even though he is a strong and fearless warrior, Gilgamesh is afraid of death and the unknown, thus recognizing his mortal limitations and the superiority of supernatural entities that he cannot fight without the help of the gods.

Confrontations with supernatural power are also frequent in the Odyssey (Porter, 2022; Pirenne-Delforge, 2020). Considering that the human mind is a fertile soil for the creation of monsters and conflicts, many of the storms and conflicts that Ulysses encountered during his journey were part of his own monsters and fears. Because of his constant conflicts and doubts, the hero may represent man's affinity for faith in gods' protection, since at various points in the narrative, he seems unable to act or make decisions of his own.

Goddess," answered Ulysses, "all that you have said is true, but I am in some doubt as to how I shall be able to kill these wicked suitors single handed, seeing what a number of them there always are. And there is this further difficulty, which is still more considerable. Supposing that with Jove's and your assistance I succeed in killing them, I must ask you to consider where I am to escape to from their avengers when it is all over (Book XX).

In this passage, one can notice two conflicts that are always present in the mind: fear and doubt. For some critics, the fantastic genre is characterized by the uncertainties that may lay in the text, generating a sense of ambiguity that can be intensified according to the reader's perception. Considering this, Tzvetan Todorov (2012, p. 25) argues that the fantastic can be defined as:

[…] a world which is indeed our world [...], there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world. The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination – and laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is a part of reality – but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us [...] The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty.

As insinuated above, some critics of the fantastic field suggest that this kind of literature emerged as a way of addressing subjects censored in earlier times and of exploring taboos. Roas (2018), discussing fantastic stories, highlights that extraordinary things are perhaps hallucinations projected by our minds, or common things that perhaps harbor a second, disturbing nature. According to the author, these themes are the essence of the fantastic because they are incomprehensible, and they cause fear. So, we point out that fiction, combined with fear, were consolidated to reflect human problems and the philosophical debates.

In a similar perspective, the Argentine writer Júlio Cortazar is one of the authors who stands out in the field of fantastic literature by focusing on themes that evoke the fears and mysteries of the world and of man. Although Cortazar focuses on modern fiction, his ideas about the barriers of what is real and unreal can be applied when analyzing Gilgamesh and The Odyssey from the perspective of ancient times. Many characters in Cortazar's works experience feelings of deep anguish and fear. It is evident that Cortazar's fantastic writing seeks to reflect the image of a human who lives surrounded by fears, sadness, and anguish, since he has no control over his destiny.

Corroborating this thinking, Tuan (2005) argues that it is a mistake to think that human beings always seek stability and order. Anyone with experience knows that order is fleeting. Everyday accidents and the weight of external forces which we cannot control frighten us and cause us to yearn for answers, even if we cannot completely gain control or maintain order. Thus, once the fantastic is juxtaposed with fear, there is the possibility of representing the relationship between humans and our uncertain environment.

In Homer's The Odyssey, reason seems to be the main weapon to defeat fear. In this regard, Adorno and Horkheimer (2006) point out The Odyssey as the allegory of the supremacy of human reason over natural and even supernatural forces. The way Ulysses deals rationally with his journey and the dangers he faces represent rationality's place as the instrument with which man may triumph over an unknown world. Ulysses' cunning or wisdom would be the first manifestation of reason and its role in dominating the irrational. The end of the narrative can be interpreted as the demonstration that reason is capable of overcoming all obstacles and imposing itself as the only tool for navigating the relationship between man and his environment.

Likewise, reason plays a significant role in the narrative of Gilgamesh. By using reason, the hero changes his behavior and personality to become more humanized. In the beginning, he was described as irrational: "His teeth are dragon's fangs, his countenance is like a lion his charge is the rushing of the flood..." (table I). Despite this rash description, Gilgamesh goes through a process of rationalization, a transformation that makes him truly praised by his people. In this sense, reason was also an important instrument and weapon to fight against supernatural powers.

4 Final Considerations

As one can see, fantastic elements played a significant role in life in ancient civilizations. As an attempt to respond to man's concerns, fantastic narratives have been part of our daily lives since antiquity. First in the form of oral tales and later written, this type of narrative has circulated over time as an integral part of cultural traditions, as an expression of the collective unconscious, or as a way of explaining the inexplicable.

The Epic of Gilgamesh, Homer's Iliad and Odyssey epics, and the One Thousand and One Nights Tales are examples of how the human imagination has dreamed up fantastic and supernatural elements since ancient times, or perhaps, since the dawn of human consciousness. These narratives have been source of inspiration for innumerable works of literature, cinema, and theater, among other artistic expressions.

The fantastic is closely linked to men's fears, dreams and fantasies. The constant search for answers causes people to create alternate worlds of heroes who fight everyday battles against the unknown, often generated by their own fears. That's why fantastic narratives have enchanted humanity since ancient civilizations. However, as Roas (2018) suggests, it is essential to bear in mind the reception of the text since the fantastic event is fundamentally directed toward the reader once the supernatural or impossible phenomenon has no other purpose than to make us question the idea of reality.

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