Some Elements of Myth and Mysticism in C.S. Lewis’ Novel *Till We Have Faces*  

Jean Marie Chard
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**Abstract**
Study of symbolism in *Till We Have Faces*, and its sources in various mystical traditions, alchemy, and psychology.

**Additional Keywords**
Lewis, C.S. *Till We Have Faces*; Lewis, C.S. *Till We Have Faces—Symbolism*; Thadara Ottobris
The myth of Cupid and Psyche, as it has been transmitted to us by Apuleius in the Golden Ass, can be appreciated on several levels. Not only is it a tale for children in its form, "Beauty and the Beast", but it expresses symbolically the search for God and ultimate knowledge of Him, however he may be defined.

Lewis changed several details in the myth as it has come down to us. One of Psyche's sisters becomes the central character, and Psyche's palace is invisible to the sister. The tale is set in a barbarian kingdom, apparently in the near East, contemporary with classical Greece. Lewis drew not only from Apuleius, but also from more ancient stories, particularly the Babylonian myth of the love goddess Ishtar. (Ishtar is also known as Inanna, though in fact Inanna was an earlier goddess, and Ishtar a later, Semitic deity. It is unlikely that Lewis distinguished between the two, as the myths that have come down to us in fact do not, so in the following Inanna and Ishtar are treated as though they were the same god.) There are also traces of mystical tradition as found in Sufism, and in the esoteric traditions underlying alchemy and the tarot. The book may also be read in terms of modern psychoanalysis.

The story illustrates the Sufi statement that "thou shouldst be unto God a face without a back, even as thou hast formerly been unto His a back without a face." (Abu Bakr al-Kalabadi, The Doctrine of the Sufis. A.J. Arberry, trans. [Lahore: Ashraf, 1966], p. 92) Or, as Orual, Psyche's sister, says after several visionary experiences: "How can they [the gods] meet us face to face till we have faces?" (C.S. Lewis, Till We Have Faces: a myth retold [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966], p. 296. Hereafter cited as TWHF.) Face, in Lewis's novel, means no less than the total integrated personality: a human being is greater than the sum of his parts, as though a jigsaw puzzle ceased to be a two-dimensional picture when the final piece was fitted into place, but became a living, three-dimensional being.

This process of coming to life is described in Till We Have Faces. The novel has remarkable depths which seem not to have been fully appreciated by the critics. It can be read with enjoyment purely as a semi-historical novel. It can also be read as a psychological portrait of a woman struggling to free herself from the blighting influence of a cruel father. Still at the level of psychoanalysis, one may follow the process of individuation, as Orual rescues from the rubble of a mental breakdown those elements of her personality which will enable her to become a truly integrated human being. Lewis also intended the story to be an account of the grief caused in a family by the conversion of one of its members to a new faith. (C.S. Lewis, letter to Clyde S. Kilby, 10 February 1957, in Letters of C.S. Lewis. Ed. W.H. Lewis [London: Bles, 1966], p. 273-4.) Yet what gives the novel its compelling power and makes it worth many re-readings, is the intense belief in the reality lying behind myths and symbols. Lewis is here writing about the human search for something which is very real to him. It is not possible to describe this as "spiritual reality" for, as we shall see, the spirit was only a single aspect of it. That for which Orual was searching—which she called the god—became known to her only when she had united the three apparently disparate aspects of her personality: physical, rational and spiritual.

Indeed, at one level, the three sisters may be viewed as representatives of these three aspects. Bardia, the middle sister, represents physical nature; Orual, the oldest of the three, and the central character, represents reason; Istra, or Psyche, is the soul or spirit. Each aspect is also represented by other characters, and by aspects of the god. King Trom, father of the girls, corresponds to Redival, as does the drunken slave, Batta. The god is here seen as a malignant mother-goddess, Ungit, and her son, the shadow-brute who devours human sacrifices. The priest is surrounded by a holy aura, and worship includes blood sacrifice, sacred prostitution, and the enactment of rituals of death and rebirth.

