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The Three Loves: Possessive, Sacrificial and Divine Love in Till We Have Faces

Cover Page Footnote

Undergraduate Student Essay

The Three Loves: Possessive, Sacrificial and Divine Love in *Till We Have Faces*

Andrew Neel

In *Till We Have Faces*, C.S. Lewis presents a bold reinterpretation of an ancient myth and creates a story which questions the true nature of love. This essay will show how Lewis represented possessive love and sacrificial love in *Till We Have Faces*. This essay will also give a discussion of the nature of divine love and its relation to natural affection as portrayed in this novel.

Till We Have Faces is a retelling of the story of Cupid and Psyche. The myth, which comes from the second-century Latin author Apuleius, tells the story of Psyche, a princess whose beauty awakens the jealousy of Venus and who eventually undergoes various trials before finding happiness with the gods. The theme of the myth, according to Peter J. Schakel, can be ascertained from the name of the protagonist, since *Psyche* is the Greek word for *soul*: "The story from the first has been allegorized as the human soul's quest for love" (Schakel, Peter J. *Reason and Imagination in C.S. Lewis: A Study of Till We Have Faces*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984, p. 5).

Lewis follows the theme of the original myth, but adds to the story a discussion of the nature of love itself. Rather than focusing on Psyche's individual quest for love, however, Lewis tells the story through the eyes – and emotions – of Psyche's older sister, Orual. Throughout the story, Orual demonstrates a possessive, controlling love of both Psyche and her teacher and friend, the Fox. Psyche, on the other hand, exemplifies sacrificial love that is more concerned with the well-being of others than of her self.

Orual's possessive love of Psyche can first be seen in her misgivings about the worship which young Psyche, who was beautiful from birth, receives from others. After Orual first learns that Psyche has been praised by others for her beauty, she warns her sister that the gods might be jealous of such behavior (*Till We Have Faces*, Harcourt Brace & Company, 1985, pp. 27-28). Schakel believes Orual's suggestion that the jealousy of the gods is a reason for Psyche to avoid the praise of others is an early example of her possessive love:

We are invited, I think, to ask if Orual's fears are in part a projection (perhaps unconscious)

of her own feelings. [...] As others notice Psyche, praise her, do obeisance to her, Orual may even at this point be protesting against sharing Psyche with others, against Psyche's obtaining from others the assistance Orual wants to come only from herself. (Schakel, p. 22)

In contrast to her sister's possessive love, however, Psyche demonstrated a willingness to sacrifice herself for others when she walked out among the diseased townspeople to heal them and touch them, risking sickness and possibly death in the process (*Till We Have Faces*, p. 32). Not long after this sacrificial gesture, however, Psyche was named as the Accursed, the person who had to be offered as a sacrifice to appease Ungit, the goddess worshipped by the people of Psyche and Orual.

As Orual comforted Psyche in her final hours, she once again revealed the self-serving, possessive nature of her love. While Psyche talked to her sister for what may have been their last conversation, all Orual could think about was how Psyche seemed too happy and should be miserable at the thought of being separated from her one true source of joy – her older sister:

[A]s she spoke I felt, amid all my love, a bitterness. Though the things she was saying gave her (that was plain enough) courage and comfort, I grudged her that courage and comfort. It was as if someone or something else had come in between us. If this grudging is the sin for which the gods hate me, it I one I have committed. (*Till We Have Faces*, p 75)

As she mourned the loss of her sister, Orual's love for Psyche takes the form of self-inflicted misery. Orual traveled up the mountain where Psyche was sacrificed so she could bury her sister's body. On the way up the mountain, Orual started to enjoy the scenery around her and had fleeting hopes of experiencing and enjoying the world. Orual soon squelches this happiness as an inappropriate feeling in light of the lingering memory of her sister's death: "My heart to dance? Mine whose love was taken from me, I, the ugly princess

who must never look for other love [...] I would not go laughing to Psyche's burial. If I did, how should I ever again believe that I had lover her?" (*Till We Have Faces*, pp. 96-97). It is clear from this passage that Orual's possessive love had not only taken a claim to the happiness of Psyche, but also to Orual's own happiness. This natural affection for Psyche had been corrupted to the point where even Orual herself suffered from her possessive obsession for her younger sister.

The true contrast between Orual's love for Psyche and Psyche's love for Orual, however, can be seen in the final conflict between the two. After traveling to the mountain, Orual discovered that her sister was alive and living in a valley of the mountain. Psyche explained to Orual that she was living with her husband, a god, in a palace in the valley, but that she didn't know what her husband looked like because he ordered Psyche not to bring any light into their bedchamber. Orual could not see the palace and assumed her sister was mad. Orual's possessive love then placed itself in direct opposition to the divine love Psyche claimed to be experiencing:

Oh Psyche, Psyche! You loved me once ... come back. What have we to do with gods and wonder and all these cruel, dark things? We're women, aren't we? Mortals. Oh, come back to the real world. Leave all that alone. Come back where we were happy. (*Till We Have Faces*, pp. 124-125)

Orual's command to Psyche to "Come back where we were happy" shows Orual's disregard for her sister's claims of happiness in the valley and exemplifies Orual's desire to control every aspect of Psyche's happiness and connection with love. Psyche asserts that she cannot return to Orual and that Orual must come to her (*Till We Have Faces*, p. 125). Although she admitted that Psyche seemed happy living in the valley, Orual concluded that her love for her sister outweighed her desire to see Psyche happy: "I perceived now that there is a love deeper than theirs who seek only the happiness of their beloved" (*Till We Have Faces*, p. 138). The pervasiveness of Orual's possessive love had reached that point that Orual was willing to kill her sister in order to stop Psyche from deriving happiness apart from her controlling guidance (*Till We Have Faces*, p. 138).

