

FEMALE KATABASIS IN ANCIENT MEDITERRANEAN CULTURES

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A katabasis, or a descent into the underworld, is a key element in many heroic journey myths and tales of ancient Mediterranean cultures. From a narrative perspective, the hero has to descend into the underworld to gain valuable knowledge or information to help him succeed on his journey. Symbolically, the journey to the underworld represents a liminal experience for the hero; his journey spiritually separates him from other men and he returns wiser and more enlightened. Aeneas, Odysseus, Hercules and Orpheus exemplify the heroes who have taken this symbolic journey. However, female katabasis stories from ancient Mediterranean cultures function differently from their male counterparts. These female katabasis stories have themes of love, fertility and power, which psychologically and symbolically reflect ancient perceptions of women and the underworld, and have their origins in pre-historical concepts of a female earth. The first written female descent story, the Sumerian/Akkadian story of the katabasis of Inanna, became a template for future katabasis stories as well as provides clues to the culture's relationship with their gods. In contrast, myths of Isis show the fluidity of the underworld in ancient Egyptian culture. Similar to

the Mesopotamian stories, in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, one initial descent becomes a yearly occurrence. Finally, the Roman female katabasis stories feature two non-deities, Psyche and the Sibyl, demonstrating the evolution of female katabasis stories in ancient Mediterranean cultures.

The Sumerians wrote, and the Akkadians later adopted, the first female katabasis story of the ancient Mediterranean. In the middle of the fourth millennium BCE, the Sumerians settled in Mesopotamia. The Akkadians conquered the Sumerian cities in the beginning of the second millennium BCE and a hybrid Sumerian/Akkadian culture developed. Even when the Babylonians conquered the region in 1750 BCE and began their Empire, the Sumerian culture, literature, and language persisted, continuing to be taught in schools.¹ This included the Sumerian gods, which two other cultures later appropriated. The pantheon contained four major deities based on the major components of the universe – sky, earth, air and water – all male except the earth goddess. Other important deities included the Moon God Nanna, his son, the Sun God Utu, and his daughter, Goddess of the Morning and Evening Star, Inanna.² Inanna played prominent roles in both Sumerian and Akkadian cultures.

A variety of cultures inhabited the Mesopotamian region in the second century BCE, and as Empires rose and fell, Inanna began to represent divergent ideas throughout the region. The powerful warlord, Sargon, politically elevated her to higher status, because in the Sumerian/Akkadian culture, the status of their deities reflected the fortunes of their earthly priests.³ Sargon united the Mesopotamian region through war around 2000 BCE, but wanted to provide a new theological foundation for the

1 Diane Wolkstein and Samuel Noah Kramer, *Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth: Her Stories and Hymns from Sumer* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1983), 117-119.

2 Wolkstein and Kramer, *Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth*, 123.

3 William W. Hallo and J.J.A. Van Dijk, *The Exaltation of Inanna* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 6-7.

emerging Sumerian/Akkadian Empire. Therefore, he syncretized the Sumerian goddess Inanna with the Akkadian goddess Ishtar and proclaimed the new Empire as a “dynasty of Ishtar.”⁴ This duality can be seen in other poems exalting Inanna; for example, *The Exaltation of Inanna* describes her as “lofty as Heaven... you are broad as the earth.”⁵ Ishtar was characteristically seen as a love goddess.⁶ In contrast, the storehouse for grains, dates, and livestock serves as the oldest emblem of Inanna, but the star also symbolized her on vessels. In her syncretic form, Inanna functioned as the goddess of gentle rains, floods and terrible storms. She represented the morning and evening star, the liminal, in-between space of consciousness and energies, but also served as the goddess of war. The “dance of Inanna” poetically describes battle, and similarly, the “heart of battle” describes Inanna.⁷ Even with her many powers and titles, the patriarchy still repressed Inanna. *The Huluppu-Tree* poem describes Inanna as “a woman who walked in fear of the word of the Sky God, An, who walked in fear of the word of the Air God, Enlil.”⁸ In the *Descent of Inanna*, the powerful male gods all refer to her as their daughter, emblematic of their patriarchal attitude towards her.⁹ Gilgamesh, a mortal, even rejects her advances. In *Gilgamesh*, he insults her, describing her as, “[you, a frost that congeals no] ice, a louvre-door [that] stay [not] breeze nor draught, a palace that massacres...warriors.”¹⁰ Inanna embodies both love and violence. She is enraged at Gilgamesh’s rejection and tries to use the Bull

