

**LIFE, LOVE, LIMINALITY:
A MYTHIC AND LITERARY ANALYSIS OF INANNA AND ISHTAR**

Emma Burrell

2127558

2026

Dissertation submitted to the
University of Wales Trinity Saint David
for the degree of
MA Ancient Religions

Abstract

About 5000 years ago, history states that a group of people migrated from further East and settled in the fertile plain between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Their civilisation is regarded as one of the earliest civilisations in the world, and even now, their name is well known throughout the world. They had an understanding of complex sciences such as astronomy and mathematics. They produced the first writing system and had a comprehensive legal and judicial system. They were, of course, the people of Sumer and Babylon, the Mesopotamians. They also had a well-developed religious life. Their cosmogonic myths laid down how and why the world came to be, and how the gods structured and ordered it. They had narratives that explained everything from astronomical phenomena to the gamut of human experience, from birth to death and beyond.

Inanna, or Ishtar as she was also known, was an important figure in the religion of the Mesopotamians, and many of the myths from their religion included her, either as a main figure or tangentially. Customarily, she is described as the goddess of love and war, in a similar vein to Freya of the Old Norse pantheon. Yet her most well-known narrative, The Descent of Inanna, did not seem to relate to either of these domains but rather to the underworld. This work examines some of the tales the goddess appears in, to determine if these divine domains are correctly ascribed to her. The work then suggests that these domains may only be aspects of her true domain, and puts forth the suggestion that Inanna is in fact a goddess of the thresholds and boundaries, of liminality.

Declaration Form

Master's Degrees by Examination and Dissertation

Declaration Form

1. This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

Name Emma Burrell

Date 5 January 2026

2. This dissertation is being submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts – Ancient Religions

Name Emma Burrell

Date 5 January 2026

3. This dissertation is the result of my own independent work/investigation, except where otherwise stated.

Other sources are acknowledged by footnotes giving explicit references.

A bibliography is appended.

Name Emma Burrell

Date 5 January 2026

4. I hereby give consent for my dissertation, if accepted, to be available for photocopying, inter- library loan, and for deposit in the University's digital repository

Name Emma Burrell

Date 5 January 2026

Supervisor's Declaration.

I am satisfied that this work is the result of the student's own efforts.

Signed:

Date:

Acknowledgements

I am extremely grateful to Dr Matthew Cobb, Professor Jane Cartwright, Dr Dorian Greenbaum, Professor Louise Steel, and Professor Nick Campion, for their support throughout my time with the University, especially Professor Campion, for taking on the supervision of this dissertation. I am also grateful to the pastoral and administration staff for their help and support when life decided to take a sharp downward turn.

Thanks are also extended to my children, for picking up my slack while I worked on this, to Rosalind Orchard, for her very constructive criticism and support, and to Keith Lesser, who has been my rock.

Table of Contents

Abstract	i
Declaration Form	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Table of Contents	iv
Introduction	1
Research Questions and Methodology	3
Literature Review	5
Sources	9
Is Inanna associated with love as believed?	10
Is Inanna associated with war, battle and conflict as believed?	19
Are there any other areas with which Inanna is associated?	29
Is there a way to reconcile these disparate aspects of the goddess into a cohesive whole?	37
Conclusion	43
Bibliography	46

Introduction

*'Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!'
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.*

(Shelley, 1987, p191)

Once, there was a land between two rivers, and it was lush and fertile. Once, there were a people who lived in there, who ploughed and irrigated it, and grew crops of barley, grapes, and dates upon it, who tended their herds of cows, goats and sheep within it. The rivers were the Tigris and Euphrates, and the time was circa 5,000 years ago. History says the people migrated from further East to settle there in the Mesopotamian plains, but their cosmogonic myths told them the gods created them there, in what they regarded as the centre of the world. Over the next two thousand years, the people of Sumer and Akkad, the Mesopotamians, built a civilisation there in that land between the two rivers, and it is regarded as one of the earliest civilisations of the world. The name of Babylon was well known throughout the world even when the lands that nurtured it were no longer lush but desert, when the city was buried under sand and dust, and no trace remained of the people.

While there has been some intermittent excavation of fired brick and other items from the sites of their cities over the last few centuries, it is really only in the last hundred years or so that we have come to discover much about the people who built them. They produced the first known writing system, cuneiform, and recorded much of their culture on clay tablets that were fired and stored in record archives. As these are unearthed and translated, our knowledge of their society expands and becomes richer and more detailed. They were proficient in mathematics, architecture, and the sciences such as astronomy, and had a comprehensive legal and judicial system. As well as an understanding of complex sciences, these people also had a well-developed religious life. Their cosmogonic myths laid down how and why the world came to be, and how the gods structured and ordered it. They had tales explaining how and why people were created, and their places and roles in creation. Their religion had tales that explained

everything from astronomical phenomena to the gamut of human experience, from birth to death and beyond, and how to act in all of these situations.

In these religious tales, several of those inscribed in Sumerian refer to a goddess known as Inanna, calling her Queen of Heaven, and the Morning and Evening Star; in Assyrian, there are tales referring to a goddess with those same epithets as Ishtar. In some of the tales, such as *The Descent of Ishtar*, or *Inanna and Enki*, she is one of the main protagonists; in others, such as the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, she is present as an antagonist towards the main protagonist. There is wide-ranging consensus these two names in actuality refer to the same goddess. In this essay, for general reference, she will be referred to as Inanna, but it should be understood that quotes and references to Ishtar are referring to the same goddess. Similarly, the other gods will be called by their Sumerian names, i.e. Nanna, Dumuzi, and Utu, but references to Sin, Tammuz and Shamash refer to the same gods.

Research Questions and Methodology

It is widely believed that Inanna is the goddess associated with love in all its forms, platonic, familial and carnal. However, she is also widely understood to be a goddess associated with war, battle and conflict.

In this essay, I will endeavour to provide an answer to the following questions:

- Is Inanna associated with love as believed?
- Is Inanna associated with war, battle and conflict as believed?
- Are there any other areas with which Inanna is associated?

Once a determination is made in response to these questions, by analysing the myths and tales in which she appears, the essay will endeavour to provide an answer to a further question:

- Is there a way to reconcile these disparate aspects of the goddess into a cohesive whole?

These questions arise, especially the latter, as the two spheres of influence understood to be under Inanna's purview seem to be disparate and, it could be said, diametrically opposed to each other. This essay will examine and analyse the myths in which she appears. It will then seek to reconcile these ostensibly opposing facets, looking for similarities between them to determine if in fact Inanna's main mandate was a more fundamental aspect which lies beneath, and contributes to, these spheres of influence.

The main issue faced in this endeavour is that of translation. As I do not speak or read Sumerian or Akkadian, it is necessary to work through translations of the original texts, and therefore I am reliant on the English translation from the source text. But there is the issue

“that at all levels there are profound differences, that languages do not simply map on to one another in straightforward ways [and] these differences range from apparently trivial ones, to those which reflect significant divergences in perception, belief or social organisation”

(Cook, 2012, p269).

In addition, “translating is not only a linguistic act, it is also a cultural one. [It] always involves both language and culture simply because the two cannot really be separated” (House, 2012, p290). Any translator will have to make stylistic choices in the target language, English, in order to portray what is meant in the original, both for each word and for the culturally embedded meanings of the words and phrases used. Each word or phrase the translator chooses for the translation will carry different connotations. This can be seen in the equivalent phrases ‘cabin in the woods’ and ‘cottage in the forest’; the former is a horror trope, while the latter is more likely in a romantic comedy genre, but both refer to a domicile surrounded by trees. Ideally, in order to minimise this issue, this essay would use at least two different translations of each of the main texts, so any bias from the translator would be mitigated as much as possible. Unfortunately, with the exception of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, I have only one translation of the relevant texts.

The analysis and arguments of this work will be using primarily discourse analysis due to the nature of the subject matter being mainly textual. The translation issue will definitely impact the analysis of such things as metonymy, but such features as repetition should still be clearly visible in the translations.

Schema theory states that “when authors write, they use various kinds of knowledge which they share with the reader (linguistic, contextual, general world knowledge) to constrain the reader into interpreting what he or she reads in a particular way” (Short, 1996, p9). Hopefully, by using discourse analysis on the texts as much as is possible, this essay can attempt to extract the particular schema held in common by the author and the original reader regarding the goddess Inanna, and thereafter determine what her actual spheres of influence were.

Literature Review

The search for and excavation of Babylon and the civilisation that built it has been ongoing for some centuries. Tanner (2002) details some of the earliest explorers to search for it, from Ibn Hawkal in the 10th century through Benjamin Bar Joanna in 1160 and Rauwolff and Eldred in the late 1500s. He spends some time on Pietro della Valle who first correctly identified the site of Babylon in 1616 and made further visits in later years, and it seems “he was the first to send copies of cuneiform inscriptions back to Europe” (Vos, 1979-1988, quoted in Tanner, 2002, p5). Further archaeological expeditions continued to be made to the site over the 18th and 19th centuries, with excavations being made and discoveries of artefacts and more cuneiform writing being sent back to Europe. The translation of the cuneiform writing is in large part thanks to diplomat and skilled linguist Henry Rawlinson in 1846. He deciphered the Bisitun inscription, and in 1850 published the decoding of the script. He continued to translate inscriptions once he returned to Britain.

The original understanding of the tales of Inanna and the other gods have undergone significant revision over time. At one point in his work *Tammuz and Ishtar*, Langdon quotes the translation “For the child who maketh glad his palace no more / Holy Innini in Eanna laments” (1914, p10) and promptly describes “the figure of the desolate mother wandering in barren fields ... wailing for the lost son and lover” (Langdon, 1914, p10). The author seems to be focusing mainly on Tammuz in this work, but where Inanna is referred to, she is determined to be a nature or mother goddess, although he makes it clear that “a considerable portion of the official liturgy is devoted to the descent of Innini [Inanna] into Hades to find Tammuz” (Langdon, 1914, p16). The work raises some interesting points regarding her astral aspect and her relationship with nature, and it is already clear at this point that the goddess is connected with both sexual activity and with war. However, it is worth noting some Eurocentric bias bleeds through; Langdon states “primitive peoples do not think in abstract terms” (1914, p43), and there is a determination to identifying correlations between their religion and Christianity, often at the expense of recognising their religion as a distinct and vibrant spiritual system in its own right.

