

## Inklings Forever

---

Volume 1 *A Collection of Essays Presented at the First  
Frances White Ewbank Colloquium on C.S. Lewis &  
Friends*

Article 7


---

1997

# Till Poems Have Faces

Lou Olson  
*Taylor University*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://pillars.taylor.edu/inklings\\_forever](https://pillars.taylor.edu/inklings_forever)

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#), [History Commons](#), [Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Religion Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Olson, Lou (1997) "Till Poems Have Faces," *Inklings Forever*: Vol. 1 , Article 7.  
Available at: [https://pillars.taylor.edu/inklings\\_forever/vol1/iss1/7](https://pillars.taylor.edu/inklings_forever/vol1/iss1/7)

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the Center for the Study of C.S. Lewis & Friends at Pillars at Taylor University. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Inklings Forever* by an authorized editor of Pillars at Taylor University. For more information, please contact [pillars@taylor.edu](mailto:pillars@taylor.edu).

---

# Till Poems Have Faces

## **Cover Page Footnote**

Undergraduate Student Essay

# **INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume I**

A Collection of Essays Presented at

The First

FRANCES WHITE EWBank COLLOQUIUM

ON

**C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS**

Taylor University 1997

Upland, Indiana

---

## **Till Poems Have Faces**

Lou Olson

student, Taylor University

## Till Poems Have Faces

by Lou Olson

*... An angel has no nerves.  
Far richer they! I know the sense's witchery  
Guards us, like air, from heavens too big to see;  
Imminent death to man that barb'd sublimity  
And dazzling edge of beauty unsheathed would be.  
Yet here, within this tiny, charm'd interior,  
This parlor of the brain, their Maker shares  
With living men some secrets in a privacy  
Forever ours, not theirs (Poems 35).*

- an excerpt from "On Being Human"

Who of us has never wished that we could be like angels—to understand that which is beyond human comprehension, to live beyond all pain and suffering, to be party to the mind of God, for angels are closer to God than we, aren't they? But C.S. Lewis proposes another idea. In his book *Till We Have Faces* and in his poetry he suggests that perhaps there is something in being human that means even more than not having to live "in the flesh". Being like the angels really isn't the issue for have we not been set just a little lower than God? Being human offers infinite joy and infinite possibilities to know God better and this is what the main character of the book, Orual, learns. She begins her book by accusing the gods and ends with knowing them. She is able to see herself as she really is, with no veils, and is able to say what she really means. So, she

discovers what it is to be human: that it means learning who God is and trusting Him, learning what love really is—and what it isn't, learning what it means to finally have a face—and to let the old self die.

*If we could speak to her . . .  
And told her, "Not that way!  
All, all in vain  
You weary out your wings and  
bruise your head." . . .  
Might she not answer, buzzing  
at the pane,  
"Let queens and mystics and  
religious bees  
Talk of such inconceivables as  
glass" . . .*

## Till Poems Have Faces • Lou Olson

*We catch her in a handkerchief  
(who knows*

*What rage she feels, what  
terror, what despair?)*

*And shake her out . . .*

*But left to her own will*

*She would have died upon the  
window sill (127).*

- excerpt from Sonnet

The book begins as Orual's book, written in order to accuse the gods. She sees them, particularly Ungit, the main goddess of Glome, as her enemies and the cause of the worst pain that has existed in her life. Her response to the gods is much like the response the bee caught in a handkerchief might have had—rage, terror, and despair. Yet for her, it seems that her views cannot be otherwise; from the very beginning her associations with the gods have been only fear, scorn, disgust, and superstition. For Orual, Ungit means blood and jealousy and death, darkness and uncleanness. Ironically enough, Ungit is supposedly the same as the Greek goddess Aphrodite. Little wonder that Orual is confused, for within the worship of Ungit there is so much apparent inconsistency. Orual's beloved half-sister, Psyche, is doomed to be sacrificed to Ungit and it is Ungit's priest who has decreed it, yet she is also to be food for the Shadowbrute (the god of the mountain), who is also simultaneously supposed to be Ungit's son and husband; however, it is also said that she is to be the bride of a god. What is one to believe? Why should one believe at all? As Orual says to PPsyche the night before she is to be sacrificed, "Do you and I need to flatter gods anymore? They're tearing us apart . . . oh, how shall I bear it? . . . and what worse can they do?