Orual has as her counterparts a Greek slave called the Fox, who is her teacher, and Armom, the old priest's successor, who tries to modify the ancient worship of Ungit by introducing Greco lymphatic and pursuing Greek learning. He tries to rationalize the dark realities of the Ungit religion, explaining them away as allegory or symbolism. Because the reason attempts to rationalize or repress the dark gods of the blood, rather than accepting and civilizing them, it remains merely a thin veneer over the violence lying underneath, no more convincing than the painted statues which the people ignore in favour of the ancient stone which to them is Ungit. When Orual undergoes her breakdown she is led by her father, the old unregenerate Adam, into a well "far below any dens that foxes can dig" (TWHF, 275). Only by accepting the importance of the physical can the rational be redeemed.

Istra, representing the spirit, has, as priest of the new religion dedicated to her, a man childlike in his simplicity. "The story and the worship were all one in his mind" (TWHF, 246). The new cult of Psyche is a corn religion, reminiscent not only of the Cupid—Psyche myth, but also of Demeter and Persephone. A genuine transformation has taken place; this is a civilized religion, but it has lost none of the validity of Ungit's dark rites. It is not merely varnished as Armom varnishes Ungit's religion, but is a genuine transformation. It is true and ageless, new and yet older than Ungit.

At the level of spirit, the man who seems to correspond to rational Fox and physical Trom, is Bardia, Orual's chief man at arms. His death triggers her final search for the god, her breakdown and subsequent visions of integration.

It is neither possible nor advisable to maintain this division, however, for at every level the emphasis of each character shifts slightly. Thus, while it is Bardia who triggers Orual's realization that she should do something...
(she is not sure what) about her present existence, it is actually Trom who takes her to the well-spring of her life and freshens the bitter waters that have so blighted her soul. And it is the Fox, originally the purveyor of superficial reason, who leads her finally to Psyche.

Redival, also, must be seen as more than fleshly desires. She is hoydenish and foolish, but it is Orual’s neglect of her that made her so. Orual, reflecting, thinks “how terribly she changed”, and realizes that it had been within her, Orual’s, power to prevent this. Orual, loving Istra to the exclusion of Redival, loses them both. Eventually reconciliation is achieved for Orual makes Redival’s second son her heir. Thus Redival fulfills the function of the Queen’s body by providing an heir to the kingdom, and through her son is integrated with reason.

The symbolism is reflected in Lewis’s use of names. Redival has no other name, but Orual is called Maia by Istra, and Istra herself is nearly always referred to as Psyche. This demonstrates on a simple certain profound truths. Greece represents civilization and the fact that Redival has no other name indicates how essential it is that Orual redeem her. In the same way, the primitive religion of Ungit must be redeemed and transformed by Greek philosophy.

The Greek names have intrinsic meaning. Maia is the goddess of spring and the mother of Hermes, god of language. It is interesting to note that one of Orual’s first actions upon becoming Queen was to marry Redival to a neighbouring prince. She also freed many slaves, permitting them to marry and form small households, thus performing the role of a goddess of love and fertility. The relationship to Hermes of course emphasizes the rational element. (Possibly, Lewis also intended an illusion to Hermes Trismegistus, the legendary esoteric master.) Orual was not as barren as she herself believed. She beheaded the drunken Battu, who had been an evil influence over Redival, at the same time as she freed the slaves. In this she acted more wisely than she knew, conceding the importance of the physical aspect while attempting to tame it. Her failure lies in her inability to recognize the significance of her own actions. (It is worth noting here the statement that Maia may be equivalent to Maya, Hindu goddess of illusion, made by Marjorie Evelyn Wright, "The Cosmic Kingdom of Myth: a study in the myth-philosophy of Charles Williams, C.S. Lewis, and J.R.R. Tolkien" unpub dia, University microfilm #60-4025, p. 56.)

Psyche, of course, means soul or butterfly. The Shadovbrute who claims Istra-Psyche has another side. He is the West Wind, and Istra, like a butterfly, abandons herself to the wind. The butterfly is a vivid symbol for the process of metamorphosis, or individuation, of the maturing human being.

In certain respects 'Istra' is even more interesting than 'Psyche'. (R.C. Zaehner, Mysticism: Sacred and Profane (London: Oxford, 1961), p. 98: Like Plato who wrote in The Republic of the reasonable, passionate and lustful parts of the soul, "Muslim philosophers...divided the psyche, as opposed to the governing intelligence, into a triad of imagination, anger and lust.") This barbarian name immediately evokes Ishtar, who was a man-destroying goddess, as many goddesses of love seem to have been. Among her lovers was Tammus, for whose sake she undertook a descent into the underworld. This myth has curious parallels with the story that Lewis tells. Ishtar, like Orual, must encounter her sister, who here is the Queen of the Underworld. She is stripped of all her garments and adornments before entering the presence of the Queen. Orual likewise is naked when she finally encounters Psyche and the god. In this novel Orual undertakes the tasks laid upon Psyche in Apuleius’s story and Inanna in the Babylonian myth.

