[Your Name]

[Instructor Name]

[Course Number]

[Date]

The Epic of Gilgamesh/Snow White

**Introduction**

‘Gender’ and ‘Sex’ are generally perceived synonyms to one another that can be used interchangeably in our daily conversation, but World Health Organization (WHO) differentiates between the two considering 'sex' as a biological term and 'gender' as a sociological one. 'Gender' thus refers to the socially attributes to a man and women. Gender determines our social roles to be acceptable members of society. For instance, the type of dress, the male/females codes of language, a male version of how to behave in a particular situation and vice versa, typical father/mother roles in a family, and workplace cites that are categorized according to male/female kinds of people. A person who goes against the socially attributed behavior is considered aberrant. The *post-modern* literature is identical in challenging this status-quo of fixed social roles, unlike traditional literature. For example, the Aristotelian theory about a hero had been considered a universal truth where the *hero* of a story must be a *man* until the appearance of woman heroes started in *post-modern* literature. Great post-modern movies like *Resident Evil (a long series), Hunger Games (2012),* and *Salt (2010)* all have female heroes. The feature of going against social norms regarding gender is rare in traditional literature albeit there are still some exceptions. An ancient Mesopotamian epic *The Epic of Gilgamesh (2100 BC)* and a 19th-century German fairy tale *Snow White and The Seven Dwarfs (1812)* are the instances where the characters go against their gender roles in the context of their circumstances. Gilgamesh is a strong male Pries-King who rules with cruelty, and a general social perception about such a monarch is that he must have loyal men as his servants and ministers, but his intimate relationship must be with a girl not with a man. Gilgamesh unlikely shows compassion to a male character Enkidu. The fairy tale on the other side revolves around three female characters. Snow White is the protagonist and her wicked step-mother is the antagonist. The male characters have an insignificant representation as they appear being the supporting characters of the story, unlike contemporary Europe where society was having a typical *patriarchal* structure. Man has assumed a leading character in the patriarchal structure of a society. Following is the detail of how the characters of the mentioned stories challenge their gender roles.

**Body**

*The Epic of Gilgamesh (2100 BC)* is an ancient story carved out from tablets that portray a Mesopotamian Priest-King of Uruk having compassion for a male character Enkidu. Mesopotamia had a strict patriarchal structure where men were the leading community and the women were second class citizens after them. A man’s falling in love with a woman was not an odd thing, and doing something unprecedented for a woman was also a practice, but this love relationship was supposed to be between the opposite genders. Faithful friendships were the norm, but a man’s madness for another man was an odd thing. This epic displays a strong and cruel male king who had absolute authority over his kingdom but had a different attitude from traditional men. In the epic, Gilgamesh has all the male traits and he is too fond of women that he sleeps with the newly wedded brides for one night before they go to their husbands, but when Ishtar, a goddess, asks her to be her lover, he denies categorically. On the other side, he shows compassion to a giant man Enkidu. He observes him in his dreams and glamorizes his appearance calling him a strong, beautiful, and adorable creature. Gilgamesh reveals his dream to his mother and says that he saw Enkidu and "I loved it and embraced it as a wife” *(The Epic of Gilgamesh,* N. p., 2100 BC). This seems an odd feeling of a strong male character for another male character equal to him. Gays and lesbians are not considered aberrant today, but we are talking about millennia-old Mesopotamian culture. Gilgamesh fights against Enkidu for once when he encounters him but the rest of Enkidu’s life passes in Gilgamesh’s company. They stay together and fight together against Humbaba (the guard of Cedar castle) and every other enemy of Gilgamesh. They live together happily and go for adventures. Gilgamesh is too busy with Enkidu that he rejects Ishtar’s proposal and blames her for being unfaithful (Harris, P.P 219-230). Enkidu is created by the gods to stop Gilgamesh from oppressing people, but he also gets involved in Gilgamesh’s business that enrages the gods. Enkidu is cursed by the Mesopotamian gods to painful and inglorious death which leaves Gilgamesh distressed. He abandons wearing delicate dresses and runs through woods. He recalls Enkidu saying: “Enkidu, whom I love deeply, who went through every hardship with me” *(The Epic of Gilgamesh,* N. p., 2100 BC.). This statement of Gilgamesh reveals the depth of his love for Enkidu. The story reveals that Gilgamesh mourned Enkidu for a long time. This is not a king’s behavior: kings used to love their friends in the ancient civilizations but this madness has little representation in the known history or literature. Moreover, the traditional compassion of a man is towards a woman as socially constructed ideas about gender demand. Gilgamesh, thus have challenged the social attributes.

*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (1812)* is a fairy tale pregnant with characters who challenge their gender roles, the antagonist also upholds one of the gender characteristics. This tale is taken from the *Grimm’s Fairy Tales* that were composed by two German philologist Brothers Grimm, Jacob (1785-1863) and Wilhelm (1786-1859). The story opens with the description of a queen who wishes to have a child as white as snow, as red as blood, and as black as ebony. This description foretells the appearance of a remarkable hero. Such descriptions were provided in stories before the appearance of male protagonists to glamorize their appearance. The hero of this story appears but it is a female: Snow White. She has all the characteristics her mother wished for, but her birth causes the death of her mother. The description of her father is too insignificant that he is described only to introduce the antagonist of the story that is also a female character: “the King took another wife, a beautiful woman, but proud and overbearing” *(Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, N. p., 1812). Snow White, thus, appears as an animus character and the other queen (her step-mother) as her rival. The whole story portrays the conflict of two female characters and all the male characters are used as side characters. The wicked woman sends Snow White to the woods and orders her servant to kill her there. He pities her and spares her life but does not play any heroic role to save a suppressed young girl. She is left alone and helpless in the forest where she struggles to save her life and does not hesitate to enter a strange house of the dwarfs. The princess' sudden disappearance does not activate her father to search for her. While the story revolves around the wicked woman's unsuccessful attempts to kill Snow White. The queen challenges her gender role of being lenient and obedient to her husband and of depending upon him for the fulfillment of every desire rather she disguises herself and goes to kill her rival.

The queen where challenges one socially constructed idea of being a feeble and fragile character that is always dependent on men, she upholds the other social idea about beauty. Her focus is that being a queen she should be the most beautiful woman in her society, or otherwise she should die. Women were considered envious of one another in terms of beauty, and they were considered more superstitious than men in the contemporary social context of this tale. Snow Whites' step-mother has both the characteristics that on one hand she is envious of Snow White and at the other she believes is in the prophecies of a speaking mirror: "And the looking-glass would answer, “You are fairest of them all” *(Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, N. p., 1812).

**Conclusion**

Gender roles are those characteristics that are attributed to men and women by social peers. These characteristics are not fixed and they vary from culture to culture. *The Epic of Gilgamesh* portrays an ancient Mesopotamian king Gilgamesh who defied his gender attribution and fell in love with a man Enkidu although he was supposed to be in love with a woman. *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* is a 19th-century fairy tale, where the protagonist Snow White and the antagonist her step-mother are the only apparent characters in the tale although they are female. Female protagonist and antagonist is not the feature on 19th-century literature. They both challenge their gender roles and go out of the way in the persuasion of their objectives: one is killing the other, and the other saving her life.

**Works Cited**

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