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C.S. Lewis's 'Till We Have Faces'
To Thine Own Self Be True
Elena Casey

Winner of an Honorary Mention in the Student Essay Contest

C.S. Lewis's *Till We Have Faces: To Thine Own Self Be True*

Elena Casey

C.S. Lewis may not be Ovid, yet his ability to pen a novel-length retelling out of the *Metamorphoses*' brief story of Cupid and Psyche suggests the aid of some ancient literary muse. Lewis's final and arguably most profound novel, *Till We Have Faces*, entreats us to envision the classic love story of Cupid and Psyche from the perspective of Psyche's ugly stepsister, Orual. Yet this story is no *Wicked*: Orual struggles with a less-than-healthy share of jealous possessiveness toward her sister and bitter hatred toward the gods. As we follow Orual's development throughout her life in the barbaric kingdom of Glome, Lewis weaves a tapestry of self-discovery and divine revelation that, when unveiled, may enrapture even the most atheistic of minds. Literary critics have tried to turn Lewis's novel into an explication of the psychology of women (Bartlett), a statement upon the alien nature of Christians in the world (Mattson), a study of beauty, justice and the sublime (Arnell), a *Metamorphoses*-esque tale of transformation (Hood), and an exemplar of Augustinian systems of faith (Watson). However, the way in which Lewis artfully loops motifs, characters, themes, and repetition into *Till We Have Faces*, twisting them together with the novel's autobiographical style, best leads the reader to understand the self-illuminating nature of divinity, revealing that none of us can understand divine intentions until we lay our own intentions bare before our eyes.

The motifs of the veil, dreams, and visions all contribute to the self-revealing search for divinity by reflecting and, at times, heightening Orual's level of self-awareness throughout the novel. For example, the image of the palace of the god of the Grey Mountain comes to Orual like a vision in the early morning but vanishes when Orual doubts its presence and becomes fearful of

what accepting the palace's presence would reveal about her. This is evidenced when Orual states, "What would it do to me for my blasphemies and unbeliefs?...I must ask forgiveness of Psyche as well as of the god...if what I saw was real. I was in great fear. Perhaps it was not real...Then...almost before I stood on my feet, the whole thing was vanished" (Lewis 132). Orual loses her ability to see the palace of the god because of her fear of revealing herself, of admitting her errors and making herself vulnerable before her sister and her sister's divine lover. This denial of truth ultimately leads Orual to destroy her sister's happiness with the god. Instead of admitting what she has done, Orual chooses to hide herself, using the veil as a way to hide both her physical and spiritual malformations. Orual narrates, "I never told Bardia the story of that night at all...Hitherto, like all my countrywomen, I had gone bareface; on those two journeys up the mountain I had worn a veil because I wished to be secret. I now determined that I would go always veiled" (180). Though the reader may believe Orual's veil to be a source of her power, the veil actually inhibits her self-understanding and only its removal allows for self-revelation. One such moment arrives in Orual's brief understanding with Bardia's widow shortly after his death. By admitting to Bardia's widow that she, too, loved Bardia, by making her intentions known, Orual is able to loosen her hatred for the other woman and let her veil fall (262). However, the instant she feels threatened and vulnerable, she draws back into herself and resumes her veil. Therefore, Orual's veiling corresponds with hiding her true intentions, whereas her unveiling corresponds with self-discovery.

Other occasions in which the removal of Orual's veil dictates self-revelation and exposure come in dream sequences. In the first dream, Orual's dead father comes with the intention of revealing her reflection to her. When Orual makes to put on her veil, her father disallows it and leads her downward through a series of Pillar Rooms until he forcefully sets her in front of a

mirror. Until this point, Orual has maintained a bitter revulsion for the goddess, Ungit. However, upon looking at herself unveiled, Orual realizes, “It was I who was Ungit. That ruinous face was mine. I was that Batta-thing, that all-devouring womblike, yet barren, thing. Glome was a web—I the swollen spider, squat at its center, gorged with men’s stolen lives” (Lewis 276). In this vision, by acknowledging her true nature and setting aside her veil, Orual is able to understand the basis of her hatred for Ungit as a problem within herself. This realization is made complete by Orual’s final vision, in which the gods bring her before them to read her complaint. Orual documents, “Hands came from behind me and tore off my veil—after it, every rag I had on” (289). After her exposure, Orual is made to read her accusations against the gods. Her exposure, both physical—as represented by the removal of her veil and other garments—and spiritual, allows her to understand the intentions of the gods, to be answered. This is shown by the quote, “The complaint was the answer. To have heard myself making it was to be answered” (294). Thus, Lewis makes clear, through his association of the motifs of the veil and dreams with the progression of Orual’s self-revelation, that the only way to understand the intentions of divinity is to understand one’s self.

In addition to the novel’s motifs, the juxtaposition of Orual’s character with Psyche’s illustrates the evolution of Orual’s corrupted intentions and, therefore, demonstrates Orual’s inability to decipher divine will until she becomes conscious of her own. To refer again to the palace vision, whereas Psyche can clearly see the god’s home, Orual cannot see anything beyond a meadow in the mountains and a dirtied Psyche. Orual asks Psyche, “Where is the palace? How far have we to go to reach it?” to which Psyche replies, “But this is it, Orual! It is here! You are standing on the stairs of the great gate” (Lewis 116). While Psyche can see and dwell within the home of the god due to her purity, her uncorrupted intentions, Orual cannot see the palace simply

because of her own denial of its existence. As with Bardia's wife, Orual closes herself off from Psyche's explanation, except in this case, Orual uses her belief that Psyche is mad—rather than a physical veil—to mask her inner turmoil about not being able to see nor understand Psyche's home and passion for her god. After hearing Psyche talk of her god as “My lover. My husband. The master of my House.” Orual says, “Oh, I can't bear it” and thinks, “Those last words of hers...set me on fire...Then (like a great light, a hope of deliverance, it came to me)...Madness; of course. The whole thing must be madness” (122). Here, the reader may believe Orual's assumption of Psyche's madness. However, the fact that Orual purposefully misconstrues what happened in the above meeting to Bardia and the Fox disproves this interpretation. If Orual truly believed Psyche to be mad, she would have no need for concealing what she experienced. Thus, Orual uses madness to hide her own refusal to comprehend what Psyche tells her about the god, creating a divide between herself and Psyche, a divide between knowing divinity and denying it.