There is yet another similarity which emphasizes the relationship of the three sisters. When Redival was a young girl and lonely, a soldier took pity upon her and for his concern was made a eunuch by Trom. Late in life Orual meets the soldier, Tarin again. He has grown very grand and important, and tells Orual the truth that she has been hiding from herself all these years—that she had deserted Redival and thereby caused her degeneration into a simple, frivolous slattern. It had never occurred to Orual (who was so ashamed of her features that she hid her face behind a veil) that golden-haired Redival might require love. Tarin makes her face this truth, and it is another step on the slow road to self-knowledge. Similarly Ishtar, or Inanna, is aided by a eunuch.

Ishtar's cult included sacred prostitution. In this novel, Lewis attempts to show the difference between the dreadful prostitution in the temple of Ungit and the giving of the self to the god which is achieved first by Psyche and later by Orual. The former is an obscene ritual which nevertheless has its basis in truth and achieves its highest form in Psyche’s self-sacrifice.

Another significant theme in the book is the doctrine of substitution, whereby each sister bears the other’s burdens. When the god tells Orual that she, too, will be Psyche, she understands only imperfectly. By the end of the book, however, it is apparent that she has suffered for Psyche, and perhaps also for Redival. During an illness she has recurrent dreams in which she sees Redival and Psyche linked arm in arm, laughing at her. Later she performs tasks which have been set for Psyche. Instead of obtaining beauty from the goddess of the underworld, however (this will come later), she takes her book of complaint against the gods and reads it to them. This is a form of purgation and from that low point she begins to rebuild herself. In the meantime she discovers that both Redival and Psyche had suffered for her, and because of her.

The doctrine of substitution is one of the bases of the new religion of Psyche. The priest describes the ritual to Orual. During the summer, Istra and the god live together. At harvest time a lamp is brought into the temple, the god flies away, and the goddess is veiled. She spends the winter wandering and weeping, searching for the god. Evidently Psyche is the summer goddess (Persephone), and Orual (Demeter) is the winter one. The god is hidden, either by concealing himself, or by Orual wearing a veil, emblematic of her blindness. Religion begins to be based on love rather than necessity or expedience as are the religion of Ungit and Arnom’s version of it. Orual and Psyche must both learn to
love the god above all else—even above the apparent illumination of the lamp, in this case possibly a symbol for incomplete knowledge.

The psychological validity of the book merits more attention than can be given here. Lewis is careful to give Orual's dreams a certain basis in waking life, until at the end of the book the distinction between waking and dreaming becomes blurred. Certain symbols, such as the well and the mirror, are repeated throughout the novel. From one point of view, the well represents the prison in which Orual confines her soul. This is the first of all a room with five sides (surely symbolic of the human body), then a well by the palace in which there are clanking chains which remind Orual of Psyche's weeping (reminiscent of Marvell's line, "A soul hung up, as 'twere, in chains"). Ultimately the well is a hole which her father forces her to enter in a vision, digging deeper and deeper. Down here she realizes that she is Ungit, and declares that she will not be Ungit.

A mirror is significant because it gives us the only picture of ourselves that we can have. Orual is first made aware of her ugliness when her father forces her to look in a mirror. A mirror in the room under the earth reflects her ugliness of soul. Finally, it is a mirror made by water in a well which shows her that she has become Psyche and is beautiful, fit to be the god's bride.

Certain themes are woven throughout the fabric of the novel, with variations, rather like the interweaving of melodies in contrapuntal music. Dominant is the death and rebirth of Orual's personality, which is echoed in various ways within the story. There is the world egg, or temple of Ungit, out of which the priest must fight his way every new year. There is a seasonal myth in the new religion of Psyche. There are the deaths, in the first part of the book, of several characters, and their reappearance in the second part, alive in another sphere.