4 Hallo and Van Dijk, *The Exaltation of Inanna*, 9-10.

5 Hallo and Van Dijk, *The Exaltation of Inanna*, 31.

6 Wolkstein and Kramer, *Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth*, 60-61.

7 Sylvia Brinton Perera, “The Descent of Inanna: Myth and Therapy,” in *Feminist Archetypal Theory: Interdisciplinary Re-visions of Jungian Thought*, ed. Estella Lauter and Carol Schreier Rupprecht (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1985), 144-145.

8 Wolkstein and Kramer, *Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth*, 5.

9 Wolkstein and Kramer, *Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth*, 62

10 Andrew George, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 49.

of Heaven to kill him, but Inanna is unsuccessful. Instead, an assembly of male gods punishes Gilgamesh with the death of his close friend, Enkidu, but for killing the Bull of Heaven and Humbaba, and not his insults to Inanna.¹¹ Even suppressed, Inanna continued to wield incredible power.

Inanna's sister, Ereshkigal, Queen of the Underworld, only appears in a few stories and myths, but plays a pivotal role in the *Descent of Inanna* and symbolizes the grim view of death found in the culture.¹² Her name translates to "Lady of the Great Place Below."¹³ At the beginning of the world, Ereshkigal was given the underworld as a dowry-gift.¹⁴ She perpetually mourns the death of her son Ninazu; she lies prostrate, rending her hair and garments.¹⁵ The myth of *Nergal and Ereshkigal* provides more insight into the personality and attributes of Ereshkigal. The gods wish to invite Ereshkigal to a feast but neither the sky gods nor Ereshkigal can enter into the realm of the other. While they communicate with her by messenger, the god Nergal offends the messenger and by proxy, Ereshkigal. Under pressure, Nergal goes down to the underworld to apologize, the travel restrictions not applying to him apparently, where he falls for the queen's charms and spend seven days in bed with her. Ereshkigal becomes bereft when he leaves and she sends her messenger to bring him back. In the end, Nergal returns "seiz[ing] her by her hair and pull[ing] her from her throne", and remains with Ereshkigal at her behest.¹⁶ Figuratively married to the underworld as a child and sequestered away from the other gods, Ereshkigal is lonely. This, then, explains her high level of passion when Nergal arrives in her home.

11 George, *Gilgamesh*, 50-55.

12 O.R. Gurney, "The Sultantepe Tablets (Continued): VII. The Myth of Nergal and Ereshkigal," *Anatolian Studies* 10 (1960): 127.

13 Perera, "The Descent of Inanna," 149.

14 George, *Gilgamesh*, 181.

15 George, *Gilgamesh*, 176.

16 Gurney, *Nergal and Ereshkigal*, 106.

Although Ereshkigal carries out the judgment of the great gods on those dwelling in her realm, she cannot do it when she becomes “sexually defiled.”¹⁷ However, she can wield her power of keeping the dead away from living as she threatens to “send up the dead to eat the living...mak[ing] the dead more numerous than the living.”¹⁸ This grim view of death extended into other Sumerian/Akkadian poems. In an early version of *Gilgamesh*, Enkidu gives a dour description of the afterlife. For instance, those who have more children will suffer from thirst less than those who have no children.¹⁹ Based on this historical and cultural context of Inanna, Ereshkigal, and the Sumerian/Akkadian afterlife, the katabasis of Inanna can now be analyzed.