Samuel Kramer was regarded as a noted Assyriologist; Sjöberg, in his biography of Kramer, stated he “really rediscovered the whole Sumerian literature” (1994, p171), while Jacobsen said “the field may be said to have been completely transformed, almost created by him” (Jacobsen, quoted in Sjöberg, 1994, p171). He started working in the field in 1933, and in 1944, he published his work *Sumerian Mythology: A Study of Spiritual and Literary Achievement in the Third Millennium*. At this point, he stated that “approximately five thousand” (Kramer, pvii) pieces of literature had been produced from the excavation of archaeological sites, while the “translation and interpretation of the Sumerian literary compositions have made relatively little progress to date” (Kramer, 1961, pviii). Kramer first translated *The Descent of Inanna* in 1936, and described it as a “charming and significant story” (1961, p31). In 1961, he revised the work and republished it, mentioning that “curious as it may seem ...[she] was conceived not only as the goddess of love but also as the goddess of battle and strife” (1961, p82). He also includes the most recent translation of *The Descent of Inanna* to date in the work.

This conception of her dominion being these two domains was also held by HWF Saggs, who commented the “union in one deity of these two disparate conceptions is paradoxical to the modern mind” (1966, p333). He also mentions that Inanna possibly originated as part of “a very early fertility cult” (1966, p334), and Langdon argues similarly that she was from antiquity the fertility of the earth, the mother and sister to Tammuz as the dying and rising god (1914). However, Jacobsen expands and explains this more clearly, arguing she began as “the date storehouse ... [whose] range was early extended to that of the storehouse generally, including wool, meat, and grain” (1976, p135), and further that she has “a good many more aspects, ... so many different ones in fact that one is inclined to wonder whether several, originally different deities have not here coalesced in one” (Jacobsen, 1976, p135). This possible syncretism may account for her disparate domains in origin, but it begs the question why these disparate deities were syncretised in the first place, unless they shared a basic similarity. Jacobsen explains many of Inanna’s aspects in turn, and finishes with a section titled “Variety and Contradictions” (1976, p141). But he also makes clear the tales including her presented “their infinite variety as but facets of one believable divine personality” (Jacobsen, 1976, p141).

In 1983, Samuel Kramer partnered with Diana Wolkstein to produce *Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth*. He described this text as an “effective cooperation between ... a folklorist ... and a cuneiformist” (1983, pxiii), but it appears to be much more than that. In the 20 years since he first translated *The Descent of Inanna*, and fuelled by the discovery of further fragments and tablets, and a more complete grasp of the language, Kramer, working with Wolkstein, has revisited *The Descent of Inanna* to provide newer and more comprehensive translations that have been turned into the poem contained therein. As such, the translations are likely to be as accurate as possible for the time the text was composed, arranged in such a way as to make it easier for the modern reader to understand and enjoy. In order for this to happen, they have discarded many of the repeated sections, and have added explanatory phrases where necessary. This is not meant to be an academic text where each word has been transliterated completely accurately, but one which will share the stories of Inanna with a wider audience.

During this same decade, renowned Assyriologist Stephanie Dalley provided a much-needed translation of several stories from the Mesopotamian area in her work *Myths from Mesopotamia* which was intended to be as accurate as possible while still being readable. The author acknowledges that by writing the translation in more modern English, archaic terms and affectations were avoided, so those in search of proper translations which discuss the range of possible word choices and other difficulties of translation are encouraged to look elsewhere. Mention is also made that it is not only likely but expected that future scholars will be able to improve on her efforts. While somewhat older than some of the texts used here, the risks of it being outdated are small compared with the author’s knowledge and depth of understanding of the source material.

By this time, Inanna’s spheres of influence were being further investigated. In 1991, Rivkah Harris’s article *Inanna-Ishtar as Paradox and a Coincidence of Opposites* investigates the underlying reason for the goddess having dominion over both love and war. In this article, Harris mentions both the goddess’s “bloodthirstiness, her love of war and carnage” (1991, p269) and her aspect of love, both the “compassionate, maternal” (1991, p264) love and her “hypersexuality” (Harris, 1991, p264). Harris reconciles these two disparate domains by arguing the goddess “encompasses the two forms of potential

disorder and violence – sex and war” (1991, p270). She further states everything about the goddess “reflect[s] her anomalousness and liminality” (Harris, 1991, p273).

By 2000, the poems of Enheduanna had become available for study, and Betty De Shong Meador published the translations in *Inanna Lady of the Largest Heart*. Far from being merely the goddess of love and strife, Meador states “more than any other goddess or god in the Sumerian pantheon, Inanna embodies the totality of ‘What Is’ [and] she is their version of a personification of the whole of reality” (2000, p12). At the same time, similar to Harris, she argues the goddess was “an attempt to bring together the seemingly chaotic forces of the universe into one unifying, and therefore orienting, personification” (2000, p16).

Caitlin Barrett, in her 2007 article *Was Dust Their Food and Clay Their Bread? Grave Goods, the Mesopotamian Afterlife, and the Liminal Role of Inana/Ishtar*, argued the grave goods and other items found in archaeological excavations and the Descent tales are evidence for Inanna being a “liminal figure” (2007, p27) associated with the “boundary between life and death” (2007, p27), so giving her an underworld aspect in addition to her aspects of goddess of love and goddess of war. Barrett, after discussing this aspect, agrees with Harris that Inanna is “a profoundly liminal figure who embodied the idea of contradictions [and who was] particularly concerned with transitions and the breaking down of boundaries between different spheres of existence” (2007, p56).

This exploration of the goddess continued, and in 2007, Joan Goodnick Westenholz contributed a chapter entitled *Inanna and Ishtar in the Babylonian World* to Gwendolyn Leick’s book *The Babylonian World*. In it, she traces the evolution of the goddess Inanna through history. Her work argues that originally these were two different goddesses, Inanna of the Sumerians and Ishtar of the Akkadians. In the beginning, she states, the worship of Inanna became widespread through syncretism with other local goddesses. Later, when the two cultures were co-existing and intermingling, some parallels were noticed between Inanna and Ishtar, and over time, the two overlapping but distinct individuals were combined into one character, complete with all the contradictory facets. (Westenholz, 2007)

Sources

This analysis will focus mainly on tales containing Inanna as the main character, but will also draw on other tales to support or refine the interpretation given here. Analysis will be undertaken of all tales simultaneously, so that comparisons can be made between them, showing similarities and differences. Such differences may arise from the schema and backgrounds of these various translators, and so an overview of these translators and their unique perspective and style needs to be presented; the conclusions can be borne in mind during the remaining analysis.

Some of the main tales including Inanna as the main character could be seen as a journey. In the beginning is *The Huluppu Tree*, followed *The Courtship of Inanna and Dumuzi*, then *Inanna and the God of Wisdom*, or *Inanna and Enki* as it is also known, and finally the tales of her descent to the Underworld. Not included in this arc are other tales such as *Inanna and Shukaletuda*. Also, in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Inanna appears as a secondary character, and her interactions there appear to be relevant to the questions being asked here.

Kramer & Wolkstein's version of *The Huluppu Tree*, *The Courtship of Inanna and Dumuzi*, *Inanna and the God of Wisdom*, and *The Descent of Inanna* will be one translation being used. These works are likely to be technically accurate, due to Kramer's expertise and insight into Sumerian (Sjoberg, 1994). The text is also more aesthetically pleasing than the direct translation, likely due to the influence of Wolkstein, as her work was primarily around folklore and storytelling (Library of Congress, 2025).

The versions of *The Descent of Ishtar* and the *Epic of Gilgamesh* provided by Dalley's *Myths of Mesopotamia* will also be used. When Dalley translates the first section of the former tale, she selects quite simple words, which appears to demonstrate a straightforward way of translating. Given that Dalley was a teacher of Assyriology at the University of Oxford, with a large list of publications in the field (University of Oxford, 2025), it is very likely that her word choices in translation will be close to the terms and connotations used in the source text.

Is Inanna associated with love as believed?

In English, the word love covers many areas, and when considering Inanna's spheres of influence, it would be incumbent upon us to scrutinise the tales for evidence of each of these areas in turn. The analysis will therefore focus firstly on the familial and platonic relationships Inanna has in these tales, followed by her romantic relationships, and finally her carnal relationships. This examination will focus on whether these types of love were actually within her purview.

Inanna was one part of a divine family, the pantheon of this religion. In *The Descent of Ishtar* she is explicitly described as "Ishtar daughter of Sin" (Dalley, 1989, p155), in *The Courtship of Inanna and Dumuzi* Ningal is referred to as "the mother who bore her" (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p35), while in both *The Huluppu Tree* and *The Courtship of Inanna and Dumuzi*, her sibling relationship to Utu is mentioned; "Inanna called to her brother Utu" (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p6) and "The brother spoke to his younger sister. The Sun God, Utu, spoke to Inanna" (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p30). Additionally, in the Descent tales, Ereshkigal is referred to as Inanna's elder sister; there is a comment to her of "your sister Ishtar" (Dalley, 1989, p155) in *The Descent of Ishtar*, and a comment by Inanna of "my older sister Ereshkigal" (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p55) in *The Descent of Inanna*, but no mention is made of Ereshkigal being the daughter of either Nanna or Ningal.

Inanna's relationship with her mother Ningal only appears to be referenced in *The Courtship of Inanna and Dumuzi*. She apparently values her mother's advice as she was "counselled ... [and acted] at her mother's command" (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p35). Inanna takes the advice her mother gave her, indicating she at least respects her mother in some fashion.

However, her relationship with her brother Utu in *The Courtship of Inanna and Dumuzi* and in *The Huluppu Tree* does not necessarily follow this same pattern. Instead of dutifully carrying out her chores of collecting the flax, preparing it and spinning it into cloth, Utu declares he will carry out these chores for her in preparation of her marriage. Inanna then asks, "Brother, after you've brought my bridal sheet to me, Who will go to bed with me?" (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p31). When Utu tells her it will be Dumuzi,

she argues with him and he remonstrates with her, “Why are you unwilling?” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p32) and tries unsuccessfully to persuade her.

Further evidence of the relationship between Utu and Inanna can be seen in the tale *The Huluppu Tree*. In this tale, Inanna finds the eponymous tree and transports it to her garden so that she can tend it, and when it is grown, she intends to harvest it to create her throne and bed. When various unsavoury creatures took up residence within the tree, Inanna requested Utu’s help in removing them. She “called to her brother Utu, saying ... I wept. How I wept!” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, pp6-7) and yet “Utu, the valiant warrior, Utu, would not help his sister, Inanna” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p7).

