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David Bedsole
Huntingdon College

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The First

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ON

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David Bedsole
Huntingdon College

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The Question of Biblical Allegory in *Till We Have Faces*

by David Bedsole

The title page of C.S. Lewis's *Till We Have Faces* clearly labels the work as "a myth retold," and some would argue that it is simply that—a pagan myth placed in a more intimate light, nothing more. The novel, they would argue, depicts two kinds of love: devouring love and exonerating love, and has nothing to do with Christian theology. It is interesting to note, however, that the copyright year of *Till We Have Faces* (1956) is the same as Lewis's final Narnia book, *The Last Battle*. He had already written such titles as *The Problem of Pain, The Screwtape Letters,* and the *Great Divorce* (Sayer 265-66). The overzealous might be found guilty of endeavoring to construct an entire Christian allegory out of the work, and the author of this paper was no exception. Lewis, one would assume, was well into his Christian walk by this time, and had just completed his allegorical masterpiece for children in *The Chronicles of Narnia*—for what reason would he confuse his readers by composing a retelling of a pagan myth in a humanistic light, with no Christian backdrop? If Lewis had set himself up as a theological author, what would cause him to suddenly depart from this into what some would call paganism or secular humanism? The only logical approach at first would be to labor at finding the "hidden" message in the novel—the parable that Lewis was actually telling us in this unorthodox context. *Till We Have Faces* is laden with theological allusions and parallels, but these seem to work on a variety of levels. Therefore, we systematically explore the novel in search of identities to assign to the characters (i.e. who represents Christ, Satan, etc.) And what biblical tale is being retold.

The first conclusion that one reaches as one finishes reading the first few chapters of the novel is that Psyche is a very obvious Christ-figure. She effectively parallels Christ's time on earth by first being blessed by the people, and later being cursed. At first, people wish for her to heal them of disease, just as Christ did in his time (Lewis 31). In the same way that Christ was accused of making himself a god by claiming to be son of God, Psyche is accused of making herself a goddess, and is called "the Accursed" (Lewis 39). The sacrifice of Psyche to the Shadowbrute could not be a more blatant crucifixion scene. Just as Christ was crucified for the sins of man, Psyche was crucified to heal an accursed land. Psyche was chained to a tree on the top of a mountain; Christ was nailed to a tree on top of a mountain. Both Psyche and Christ were guiltless; the book states that "In the Great Offering, the victim must be perfect." Just like Christ, Psyche's only sin was perfection (Lewis 49, 107-109). Ironically enough, Bardia later calls Psyche "the Blessed" in sorrow for her death and lamentation for the sins of his land. This is the same way that Christians regard Christ (Lewis 95).

On the basis of these points alone, one is apt to go careening wildly through the novel with smug confidence that Psyche is Christ, therefore Trom is Satan, and so on. However, tension begins when one reaches chapter fourteen, when Orual convinces Psyche to reveal the face of her husband/god. If we were to cling doggedly to our current theory, then we might say that Orual was fallen man asking Christ to break faith with God so that man could see the Kingdom. Unfortunately, reason explodes our theory at this point for two reasons: first, this would place the entire allegory out of chronological order (the asking for intervention after the crucifixion) and secondly, this would imply that the redemption of Christ was a favor granted at man's behest—not a gift that man could not possibly ask for or deserve.

We are forced at this point, then, to see chapter fourteen as a Fall scene, and Psyche is cast in the role of Eve. Orual takes the form of Satan in this chapter as she manipulates Psyche to do the one thing that she has been forbidden to do—reveal her god's face. Psyche, like Eve, acquires the deadly knowledge that had been denied to her. God commanded Adam and Eve not to eat of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil because it allowed them to cheekily attempt to transcend their mortality, and Psyche (albeit unwillingly) commits the same sin. Sin invariably leads to estrangement, however, and Psyche is banished by the angry god to roam the earth just as Eve was (Lewis 175, 298-300). The indignant god tells Satan/Orual that "You shall also be Psyche" and Orual interprets this as a curse (174). This could be seen as a parallel of god's curse on Satan in Genesis.

We now begin to doubt our theory that *Till We Have Faces* is an allegory, because we see that the characters in the story behave like traveling actors, going backstage to change costumes and constantly coming back in a different role. Just as we begin wondering how we can change our former Christ-figure theory to fit this new Eve-figure theory, Lewis again turns the tables on us, and we find Psyche in the role of Christ once again, this time as Christ the Redeemer. This time, Orual shows herself to represent fallen man. The dream that Orual has about digging with King Trom can be interpreted as Orual's descent into hell, with Trom, or Satan, as her guide. She finds that this Ungit that she has so hated—this hateful, unfair, devouring goddess—is herself. She has devoured the lives of those who are loyal to her, such as Bardia. She is Ungit—or man, dead in sin—and she needs to be redeemed (Lewis 274-276). (This was undoubtedly an offshoot of William's theology, the idea that hell is a subjective reality that one thrusts himself into because of selfishness.) Orual angrily accuses the gods at the end of the novel, and begins to realize that in doing so, she implicates herself. Thus, she parallels man's rebellion against God. Obviously, the punishment for treason is death, and Trom again shows himself as Satan as he requests that the god "leave the girl to me. I'll lesson her." Satan, like Trom, requests and demands the soul of the unredeemed (Lewis 294). Psyche, however, ransoms Orual's soul with her descent into the Deadlands. She parallels the dynamic redemption of Christ by ascending into this symbolic Hell to acquire beauty for Ungit, or Orual—the unredeemed. Lewis reconciles myth and allegory as he depicts Psyche's refusal to be stopped by the forces of reason (the Fox) or non-divine love (Orual herself), just as Jesus is not dissuaded from h is spiritual battle by Satan's temptation in the desert. Earthly loves and humanistic reason do not stop him from completing the task, and neither do they halt Psyche. Psyche continues down into Hell and acquires the beauty that is promised to Orual, in the same way that Christ descended into Hell after his crucifixion for man's redemption. When Psyche gives the beauty to Orual, Orual is reconciled to the gods and pardoned of her impudence. The phrase "You are also Psyche" becomes a pardon at this point, because Orual is like Psyche, and in another dimension, man becomes like Christ (Lewis 301-309).

Here we see three separate stories told in allegory, and yet there is no cohesion between them. Two suggest Psyche as a Christ-figure, but one shows her inarguably as an Eve-figure. All attempts at reconciling the two views fail, and we become more and more frustrated as we see the novel as a kind of a disjointed allegory, one where the characters constantly change roles. Admittedly, Lewis shows in *The Great Divorce* that he sees time as merely a mortal inconvenience, and that Christ's redemption is occurring at every moment of every hour. This could account for the chronological order problem, but leaves the problem of synthesis between the three stories untouched. We find that the allegory that we have synthesized brims over with contradictions, and compromise is inevitable. We begin to realize that there is Christian theology at work in the novel, although we are forced to admit that the allegory idea is *non sequitur*. It seems in conclusion that Lewis formulated the novel not simply to show the two kinds of love in a human context, but to illuminate the only two loves in the world—human love and divine love. The novel shows the futility of human love without the intervention of Christ, and the bliss that is possible when man ceases to rebel against God.

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