The *Descent of Inanna* begins with Inanna’s preparations and instructions before her journey. The poem was pieced together from thirty tablets and fragments, a majority date back to 1750 BCE to Nippur.²⁰ Although the poem comprises several divided parts, the first part details her katabasis and has a correspondingly appropriate title, “From the Great Above to the Great Below.” The opening begins with Inanna “abandon[ing] heaven and earth to descend to the underworld.”²¹ After a brief description of the geographical locations of her power, the poem describes Inanna as abandoning these places for her katabasis. Inanna prepares herself for the journey. She gathers the seven *me* and outfits herself in seven physical representations of her power, including a crown, royal robes and lapis beads.²² The *me* are the “set of universal and immutable rules and limits.”²³ Other

17 Gurney, *Nergal and Ereshkigal*, 123.

18 Gurney, *Nergal and Ereshkigal*, 123.

19 George, *Gilgamesh*, 176-189.

20 Wolkstein and Kramer, *Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth*, 127.

21 Wolkstein and Kramer, *Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth*, 52.

22 Wolkstein and Kramer, *Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth*, 52-53.

23 Wolkstein and Kramer, *Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth*, 123.

scholars define them as “divine attributes.”²⁴ These possessions demonstrate the importance of Inanna; literature like *Gilgamesh* reflects the incredible importance of the concepts of civilization and city-states to the Sumerians/Akkadians. Inanna advises her close servant, Ninshubur, to seek the help of the other gods if she does not return, and then, Inanna travels to the outer gate of the underworld.

The next part of the poem details Inanna’s journey through the underworld to her sister, Ereshkigal, and the consequences of this journey. At the gate, the gatekeeper questions Inanna about her intentions. Inanna replies she would like to visit her sister Ereshkigal to observe the funeral rites for Ereshkigal’s husband, the Bull of Heaven. Ereshkigal allows Inanna to enter, but strips Inanna of one of her vestments of power at each of the seven gates of the underworld. At each gate, she hears,

Quiet, Inanna, the ways of the underworld are
perfect.
They may not be questioned.²⁵

This mirrors the process Nergal underwent when he made the journey to the underworld, though he retained his powers, unlike Inanna.²⁶ When Inanna enters the throne room of her sister, Ereshkigal, the judges of the underworld pass judgment against her and Ereshkigal strikes Inanna, turning her into a corpse, “a piece of rotting meat.”²⁷ Ereshkigal then hung Inanna on a hook in the throne room. Meanwhile, when Inanna does not return immediately, Ninshubur mourns Inanna and seeks the counsel of the gods as Inanna had commanded her. Enki, the god of wisdom,

24 Hallo and Van Dijk, *The Exaltation of Inanna*, 50.

25 Wolkstein and Kramer, *Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth*, 58.

26 Gurney, *Nergal and Ereshkigal*, 127.

27 Wolkstein and Kramer, *Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth*, 60.

sends two creatures to Ereshkigal to offer her sympathy as she squirms in pain as if in childbirth. Touched by their empathy, Ereshkigal offers them a gift and they ask for the corpse of Inanna. Sprinkling water and food upon Inanna returns her to life. The rest of the poem describes the events after Inanna is freed from the underworld. Someone must take her place in the underworld and demons follow Inanna to make sure she follows this rule. When Inanna sees her husband, Dumuzi, does not mourn her absence, she is enraged and chooses him to take her place in the underworld. Through hiding and deception, Dumuzi tries to escape his fate with the help of his sister, but in the end, the underworld claims him. His sister is bereft. In compassion, Inanna allows Dumuzi's sister to take his place in the underworld half the year.

The first female katabasis story, *The Descent of Inanna*, provides a template for future female katabasis stories. The poem also raises several questions – what motivated Inanna to go down to the underworld? Why does Ereshkigal strike her dead immediately? Why does the poem end with the cyclical katabasis of Dumuzi and his sister? Psychoanalysis of the poem can provide some clues. Laurie Brand Gagné calls the poem a triumph of a hag-queen over a beautiful goddess.²⁸ She describes Ereshkigal and Inanna as two parts of one woman. Inanna's anger against patriarchy results in her decision to descend into the underworld. When a woman rages against her powerlessness, they have a tendency to turn that anger inward against themselves. Ereshkigal demonstrates this when she strikes Inanna dead immediately.²⁹ Ereshkigal only restores Inanna to life again when Ereshkigal “is able to relate to herself again because someone took the time to relate to her.”³⁰ However, in her analysis, Gagné believes some part

28 Laurie Brand Gagné, *The Uses of Darkness: Women's Underworld Journeys, Ancient and Modern* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), 23.