These interactions give rise to some suppositions about the relationship between Utu and Inanna. Firstly, Inanna is still living in her mother’s house and is unmarried, so it is likely that she is still young and probably chaste. Her appeals to her mother and brother for aid are also likely due to her youth, inexperience and lack of knowledge of her own desires and choices. While her actions in relation to her mother appear to conform to the cultural dictates for her behaviour at this stage of her life, her youthfulness may also be apparent in another way; she displays what could in modern times be termed teenage wilfulness in response to her brother’s decisions about her life. Secondly, when requesting aid from Utu, she emphasised her weeping. Clearly however, her distress, whether real or melodramatic, was not enough to persuade Utu to aid her. Given his lack of aid and her unwillingness to defer to his decision, their relationship does not appear to be close and supportive.

This essay will now turn attention on Inanna’s relationship with her father Nanna, and whether this is representative of a goddess of love. In *The Courtship of Inanna and Dumuzi*, she is quick to boast of his power, saying “Without my father, Nanna, you’d have no roof” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p34), but he does not appear in the tale in person. He does appear in *The Descent of Inanna*; when Inanna is in the underworld, her servant requests help from him to bring her back. His response however is not encouraging:

“Father Nanna answered angrily:

‘My daughter craved the Great Above.

Inanna craved the Great Below.

She who receives the *me* of the underworld does not return.

She who goes to the Dark City stays there”

(Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p62)

Nanna here refers to the *me*, a fundamental concept within the culture. They are described as a “set of universal and immutable rules and limits” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p123) which kept “the cosmic entities and cultural phenomena operating continuously and harmoniously without conflict and confusion” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p123). The *me* are both concepts, such as kindness or deceit or the one mentioned here, and physical items which in some way embody the concept, as Dumuzi wears *me*-garments and the *me* are loaded into the boat in the same way as any other cargo.

Nanna’s actions do not seem to be the actions of an adoring father, rather he seems willing to let Inanna suffer the consequences of her actions. But there could be an alternative way to read this. Nanna, as the Moon god, was not only an astral deity. Meador shares that “the waning moon seemed to represent the moon god’s journey towards the underworld, where ... Nanna visited Lord Nergal, god of the underworld and ‘decreed fates for the dead’” (2000, p54). From this it can be seen that he is also an underworld deity, one of the judges of the dead, and as such it could be supposed that he must abide by the laws of the underworld. The anger in the above quote could have been because he wished to aid Inanna, but was unable to due to that role.

Three more familial relationships remain to be investigated. In *The Descent of Inanna*, two sons are mentioned for Inanna, Shara and Lulal. When Inanna and the galla first approach them, they are described as “dressed in a soiled sackcloth” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p70). Inanna then describes Shara as “my son who sings hymns to me” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p70) and Lulal “is my right arm. He is my left arm.” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p71). While there is no other mention of these individuals in these tales, it is clear from these extracts that they are important to Inanna, and that Inanna is important to them, as they are grieving. However, their relationships do not seem to follow a typical mother-son pattern, as Shara provides a service to her, and Lulal acts for her, rather than her providing maternal care to them.

The final close familial bond known is with Ereshkigal, Queen of the Underworld. Initially, in *The Descent of Inanna*, it seems that Inanna is acting out of a sibling bond, as she says “Because ... of my older sister Ereshkigal, her husband, Gugalanna, the Bull of Heaven, has died. I have come to witness the funeral rites.” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p55). This does not satisfy Ereshkigal; she “slapped her thigh and bit her lip” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p56). Given that in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Inanna is instrumental in the Bull of Heaven being released and subsequently killed by Gilgamesh and Enkidu, Ereshkigal’s reluctance is understandable. Alternatively, in *The Descent of Ishtar*, the goddess gives no reason for her visit, but the text states Ereshkigal’s face “grew livid as cut tamarisk, her lips grew dark as the rim of a *kuninu*-vessel ... [and she asked] ‘What has incited her against me?’” (Dalley, 1989, pp155-156). In neither case do the actions of Ereshkigal indicate welcome, happiness or sisterly love at the visit of her younger sister.

One relationship appears in these tales which does not appear to be familial, romantic or sexual in nature, that of Inanna and Ninshubar. In *Inanna and the God of Wisdom*, when Inanna is returning to her home with the *me* bestowed upon her by Enki, Ninshubar is the individual who prevents Enki and his creatures from retrieving them. Ninshubar also appears in *The Descent of Inanna* as the envoy sent to the temples to ensure Inanna can return from the Underworld, although it should be noted that in *The Descent of Ishtar*, the individual filling this role instead is named Papsukkal (Dalley, 1989, p158).

Ninshubar acts both times to support Inanna’s intentions, which could be described as friendship, a platonic kind of love. Simultaneously, Ninshubar is described in the former tale as “the faithful servant of the holy shrine of Uruk, ... my *sukkal* who gives me wise advice, my warrior who fights by my side” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p21) and in the latter, Inanna describes her as “faithful servant [and] constant support” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p53). While the relationship between the two may have included friendship or love, it clearly has as its basis a master and servant or employer and employee relationship first and foremost, rather than a devoted relationship between equals.

Having investigated the instances of familial and platonic love, this analysis will now move to investigate instances of romantic love and carnal love. While such evidence appears to be lacking in the tale *The Huluppu Tree*, there appears to be some in *Inanna and the God of Wisdom*, and it is most assuredly present in *The Courtship of Inanna and Dumuzi* and the *Epic of Gilgamesh*.

Firstly, the tale of *Inanna and the God of Wisdom* will be examined. Enki is described as “he whose ears are wide open, he who knows the *me*, the holy laws of heaven and earth” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p12), and it was Enki who was responsible for distributing these to the various gods. The intended audience would have known him as a powerful and cunning individual.

In the tale, before visiting Enki, Inanna prepares herself; as well as donning her crown, she visits the shepherd and when she leans “against the apple tree, her vulva was wondrous to behold” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p12). Clearly in this tale, she is no longer a child, she has entered, or is just entering, womanhood and she is preparing to take on an adult role. Later on, Enki gets drunk and bestows upon Inanna many of the *me*, which she gladly accepts and transports back to her home base of Uruk. Inanna acknowledges the gifts in a list, including:

“He gave me the art of lovemaking.
He gave me the kissing of the phallus.
He gave me the art of prostitution.
...
He gave me the cult prostitute.
...
He gave me procreation.”

(Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, pp17-18)

At the end of the tale, due to her ability to keep the *me* after Enki sent creatures to retrieve them, more *me* were discovered within the collection Inanna shows to the people of Uruk. Some of these would be relevant here, such as:

“She brought the placing of the garment on the ground.
She brought allure.
She brought the art of women.”

(Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p26)

Her action at the start, and the *me* mentioned above, all refer to sexual activity rather than familial, platonic or romantic love.

Next, *The Courtship of Inanna and Dumuzi* will be examined for evidence of romantic and carnal love. In this tale, Inanna is initially not interested in Dumuzi as a suitor, she states “The farmer! He is the man of my heart” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p32), although she goes on to mention he “brings the grain regularly into my storehouses” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p32), which suggests a certain amount of mercenary thought. Utu continues to advocate for Dumuzi but it is not until Dumuzi speaks to her personally, promising to equal or exceed the gifts that the farmer gives her, that she accepts his suit and agrees to the marriage. This does not seem to be the actions of a woman experiencing romantic love for her soon-to-be-husband. After Inanna accepts his suit however, there is a duet between the two where she desires him, she is eager for him to “plow her vulva” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p37) and he agrees; although she was hesitant at the start of the tale, she now appears to be not only receptive to his advances but instigating the proceedings.

Where Inanna is talking about the sexual activity between the two of them, she says:

“He stroked my pubic hair,
He watered my womb.
He laid his hands on my holy vulva,
He smoothed my black boat with cream,
He quickened my narrow boat with milk,
He caressed me on the bed

Now I will caress my high priest on the bed,
I will caress the faithful shepherd Dumuzi,
I will caress his loins, the shepherdship of the land,
I will decree a sweet fate for him.”

(Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p44)

In this section, she describes his actions all in past tense, and her actions all in future tense. This implies that Inanna waited to be satisfied before reciprocating for Dumuzi. If this is correct, the question arises why this was so, why it was not more parallel.

One possible premise is the fertility of crops was related to her sexual satisfaction, so it was necessary for her to be satisfied in order for crops to germinate and sprout. This might have some support when Inanna says “Before my lord Dumuzi, I poured out plants from my womb ... I poured out grain from my womb” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p40). There are also significant amounts of imagery around crops being watered and growing abundantly, and references to sweet milk and cream and honey (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, pp37-40). These allusions may only be metaphor, but given Dumuzi’s earlier introduction as a shepherd and his likely role as a god of vegetation, it is as possible these allusions refer to the sprouting of the crops and increase in the flocks due to their sexual congress. This suggestion is possibly supported by the comment from Utu, “You who adorn yourself with the agate necklace of fertility” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p33).

Later, in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, there is significant evidence. When Inanna first sees the freshly bathed Gilgamesh, she propositions him; she wishes to have a sexual relationship with him and offers him riches in the form of “a chariot of lapis lazuli and gold ... with wheels of gold” (Dalley, 1989, p77) and “[his] goats shall bear triplets, [his] ewes twins” (Dalley, 1989, p78), she offers him power in the form of “kings, nobles, princes shall bow down beneath you” (Dalley, 1989, p77), and she offers him fame with “your loaded donkey shall outpace the mule, your horses shall run proud at the chariot, your ox shall be unrivalled at the yoke” (Dalley, 1989, p78). Mitchell describes these as “abundance beyond your dreams, ... kings and princes will kneel before you, bringing you tribute ... [and you] will be the envy of the world” (2005, p131). Gilgamesh’s first response is “how could I ever repay you” (Mitchell, 2005, p132), implying Inanna views reciprocity as an essential part of her relationships; she is pre-emptively offering significant recompense for Gilgamesh’s sexual services. This particular dynamic, of an individual in a position of power or influence soliciting sexual favours from someone in exchange for exercising that power or influence on behalf of the other individual, is still common today, although sextortion or quid pro quo harassment is now illegal.

Gilgamesh then gives details of some of her previous relationships. They might at first be considered romantic, but closer inspection casts doubt upon that idea. Inanna seems more interested in them for her own personal gain or pleasure, rather than in them as individuals.

