

When we hear the name Inanna the story of her mystical descent through the seven gates, deep into the Underworld, is the one aspect of her tale that tends to most readily spring to mind. Probably because it resonates with our own experiences of periods of blackness and I suspect that there are few people who can not relate in some way to it. The trials and anguishes caused by states of despair, when life has gone distinctly pear-shaped and all around seems to be veiled in darkness as you blindly claw your way through internal, twisty, dark tunnels with a desperation to find the light of understanding lest you should lose the path for good. Finally, there is (hopefully) a symbolic rebirth, a re-emergence, and you find yourself older, wiser and with a few more wrinkles.

My understanding of Inanna changed when I came across the book 'Inanna Queen of Heaven and Earth – Her Stories and Hymns from Sumer' by Diane Wolkstein and Samuel Noah Kramer. I was immediately struck by the image of Inanna on the front which appeared to depict a smiling crowned Goddess with long plaits and what look like phalluses protruding from her shoulders; we are told that these are actually feathers!¹ (Fig.1) I realised that there was much more to Inanna than what is commonly thought or indeed, portrayed, for Inanna's descent is only a very small part of her epic story.



Figure 1 - Inanna with 'feathers' on her shoulders c. 2400 B.C.

Wolkstein and Kramer's book is essentially a translation of the inscriptions of the Inanna myth found on ancient Sumerian stone tablets that were unearthed from amongst the ruins of Nippur, one of the most ancient cities of Babylonia and the cultural and spiritual centre for Sumer, which nowadays corresponds to the region of Southern Iraq. The tablets are thought to date from around 1750 B.C. and were excavated by the University of Pennsylvania between 1889 and 1900. Samuel Kramer was a key figure in piecing together and translating the texts found on the broken tablets, whilst Diane Wolkstein, a folklorist and storyteller, took the time to study the language, culture and history of ancient Sumer and presents us with her inspired interpretation of Inanna's myth based on the translated texts.

Upon opening the book, you will discover the delightful tale of Inanna as '*a young woman who loved to laugh*' who plucks and then lovingly cares for the Huluppu Tree. Thought by some to refer to a Willow, Poplar or a Date Palm, it also has some obvious parallels with the Tree of Life.

To Inanna's dismay, a serpent makes its nest in the Huluppu, as too does the fearsome lion-headed Anzu bird and that 'demon' of unbridled sexuality, Lilith. This imagery is said to represent Inanna's unexpressed fears and desires and gives her character a maiden-like quality.



Figure 2 The Huluppu Tree 2330-2150 B.C.

After much weeping (adolescent angst?), Inanna's brother Gilgamesh comes and chops down the tree with his big and shiny axe, an action that seems to symbolise the end of her childhood. From the wood is made a throne and more importantly, a bed, for Inanna is now ready to become a woman and a Queen.

Inanna then embarks on an epic journey through which she comes to be mentally, spiritually and

emotionally fertilised by a meeting with her (grand) father Enki, who is both the God of Wisdom and the God of Water – a vital component of fertility when it comes to vegetation and growth. In ancient Sumerian the word for water is synonymous with the word for semen. When Inanna reaches Enki's temple at Eridu, 'where kingship descended from heaven', they sit up all night getting drunk and in his inebriated state, Enki offers Inanna all manner of gifts, many of which are conceptual (these are the *Me*, the gifts of civilisation). Upon receiving the gift of decision-making she decides to take all the *Me* for herself and for her people. Loading them onto her 'Boat of Heaven', she beats a hasty retreat before Enki can change his mind.

Enki awakens to sobriety and realising what he has done, creates various magical monsters and sends them off after Inanna. Altogether there are seven attempts by Enki to prevent his daughter from getting home with the divine *Me*. These seem to be analogous to the seven challenges Inanna later faces at the seven gates leading down to the Underworld domain of Queen Ereshkigal, who in some versions of this myth is identified as being Enki's twin sister. In this instance, however, Enki's sorcery is trying to stop Inanna's return from the realm of the Gods, back to her home city of Uruk. He is foiled every time by Ninshubar (who appears to represent Inanna's higher self) and so the Goddess returns safely from Eridu with the heavenly *Me* and, along with them, her own sovereignty.