29 Gagné, *The Uses of Darkness*, 25.

30 Gagné, *The Uses of Darkness*, 27.

indiscretion of Dumuzi motivates Inanna to begin her journey, and surmises that an unwritten indiscretion occurred between the poem of their courtship and Inanna's descent.³¹ However, the *Descent of Inanna* makes it clear Dumuzi's relative indifference to her disappearance is what incites Inanna's rage, especially compared to the grief shown by her sons and servant.

In later variants of the poem, Ishtar replaces Inanna, although all of Inanna's characteristics remain the same. Ishtar lists specific reasons for wanting to descend to the underworld, including her intent to raise the dead. This new reason explains why Ereshkigal would fear her approach and strike her dead immediately.³² This later clarification does not detract from the original vague purpose of Inanna's descent.

Within the Sumerian/Akkadian culture, the physical representation of a god's statue was symbolic of the status of the god. Whatever befell the statue also happened to the god automatically. In the *Descent of Inanna*, Ninshubur lists precious metals in her lament of Inanna, which represent the statues of Inanna. Rituals required the physical representation of the god or goddess represented. Therefore, Inanna's descent can be seen as a ritual.³³ Rituals demonstrate change from one state to another.

Other goddesses, motivated by love and anger, also symbolize change. Many Sumerian/Akkadian myths contain examples of divine anger because the culture viewed natural and political disasters as retribution from the gods in anger.³⁴ Inanna offers an excuse for her journey, which is motivated by her love for her sister to help her sister mourn her husband. The love between Dumuzi and his sister also touches Inanna, and she allows them both to share Dumuzi's punishment. This is symbolically linked

31 Gagné, *The Uses of Darkness*, 29.

32 Perera, "The Descent of Inanna," 167.

33 George, *Gilgamesh*, 112-113.

34 Gagné, *The Uses of Darkness*, 53.

to the theme of fertility. Before marrying Inanna, Dumuzi was a shepherd. Additionally, his sister's name means "rootstock of the grapevine."³⁵ Their cyclical descents into the underworld represent the two seasons of the Sumerian/Akkadian harvest cycle; grapes and figs are harvested in autumn while barley for beer is harvested in the spring.³⁶

Primordial fertility rites share similarities with the ritual of sacrifice of Inanna and the fate of Dumuzi and his sister. As Eliade wrote "the myth of the birth of edible plants...always involves the spontaneous sacrifice of a divine being...the fundamental idea is that life can only be born of another life which is sacrificed."³⁷ These rituals are widespread and old; evidence of them has even been found in ancient Mexico.³⁸ Other ancient Mediterranean female katabasis stories demonstrate the themes of love, power and fertility.

The afterlife in ancient Egyptian myth presents a contrast to the harsh and cruel afterlife depicted in other ancient Mediterranean cultures. Egyptians considered the transformation of the soul upon death to exist in a dream-like state in "a domain of irrationality."³⁹ The *duat*, the underworld, formed one part of the geography of the afterlife. Unlike other ancient Mediterranean cultures, the gods and goddesses could move between the many realms of the world, such as the underworld and the celestial world.⁴⁰ For example, *The Book of the Dead* often depicts Isis and Nephthys standing behind the throne of Osiris although they also interacted with the rest of the world. Therefore, katabasis stories

35 Wolkstein and Kramer, *Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth*, 168.

36 Wolkstein and Kramer, *Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth*, 168.

37 Perera, "The Descent of Inanna," 169.

38 Perera, "The Descent of Inanna," 170.

39 Ogden Goelet, Jr., "A Commentary on the Corpus of Literature and Traditions Which Constitutes *The Book of Going Forth by Day*," in *The Egyptian Book of the Dead: The Book of Going Forth by Day*, ed. Eva Von Dassow (San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books, 1998), 142.

40 Goelet, "A Commentary on the Corpus of Literature and Traditions Which Constitutes *The Book of Going Forth by Day*," 143.

do not appear amongst the Egyptian gods and goddesses. Isis though shares similar characteristics to Inanna, being “ignorant of nothing in heaven or on earth.”⁴¹ However, the *Myth of Kingship* shares similar themes to the *Descent of Inanna*, including returning from the dead.