As an overarching theme of the book, Orual's profane love, a love tainted by unknowing selfishness to the point where it no longer resembles true love, as compared to the divine love Psyche and the god represent, acts as the root cause for Orual's refusal to acknowledge the intentions of the divine. Earlier in the novel, Fox tells Orual, “To love, and to lose what we love, are equally things appointed for our nature. If we cannot bear the second well, that evil is ours” (Lewis 86). While the reader may, initially, perceive Orual's love for Psyche as pure, Orual fails to grasp the self-sacrificing nature of love, a failure that perverts her own love for Psyche into a harmful and jealous possessiveness, which ultimately drives her to ruin Psyche's life. In her zeal for proving to Psyche that her god is naught but a deceitful brute, Orual manipulates Psyche into holding a lantern to the god's face as he sleeps by threatening both of their lives, saying, “Swear...you will this very night do as I have commanded you; or else I'll first kill you and then

myself” (165). The baiting of Psyche by her love for Orual is a perverse form of love and Psyche recognizes this, replying to Orual:

You are indeed teaching me about kinds of love I did not know... I am not sure I like your kind better than hatred. Oh, Orual—to take my love for you, because you know it goes to my very roots and cannot be diminished by any other newer love, and then to make of it a tool, a weapon...an instrument of torture—I begin to think I never knew you. (165)

As Orual cannot recognize love as anything more than possessing a person’s affections, she cannot grasp its divine nature of self-sacrifice, embodied by Psyche’s giving of herself to the god.

The repetition of the phrase “you also shall be Psyche” after Orual’s perverted love causes the god to cast Psyche out of his home and wander the earth also connects to the essentiality of knowing oneself before one can know divinity by acting as the backdrop for Orual’s self-realization through the rest of the novel (Lewis 176). At first, Orual misunderstands the god, thinking that she should become a “beggarwoman” like Psyche, that she should endure the same physical punishment (176). Later in the story, Orual reinterprets the god’s words as “I might also be an offering” when she faces potential death by hand-to-hand combat with a neighboring prince (216). However, it is not until Orual lays her complaint before the gods, hearing herself voice it without any veiling, whether spiritual or physical, that Orual is truly able to understand what the god meant by “you also shall be Psyche.” After reading her complaint, in another vision Orual watches as both she and Psyche toil through their tasks, finally coming to the realization that she and Psyche are one and the same, noting, “Two figures, reflections, their feet to Psyche’s feet and mine, stood head downward in the water. But whose were they? Two Psyches, the one clothed, the other naked? Yes, both Psyches, both beautiful (if that mattered now) beyond all

imagining, yet not exactly the same...‘You also are Psyche,’ came a great voice” (307). Only after realizing her own intentions, by laying herself spiritually and physically bare, is Orual able to comprehend the god’s words, “you also shall be Psyche,” signifying that self-revelation must come before divinity can be wholly revealed.

The novel’s autobiographical style strengthens all the above reasons for interpreting Lewis’s novel as an argument for self-revelation as crucial to divine understanding, by keeping Orual’s journey toward self-realization a personal experience, an experience that the reader sees develop through Orual’s thoughts as the novel progresses. At the start of book one, Orual, in a self-ignorant state, declares that she “will accuse the gods, especially the god who lives on the Grey Mountain” because the “god of the mountain will not answer [her]” (Lewis 3). By the start of book two, Orual acknowledges the corruption of her thoughts that drove her to write her accusation in book one, writing, “Since I cannot mend the book, I must add to it. To leave it as it was would be to die perjured; I know so much more than I did about the woman who wrote it. What began the change was the very writing itself” (253). Again, as when Orual reads her accusation before the gods, in her true voice and stripped of her veils, understanding came out of Orual’s penning of her book, out of the act of writing what she truly thinks and seeing the words form on the pages. With this newfound self-revelation, Orual is able to write, at the end of her book, “I know now, Lord, why you utter no answer. You are yourself the answer. Before your face questions die away...” (308). Without voicing her thoughts, without penning her accusation and seeing it uncovered before her own eyes, Orual would have remained embittered against divinity and unable to find an answer for divine actions.

By enfolding motifs, characters, themes, and repetition into the pages of Orual’s journal, C.S. Lewis proves that *Till We Have Faces*, until we understand ourselves, the intentions of

divinity will remain distant and unfathomable. Through the motifs of the veil and dreams, the characters of Psyche and Orual, the theme of profane versus sacred love, the repeated mention of "You also shall be Psyche," and the autobiographical style of the novel, Lewis effectively communicates Orual's struggle toward self and divine revelation to his readers so that they may apply Orual's revelation to their own lives. To close in the words of C.S. Lewis, to understand the nature of divinity, one "must be speaking with its own voice (not one of its borrowed voices), expressing its actual desires (not what it imagines that it desires), being for good or ill itself, not any mask, veil, or persona."

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