. . . the gods are real, and viler than the vilest men" (Faces 71). This is how she sees them - only as objects to fear and hate. And of course, much of that hate lies in the fact that she doesn't understand them. And why not, when all that she has understood of Ungit and the gods is that they want what is dearest to her, to take it from her? All she has seen has been shrouded in mystery and shadow and blood. She sees Ungit as a more powerful version of people like her busybody old nursemaid Batta, whose love was inconsistent, capricious, conditional. Later on in the story, much later when she has been the Queen of Glome for years, she has had a new statue of Ungit made for the temple. It is beautiful and has helped to dispel some of the fear and darkness that has been associated with the goddess before. As she looks at the old figure of Ungit, covered in blood, she thinks,

In the little clots and chains of it I made out a face . . . A face such as you might see on a loaf, swollen, brooding, infinitely female. It was a little like Batta as I remembered her in certain moods. Batta . . . had her loving moods, even to me. I have run out into the garden to get free — and to get, as it were, freshened and cleansed—from her huge, hot, strong yet flabby-soft embraces, the smothering, engulfing tenacity of her (270).

What is it that she is running from? Perhaps she thinks it is the embrace itself, but really it is the fakeness that she perceives Batta and therefore Ungit's love to be. She wants no lies or pretensions; she just wants the gods to admit once and for all that they don't love

## Till Poems Have Faces • Lou Olson

men; that they are no better than men, only more powerful. And of course, her view of the gods is also colored by the Fox, her Greek enlightened tutor who does not believe in gods at all. She vacillates between superstition and agnosticism. In that way, she is often like the bee who doesn't believe in such "inconceivables as glass." But, the bee was mistaken, and so was Orual. We can sympathize with her, for the ways of the gods were not always easy to understand. But, there was still evidence. Even Psyche caught glimpses of the truth. As she says in response to Orual, "Or else . . . they are real gods but don't really do these things. Or even—mightn't it be—they do these things and the things are not what they seem to be?"(71). She has stumbled onto a great truth—that things are not always what they seem, especially to men who have such limited sight. Orual's sight seemed especially limited—she could not see the castle of which Psyche spoke, in which Psyche claimed she lived. But even worse, she did not believe even when she could see it, even when the gods granted her a moment of seeing it clearly, though no other mortal could. She refused to believe because she didn't want to. She didn't want to believe that Psyche truly was the bride of a god and lived in a gorgeous palace with a man she loved. She didn't want to believe that Psyche wouldn't be coming back to her. And how much we are like Orual. How often is it that we refuse to believe in something we cannot see or comprehend, like glass to a bumblebee? And how often do we even refuse to believe that which we are granted to see, because we don't want to have to change because of it? Indeed, when Orual finally makes her accusation to the gods themselves she is answered by silence. It is then that she sees that there always was a glass window there and that the pain she had to go through while being "in the handkerchief"

was something the gods did in order to save her from herself. How often has God had to allow us to experience pain in order to save us from ourselves?

*Pity hides in the wood . . .  
Lapping against their walls,  
Mining, sapping,  
Patiently eating away  
The strong foundations  
Of the towers of pain, rising  
An inch in an hour . . . (Poems 39)*

— an excerpt from "The Saboteuse"

One of the unmistakable aspects of Orual is the love she bears for the three people who have been given her in her life — for Bardia, Fox, and Psyche. They are absorbingly important to her and she would easily die for them. In fact, this is one of the greatest reasons that she feels cheated by the gods. She loves them all with such fierceness, but that love is not returned in kind. She had always been in love with Bardia, her counselor, but he was married and cared deeply for his wife. The Fox had always yearned for the life and family he had left behind in Greece, and Psyche had been taken from her forever, as dead or forever disappeared. How could the gods do such things when she loved these people so much and they were all she had? How could they take them while she was left nothing in return as a lonely, ugly, unlovable woman? It wasn't fair. But, that was the heart of the problem. She wanted fairness, love in return for her love, feeling in return for her feeling. What she did not realize was that is not what the nature of love is at all. Love is not based upon the fact that it is returned; love asks for nothing in return. Orual's love was more akin to selfishness and self-pity than to true agape