Pieced together from numerous *Pyramid Texts*, *The Myth of Kingship* includes the death of Osiris; however within the story, Isis shares many similarities with Inanna. Eldest son of the earth and the sky, Osiris is murdered by his brother, Seth, and his body parts are scattered across Egypt. Bereft, Isis and her sister Nephthys scour the land and piece back together the body enough for Isis to become pregnant. Other versions of the myth have her breathing life back into Osiris with her wings or transforming into a sparrow hawk to become impregnated. Osiris can now descend into the underworld, where he refuses to become involved in the issues of the living. Isis, though, is the true protagonist of this story, “the hieroglyphs of whose name contain the symbol of the throne.”⁴² Motivated by love, Isis resurrects Osiris and using her magic, she offers “the basic hope of a continuity of existence for everyone” through her conception of Osiris’ son, Horus.⁴³ With obvious connections to fertility, her ability to turn into various animals symbolizes her connection with nature. Additionally, similar to Inanna, the patriarchy of the gods represses Isis, even with her great power and wisdom. When Isis spares Seth’s life, Horus cuts off her head in a rage and her headless body becomes a statue, though Re eventually restores her. Isis has the power to resurrect the dead and perform other powerful magic but cannot defend against the anger of her son. Both Inanna and Isis share themes of fertility, nature, and patriarchy. The theme of death connects both goddesses. However, the Egyptian concept of the

41 George Hart, *Egyptian Myths* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1990), 44.

42 George Hart, *Egyptian Myths*, 33.

43 George Hart, *Egyptian Myths*, 33.

underworld allows Isis easier travel between the realms, appearing behind Osiris in many depictions of the judgment of the dead. These themes continue into ancient Greece.

The *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* mirrors many of the themes and symbolism in the *Descent of Inanna*. Composed at the beginning of the sixth century BCE, the poem begins with the abduction of Persephone.⁴⁴ Stolen away from a field of flowers while frolicking with other young women, Persephone is carried into the underworld kicking and screaming. Her father, Zeus, had given her away to his brother, Hades, in marriage without telling her mother, Demeter, the goddess of the harvest. Demeter wanders the earth for nine days before she finds out the cause of Persephone's disappearance. Stricken with grief, Demeter withdraws from the world of the gods and travels to Eleusis, where she becomes the nurse to a young baby boy. Demeter anoints the boy with ambrosia and hides him in the fire at night to turn him immortal, but the mother is angry when she sees what Demeter is doing. Angry herself, Demeter leaves and withdraws from the earth as well. The earth lies fallow and the gods, alarmed, try to appease Demeter. She refuses all their offers, only wishing to see her daughter again. Finally, Zeus sends for Persephone. However, because she has consumed part of a pomegranate, she must spend a third of the year in the underworld with Hades.⁴⁵ Sumerian/Akkadian myth similarly expresses the symbolism of consuming food in the underworld. Nergal received a warning not to eat or drink any food nor sleep with the goddess of death, though he did not resist the last item.⁴⁶ Once again, the power of anger provides the theme throughout this poem. In anger, Inanna condemns Dumuzi to the underworld just as Demeter's anger

44 Lars Albinus, *The House of Hades: Studies in Ancient Greek Eschatology* (Oxford: Aarhus University Press, 2000), 159.

45 Apostolos N. Athanassakis, *The Homeric Hymns*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore, Maryland: The John Hopkins University Press, 2004), 1-14.

46 Gurney, *Nergal and Ereshkigal*, 115.

reunites her with Persephone. The kidnapping of Persephone does not automatically cause the crops to die in the field; the wrath of the mother causes these consequences.⁴⁷ This anger manifests as intimately personal. The love relationship exemplifies one noticeable difference between *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter* and the earlier stories. In this myth, love exists between a mother and daughter compared with love between sisters (Inanna and Ereshkigal), and between brother and sister (Dumuzi and his sister, and Osiris and Isis).