The roller-bird, or “*allullu*-bird” (Dalley, 1989, p78), is described as “colourful” (Dalley, 1989, p78) or “bright-speckled” (Mitchell, 2005, p133), inferring Inanna may have been interested in his aesthetic attractiveness. The lion is described as “matchless in strength” (Mitchell, 2005, p133), inferring she was interested in him for this strength. The horse was “hot-blooded, war-bold” (Mitchell, 2005, p133) and “so trustworthy in battle” (Dalley, 1989, p79), inferring Inanna’s interest was due to his bold yet loyal nature. With the shepherd, who “every day would bake bread for you and would bring you a fresh-slaughtered, roasted lamb” (Mitchell, 2005, p135), and the gardener, who “would bring you baskets of fresh-picked dates” (Mitchell, 2005, p134), it infers she is more interested in the material items they could provide for her. Inanna’s relationship with Dumuzi also seems to adhere to this pattern; the relationship seems to have been at least partly due to familial duty and partly transactional in order to gain the items he promised. In all these cases, it was inferred that Inanna was attracted to them because of some benefit she would receive from them, rather than loving them because of their character or personality.

In each case, Gilgamesh states that Inanna supposedly loved them, and then states “then you changed” (Mitchell, 2005, pp133-135). When this change happened, Inanna broke the roller-bird’s wing and left him crying in the woods, she dug pits for the lion and bound the horse with whips and spurs. The shepherd was transformed into a wolf and attacked by his own dogs, while the gardener was transformed into a toad. Dumuzi, of course, was condemned to the underworld. It seems when Inanna tires of her lovers, they are each doomed to a dreadful fate. (Dalley, 1989, pp78-79; Mitchell, 2005, pp133-135)

As just examined, the relationships alluded to in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* may not have been romantic in nature, but at least some were, or were intended to be, sexual. It has already been established that her relationship with Dumuzi was sexual, but also Gilgamesh states that Inanna said to Ishallanu the gardener, “let me suck your rod, touch my vagina, caress my jewel” (Mitchell, 2005, p134). This is also the case with Gilgamesh himself; she saw “how splendid a man he was” (Mitchell, 2005, p130) and specifically requested that Gilgamesh “be my lover” (Dalley, 1989, p77).

Looking at *The Descent of Ishtar*, the goddess herself does not engage in sexual activity, however, there is mention that when Ishtar descended, “no bull mounted a cow, no donkey impregnated a jenny, no young man impregnated a girl in the street” (Dalley, 1989, p158). This may indicate that her absence had a negative effect on the sexual activity and fertility of the living, implying that these activities are reliant on her presence, but no mention is made of her absence having any effect on familial, platonic or romantic love.

After examining the tales for evidence, some points have become clear. Inanna’s relationships with her family cover a range of emotions, but in none of them does it appear to be show love, care, affection as would be expected in a modern family. Neither does her only platonic relationship seem to be due to love; any affectionate feelings appear to be secondary to the master and servant aspect. From the evidence, romantic relationships appear to be scarce, while she does appear to have a myriad of sexual or carnal relationships. Instead of a goddess of love, it would seem more fitting for Inanna to be regarded as a goddess of sex and fertility, which is clearly not the same thing.

Is Inanna associated with war, battle and conflict as believed?

It is now time for this essay to investigate the second question given above. Again, the tales will be examined in turn for evidence relating to Inanna's association with war, battle and strife.

The Huluppu Tree, the earliest tale in the arc, takes place at the beginning of time, when Inanna is a girl. She finds the tree in a river and plucks it out, plants it in her garden and tends it. She intends to make a bed and throne from it once it is fully mature. However, before then, three creatures take up residence in the tree preventing her from carrying out her plan; these were the "serpent who could not be charmed, ... the Anzu-bird, ... and the dark maid Lilith" (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p7). She appeals to her brother Utu for his aid, but he "would not help" (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p7). She then appeals to "Gilgamesh, the valiant warrior, Gilgamesh, the hero of Uruk" (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p8), who agrees to come to her aid. It is he who "struck the serpent" (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p9); it is due to this that the Anzu-bird flies away and Lilith "smashed her home and fled to the wild, uninhabited places" (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p9). Her actions here would seem to be entirely appropriate and consistent from an inexperienced girl in a patriarchal society, as she has appealed to the male god of the Sun and to a battle-hardened male warrior to engage in battle on her behalf.

In the second tale, *Inanna and the God of Wisdom*, Inanna is now a young woman. She visits Enki, who is her maternal grandfather, according to the family tree given by Kramer (1983, ppx-xi). To start with, Enki is hospitable to Inanna, providing food and drink and merrymaking. In a drunken state, Enki bestows many *me* upon her, which she accepts. When Inanna lists these *me*, the following ones definitely seem to relate to war, battle and conflict in some way:

"He gave me the dagger and sword.

...

He gave me the standard.

He gave me the quiver.

...

He gave me the art of the hero.

He gave me the art of power.

...

He gave me the plundering of cities.

...

He gave me the kindling of strife.”

(Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, pp16-18)

Inanna leaves with Enki's blessing while he is drunk, but when he recovers from the drunken state, he regrets his actions and sends his various servants to recover the *me*. Inanna, when asked to return the *me*, is indignant, and responds with “My father [Enki] has changed his word to me! He has violated his pledge – broken his promise! Deceitfully my father spoke to me!” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p21). At this point, the servants of Enki seized the boat in which Inanna was travelling in order to retrieve the *me* as commanded by Enki. Inanna speaks to her servant Ninshubar, saying “My warrior who fights by my side, save the Boat of Heaven with the holy *me*!” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983), so it is Ninshubar who saves the day, as she “sliced the air with her hand. She uttered an earth-shattering cry [and] the *enkum*-creatures were sent hurtling back to Eridu” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p22). Five more times Enki sends creatures to board the boat, and five more times Ninshubar “rescued the boat for Inanna” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, pp22-24). In this tale, rather than undertaking war, battle and conflict herself, Inanna has commanded her *sukkal* to battle on her behalf, an action which would be consistent with her position as Queen of Uruk.

The question of how and when the *me* are properly transferred from Enki to Inanna in this tale may be important here. In the reading, it seems that Enki feels he can still retrieve the *me* until just before Inanna enters her city of Uruk, as he sends the last creature when the boat “is about to enter Uruk” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p23), which implies that she does not truly possess dominion over them until she is home. If this is the case, it might have bearing on her actions in *The Huluppu Tree* and in this tale, where she does not engage in battle herself.

The third tale in the arc, *The Courtship of Inanna and Dumuzi*, starts with Inanna being informed by Utu that she will be marrying Dumuzi, then being courted by the shepherd and persuaded to accept the match by her mother. At one point in this section of the

tale, Utu asks her “You who are meant to be the king’s protector, why are you unwilling?” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p33). Two questions suggest themselves here.

Firstly, since Dumuzi has only been referred to as a shepherd to this point, who is the king that she is meant to protect. This matter is clarified almost immediately; Dumuzi is a shepherd when he visits Inanna in the “royal house” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p35), but once she, being of royal blood, accepts his suit, he refers to himself as “Dumuzi the King” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p37). When the marriage is consummated, it is Dumuzi as King who consummates it in the “bed of kingship” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p42), and when Inanna makes the bridal bed, she “called to the king: ‘The bed is ready!’ She called to her bridegroom: ‘The bed is waiting!’” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p42). Clearly, the literal explanation is Dumuzi is the king Inanna is meant to protect, which would be appropriate for a goddess of war and conflict.

Secondly, what form is that protection meant to take. A goddess of war and conflict would be an ideal protector for an individual, but the context of the surrounding lines argues against this; they state:

“You who adorn yourself with the agate necklace of fertility,
Why are you unwilling?
Dumuzi will share his rich cream with you.
You who are meant to be the king’s protector,
Why are you unwilling?”

(Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p33)

The section might be more metaphorical than literal; it could be the kingdom, being personified by the king, that requires her protection. It might be through her sexuality and associated fertility that she protects the King and the kingdom. This could be by producing legitimate heirs to ensure a smooth succession, or by producing and storing grain and other crops, or even conceivably both.

Later, however, there is some evidence in support of her role around war, battle and conflict in this tale. Inanna announces their new roles:

“In battle I am your leader,
In combat I am your armour-bearer, ...
On the campaign I am your inspiration ...

In all ways you are fit: ...

To carry the mace and sword,

To guide straight the long bow and arrow,

To fasten the throw-stick and sling at your side”

(Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p45)

While all of these are related to war, battle and conflict, none of them indicates that she herself would be fighting. She is supporting or inspiring the king, the one who is fighting, while Dumuzi is the one who is carrying, and presumably using, the weapons. It is worth noting also the support and inspiration she lays on herself to provide to Dumuzi here could be construed in some ways as protecting the king while he protects Uruk.

Analysis now moves onto the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, where Inanna is a secondary character in the tale. While there is some mention of her temples and possible priestesses near the beginning of the tale, she herself is only introduced much later. Gilgamesh has returned from battle with Humbaba, and now bathes and refreshes himself. It is at this point that Inanna “raised her eyes to the beauty of Gilgamesh” (Dalley, 1989, p77); Mitchell alternatively transcribes she “caught sight of him, she saw how splendid a man he was” (2005, p130). While this could be a good point to introduce a goddess of love, it seems to be a counterintuitive point at which to introduce a goddess of war, conflict and battle; it would have been more logical for her to be present in some form during the battle with Humbaba.

After Inanna propositions Gilgamesh, he rejects her, and he is savage and merciless. Firstly, he asks “What could I give you if I possessed you?” (Dalley, 1989, p78), also “Your price is too high, such riches are far beyond my means” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p132). He is addressing the previously mentioned reciprocity valued by Inanna and stating he cannot match her offer. He then insults her numerous times by comparing her to various items which bring down damage and misery due to their construction or nature; such comparison clearly infers that Inanna will bring damage and misery to him should he accept her offer. A modern audience might understand a similar message from the tale of the frog and scorpion, or the phrase ‘A leopard cannot change its spots’. He next details her previous relationships and “how each one came to a bitter end” (Mitchell, 2005, p133); in Mitchell’s version, the phrase used is “then you changed” (2005, pp133-135), but in Dalley’s version, this is translated several times as “you hit

him” (Dalley, 1989, pp78-79), which suggests that in those moments, Inanna is sometimes physically attacking the individuals she previously desired.

Inanna is furious at Gilgamesh’s rejection, and promptly takes action against him. “Raging, weeping, she went up to heaven” (Mitchell, 2005, p135) and approaches Anu, god of the sky and king of the gods. At first, she cries while accusing Gilgamesh of shaming and insulting her, at which point Anu suggests she provoked Gilgamesh and asks why she has not dealt with his insults herself. She ignores this and begs Anu, “Father, please give me the Bull of Heaven, and let me strike Gilgamesh down!” (Dalley, 2002, p80). She does not give Anu chance to refuse her plea before she issues a threat:

“If you don’t give me the Bull of Heaven, ... I shall set my face towards the infernal regions, I shall raise up the dead, and they shall eat the living, I shall make the dead outnumber the living!”