Inanna's throne is now befitting of her, but her special bed is still empty. After more wiliness (male, this time), she finally falls for Dumuzi (also called Tammuz), a vegetation God who is also a mortal shepherd (bear in mind here that in Sumer, a sheepfold was often used as a metaphor for female genitalia).

This section of Wolkstein's translation, with its obvious and abundant sexual metaphors, makes for erotic reading as we find Inanna declaring;

*'My vulva, the horn,
The Boat of Heaven,
Is full of eagerness like the young moon.
My untilled land lies fallow.*

*As for me, Inanna,
Who will plow my vulva?
Who will plow my high field?
Who will plow my wet ground?'*

Dumuzi courteously replies that he would be more than happy to plow Inanna's vulva for 'At the king's lap stood the rising cedar.' Inanna then sings:

*'He has sprouted; he has burgeoned;
He is lettuce planted by the water
He is the one my womb loves best...*

*My honey-man, my honey-man sweetens me always.
My lord, the honey-man of the gods,
He is the one my womb loves best.
His hand is honey, his foot is honey,
He sweetens me always.[...]*

*Make your milk sweet and thick, my bridegroom.
My shepherd I will drink your fresh milk.
Wild bull, Dumuzi, make your milk sweet and thick.
I will drink your fresh milk.*



Figure 3 Lovers embracing on bed. 2000-1600 B.C.

*Let the milk of the goat flow in my sheepfold.
Fill my holy churn with honey cheese.
Lord Dumuzi, I will drink your fresh milk'*

According to modern Sumerian theologians and mythographers, these Sumerian love songs were integral to Inanna's status as a love Goddess, but not of the modern sweetness and light kind, for Inanna was also very ambitious and aggressive. The 'darker' (not to be construed negatively) aspects of Inanna as a Goddess of Love can be seen in the Goddess Ereshkigal who rules over the Underworld and torments Inanna during her descent. For Ereshkigal is also Inanna's older, darker, sister, nemesis and shadow self. The side Inanna must face before she can truly return and take control of not only her kingdom, but her whole being for without the darkness, we would not be able to distinguish the light and without knowing both, we wouldn't know the place of balance which sits in-between.



Figure 4 Door to the Underworld. 2000-1600 B.C.

So, Inanna descends and confronts her dark side, Ereshkigal, who, with her equally raging, yet more devouring and compulsive sexuality, seems to demand only her own self-satisfaction. Having stripped Inanna of everything she slings her on a meat hook and leaves her to die. However, Inanna's spiritual self, Ninshubur, as previously instructed by Inanna, appeals to the Gods and through Enki's intervention, Inanna is reborn in the Underworld. A passageway that links the Great Above (light) to the Great Below (dark) is created through which Inanna is allowed to leave. But, there is a price to pay, for *'No one ascends from the underworld unmarked... she must provide someone in her place...'* Inanna returns to the Great Above and finds that her lover Dumuzi has let power go to his head during her absence, so, Inanna sends him off to the underworld to face his darker side and to take her place. Fortunately, the 'lighter' side of Inanna, perhaps realising that she would be barren without him, allows his return and resurrection every six months at which point his sister, Geshtinanna, takes his place. In Sumer this annual rebirth of Dumuzi and his subsequent marriage to Inanna was celebrated every year at the spring equinox in the sacred marriage ritual (the *hieros gamos*).

This part of Inanna's story appears to share something in common with that of Hades and Persephone. Whilst Hades is now commonly portrayed as the bad guy, he was also known by the Greeks as 'The Wealthy One' and was often pictured with an overflowing cornucopia. Similarly, in some versions of the myth it was actually Persephone who was the 'destroyer' and the Queen of the Underworld, with the Orphic mystics celebrating her as the Goddess of the Blessed Dead.