## Till Poems Have Faces • Lou Olson

love. With Bardia she claimed she loved him, but her love for him was hungry for requital. Bardia's wife spoke truly when she said, "Queen Orual, I begin to think you know nothing of love . . . Yours is a Queen's love, not commoners'. Perhaps you who spring from the gods love like the gods. Like the Shadowbrute. They say the loving and the devouring are all one, don't they?" (*Faces* 265). And that is exactly it. Orual's love devoured others and devoured herself. She expected so much in return for her love, that one's debt to her could never be paid back. And when it wasn't, she pitied herself. Perhaps it was the pity that did the greatest harm. For any strength that might have grown up in her from the pain that did exist in her life was "eaten away" by Pity, a self-pity that hid in the woods and lapped against the walls of the tower of pain. Bardia died, broken and used up by a Queen whose appetite could never be satiated. And the Fox stayed behind, when he could have left to finally go home to Greece, in order to help pay back the debt of love he owed her. But perhaps the worst was how her love devoured Psyche, she whom Orual claimed to love the most. But again, we know what her love really was. It was a way of being loved back — and Psyche was the one who rejected that love the most. When Orual is presenting her case before the gods, she is finally being truthful:

You know I never really began to hate you until Psyche began talking of her palace and her lover and her husband. Why did you lie to me? You said a brute would devour her. Well, why didn't it? I'd have wept for her and buried what was left of her and built her a tomb. . . . But, to steal her love from me! . . . to

make her see things I couldn't see . . . The girl was mine. What right had you to steal her away into your dreadful heights? You'll say I was jealous. Jealous of Psyche? Not while she was mine (290).

Orual's love was conditional. As long as Psyche was with her or was dead and out of everyone else's reach, she could accept her great beauty and giftedness. But, once Psyche was taken away to be the wife of a god, once she was raised above other mortals and made almost a goddess herself, she could not stand it. It was jealousy, for Psyche had everything and now she had nothing. Not even Psyche. And so she convinced herself that she had to save her from whatever it was she was living with and forced her, using Psyche's love as a weapon against her, to question the life she had been given with a god and to therefore throw it away. Her love really did more harm than good. And she comes to realize this when she asks, "Did we really do these things to her?" "Yes. All here's true." The Fox answers, "And we said we loved her. And we did. She had no more dangerous enemies than us" (304). Orual learns that she had become that which she always thought she hated about Ungit; she had been "gorged with other men's lives—women's too." And that brings us to another person she had destroyed with her love, her other sister Redival. For before the Fox and Psyche had come, each had only the other. But, with a love like Orual's there is only so much to go around and after they had come there was no room left for Redival in her heart. So she was thrown out of it and replaced and from then on could bear only resentment for those who had usurped her place in Orual's heart. Indeed, it was due to

Till Poems Have Faces • Lou Olson

her that Psyche was doomed to be sacrificed in the first place. So devouring begets devouring. And it causes us to look at the “love” we say we bear for others. For, though someone means a lot to us, there are so many who still expect much in return. But that is not love, it is our own selfish desire to be loved and when we do that we use love as weapon or means to be loved. It is not for its own sake. It is self-seeking. And we can look around us at examples of true, self-sacrificing love and compare it and see that, in reality, it does not even deserve the name. Psyche is looking at it when Orual has tried to force her into doing what she asks. “You are indeed teaching me about kinds of love I did not know. It is like looking into a deep pit. I am not sure whether I like your kind better than hatred”(165). She has hit upon the truth: it is really no different from hatred. And it is when Orual is freed from this feeling she has always termed “love” that she is free to love unconditionally.

*... Now the mask you call  
A Face has blotted out the  
ambient hemisphere's embrace  
... For a dome of severance,  
A helmet, a dark, rigid box of  
bone, has overwhelmed  
... crushed in a brain (Poems 8)  
- excerpt from "The Magician  
and the Dryad"*

The last thing Orual learns is what it means to truly “have a face.” In the poem the face is a mask of sorts that is used to cover up who the dryad really is—but in the story it means something wholly different. In fact, that is what this book *Till We Have Faces* is all about. In the story Orual first begins to wear a veil that covers her face when she goes on her errand to force Psyche into coming home with