(Dalley, 1989, p80)

Anu’s reactions are curious. When Inanna is first crying to him, he suggests she deals with the insult herself; he does not appear willing to get involved in conflict between her and Gilgamesh. However, when she issues the threat, Anu reconsiders his stance. Although he questions Inanna regarding preparations for the “famine for seven long years” (Mitchell, 2005, p136) which would result from the Bull being unleashed, he accedes and “put the Bull of Heaven’s reins in her hands” (Dalley, 1989, p81). Within this interaction, two points become evident. Firstly, again, Inanna is not intending to take part in the conflict herself, but is the proposer of conflict between Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven. Secondly, Anu takes her threat seriously enough to accede to her demands; which implies he believes she has the ability to do as she has threatened.

Once the goddess has the Bull of Heaven in hand, she “led the Bull down to the earth” (Mitchell, 2005, p137) whereupon it caused drought and earthquakes which caused the earth to split and swallow hundreds of warriors. Gilgamesh and his close friend Enkidu attacked the Bull and slew him, making of him an offering to Utu. Inanna was “outraged” (Mitchell, 2005, p138) by this, and cursed the two heroes. They responded by taking the “thigh” (Mitchell, 2005, p138) or possibly “shoulder” (Dalley, 1989, p82) and throwing it in her face.

These actions could certainly be seen to be insulting and humiliating to Inanna, but she still does not personally attack the heroes. Instead, she initiates “a solemn lament” (Mitchell, 2005, p139) in Gugulanna’s honour. At this point, although she has brought the Bull to earth, her hands are still clean of violence. Now, the “great gods” (Dalley, 1989, p83) hear the lament and take notice, determining that one of them should die for their offences of killing both Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven. It could be argued this time Inanna has inveigled the great gods to engage in conflict on her behalf, without actively getting involved herself.

The Descent tales will now be scrutinised for evidence of Inanna embodying war and conflict. The two texts treat Inanna’s reason for visiting the underworld differently. There is no explicit reason given in *The Descent of Ishtar* for Inanna’s visit, but the sibling relationship she claims could imply a simple family visit. In *The Descent of Inanna*, she firstly states she is “on my way to the East” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p55), then either elaborates or changes her story to say she is there because Ereshkigal’s husband “Gugalanna, the Bull of Heaven, has died [and she has] come to witness the funeral rites” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p55). This appears to be a supposedly straightforward visit of compassion and support to her sister.

The gatekeeper then informs Ereshkigal of Inanna’s visit. The supposition that she has an innocent reason for visiting the underworld does not appear to be correct once Ereshkigal’s reaction is taken into account. In *The Descent of Inanna*, Ereshkigal is described as slapping her thighs and biting her lip (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p56), while in *The Descent of Ishtar*, Ereshkigal’s face turned as “livid as cut tamarisk” (Dalley, 2002, p155), and she responds with “What brings her to me? What has incited her against me?” (Dalley, 1989, p156).

As has been made clear, Ereshkigal’s realm is one of no return; it is mentioned in *The Descent of Ishtar* explicitly, and the same phrasing is used in *Nergal and Ereshkigal* (Dalley, 1989, p168), while the gatekeeper mentions it to Inanna when she is requesting entry in *The Descent of Inanna* (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p55). If Inanna enters, it could be argued that she is intending to stay, which would account for Ereshkigal’s reluctance to see her. But what options does Ereshkigal then have to deal with this

infringement? One must wonder at this point why Ereshkigal does not choose what would seem to be the simplest option, denying Inanna entry through the gates.

In *The Descent of Ishtar*, Inanna issues a threat to the gatekeeper:

“If you do not open the gate for me to come in,
I shall smash the door and shatter the bolt,
I shall smash the doorpost and overturn the doors,
I shall raise up the dead and they shall eat the living:
The dead shall outnumber the living!”

(Dalley, 1989, p155)

This is the same threat she issued to Anu to gain access to the Bull of Heaven in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the same threat that Ereshkigal herself uses in *Nergal and Ereshkigal* (Dalley, 1989, p173). Clearly, as Queen of the Underworld, Ereshkigal would be aware of what was required in order to carry out this threat. Since, as Herbert puts it, “the power to destroy a thing is the absolute control over it” (1968, p547), by allowing entry, however unwilling, it implies that Ereshkigal and Anu are both aware this is a serious threat, that Inanna has the ability to destroy the gates and allow the dead to raise up.

Inanna does not issue an overt threaten to gain entry in *The Descent of Inanna*, instead the gatekeeper gives a description of her to Ereshkigal, where she is described as being “as tall as heaven, as wide as the earth, as strong as the foundations of the city wall” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p56). Her appearance by itself may or may not be construed as threatening, however, the text then states Inanna has “gathered together the seven *me*. She has taken them into her hands, with the *me* in her possession, she has prepared herself” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p56). There is a sense in this section that Inanna is arming and armouring herself before an expected battle.

It is not clear if it is Inanna’s arrival or her preparations with the *me* that Ereshkigal regards as a threat, but the concern is clear. Ereshkigal has to conceive of a course of action that will allow Inanna to enter the underworld, while at the same time, mitigating the threat she poses. In *The Descent of Ishtar*, Ereshkigal instructs the gatekeeper to “open your gate to her. Treat her according to the ancient rites” (Dalley, 1989, p156), while in *The Descent of Inanna*, the gatekeeper is told “open each gate a crack [and] ...

as she enters, remove her royal garments” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p57). The gatekeeper complies, and as each gate of the underworld is opened, Inanna is divested of another item. She objects each time, but accepts the explanation given, and does not cause strife or conflict.

In *The Descent of Inanna*, after stating she “gathered together the seven *me*. She has taken them into her hands, with the *me* in her possession, she has prepared herself” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p56), there is a description, stating

“On her head she wears the shugarra, the crown of the steppe ...

Around her neck she wears the small lapis beads.

At her breast she wears the double strand of beads.

Her body is wrapped with the royal robe ...

Around her chest she wears the breastplate called ‘Come, man, come!’

On her wrist she wears the gold ring

In her hand she carries the lapis measuring rod and line.”

(Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p56)

Although it does not explicitly state these are the physical manifestations of the *me* in question, the implication is there. Additionally, the fact it is these items that are removed at each of the gates does seem to lend credence to that idea. In *The Descent of Ishtar*, her appearance is not described before entering, and *me* are not mentioned. However, the items removed from her at the gates are mentioned; “the great crown, ... the rings in her ears, ... the beads around her neck, ... the toggle-pins at her breast, ... the girdle of birth-stones around her waist, ... the bangles on her wrists, ... [and] the proud garment of her body” (Dalley, 2002, pp156-157), which is a not dissimilar list of items. If this is so, it is notable none of them appear as traditional weapons, such as sword or bow, and indeed only one is possibly in the form of armour. It is also notable that if these are *me*, there is no explanation given of their functions. Possibly the intended audience would have known the function from the form, in the same way a modern audience could discern a character wields judicial power merely from observing the wig or gavel in their possession.

It seems Ereshkigal’s instincts regarding Inanna were correct. After Inanna arrived in the throne room, when “Ereshkigal rose from her throne. Inanna started towards the throne” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p60) as though to seat herself on it, and thereby take

control of the underworld. *The Descent of Inanna* then states Ereshkigal “spoke against her the word of wrath. She uttered against her the cry of guilt. She struck her. Inanna was turned into a corpse” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983). In *The Descent of Ishtar*, Dalley says when the goddess “leant over her, Ereshkigal made her voice heard and spoke, [saying]... send out against her sixty diseases” (1989, p157). In both cases, it is clear Inanna initiated conflict and was rebuffed, and Ereshkigal remained in control of the underworld. Whether that would have been the outcome had Ereshkigal not caused Inanna to enter her hall without those items is open to debate. The Queen of the Underworld is undoubtedly powerful, but she also “trembled” (Dalley, 1989, p157) when meeting Inanna, possibly implying some trepidation or uncertainty.

The Descent of Ishtar does not include any other scenes of conflict or battle, but there is more in *The Descent of Inanna*. Once Inanna is restored to life, she ascends from the underworld accompanied by galla demons, as she has to provide a replacement to the underworld. She refuses to allow Ninshubar, Shara, or Lulal to be taken; they were grieving her demise and were overjoyed to see her return. However, when they encounter Dumuzi, he “was dressed in his shining *me*-garments. He sat on his magnificent throne; he did not move” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p71). Clearly, he was not grieving and does not rejoice in her return. When she sees this, Inanna “fastened on Dumuzi the eye of death. She spoke against him the word of wrath. She uttered against him the cry of guilt: ‘Take him! Take Dumuzi away!’” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p71). These are the same actions used by Ereshkigal against Inanna in the underworld. The galla accepted the instructions, they “seized Dumuzi ... they beat the husband of Inanna. They gashed him with axes” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p71). Again, Inanna does not take part in any physical conflict, but this time, instead of manipulating others into conflict, she has directly commanded it.

From this section of the analysis, an evaluation can be made on Inanna’s aspect as a goddess of war, conflict and battle. In most of the tales, there has been some form of contention, but rarely if ever does Inanna actually take part in any combat that ensues; Gilgamesh’s diatribe about her attacks on past partners may be accurate, but it may also be merely hearsay or slander. What does seem to be clearly shown however is that Inanna instigates, prompts, and even threatens and manipulates others into engaging in

combat. This could be part of the domain of a goddess of war and battle, but it could equally fall into several other domains.

Are there any other areas with which Inanna is associated?

Having examined the tales for evidence of the two areas with which Inanna is predominantly associated, attention can now be turned to search for other areas with which she may be associated. Given that the most well-known of Inanna's tales are those involving the descent to and return from the underworld, it would be disingenuous not to suggest some connection with the underworld. This section will examine that connection.

There are two mentions of the underworld in *The Huluppu Tree*. The first says "When the Queen of the Great Below, Ereshkigal, was given the underworld for her domain" (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p4). The implication is she did not get to choose which domain she received, leading to an inference it had to be assigned as no-one would willingly choose the underworld as their domain. This is in direct contrast to the previous two lines, which state An and Enlil "carried off" (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p4) the heavens and the earth. The second is when Enki "set sail for the underworld, and the underworld rose up and attacked him" (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p6). It seems Enki was not permitted to enter the underworld, even though he was one of the highest ranked gods. This immediately gives the impression that the underworld is a challenge to enter even for the gods.