The changing status of many an old God and Goddess can be seen elsewhere. For example, in the story of Aphrodite, a Goddess who seems to be heralded these days as *the* Goddess of Love, and who is depicted in TV shows such as 'Xena', as a ditzy, ringlet-encrusted blonde. However, if one digs about a bit you also find fragmentary stories identifying her with Epitymbia, 'on the graves' and Androphonos, 'man killer.'² These aspects could be seen as a manifestation of Aphrodite's ruler-ship over the underworld as also suggested by both Persephone's and Inanna's stories, plus, it gives you that powerful link between sex and death.

Over time, perspectives change due to political and historical events, resulting in the distortion of many a myth. The last two thousand years, with its strong, patriarchal, Christian influences, have meant that sacred prostitutes and extrovertive, sexual love Goddesses have been down-played or even demonised and modern depictions of Goddesses of Love seem to come nicely-packaged, complete with glitter, and largely devoid of wanton, rampant sexuality. It's not just Goddesses either. On a trip to Rome I was struck by the fact that so many of the beautiful statues of Pan, Dionysus and Bacchus have at some

point in the past, had their genitals chipped off lest they offend.³ Can you imagine it – Pan without a prick!

How often do you see Love Goddesses depicted with wreaths of flowers, an enchantingly smiley face and maybe a cupid with an arrow, above her shoulder? Now think, how many of these kitsch Love Goddesses are depicted in an obvious state of full-on, in-your-face, sexual rapture? If you pick up some of the mainstream modern books on love magic, you can guarantee that Aphrodite will be in there (minus the sitting on graves reference), but what of Inanna with her broad-spectrum sexuality and her vulva that was ‘*wondrous to behold*’? If you do a search for Love Goddesses on Ebay, you will be faced with pages and pages of very nice, voluptuous Goddesses bedecked with stars, butterflies and flowers. Lewd, maniacally grinning Sheela-na-gigs or overtly sexual Goddesses with legs fiercely and passionately parted are a relatively rare find.



Figure 5 Sheela-na-gig on Kilpeck Church

Inanna’s story not only celebrates her as a love Goddess, for if you accept that Ereshkigal is Inanna’s shadow self, her myth also celebrates her sexuality in both its nurturing and devouring aspects (for the latter, Crowley’s *Leah Sublime* springs to mind). Inanna’s myth also reminds us that sex and love are not divorced from each other for during her passionate courtship with Dumuzi, we are told ‘*sweet is the sleep of hand-to-hand. Sweeter still the sleep of heart-to-heart*’ and she refers to Dumuzi as ‘*My sweet love, lying by my heart*’. It is this compassionate aspect of her being that welcomes his return from the underworld every six months.

Whilst modern society seems capable of separating sex and love, one can’t help but wonder if this is just encouraging a hedonistic, self-centredness that divorces the heart from the soul; a path 32 period, or perhaps we should call it the ‘path of self-service.’ I can’t help but feel that this is a bit like Inanna leaving Dumuzi in the underworld with her darker sister/self, Queen Ereshkigal, for good. How then would the Queen of Heaven and Earth be fertilised?

I have merely touched upon Inanna’s epic, complex and multi-layered story which seems to take us from the heights of spiritual inspiration, down to the darker recesses of our mind. Like a good tarot deck, you can interpret a good myth in multiple ways and use its messages to reflect on your own sense of self. So, if you fancy a good read and have had your interest aroused (pun intended) by the small extracts given herein, get yourself a copy of this book, you probably won’t think of Inanna in quite the same way, again.

‘Inanna Queen of Heaven and Earth – Her Stories and Hymns from Sumer’ by Diane Wolkstein and Samuel Noah Kramer. First paperback edition by Harper Perennial 1983 ISBN 0060908548. Second paperback reprint by Rider 1984 ISBN 0091581818 (the edition I used)

Endnotes:

1: *Inanna Queen of Heaven and Earth* Wolkstein and Kramer, Rider, Pg 177.

2: <http://www.ancientworlds.net/aw/Post/151383>

3: I have been informed that most of the ‘missing members’ are kept in little boxes in the Vatican’s vaults!

Many thanks to Ken Rees for drawing my attention to this book.

For Robyn Marler, Ninshubur on her Nishiki.