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Tale as Old as Time: A Study of the Cupid and Psyche Myth, with Particular Reference to C.S. Lewis's Till We Have Faces

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Tale as Old as Time

*A Study of the Cupid & Psyche Myth,
with Particular Reference to C.S. Lewis's "Till We Have Faces"*

John Stanifer

In 1956, C.S. Lewis saw the publication of his final novel, *Till We Have Faces*. Considered by Lewis himself to be among his best work, the novel's plot is essentially a reworking of the myth of Cupid and Psyche, a myth first recorded in Apuleius's *Metamorphoses*. In this presentation, I will trace the various adaptations of the Cupid and Psyche myth and its echoes in works as various as the poetry of John Milton, Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* novels, and Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*.

Stanifer, John "Tale as Old as Time: A Study of the Cupid & Psyche Myth, with Particular Reference to C.S. Lewis's *Till We Have Faces*."

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**Tale as Old as Time:
A Study of the Cupid and Psyche Myth, with Particular Reference to
C.S. Lewis's *Till We Have Faces***

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In 1956, C.S. Lewis saw the publication of his final novel, *Till We Have Faces*. “Everyone says it’s my best book,” he wrote to one correspondent (Hooper, 647). Lewis lovers may argue that point till they have *blue* faces, but one thing they can agree on is that the novel stands as a testament to Lewis’s love for Greek myth. For those who are unfamiliar with *Till We Have Faces* or who simply need a refresher, the novel’s basic plot is a reworking of the myth of Cupid and Psyche, a myth that centers on the love between a gorgeous god and a mortal woman. As we will see, this myth in all its numerous forms is designed to resonate in the hearts of book lovers, playgoers, film audiences, and human beings everywhere.

The goal of this discussion will be to trace the various adaptations of the Cupid and Psyche myth and its echoes in works as various as the poetry of John Milton, Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* novels, and Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast*. Though I’ll be referring back to Lewis and *Till We Have Faces* often, my aim is to unveil the threads that run through each and every one of these works. At heart, I believe that the Cupid and Psyche myth is a reflection of man’s struggle to transcend his human nature and embrace the God of Love who created him. Stick around and find out how this proves true every single time the story is retold.

Let’s start by examining the roots of the Cupid and Psyche myth. Our earliest written record of the myth comes from a Classical novel titled *The Golden Ass* or *Metamorphoses*. By strange literary device, a drunken old woman narrates the myth to the novel’s protagonist while

he suffers in the captivity of a gang of thieves (Apuleius, 106, bk. 6). Though the myth comes across as a side story to the main plot, one gets the feeling it's there for a reason.

Here's a summary. A king and queen have three beautiful daughters, one of whom outshines the rest in beauty and in virtue. This Helen of Troy lookalike, whose real name is Psyche, is so beautiful that men are afraid to ask her hand in marriage and instead decide to worship her as a goddess. Venus, the goddess of love herself, becomes jealous of Psyche's popularity and commands her son Cupid to afflict Psyche with a lust for the lowest kind of scumbag he can find. Instead, Cupid falls in love with the girl himself (71-76, 89, bks. 4-5).

Psyche is taken to the god's palace, where they are wed. Homesick for her sisters, Psyche invites them to her palace, but the two sisters are filled with envy at everything they see and concoct a plan to ruin Psyche's happiness. Because Cupid refuses to let Psyche see his face, the sisters convince her that her husband must be a monster. But when Psyche finally gazes on Cupid's face by candlelight, the god's beauty overwhelms her. Unfortunately, Cupid wakes and banishes Psyche to wander the earth while he returns to his home with Venus at the bottom of the sea (77-91, bk. 5).

Before she can be reunited with her divine husband, Psyche must complete four impossible tasks concocted by Venus. With the help of a few unexpected allies, she does just that. Cupid petitions Jupiter for a blessing on their marriage, and Psyche is transformed into a true goddess. The cliché "happily ever after" certainly applies here, since the marriage of Cupid and Psyche is for eternity (97-106, bk. 6).