her. Interesting, for it is then when she really begins to hide from herself; it is then that she begins to bury herself into oblivion and, she hopes, nonexistence. One can perhaps understand why she wanted no more of herself—she was tired of being ugly, unloved Orual, whose heart had been broken by losing the one she thought she most loved. But she wore the veil from then on. “I now determined that I would always go veiled. I have kept this rule . . . ever since. It is a sort of treaty made with my ugliness . . .”(Faces 180). She did it to hide her ugliness from the rest of the world, but also from herself — her inner ugliness. And so, for years and years after she is the veiled Queen about whom there are many stories. Some said she was so beautiful that she had to cover herself up from men; some said she was so ugly that all would be afraid if they saw her. And some believed that she had no face left. Perhaps they were all right in a way. But she doesn't unveil herself until the day that she resolves to commit suicide. That day she is stopped by the voice of a god, but what had caused her to desire to die was that she had had a dream. In the dream she had been forced by her father to look into a mirror and what she saw there was not herself, but Ungit. She was Ungit. As we have already seen, her love was the same as she had perceived Ungit's to be. And it was this knowledge that had caused her to wish she could be dead so she takes the veil off. What does she have left to hide from, after all? But it isn't until the veil is taken off and she is completely uncovered before the gods that the whole truth is revealed to her. For it is at this time that she makes her accusation to the gods and it is then, unveiled, naked before them, that she could say what she really meant. And, as she says, “[T]o say the very thing you really mean, the whole of it, nothing more or



## Till Poems Have Faces • Lou Olson

less than what you really mean; that's the whole art and joy of words"(294). And so it is. And that explains why she could never have faced the gods otherwise. "Till that word can be dug out of us, why should they hear the babble that we think we mean? How can they meet us face to face till we have faces?"(294) She had not allowed herself to have a face before, perhaps she was afraid of what she would see but she had covered it up and pretended it no longer existed. However, in doing so, she had hid from her real self and the truth. So, no wonder she could not understand or see the gods before. She could not meet them "until she had a face." And after finally having a face, it was no longer the face of Ungit that she had. After seeing the truth Orual goes to a pool and looks into it and sees . . . Psyche as her own reflection. And she hears "You, too, are Psyche." And it is then that she learns that she had helped all those years to bear Psyche's pain that she had to undergo in order to be with her husband. But, seeing her sister's reflection instead of her own is also symbolic. For the first time, she sees beauty as her reflection. For the first time, she sees herself, her inner self, as beautiful. She could not have become so without the suffering that she had undergone—that of seeing, unveiled, the evil that existed within her. In a way, the old Orual, the one who had to hold so tightly onto love—who had to grab for it—who had to hide from herself, had to die. And this is the final truth that we must understand. Orual had to die to herself in order to truly live, in order to find herself. So then must we let go of our old selves, and the sin that we hold onto and holds us, and let that part die. But, here is the clincher—when we do so, our true selves, the one God sees, becomes who we really are. We give Him us: sinful, rebellious, accusatory, and He gives us a self that is new, forgiven, awakened. We are like a seed that finally

concedes to die to being a seed and is then able to grow to an oak tree.

*If thou think for me what I  
cannot think, if thou  
Desire for me what I  
Cannot desire, my soul's interior  
Form, though now  
Deep-buried, will not die,  
No more than the insensible  
dropp'd seed which grows  
Through winter ripe for birth  
(Poems 117).*

-Excerpt from  
"The Naked Seed"

With such words there is little left to say. Obviously, there is so much that we can learn from C.S. Lewis's work, especially his poetry and *Till We Have Faces*. From him we can learn to see how much more God knows than us; how much He is trying to help us when all we see is pain. From him we see that love is not love which expects anything in return, it is something that is more akin to hate, and something that will devour those around it and itself. And we learn that only when we are completely honest with ourselves can we truly have a face, can we meet God face to face. Orual's life is seen through a microscope for us, and we can see how her true self was finally awakened when she let the walls fall between herself and Him. Hopefully, we will come to understand this as well as she. Hopefully, we will come to see what it means to be human, the creation of God. So, we end with one more poem, a poem I perceive as Orual's life.

As the Ruin Falls  
All this is flashy rhetoric about  
loving you.

Till Poems Have Faces • Lou Olson

I never had a selfless thought  
since I was born.  
I am mercenary and  
self-seeking through and through;  
I want God, you, all friends,  
merely to serve my turn.

Peace, reassurance, pleasure,  
are the gods I seek,  
I cannot crawl an inch  
outside my proper skin:

I talk of love—a scholar's parrot  
may talk Greek—  
But, self-imprisoned, always end  
where I begin.

Only that now you have taught me  
(but how late) my lack.  
I see the chasm. And everything  
you are was making  
My heart into a bridge by which  
I might get back  
From exile, and grow man. And  
now the bridge is breaking.  
For this I bless you as the ruin  
falls.  
The pains  
You give me are more precious  
than all other gains (Poems 109).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Lewis, Clive Staples. *Poems*. New  
York: Harcourt Brace &  
Company, 1992.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Till We Have Faces*. New  
York: Harcourt Brace &  
Company, 1984.