This relationship leads to some additional psychoanalytic perspectives. Demeter and Persephone represent two aspects of the same goddess, demonstrating the continuity of being beyond the boundary of life.⁴⁸ Additionally, it represents the symbolic three phases of a woman's life. Persephone symbolizes the maiden, Demeter the mother, and Hekate the crone, who supports Demeter throughout the poem. At the end of the story, all three women unite.⁴⁹ Similarly this reflects the cyclical nature of life – the theme of death and regeneration. Persephone descends and returns to earth every year (yet she remains conveniently available anytime someone seeks her in the underworld); the importance of her role continues as “she separates the light and the dark.”⁵⁰ The revolving descent and return of Dumuzi and his sister echoes this as does Isis' regeneration of Osiris. In the end, this myth has similar themes of love, power, and regeneration found in the other female katabasis myths.

In contrast, the katabasis of Odysseus has an entirely different meaning and symbolism than *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter* and the other female katabasis stories even though they originate from the same relative time period. Odysseus descends

47 Albinus, *House of Hades*, 165-166.

48 Albinus, *House of Hades*, 177.

49 Gagné, *The Uses of Darkness*, 31.

50 Perera, *The Descent of Inanna*, 188.

into the underworld to gain important knowledge from the dead. This presents a test, and by passing this test, he confirms his status as a hero and gains important wisdom.⁵¹ Furthermore, Odysseus does not intend to confront a deity in the underworld like the women, but instead, interact with the dead, which are memories of the living.⁵² The nature of Inanna, Isis, and Persephone as goddesses differs from the divinely blessed mortal Odysseus; however, the symbolism and meaning differ based on their gender and not their divinity. The Romans have two female katabasis stories featuring mortal women with divine blessings.

These stories, beginning with *Cupid and Psyche*, share close similarities with the preceding female katabasis myths. Apuleius inserted the story of *Psyche and Cupid* into a longer story called the *Metamorphoses* or *Golden Ass*, written in the second century AD. Apuleius frames the narrative in history claiming they were based on old Grecian stories and written on Egyptian paper with a reed from the Nile.⁵³ An old Grecian woman tells the story of *Psyche and Cupid* within the story. People worshipped Psyche instead of Venus because of her incredible beauty. Incredibly jealous, Venus orders her son, Cupid, to punish her; instead, he falls in love with her. Taken to an isolated house with invisible servants, Psyche falls in love with an invisible husband with one strict rule – Psyche must never try to see him. However, eventually, Psyche's sisters convince her to look at her husband. When she does, she sees Cupid and in the process, pricks herself with his arrow. Angry at her discovery and wounded by oil lamp, Cupid flees back to his mother. Madly in love with Cupid, Psyche wanders the earth looking for him before encountering Venus, who decides to test Psyche's worthiness. First, Venus piles together a bunch of seeds and demands Psyche separate it by the end of the day. Aided by

51 Albinus, *House of Hades*, 69.

52 Albinus, *House of Hades*, 73.

53 E.J. Kenney, "Introduction," in *Apuleius: Cupid and Psyche*, ed. E.J. Kenney (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 9.

ants, Psyche succeeds in her task to the anger of Venus. Next, Venus commands Psyche to get gold wool from some dangerous sheep. Again, with the help of a river spirit, she succeeds. Finally, Venus commands Psyche to go into the underworld and ask Persephone to place a day's worth of her beauty into a box. Yet again, a Tower helps Psyche by giving her specific instructions on how to complete her task. She arms herself with barley cakes soaked in wine and honey, and places two coins into her mouth to pay the ferryman Charon. She ignores the requests of a donkey, a dead swimmer, and a group of old women weavers. Throwing one of the barley cakes to Cerberus, she manages to safely make it to the throne room of Persephone. Persephone fills the box in private and returns it to Psyche, who then makes the return journey with the help of the other barley cake and coin. However, despite a warning not to look in the box, Psyche opens it once she has left the underworld and immediately falls into a deep and infernal sleep. In the end, Cupid saves Psyche, and Psyche obtains permission to marry Cupid in a proper ceremony.⁵⁴ Although the katabasis comprises one small part of the *Psyche and Cupid* story, the story contains similar elements to the other female katabasis myths.