Till We Have Faces pays tribute to this myth by retaining the central characters and keeping most of the major plot points intact. However, Psyche's two jealous sisters make way for one: Orual, the narrator and hence the focus of Lewis's novel. Orual is actually the older of

the two, which creates a great deal of tension when Psyche becomes the god's bride and Orual is literally unable to see or hear or touch any part of the god's palace. Orual begins to believe that Psyche is insane—or worse, that Psyche is being duped by a man or beast coming to her at night (122, 136-37, 142-43).

That Orual is blind to the reality of the god's existence gives the myth a whole new direction. I'll let C.S. Lewis explain in his own words to close friend Katharine Farrer: "It is the story of every nice, affectionate agnostic whose dearest one suddenly 'gets religion,' or even every luke warm [sic] Christian whose dearest gets a Vocation" (Hooper, 590). Orual's inability to take part in Psyche's joy is an illustration of what Christ meant when He said "I did not come to bring peace, but a sword...a man's enemies will be the members of his own household" (*Life Application Study Bible*, Matt. 10:34-36). Faith in Cupid or God as the case may be becomes a source of conflict rather than a point of common interest.

Milton alludes to the Cupid and Psyche myth in the conclusion to his poem "Comus" or "A Mask Presented at Ludlow Castle."

Celestial *Cupid* her fam'd son advanc't
 Holds his dear *Psyche* sweet intranc't
 After her wandering labours long,
 Till free consent the gods among
 Make her his eternal Bride,
 And from her fair unspotted side
 Two blissful twins are to be born,
 Youth and Joy; so *Jove* hath sworn. (72)

Okay, we get it. The myth of Cupid and Psyche appeals to learned men like C.S. Lewis and Milton who play Scrabble in Greek and read so many books that they go blind. Why should the rest of humanity care? Why would a hip, cutting-edge audience give a rat's hind end about a story embedded in the middle of a larger story that was written thousands of years ago in another language and hasn't even been featured on Oprah or made into a movie starring Brad Pitt?

The answer is simple. Even those among us with little exposure to ancient Greek myth are familiar with Cupid and Psyche's modern counterparts.

Take Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series as an example. Though critics like Harold Bloom and Stephen King have managed to stereotype the series as a fad for teenyboppers and other readers too stupid to recognize a bad book even if it tried to bite them, *Twilight* is worth examining here if for no other reason than its startling parallels to the myth of Cupid and Psyche.

For the three people left on Earth who haven't been exposed to *Twilight* one way or another, here's the gist. Girl named Bella meets boy named Edward. Bella falls in love with Edward. Bella finds out Edward is a vampire who loves her but is constantly tempted to have her over for "lunch." Bella wants Edward to bite her so she can be a vampire too and live with him forever. Edward reluctantly agrees to the transformation, but only if Bella marries him first. That covers the plot of the first two books, *Twilight* and *New Moon*, and most of the third.

The parallels become obvious with a closer look. Twice within the first *Twilight* novel, Bella describes Edward as a statue of Adonis come to life (299, 317). In Greek mythology, Adonis was the lover of Aphrodite, better known as Venus (Hamilton, 117). Venus, of course, is the mother of Cupid in the myth of Cupid and Psyche.

Both Cupid and Edward are described as excessively good-looking. E.J. Kenney's translation of the original Cupid and Psyche tale puts it like this: "She [Psyche] saw a rich head

of golden hair dripping with ambrosia, a milk-white neck...the god's body was smooth and shining and such as Venus need not be ashamed of in her son" (Apuleius, 88, bk. 5). Edward is said to have a sculpted chest, "scintillating arms," and skin that is "smooth like marble" and glitters in the sunlight (*Twilight*, 260). It should be noted that Lewis's physical description of the son of Ungit, his stand-in for Cupid, is similarly flattering (*Till We Have Faces*, 111, 172).