Some evidence is also available in *Inanna and the God of Wisdom* regarding this aspect. As previously established, in this tale Enki becomes drunk and bestows upon Inanna many of the *me* which were in his charge. As part of this, he hands to her "Descent into the underworld! Ascent from the underworld!" (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p16), which are clearly two different *me*. Given he had charge of these particular *me*, it is curious that he could not descend to the underworld in *The Huluppu Tree*. Although no clear answer is found in these tales, it could be his journey in *The Huluppu Tree* happened before these *me* were given to him to distribute to the other gods, or it could be that travel to the underworld can vary in difficulty.

Since there are no mentions of the underworld in *The Courtship of Inanna and Dumuzi*, unsurprising in a tale centred around courtship, marriage and fertility, this section of analysis will move straight on to the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, where there are clear mentions

of the underworld. Firstly, when Gilgamesh and Enkidu are travelling to slay Humbaba, Gilgamesh made multiple offerings to the Sun God, Utu. The texts state he “went up on to the mountain [and asked] ‘O Mountain, bring me a dream’” (Dalley, 1989, p67). Modern audiences may find it peculiar to be asking a mountain for a prophetic dream. However, it should become more understandable when they discover that “the Sumerian word *kur* stands for both ‘mountains’ and ‘netherworld’” (Barrett, 2007, p23). So, Gilgamesh is in actuality pleading with the underworld for a prophetic dream, rather than pleading with a literal mountain.

But this leads to another question, why make the offering to Utu and then plead with the underworld. Inanna’s family connections have previously been discussed in the context of familial love, but there does also seem to be an underworld affiliation to them. The family consists of Inanna, her father Nanna, her mother Ningal, her brother Utu and of course, her sister Ereshkigal. Ereshkigal has been mentioned previously as Queen of the Underworld; her association is conspicuous and unmistakeable. Nanna has also been mentioned previously; he is the Moon God, but also, when the moon is dark, he enters the underworld to act as one of the judges of the dead. Ningal is mentioned as Nanna’s consort, and as a goddess of the moon. There appears to be no explicit association with the underworld, but there may be a hint. She is mentioned as a “patroness of dream interpretation” (Hallo and van Dijk, 1968, in Meador, 2000, p65) and in *The Exaltation of Inanna*, Enheduanna mentions “Ningal’s gifts of dreams” (Meador, 2000, p178). It could be tentatively suggested that an underworld link may exist if, as has previously been mentioned, dreams are in some way linked with the underworld.

It is now time to examine the tales for evidence that Utu is associated with the underworld. In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, after the funeral of Enkidu, Gilgamesh travels the wilderness, trying to “find the one man whom the gods made immortal, ... [to] ask him how to overcome death” (Mitchell, 2005, p159). Gilgamesh finally arrives at two mountains, where the “summits touch the vault of heaven, [and] their bases reach down to the underworld” (Mitchell, 2005, p160). Within these mountains, guarded by scorpion people, is “the tunnel into which the sun plunges when it sets and moves through the earth to emerge above the horizon at dawn” (Mitchell, 2005, p160). Dalley has this section of the tale as “the name of the mountain is Mashu ... which daily guards the

coming out of Shamash – their upper parts touch the sky’s foundation, below, their breasts reach Arallu [the underworld]” (1989, p96). At the end of each day, Utu descends through this tunnel into the underworld, and would emerge from it again at the dawn of the new day. During the night, Utu is spending time in the underworld, travelling “through the earth to emerge above the horizon at dawn” (Mitchell, 2005, p160), although there is no indication of what actions he is able to take while there.

The Descent of Inanna and *The Descent of Ishtar* tales contain the most evidence of Inanna’s connection with the underworld, as they focus on the events around her journey there and back. Therefore, different aspects of this connection will be dealt with in turn here.

The underworld was understood to be the final destination for all of mankind. Gilgamesh searched extensively, but found no way to escape that fate. As Ut-napishtim stated, “Death is inevitable” (Dalley, 1989, p107) and “death destroys us, all of us” (Mitchell, 2005, p178), as the gods made mankind mortal. Once dead, no man returns from the underworld; even Enkidu was unable to return in the flesh, although “the spirit of Enkidu” (Dalley, 1989, p123) was able to return briefly and speak to Gilgamesh. It is clear therefore that for humanity, descending to the underworld is seen as final, with no return possible.

This irrevocability is mentioned in *The Descent of Ishtar*, as the first line states “To Kurnugi, land of no return” (Dalley, 1989, p155) and further emphasised a few lines later as “To the house which those who enter cannot leave, On the road where travelling is one-way only” (Dalley, 1989, p155). This characteristic of the underworld is attested in other tales too, and not only in connection with humanity. At least some of the gods were also subject to this principle which ensured there was no return from the underworld. In *Nergal and Ereshkigal*, the gods in heaven sent a message to Ereshkigal saying “It is impossible for you to come up” (Dalley, 1989, p165), indicating Ereshkigal is not able to leave the underworld. The Queen of the Underworld, who has power over the underworld, not being able to leave the realm implies a task of significant difficulty.

And yet, that irrevocability is not complete. As previously discussed, Nanna disappears into the underworld every month when the moon is dark, and Utu descends into the

underworld each night. In *Nergal and Ereshkigal*, Anu sent his messenger to the underworld, Ereshkigal sends her own sukkal Namtar up to heaven, and Nergal both descends to the underworld, ascends back to heaven, and descends a second time (Dalley, 1989, pp165-176). It is not made clear why some of the gods are able to return from the underworld and others are not.

When Inanna first discusses her journey to the underworld with Ninshubar in *The Descent of Inanna*, she is clearly not certain she will be able to leave again under her own power, even with her possession of the *me* of ascending from the underworld. She says to Ninshubar “I am descending to the kur, to the underworld. If I do not return” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p53), acknowledging the possibility that she will be trapped there. In both Descent tales, she sets contingency plans in place for that eventuality; in *The Descent of Inanna*, she asks Ninshubar to visit Enlil, and her father Nanna, and Enki, and in *The Descent of Ishtar*, the vizier Papsukkal visits Sin and Ea, so they can instigate a plan to bring her back.

On reaching the gates of the underworld, her passage is initially blocked. In none of the tales here examined where a god enters the underworld does the god give up items at the gates. There is no mention of the gates at all for Nanna and Utu, while in *Nergal and Ereshkigal*, the gatekeeper just lets the messenger and Nergal through (Dalley, 1989, p165). But with Inanna, the gatekeeper strips an item from her at each of the seven gates before allowing her to proceed. As a result, she enters into Ereshkigal’s presence “naked and bowed low” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p60).

Similarly, death is not a normal state for the gods; they are immortal, undying, they “live forever” (Mitchell, 2005, p191). There are tales in which gods die, but this is unusual. In the *Enuma Elish*, Apsu and Tiamat are killed, while in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Gugalanna, the Bull of Heaven, is killed. For Inanna to be “turned into a corpse” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p60) is rare. Her subsequent resurrection is even rarer, as Tiamat and Gugalanna were not resurrected. It would seem therefore that she approached the underworld in the same state as a mortal, and experienced death as mortals do.

Inanna was revived; her contingency plans were set in motion, and Enki created proxies to arrange this revivification. She was “about to ascend from the underworld” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p68), but was prevented. Unlike Nanna and Utu, who appear to have no difficulty leaving the underworld, or Ereshkigal’s sukkal Namtar, who was able to go to the Great Above without trouble, Inanna was not permitted to leave. Instead Ereshkigal said “bring the Anunnaki out and seat them on golden thrones” (Dalley, 1989, p159). These “Annuna, the judges of the underworld” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p68) are the same individuals who passed judgement on Inanna when she arrived in the underworld. It is these judges who prevented her from leaving.

Although nothing is explicitly mentioned in *The Descent of Ishtar* about Inanna agreeing to provide a substitute, it does say “Swear that she has paid you her ransom” (Dalley, 1989, p160). Ransom is a price paid to obtain the release of a person from captivity; Inanna has to provide another person to take her place in the underworld in order to obtain her own release from there. There is nothing to indicate how Dumuzi was chosen as the ransom, but that he was chosen is made clear by saying “give her back in exchange for him, For Dumuzi, the lover of her youth” (Dalley, 1989, p160).

There is somewhat more explanation about this in *The Descent of Inanna*. The judges lay down the law of the underworld, saying “no one ascends from the underworld unmarked. If Inanna wishes to return from the underworld, she must provide someone in her place” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p68). There is no explicit agreement shown from Inanna, but the text continues with “As Inanna ascended from the underworld” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p68), implying her agreement with these terms.

It seems however that the Anunnaki wanted some assurance the substitute would be provided, as when she ascended from the underworld, the galla came up with her. The galla are described as:

“the demons of the underworld ... who know no food, who know no drink, who eat no offerings, who drink no libations, who accept no gifts. They enjoy no lovemaking. They have no sweet children to kiss.”

(Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p68)

The description shows these creatures are incorruptible and inexhaustible, and it may have evoked in the intended audience a similar reaction as the quote “It can't be

bargained with. It can't be reasoned with. It doesn't feel pity, or remorse, or fear. And it absolutely will not stop" (The Terminator, 1984) would in a modern audience. Their role is to ensure someone returns to the underworld, and from the way they "clung to her side" (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p68), it can be inferred if Inanna does not provide a substitute, she will be returned there. It appears there are many galla with her; she is described as "surrounded by the galla" (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p70) and at least seven are detailed in the actual capture of Dumuzi (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p83). Clearly Inanna will not be able to carry out any other actions until such time as the substitute is claimed by the galla.

Inanna and the galla journey from place to place, searching for a substitute. They encounter her sukkal Ninshubar, her son Shara, and her son Lulal. Each time the galla offer to take the individual in Inanna's stead. They are all described as being "dressed in soiled sackcloth" (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, pp68, 70), indicating they are grieving for her. In each case, Inanna refuses the galla and they continue on their journey.

Then they encounter Dumuzi, her husband. He is not in soiled sackcloth, but "dressed in his shining *me*-garments [and] sat on his magnificent throne" (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p71). He is clearly not grieving for Inanna; since she has only been gone a few days, it is possible he has not even noticed her absence. This time, the goddess did not refuse the galla, instead, she "fastened on Dumuzi the eye of death. She spoke against him the word of wrath. She uttered against him the cry of guilt: 'Take him! Take Dumuzi away'" (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p71). The galla promptly seized him, then when he escaped, they pursued him until he was recaptured.