The theme of love prevails throughout the whole story - love between Cupid and Psyche, and Cupid and Venus. Motivated by her love for Cupid, Psyche undertakes her journey. She is even willing to kill herself for his love, though ants, a river spirit, and a Tower convince her against it. Furthermore, the connections between love and the soul provide a meaningful metaphor in the story. The word *psyche* means "soul" in Greek and Cupid embodies love.⁵⁵ In the end, love saves Psyche, but "the helpless need of the seeker for salvation rather than...her deserts or convictions" calls

54 Apuleius, *The Golden Ass or Metamorphoses*, trans. E.J. Kenney (London, England: Penguin Books, 1998), 71-106.

55 Kenney, "Introduction," 16.

it down.⁵⁶ Psyche has a passive role in the story; things happen to her rather than her acting upon them. This exemplifies one main difference between her and the mortal men who make katabasis journeys. One of Psyche's key characteristics is "her utter helplessness when thrown on her own resources."⁵⁷ A hero does not have this characteristic.

Psyche also differs from Inanna and Demeter because Psyche remains unchanged by her journey while both Inanna and Demeter change forever. However, even though Psyche never matures within the story, she perhaps represents the maturity of the attitude towards death. "To remain oneself, in the face of the power of death, that is to remain open to life instead of closing off and shutting down in anger and despair, requires letting go of all that death can take from us."⁵⁸ Unlike Inanna and Demeter, Psyche does not find her power within her anger. She wields a more innate and personal power; it comes from her beauty, her simplicity, and her naivety. From the story of the *Descent of Inanna* to the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* to the story of *Psyche and Cupid*, these three myths can be seen to comprise one long story over 2,500 years of an angry woman learning to love, and her ability to transform her power from wild and angry and used to lash out to an controlled innate personal power.⁵⁹ Additionally, themes of fertility are interwoven throughout the story. Psyche is pregnant for most of the story, reveling in the "dignity of being called a mother."⁶⁰ She also "marveled that from a moment's pain there should come so fair an increase of her rich womb."⁶¹ However, Venus threatens her pregnancy and successfully completing the tasks provides additional incentive for Psyche. In addition to

56 Kenney, "Introduction," 14.

57 Kenney, "Introduction," 19.

58 Gagné, *The Uses of Darkness*, 52.

59 Gagné, *The Uses of Darkness*, 59-60.

60 Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, 83.

61 Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, 83.

the story of Psyche, Roman culture contains other examples of a mortal woman completing a katabasis.

The second Roman story occurs within the *Aeneid*, and shares many of the traits of *Psyche and Cupid*. Written around 19 BCE, the *Aeneid* has an episode where Aeneas travels to the underworld with Deiphobë, the Sibyl, as a guide. She shares with Psyche a common background as the daughter of a mortal man, which makes her mortal rather than a goddess. She also serves Apollo as a priestess. The descent of Aeneas and the Sibyl is a small episode in a much longer epic. She guides him along the path to the underworld so he may speak with his father one more time. She wields knowledge and wisdom as her power. Aeneas' men swiftly carry out her commands and Aeneas himself quickly does as she says. Like Psyche, she brings necessary objects, as required, with her to help complete the journey. While romance does not exist between her and Aeneas, she does love Apollo. When she begins to channel the god, her "wild heart grew large with passion."⁶² Apollo fills her with his spirit as she gains his powers of divination. She becomes "taller to their eyes and sounding no longer like a mortal."⁶³ Additionally, the Sibyl witnesses the glorious recitation of the descendants of Aeneas including Caesar and Augustus, reflecting the continuation of life after death. Similar to Psyche, the Sibyl remains unchanged by her journey.

Therefore, a basic pattern for female katabasis stories from the Sumerian/Akkadian to the Roman culture can be identified; it involves "discovering a new life through the surrender to passion, losing that life through the loss of the other, and coming through loss."⁶⁴ In the *Descent of Inanna*, Inanna surrenders herself to her sister and returns to life, and she loses her husband, yet survives. The story of *Psyche and Cupid* has Psyche discovering

62 Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans. Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Vintage Classics, 1990), 161.

63 Virgil, *The Aeneid*, 161.

64 Gagné, *The Uses of Darkness*, 7.

married life, experiencing the loss of her husband, and surviving through love. Furthermore, love progresses over time from dark to pure.⁶⁵ While Inanna expresses angry and wild love, Demeter and Persephone show a maternal and protective love. In ancient Egypt, Isis demonstrates the “supreme example of a devoted mother.”⁶⁶ Psyche’s love manifests as simple and pure. Throughout these stories and myths, these themes of love, fertility and power have been woven together, representing ancient attitudes towards women and the afterlife.