Does the resemblance go any deeper than the flesh? Let the audience judge for itself with the following examples. Perhaps the most obvious is that Cupid and Edward are both immortal. Both fall in love with humans. Both avoid being seen in the light, because doing so reveals their beauty and therefore their true identities (Apuleius, 88, bk. 5; Lewis, *Till We Have Faces*, 123; Meyer, *Twilight*, 260). Near the end of their respective tales, both give in and allow their loved ones to undergo the process of becoming immortal (Apuleius, 105, bk. 6; *Till We Have Faces*, 241; *Breaking Dawn*, 378-86). Both father a child that is part-human and part-immortal (Apuleius, 106, bk. 6; *Breaking Dawn*, 443-45).

The similarities between Cupid and Edward go hand-in-hand with the similarities between their lovers, Psyche and Bella. Both are mortal women who admit to feeling inferior next to their god husbands (Apuleius, 104, bk. 6; *Till We Have Faces*, 113; *New Moon*, 70). Both have friends and family who just don't get it (Apuleius, 81, bk. 5; *Till We Have Faces*, 117-19; *New Moon*, 544-45). Both are warned that their husbands are monsters who are bound to make a meal out of them sooner or later (Apuleius, 85-86, bk. 5; *Till We Have Faces*, 160; *Twilight*, 195). Both are persecuted by the divine elite (Apuleius, 97-98, bk. 6; *Till We Have Faces*, 242; *Eclipse*, 576-79).

Most importantly, Psyche and Bella endure a period of "wandering" in which they are forcibly separated from their lovers and must attempt to put themselves back together again.

In the myth, this separation occurs when Psyche gives in to her curiosity and sneaks a look at Cupid in the candlelight while he's sleeping. Cupid discovers her violation of trust and flies away, condemning her to exile (Apuleius, 88-89, bk. 5; *Till We Have Faces*, 173-74).

Bella's separation occurs when Edward decides, once and for all, that it's just too dangerous for her to be around him and his family (*New Moon*, 44-45). Whatever the reason, the results are the same. Psyche and Bella must wander and suffer before being reunited to their respective lovers. Interestingly, both attempt to throw themselves off of a high precipice into the water at some point (Apuleius, 89, bk. 5; *Till We Have Faces*, 279; *New Moon*, 359).

Before we get into the spiritual meaning behind this God-centered love story, let's bring in one more modern-day adaptation of the Cupid and Psyche myth, promised in the introduction to our discussion: Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*.

You'll remember that Belle, the heroine of Disney's fairy tale, encounters the Beast for the first time while searching his castle for her lost father. In the process, she is also introduced to the castle servants, including a candlestick named Lumiere, a clock named Cogsworth, and a bubbly teapot known as Mrs. Potts. When Belle later agrees to become the Beast's prisoner in exchange for her father's freedom, the servants do everything they can to make her welcome and to help her appreciate their master's better qualities. This is particularly well exemplified by the song-and-dance number "Be Our Guest."

In many ways, Belle's first visit to the castle is mirrored in Psyche's first visit to the god's palace in *The Golden Ass*. Let's take a look:

As she gazed at all this with much pleasure there came to her a disembodied voice:

'Mistress, you need not be amazed at this great wealth. All of it is yours. Enter then your bedchamber, sleep off your fatigue, and go to your bath when you are minded. We

whose voices you hear are your attendants who will diligently wait on you; and when you have refreshed yourself a royal banquet will not be slow to appear for you.’ (Apuleius, 78, bk. 5)

Once readers have made the connection between the two stories, it’s difficult to avoid hearing the voice of Lumiere when one reads of Psyche’s visit to the palace, since the words of the “disembodied voice” are very similar to the opening lyrics of “Be Our Guest:” “Ma chere Mademoiselle, it is with deepest pride and greatest pleasure that we welcome you tonight. And now we invite you to relax, let us pull up a chair as the dining room proudly presents your dinner” (*Beauty and the Beast*)!