As a counterpart to cyclical death and rebirth is the theme of fertility versus sterility. On the one hand are the birth of Ungit's son, or the rise of an enlightened religion out of the primitive one (perhaps more correctly stated as a return to enlightened religion from the perverted everyday religion presented to the people); there is Orual's book, for she "wrote book" as a child (cf. Idries Shah, The Way of the Sufi (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974) p. 108; "The human's progress is that of one who has been given a sealed book, written before he was born. He carries it inside himself until he 'dies'. While man is subject to the movement of Time, he does not know the contents of that sealed book"—Hakim Sana); there is the quiet progress of her primitive kingdom towards the ideal civilization represented by Greece. But on the other hand is the sterility of the house of Ungit:

...the seed of men that might have gone to make hardy boys and fruitful girls was drained into that house, and nothing given back; and...the silver that men had earned hard and needed was also drained in there, and nothing given back; and...the girls themselves were devoured and were given nothing back. (TWHF, 269-70)

There is Orual trying to "kill Orual" so that something within her lies coiled like a child, but unlike a child it shrinks; there is unnammed Tarin; there are the Fox and Bardia whom Orual unwittingly sucks dry. Ungit, Maia, Ishtar have two aspects, like the Egyptian goddess Hathor-Sekhmet, and while with one hand they give life and bestow fertility, with the other they destroy and cause barrenness. And, as with the tripartite nature of man, these two aspects must somehow be reconciled.

Thus it is that even the hideous Ungit gives birth to the young god and each terrible blight is somehow healed. For even while the house of Ungit is devouring lives and money, somewhere Ungit's son is dancing. At the same time as Orual is damming the waters in her soul, that very soul is sporting with the god. By the end of the book, divisions of time and space no longer seem to matter. Something greater than either has burst the bonds of flesh and temporal existence while at the same time transforming that same flesh and mundane life into some condition beyond the understanding of the five senses and the rational mind. This final transformation may be described as the birth of Ungit's son, or regeneration, or integration. It must occur, or the individual dies.

A striking parallel may be drawn with the alchemical process of creating the Philosophical Gold from mercury, sulphur and salt. Alchemy was not only a scientific exploration, but also a spiritual process. Idries Shah points out in his book, The Sufis, that Western alchemists owed much to their counterparts in the Islamic world, including—and perhaps most importantly—the mystical symbolism of alchemy. As an alchemist, a man not only sought to create gold, but he also tried to transmute his own being into gold. The three elements used in the alchemical process to the three aspects of the human personality. Just as mercury, sulphur and salt, in the correct proportions, and under the proper conditions, could be transmuted into an element greater than the sum of the three, so the animal, rational and spiritual elements of the human personality could be transmuted into something greater: sainthood.

One of the key steps in the alchemical process is the reduction of the three elements to a black mass called the nigredo. This represents the death of self:

The alchemist himself had subjected his own personality to the fiery furnace of self-questioning and self-doubt, had gone down into his own inner abyss, had apparently destroyed himself and laid 'dead' rotting in the slime which was all that was left of his ideals, his hopes and ambitions, his defenses against the outer world. (Hans Biederman, "Alchemy: a secret language of the mind" in Man, Myth and Magic (London: Purnell, 1970), p. 57. Cf. C.S. Lewis, Letter to Malcolm chiefly on prayer (London: Fontana, 1966), pp. 100-1.)

Orual, divested of her ideals, hopes and ambitions, descends into the pit, or well, of her self. In so doing, she enters that process of putrefaction, decomposition, which is a necessary preliminary to the rebirth and rebuilding of the elements. Stripped naked, spiritually as well as physically, she is exposed to the gaze of the gods. Their silent gaze reveals her own folly to her.

The complaint was the answer. To have heard myself making it was to be answered. Lightly men talk of saying what they mean... A glib saying. When the time comes to you at which you will be forced at last to utter the speech which has lain at the centre of your soul for years, which you have, all that time, idiot-like, been saying.
over and over, you'll not talk about joy of words. I saw well why the gods do not speak to us openly, nor let us answer. 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? (TWF, 296)

To end it, she flings herself "down into the black sea of spectres."

The Fox catches her and leads her out into the open air. Like the nigredo she is reborn in gradual stages. The point corresponding to the formation of the Philosopher's Stone is the moment when the god is revealed. It seems that he has not been hiding, but that Orual has had no eyes to see him.