Besides the similarity in female katabasis myths and stories, these ancient Mediterranean cultures shared another characteristic of the underworld – the fact it existed under the world. These cultures had their own names and descriptions for the underworld, such “the land of no return,” but each depiction clearly located them under the earth.⁶⁷ There existed a clear delineation between the living and the dead. The themes and motifs seen in these female katabasis stories, which differ greatly from the male versions, represent a connection between the underworld and the woman. These women do not interact with the dead, but with the physical representation of the underworld.

Myths and stories use symbols to communicate with their audience and manipulate the teller as they themselves view the cultural models. Within myth, traditional elements familiar to the audience occur within the cultural context. These elements usually appear as motifs, like people, places, and other cultural items, and action patterns, which “are familiar actions or sequences of actions that are recognizable from one story to another.”⁶⁸ Jung viewed descent stories as “retrieving values long repressed and of uniting

65 Gagné, *The Uses of Darkness*, 7-8.

66 Hart, *Egyptian Myths*, 44

67 Gurney, *Nergal and Ereshkigal*, 109.

68 Radcliffe G. Edmonds, *Myths of the Underworld Journey: Plato, Aristophanes, and the ‘Orphic Gold Tablets’*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 6-8.

above and below into a new pattern”.⁶⁹ Such symbolism must have originated in the pre-history of humanity when humans communicated through symbols before words.

Prior to the Neolithic period, humans gazed up at the sky and pondered the divinity of limitless sky. In the Neolithic period, humans invented agriculture, relying upon the earth for their sustenance, and they no longer relied upon hunting as their main source of food. Long before knowledge of photosynthesis and hardiness zones, planting would still hold mystical traces. The seeds would disappear into the earth and return as life-giving plants, and the cycle repeated every year. Human sexuality became tied to these rituals; “the harvest was seen as the fruit of a hierogamy, a sacred marriage; the soil was female; the seeds divine semen; and rain the sexual congress of heaven and earth”.⁷⁰ Ancient Israelite texts show the continuation of these rituals into the sixth century BCE, much to the consternation of the prophets Hosea and Ezekiel.⁷¹ Thus, the invention of agriculture and the observations of the early humans gave the impression of personifying the earth as female, even symbolizing the earth as a womb from which life springs forth.⁷² The female katabasis stories of cultures that developed from these Neolithic farmers reflect these same symbolic meanings. Each symbol connects to an aspect of the culture. Love relates to human sexuality; fertility to the planting; power to drought, flooding, and the lack of food; and anger to wild and irrational nature. The female katabasis stories connect to the early concept of a “mother earth.”

Some scholars argue the prominent female deities from these ancient religions, like Inanna, Isis and Demeter, represent archetypes of a Mother Goddess or Great Mother figure, which

69 Perera, *The Descent of Inanna*, 143.

70 Karen Armstrong, *A Short History of Myth* (New York: Canongate, 2006), 41-42.

71 Armstrong, *A Short History of Myth*, 43.

72 Armstrong, *A Short History of Myth*, 43.

the patriarchy suppressed at the beginning of civilization. Whether these scholars offer a correct analysis does not deny these female deities wielded their own power – this has been demonstrated above. These females had a different relationship with death than their male counterparts, both in myths and tales as well as life. Women create life much like the earth creates the food humans need for life. The dead transform when they return to the womb under the earth. They may be meat on hooks, thirsty bird-like creatures, souls, and memories of the living, but they transform. At a primal level, women also represent the liminal state between life and non-life, one that lasts nine months.

Overall, the underworld in ancient Mediterranean cultures symbolically connects to the pre-historical concept of the earth as mother, demonstrated by an analysis of the female katabasis myths and stories from these cultures. Similar themes of love, fertility and power appear throughout these stories and in the rituals and beliefs of the Neolithic human culture. These stories differ from their male counterparts and demonstrate how women had symbolism and meaning even within a patriarchal culture. While women may not have had institutional power, they wielded their own unique power. Through psychoanalysis, these stories reveal universal symbols and meanings; as Jung said, “the soul expresses itself in the universal language of symbols.”⁷³