While Inanna was not able to supplant her sister Ereshkigal, a case could be made that she was not completely unsuccessful. The actions of the galla could be seen as supporting evidence of this. Since they have no interest in food or gifts, and they have no lovemaking or children, they cannot be influenced by bribery, or extortion, or seduced from their duty, and as underworld creatures, they owe no allegiance or duty to anyone not of the underworld. And yet, when Inanna refuses a prospective substitute, they accede to her wishes, they do not take the individual. Similarly, when Inanna and the galla reach Dumuzi, it is she who commands them to "Take him! Take Dumuzi

away!” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p71). In both cases, the underworld entities are abiding by her directives.

Furthermore, Inanna also “fastened on Dumuzi the eye of death. She spoke against him the word of wrath. She uttered against him the cry of guilt” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p71). This is the same action Ereshkigal took against Inanna when she was turned into a corpse. Since Ereshkigal was the one previously uttering these words, and the consequences of uttering it, it may be inferred it is specific to the underworld and underworld deities.

A further argument in support of the point occurs at the end of the tale. Dumuzi’s sister Geshtinanna grieves for him, and Inanna says “I would take you to him, but I do not know the place” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p88). When they find him, Inanna tells Dumuzi “You will go to the underworld half the year. Your sister, since she has asked, will go the other half” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p89). She is amending the substitution arrangement, which would surely not possible without having some power in the underworld.

Another somewhat tenuous argument can be made in support of the case. Firstly, in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, when the Bull of Heaven is killed, Inanna “arranged for weeping over the Bull of Heaven’s shoulder” (Dalley, 1989, p82). Those lamenting are “the crimped courtesans, prostitutes and harlots” (Dalley, 1989, p82), who Dalley describes as “the cultic devotees of Ishtar” (1989, p129). Secondly, in *The Descent of Ishtar*, when Dumuzi is chosen, the text states “wash him with pure water, anoint him with sweet oil, clothe him in a red robe, let the lapis lazuli pipe play, let party-girls raise a loud lament” (Dalley, 1989, p160). Dalley (1989, p162) has mentioned that the dead were wrapped in red cloth for burial, so these actions appear to be treating Dumuzi as if he were newly dead and being prepared for burial. Also, the ones lamenting “the staff of Ishtar’s temples” (Dalley, 1989, p162). It appears that members of Inanna’s temples may have had the responsibility of preparing the dead and carrying out the funerary rites as part of their religious duties. If so, those duties belonged to her and her clergy precisely because she was connected to the underworld.

This section has examined the tales and determined Inanna does indeed have a connection with the underworld, and that it is multi-faceted. Firstly, there seems to be a familial connection; Nanna and Utu regularly visit the underworld, her sister Ereshkigal is the Queen of that realm, and even her mother has a tentative connection through prophetic dreams. So, Inanna having a connection to the underworld is not unexpected. Secondly, Enki has bestowed the *me* of descending and ascending from the underworld on her, so she supposedly has that power. And finally, she has descended to the underworld, died and been revived, and returned to the world of the living. After that point, it appears she has some power over the underworld creatures.

Is there a way to reconcile these disparate aspects of the goddess into a cohesive whole?

This essay has examined the two most well-known areas that fall within the purview of the goddess Inanna, love and war, and one area with which she is particularly associated, the underworld. At a cursory glance, these areas seem so disparate, it seems unlikely that they could all proceed from one central, core sphere for which the goddess was responsible. However, this essay will examine the texts looking for any evidence that such a core sphere might exist.

When the stories of Inanna and her fellow gods were first discovered and translated, the academic sources declared Inanna to be the goddess of love, and the goddess of strife and war. From around 1990 onwards, academics have investigated her further, with Harris (1991) suggesting that she was more associated with disorder and anomalousness, and sex and war, her ostensible domains, were merely two forms of this. Meador (2000) has suggested that she personifies the chaotic elements of the universe, while Barrett (2007) suggests she is a goddess of liminality, of thresholds and boundaries and the space between. This analysis will look for evidence of these ideas in the tales.

As in the previous sections of this work, this section of analysis will start with *The Huluppu Tree*. This tale is ostensibly a tale discussing how Inanna wished to create for herself a bed and a throne but was thwarted, and how those obstacles were overcome and she subsequently managed to obtain these items. The text starts by detailing the beginning of time, and then how the world was apportioned and settled. It begins with “In the first days, in the very first days” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p4), and shortly afterwards, there is “In the first days when everything needed was brought into being” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p4). Prior to this point, there was only the primordial chaos; the world had not existed, even time had not existed. But now, the world and everything in it was being arranged, chaos was giving way to order.

The tale progresses with details of “a tree, a single tree, a huluppu tree was planted by the banks of the Euphrates” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p5). On the most surface level, the tree is simply a tree and the tale is a simple tale of how Inanna got her furniture. But

it is more likely the tree is polysemic; it has multiple symbolic meanings. This tree is coming into existence at the beginning of time; since this is when everything needed is being created, it would seem this tree was needed. A tree being created at the beginning of time, at the beginning of the world, would seem to fit the characteristics of the World Tree, whose roots connect the mortal realm with the underworld and whose branches connect with the heavens. Later in the tale, after Gilgamesh has overcome the serpent, and the Anzu-bird, and the dark maid, he fells the huluppu tree and carves from it a throne and a bed for Inanna (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983).

The beginning of the world of time and order would have been an enormous transition, with a boundary between it and the realm of eternal primordial chaos that existed before. Although Inanna is not mentioned in connection with this transition, if she was a goddess associated with chaos or liminality, this section could have brought her to the minds of the original audience. Furthermore, the huluppu tree in this tale could have yet another symbolic meaning. As it is a connection to the heavens and the underworld, it could represent Inanna herself. She has a heavenly aspect, as Queen of Heaven and the Morning and Evening Star, she has the underworld connections due to her time in that realm and her death, and she is connected intimately with the world of the living due to her connection with sex and fertility. When the tree is felled and carved into the throne and bed, Inanna is in a transitional phase, passing from her wild and carefree beginnings into womanhood and queenship.

The next tale to be examined is *Inanna and the God of Wisdom*. In this tale, Inanna decides to visit Enki, the God of Waters, who bestows upon her various *me* while drunk. She leaves Uruk, intending to “go to the Abzu, the sacred place in Eridu” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p12). This is described as the “domain of sweet, fresh water beneath the earth” (Dalley, 1989, p318), where Enki makes his home. This abode is referred to in the *Enuma Elish*; Apsu, the “begetter of the great gods” (Dalley, 1989, p234), was one of the two primordial forces of the beginning, and Enki “put Apsu to sleep ... [and] he held Apsu down and slew him; ... he set up his dwelling on top of Apsu” (Dalley, 1989, p235). Since he created his dwelling in the sweet waters of Apsu’s very being, before the world had come into being, then clearly it would not be in the mortal realm. So, Inanna’s journey takes her out of the mortal realm, the world of the living, and into the realm of the gods. Once Enki has bestowed the *me* upon her, she makes that journey in

reverse, taking the *me*, the means by which the world operates, from the world of the gods to the mortal realm. Clearly Inanna is accustomed to crossing between the realms in this way, which does lend credence to the suggestion she is a liminal goddess.

It may be that the *me* being bestowed were chosen randomly. If this were so, it would accord with Inanna having such disparate spheres of influence, but in this case, there would be no underlying core domain for which she was responsible. Another possibility exists that Enki, who “knows all things” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p12), knew in advance that Inanna would visit and drink with him. He may have decided to provide her with *me* which would fit with her underlying sphere of influence, and test her worthiness to have them by trying to reclaim them. This deviousness would not be out of character for the god who, in the tale of *Atrahasis*, managed to circumvent the drowning of all life. If this is so, then the many *me* provided to Inanna by Enki would have some bearing on her underlying sphere of influence.

Wolkstein suggests that the first groupings “center on the priesthood and the rituals involved in serving the gods, the king and the temple” (1983, p147) while the later groupings seem to relate to “humanity’s concerns” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p147) and how their lives are ordered. It is known from the *Enuma Elish* that Marduk created mankind so that “the service of the gods may be established, and that their shrines may be built” (Luckenbill, 1921, p89); clearly humanity was created for a fixed purpose. It would seem that these first groupings include specific *me* that detail how humanity’s purpose was to be carried out. The priesthood, acting as mediators between the gods and the people, can be viewed as inhabiting a liminal space, and so those *me* that show the proper behaviour of these groups could be argued as falling within the sphere of influence. The later groupings include *me* which relate to humanity and the choices it could make, where each choice involves a transition. Humanity has been given the free will to make these choices. This is very clearly summed up in the last *me* mentioned, “the making of decisions” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p18). In viewing this from the perspective that Inanna is a liminal goddess, it does seem that all of the *me* could fall under this sphere of influence.

In *The Courtship of Inanna and Dumuzi*, the tale revolves around what was traditionally regarded as a very important event in a young woman’s life; the wedding and

concomitant loss of virginity. As a liminal goddess, this tale positioned Inanna as moving from child to adult, from girl to mature, married woman. But during the tale, she is both and neither. When she “ran to Ningal, the mother who bore her” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p35), she is clearly a child, but later she is “The Queen of Heaven, the heroic woman” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p44), fully adult. In the tale, she is the bride, no longer maiden, on the threshold of being matron.

While the tale as a whole showcases Inanna’s position as a goddess of thresholds and boundaries, there is yet more evidence within the tale. Inanna sings to Dumuzi, “I will guard my sheepfold for you. I will watch over your house of life, the storehouse” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p39). On the surface at this point, Inanna is guarding or watching over the sheepfold and the storehouse, ensuring there is food available for Dumuzi. In this case, it would seem the gate or doorway would be the most logical place for a guard or watcher to be positioned in order to protect the precious contents. This is one aspect of Inanna’s role as a goddess of the thresholds, the boundaries. To support this idea further, consider the *mùš* symbol associated with Inanna. It is described as “a gatepost situated on either side of the doorway to the storehouse” (Meador, 2000, p14). In this representation, she not only stands at the doorway, she is the doorway!

This section can also be understood on another level. Sheepfold can be understood as an allegory, since “in Sumerian, the word for sheepfold, womb, vulva, loins, and lap is the same” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p146); similarly, the storehouse is also referred to in the section as the “house of life” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p39). Here, instead of guarding the food supplies, Inanna is watching over the womb and vulva, the gateway of fertility, through which all things are born and come into being. Her declarations that “I poured out plants from my womb ... I poured out grain from my womb” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p40) are specific about how fertility and abundance come through and from Inanna, but the numerous expressions in the wider tale which relate to fertility are also relevant.