Orual left the mountain with a sense of anxiety about her sister, but soon returned after she resolved to test Psyche's love by forcing her to disobey her husband, whom Orual concluded was either a deceitful, evil man or a hideous, shadowy spirit. When Orual confronted Psyche for the second time, Psyche explained the meaning of true love to her sister: "You do not think I have left off loving

you because I now have a husband to love as well? [...] that makes me love you – why, it makes me love everything – more" (*Till We Have Faces*, pp. 158-159). Orual quickly responded with her possessive, control-driven definition of love: "Those who love must hurt. I must hurt you again today. You cannot go your own way. You will let me rule and guide you" (*Till We Have Faces*, p. 159). This verbal exchange perfectly presents Lewis' beliefs about the nature of possessive love, sacrificial love and divine love. In this conversation, Psyche, who has always demonstrated sacrificial love for others, explains that she is able to love others more because of her love for her husband – a god. Lewis' point in this is to suggest that Psyche was able to love others more effectively because she had given her love completely to the divine and had increased in capacity to love everything as a result. Orual, however, who had only her natural affection for Psyche as a definition of love, believed that she would be able to control and possess her sister. Orual, who had not given her love to the divine, had lost her ability to love others in a healthy way because her natural love for Psyche was obsessed with trying to possess her.

Orual then gave Psyche her ultimatum: Either Psyche would disobey her husband and bring a lamp into her bedchamber to discover his identity or Orual would kill Psyche and herself. Psyche, addressing her sister, reveals the hurt caused by Orual's threats, which were supposedly motivated by Orual's love:

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. Oh, Orual – to take my love for you [...] and then to make of it a tool, a weapon [...] an instrument of torture – I begin to think I never knew you. (*Till We Have Faces*, p. 165)

Here Lewis reveals the full destructive power of Orual's natural affection for her sister. Lewis believed that any natural affection, no matter how pure and well-intentioned it was in its conception, would end in corruption without divine influence – as shown in Orual's confrontation with Psyche. Schakel summarizes Lewis' explanation of this in *The Four Loves*:

His thesis about loves is that the natural loves can remain themselves, can remain loves, only if they are infused with, or transformed by, divine love, or *agape*; left to themselves, cut off from *agape*, the natural loves will become corrupted, will gradually cease to be loving and will in fact, eventually, turn into forms of hatred. (Schakel, p. 28)

Lewis also presented this view on the necessity of divine love in *The Great Divorce*: “You cannot love a fellow-creature fully till you love God” (*The Great Divorce*, HarperCollins, New York: 1973, pg. 518). In light of Lewis’ understanding of divine love, then, Orual’s natural affection for Psyche was doomed to corruption without the influence of divine love. Orual’s love was destined for failure because she was trying to possess someone – Psyche – who wasn’t hers to possess. Psyche belonged to her husband – the divine.

Psyche’s sacrificial love, on the other hand, was made stronger through divine love. Because of her faith in the love of her husband, a god, Psyche was willing to disobey her husband and risk losing her own happiness to stop Orual from killing herself (p. 166).

This divine love, which is necessary for natural affection to turn into lasting love, has a dual nature in *Till We Have Faces*. This dichotomy is summarized in the Priest’s explanation of the sacrifice of the Accursed, which became Psyche:

In the Great Offering, the victim must be perfect. [...] a man so offered is said to be Ungit’s husband, and a woman so offered is said to be the bride of Ungit’s son. And both are called the Brute’s Supper. [...] And either way there is a devouring. [...] Some say the loving and the devouring are all the same thing. (*Till We Have Faces*, p. 51)

As the Priest’s explanation showed, the interaction of the god or goddess with the sacrifice was to be both a “devouring” and a “loving.” The “devouring” aspect of divine love could be connected to the idea of mortals “surrendering” their will to the divine and giving up the struggle for independence from divine influence: “the death which is wisdom [...] meant the death of our passions and desires and opinions” (*Till We Have Faces*, p. 281). Part of this surrendering process, though, includes accepting the way in which the divine interacts with humanity. Part of Orual’s struggle against the divine is that she can’t accept the shadowy, mysterious way in which the gods work (*Till We Have Faces*, p. 249). Later in her life, however, Orual is forced to acknowledge that divine influences often “devour” or “control” her for her own good: “And now those divine Surgeons had me tied down and were at work” (*Till We Have Faces*, p. 266).

The “loving” aspect of divine influence comes only after the devouring has been complete. Psyche could not become the god’s bride until she had given up her will on the mountain. Once she had, however, she was in communion with the divine.

Once Psyche endured toils and trials at the command of the gods, she became “a thousand times more her very self than she had been before the Offering” (*Till We Have Faces*, p. 306). This ties into another theme found throughout Lewis’ work: namely, that people become their true selves only after surrendering their selves to God. In the same way, Orual was able to demonstrate true love only after experiencing the love of the divine and surrendering all her possessive love to the gods. Orual’s surrendering of her love mirrors her acknowledgment that she could never possess or “devour” Psyche because Psyche didn’t belong to her, and it reflects her understanding that she herself must be devoured by the divine love before she could begin to truly love anyone.

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