Till We Have Faces adds another layer of depth to this scene, largely because Lewis’s version of the myth takes up more space, allowing him more room to develop his characters. For example, we are told early on in *Till We Have Faces* that Psyche dreams of being “a great queen, married to the greatest king of all” (23). She goes on to say, “he will build [her] a castle of gold and amber...on the very top [of the Grey Mountain]” (23). Later, when Psyche is telling the tale of her visit to Cupid’s palace to her sister Orual, she brings up this childhood dream again (109).

Again, we have a significant parallel with Disney’s Belle. Long before she visits the Beast’s castle, the cry of Belle’s heart is expressed in her song: “I want adventure in the great wide somewhere. I want it more than I can tell, and for once it might be grand to have someone understand: I want so much more than they’ve got planned!” We also learn that Belle’s favorite book contains “far off places, daring swordfights, magic spells,” and “a prince in disguise.” She gets all this and more in her romance with the Beast, just as Psyche finally gets her king and her gold and amber palace in the end.

During a key scene in *Beauty and the Beast*, the filmmakers come quite close to advertising their debt to the myth of Cupid and Psyche explicitly. This may or may not have been intentional, but for viewers familiar with both stories, it's hard to ignore the allusion. I'm referring, of course, to the famous ballroom scene where Belle and the Beast dance for the first time. As the camera pans around the scene, tracking their graceful movements, we get a brief glimpse of the ceiling, a painted panorama that features little Cupids watching down on the ballroom from the heavens.

I hope by now I've succeeded in making the connections between all these Cupid and Psyche stories plain. It's time now we turned to their deeper meaning. I'll let *Twilight* apologist John Granger summarize that meaning for us: "In a nutshell, the reason we and millions... around the world respond to these stories is that their allegorical and anagogical meanings are about the central drama and relationship of human existence—our life with God—told in compelling, engaging fashion" (76).

This goes not only for *Twilight*, but also for *Till We Have Faces*, *The Golden Ass*, and *Beauty and the Beast*.

Allow me to elaborate. Like Psyche and Belle, we all have a longing to be joined to a great king, a "prince in disguise," if you will. Although this longing is sometimes distorted by sin and all kinds of false ideas about God, the Apostle Paul said that "[we] have no excuse for not knowing God," because all Creation is full of "his invisible qualities" (Rom. 1:20-23). We may disbelieve in the existence of our God at first, like Psyche's sister Orual, who is skeptical when her sister tries to make her see the glorious palace all around her. We may be terrified of surrendering ourselves to God, because we can't see past the Lion of Judah to the Lamb of God within, just as Belle is terrified of the Beast until she perceives his gentle soul.

But once we see past the forbidding exterior of the God of Love, we are bound, like Bella, to be swept up in our desire to be with Him forever. Like the Psalmist, we will long to “live in the house of the Lord” (23:6). After all, God is constantly speaking to us through the “disembodied voices” of His servants, including the apostles and prophets in the Bible and godly modern day Christians like Lewis. These voices speak to our inner heart, inviting us to pull up a chair to the banquet God has prepared for us. He has pulled out all the stops. He has spared no expense. He will do everything he can to impress us with His love, short of overriding our free will.

How else are we to respond? Like Lewis’s Psyche, we must name Him the “Master of [our] House” (*Till We Have Faces*, 122). Only then can we experience the “rich and satisfying life” that Christ speaks of in the Gospel of John (10:10).

Cupid and Psyche. God and Man. It’s a tale as old as time, told again and again by different people. In the end, it doesn’t matter whether the storyteller is an Oxford academic, a Mormon housewife, a “drunken garrulous old woman” (Apuleius, 106, bk. 6), or a team of animators and musicians working for a multinational corporation. The same message will always be there just beneath the surface.

Who could put it better than Mr. Beaver from Lewis’s classic, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*? “Who said anything about safe? ‘Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King, I tell you” (80).

That’s the heart of *Till We Have Faces*. It’s the heart of the myth of Cupid and Psyche. It’s a summary of our relationship with God. May we never forget it.

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