There is one piece of supporting evidence for the argument in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, but this is related so closely to supporting evidence in *The Descent of Ishtar*, it makes sense to examine them together. In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Inanna cries to Anu, “I shall smash the gates of the underworld” (Mitchell, 2005, p136), while in *The Descent of*

Ishtar, after the goddess travels towards the underworld and eventually arrives at “the gate of Kurnugi” (Dalley, 1989, p155), she addresses the gatekeeper:

“Open your gate for me to come in!
If you do not open the gate for me to come in,
I shall smash the door and shatter the bolt,
I shall smash the doorpost and overturn the doors”

(Dalley, 1989, p155)

This analysis has previously looked at these threats with reference to the sphere of war, battle and conflict. It seemed that both Anu and Ereshkigal believed these to be credible threats by Inanna, and acquiesced to her demands. However, once the validity of the threat was established, the analysis moved on; the reason why Inanna was able to issue such a threat was not examined.

These are the gates of the underworld, designed to prevent the dead from returning, from rising, so it could be assumed their destruction could only be arranged by a powerful deity. And yet, of all the powerful deities in the pantheon, only two appear to have issued this threat, one being Ereshkigal in *Nergal and Ereshkigal*, and the other being Inanna, to both Anu and the gatekeeper of the underworld. The other powerful deities do not seem to refer to destroying the gates of the underworld, possibly because they lack the ability to do so.

As Queen of the Underworld, it is completely plausible that Ereshkigal has the power to destroy the gates, and this would explain why her threat to the gods was credible and taken so seriously. Since this essay has previously argued that Inanna has at least some power from and in the underworld, it would be easy to argue that her ability to carry out the threat was also due to this power of the underworld. In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, there are indications that Inanna has already been to the underworld and returned, so this is still plausible. However, when she issues the threat in *The Descent of Ishtar*, she has only just arrived at the gates. Therefore, this claim cannot be supported in both cases. If, as this analysis is stating, Inanna was a goddess of thresholds, of boundaries, then this would support her ability to carry out this threat, even before she had descended to the underworld. Gates, being a transition point between two different spaces, are the very epitome of liminal spaces, and would therefore fall under the sphere of influence of a liminal goddess. Additionally, the point

has been made that the *me* that Inanna has for the underworld focus on the journey there and back rather than her time spent there, so the tale “associates her with the journey between the worlds of the living and the dead” (Barrett, 2007, p23), which is again a boundary, the transition between one realm and the other.

In these tales, especially the Descent tales, death is seen as both a physical state, and a place that can be visited, the underworld. This essay has discussed the underworld as a place, but there is also a case to be made for there being a boundary between life and death as physical states.

Previously, this essay has discussed that Inanna did not just visit the underworld, as many other gods did. Instead, she died and her corpse was hung on the wall. In this way, she experienced death as mortals do, she crossed that boundary between life and death. When the waters of life were sprinkled on the corpse, she was revived, and passed through that boundary again in the other direction. As far as the tales appear to show, she is the only individual to have returned from death to life, rather than simply returned from the underworld. It could be suggested that while her return may have been facilitated by Enki, her position as a goddess of boundaries and thresholds may have been what enabled her to return to life from death.

Conclusion

When first starting this essay, I knew what was commonly believed about the goddess Inanna and not much more. I knew she was the goddess of love and war for the Mesopotamians, similar to how Freya is portrayed for the Ancient Norse people. This essay looked at various tales and stories in which Inanna was a participant, attempting to answer how a single goddess could conceivably be able to encompass both of those areas. To do so, four questions were posed:

- Is Inanna associated with love as believed?
- Is Inanna associated with war, battle and conflict as believed?
- Are there any other areas with which Inanna is associated?
- Is there a way to reconcile these different aspects of the goddess into a cohesive whole?

The essay examined each tale in turn, using mainly discourse analysis, and looked for evidence to answer each of these questions. Firstly, the essay looked for evidence that Inanna was in any way responsible or tied to love, then for evidence in the same tales for her connection with war and conflict, and next for evidence of any other areas she was connected to. Finally, the essay laid out a possible solution in answer to the fourth question, then examined the tales for evidence to support this possibility.

Being part of a large pantheon, Inanna clearly interacted with and was related to many other deities. However, where familial affection could be expected, either from or to her siblings or parents, the essay found instead various interactions ranging from respect for her mother, her father's exasperation, and melodrama and manipulation for her siblings. Platonic relationships are scarce and unequal, based more on master and servant than true platonic love. At first glance, the fact one tale revolves almost entirely around her wedding to Dumuzi and the existence of numerous other relationships mentioned in the tales examined might seem to support her being a goddess of love. When these relationships are examined more closely, they do not seem to involve love necessarily. Instead, they seem to be based on physical appetites and pleasures, most obviously sex. With this being so, it seems that instead of love, Inanna might be more properly described as a goddess of fertility and abundance.

In response to the second question, the selected tales were examined closely again. There seems to be some form of conflict in each tale. However, whereas it might be expected for a goddess of war and conflict to be personally involved, in a similar way to how Sekhmet or Athena took part in battles, in these tales Inanna does not appear to have done so. There is a mention by Gilgamesh in one translation that Inanna struck her former partners, but that may be hearsay, slander or even issues with the translation; the corresponding section in another translation does not include this. The tales do show that Inanna initiates situations where combat then ensues, she prompts and manipulates others into engaging in combat. From this, her attribution as a goddess of war and battle cannot be evidenced, although it can be agreed she is an initiator of conflict.

The third section expanded the analysis to encompass any other well-known areas of influence for Inanna; one was determined to be the underworld, and the tales were examined for this. The analysis showed multiple connections with the underworld. Firstly, Inanna's family seem to all have some connection with the underworld, so her having such a connection would be plausible. Secondly, she has a connection through the *me* bestowed upon her by Enki. And finally, she has not only visited the underworld, as other gods have, but has died in the underworld and been revived, unlike other gods. It would seem therefore that Inanna is most definitely connected with the underworld.

Finally, the suggestion was made that all of the different areas with which Inanna is associated are actually facets of her control over the larger, overarching domain. Other authors have suggested that this sphere could be disorder, or chaos, or liminality. It was this latter suggestion which seemed most probable, and so the tales were again examined for evidence which may support this option.

In each of the tales, Inanna's presumptive position as a liminal goddess is reinforced. Transitions between physical, or perhaps metaphysical, spaces such as the mortal realm, the realm of the gods and the underworld occur in several of the tales; the beginning of the world may also be considered as a threshold between eternity and time. But these are only one aspect of boundaries and thresholds. Personal transitions are also apparent, from passing from the womb through the vulva, the doorway to life,

and into the world, from childhood to adulthood, and eventually through the gates of death and into the underworld. Each of these involves a threshold that each person must pass through, and for each of these thresholds, Inanna has been shown previously to have some control or connection, which supports the possibility of her being a liminal deity.

In conclusion, rather than being a goddess of love and war as was originally stated, I now believe that Inanna's actual domain is the threshold, the boundary, the doorway. I believe that, although he was talking about witches, Sir Terry Pratchett put this much better than I ever could:

"There're a lot of edges, more than people know. Between life and death, this world and the next, night and day, right and wrong ... an' they need watchin'. We watch 'em, we guard the sum of things."

(Pratchett, 2004, p304)

Bibliography

Barrett, C. (2007) 'Was Dust Their Food and Clay Their Bread? Grave Goods, the Mesopotamian Afterlife, and the Liminal Role of Inana/Ishtar', *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religion*, 7(1), pp. 7-65.

Cook, G. (2012) 'Translating into and out of English', in Hewings, A. & Tagg, C. (eds.) *The Politics of English: Conflict, Competition, Co-existence*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Dalley, S. (1989) *Myths From Mesopotamia: Creation, The Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Dalley, S. (2002) *Mari And Karana: Two Old Babylonian Cities*. 2nd ed. Piscataway: Gorgias Press.

Harris, R. (1991) 'Inanna-Ishtar as Paradox and a Coincidence of Opposites', *History of Religions*, 30(3), pp. 261-278.

Herbert, F. (1968) *Dune*. London: Hodder & Stoughton.

House, J. (2012) 'What is translation?', in Hewings, A. & Tagg, C. (eds.) *The Politics of English: Conflict, Competition, Co-existence*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Jacobsen, T. (1976) *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Kramer, S. N. (1961) *Sumerian Mythology: A Study of Spiritual and Literary Achievement in the Third Millennium*. Available at:
<https://archive.org/details/sumerianmytholog00kram/mode/1up>
(Accessed 10 March 2025).

Langdon, S. (1914) *Tammuz And Ishtar: A Monograph Upon Babylonian Religion And Theology*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Library of Congress (2025) *Diane Wolkstein collection, 1960-2013*. Available at: https://findingaids.loc.gov/db/search/xq/searchMfer02.xq?_id=loc.afc.eadafc.af024003&_faSection=overview&_faSubsection=bioghist&_dmdid=d35209e14 (Accessed 11 May 2025).

Luckenbill, D. D. (1921) 'The Ashur Version Of The Seven Tablets Of Creation', *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures*, 38(1), pp. 12-35.

Meador, B. D. S. (2000) *Inanna Lady of the Largest Heart: Poems of the Sumerian High Priestess Enheduanna*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Mitchell, S. (2005) *Gilgamesh*. London: Profile Books.

Pratchett, T. (2004) *The Wee Free Men*. London: Corgi Books.

Saggs, H. W. F. (1966) *The Greatness That Was Babylon*. London: Sidgwick & Jackson.

Shelley, P. B. (1987) 'Ozymandias', in The Great Writers Library (ed.) *The Romantic Poets: An Anthology*. London: Marshall Cavendish Partworks.

Short, M. (1996) *Exploring the Language of Poems, Plays and Prose*. Harlow: Pearson Education.

Sjoberg, A. W. (1994) 'Samuel Noah Kramer', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 138(1), pp. 170-173.

Tanner, J. P. (2002) 'Ancient Babylon: From Gradual Demise To Archeological Rediscovery', *Near East Archeological Society Bulletin*, Volume 47, pp. 11-20.

The Terminator (1984) Directed by J Cameron. [Film] Los Angeles, California: Orion Pictures.

University of Oxford (2025) *Stephanie M. Dalley*. Available at:
<https://www.ames.ox.ac.uk/people/stephanie-m-dalley?page-665861=2>
(Accessed: 05 May 2025).

Westenholz, J. G. (2007) 'Inanna and Ishtar in the Babylonian World', in Leick, G. (ed.)
The Babylonian World. Abingdon: Routledge.

Wolkstein, D. & Kramer, S. N. (1983) *Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth*. New York:
Harper & Row.