In a sense the alchemists torture the elements with which they are working. But only so that something greater will result. The gods alchemists who torture Orual's personality so that it will be transmuted. Indeed, Orual speaks of the gods as divine surgeons. One is reminded of Lewis's cry against God the vivisectionist in A Grief Observed and how even at that time he is able to reconcile himself to his grief, believing as he does that God is good. Despite their apparent harshness, the gods help Orual. Little by little they bring her to the point where she may be reborn. "The process of purification will normally involve suffering." (Letters to Malcolm, p. 110.)

The tarot cards may also have been a source of symbolism for Lewis. He certainly knew about these cards as his close friend, Charles Williams, had written a novel about them (The Greater Trumps). In this context, the card of greatest interest is the Priestess. She has been described as Isis veiled. As a sequence, the major trumps of the tarot may be regarded as symbols of individuation, as the human seeker moves from the Fool through the stages of evolution, culminating in the card called the World, which represents the moment of integration, or formation of the Philosophical Gold, or vision of the god. The tarot has also been connected to the Sufis by Idries Shah.

Lewis does not seem to have thought of himself as a mystic. Nevertheless, in much of his writing, and in this book particularly, there seems to be much wisdom of the sort that is associated with mysticism, and which really cannot be reduced to any system, no matter how the theologians or the psychoanalysts may try. Consider, for example, the words on the title page: "Love is too young to know what conscience is." This is a remarkable statement of a Sufi description of repentance. "Al-Junayd was asked, 'What is repentance?' He replied: 'It is the forgetting of one's sin.'" (Al-Kalabadjah, op. cit., p. 91). On a rational level the statement may appear meaningless, but in one sense, the whole novel is a demonstration of the meaning of the statement.

It would be a mistake to attempt to reduce this book to a set of themes and variations, as I have done, without also attempting to redress the balance. The book is much more than the sum of its themes and symbols. In reworking the ancient myth, Lewis has added much that should make the story meaningful to the modern reader.

The story is a modern Divine Comedy in the sense that good is fulfilled and the beatific vision attained, having withstood the horrors of hell. This view of life is opposed to the essentially tragic vision of modern physics, at least as the average layperson tends to understand it: that all there is, is running down. Alan Watts wrote of the "cosmic punch line," especially in Hindu cosmology:

Shiva is simply the opposite face of Brahma, the Creator, so that as he turns to leave the stage with the world in ruin, the scene changes with his turning, and all things are seen to have been remade under cover of their destruction. (Alan Watts, The Two Hands of God (New York: Collier, 1969), p. 79. One might note here that more recently, in a very different kind of novel, Doris Lessing has also described the remaking of the earth under cover of destruction in The Four-Gated City in which certain Sufi ideas are illustrated.)

In Lewis's cosmogony as it is developed through all his novels, culminating in Till We Have Faces, the remaking occurs on more than the material plane. The new creation is not merely a duplication of the old, but even the mode of change is changed forever. All is both ancient and new. Orual is translated into a new mode of being where she is herself, and yet is Psyche also. Joseph Campbell writes of the importance of the comic ending:

The happy ending of the fairy tale, the myth, the divine comedy of the soul, is to be read, not as a contradiction, but as a transcendence of the universal tragedy of man. The objective world remains what it was, but, because of a shift of emphasis within the subject, is beheld as though transformed. Where formerly life and death contended, now enduring being is made manifest... Tragedy is the shattering of forms; comedy, the wild and careless inexhaustible joy of life invincible. Thus the two are the terms of a single mythological theme... which the individual must know if he is to be purged... (Joseph Campbell, The Hero with a Thousand Faces (Princeton: Princeton University, 1968) p. 28.)

And so Orual looked down into the pool at her feet:

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... beyond all imagining...

I ended my first book with the words no answer. I know now, Lord, why you utter no answer. You are yourself the answer. (TWF, 308)

Till We Have Faces is Lewis's masterpiece, in which he overcame several problems that beset him in his earlier fiction, notably an uncomfortable hint of dualism. In this book Lewis has accepted and recognized evil, such acceptance and recognition leading ultimately to an ability to transcend it. Until Orual recognizes the Ungit within herself, she is incapable of recognizing Ungit's son. No doubt remains that evil, like Ungit, must be left behind, but it is Ungit who gives birth to the joyous young god. Orual is Everyman, or, in metaphorology, the Fool.

When the reader sympathizes with her, he is sympathizing with the lot of all men who have besought the gods to reveal themselves and have received, as they thought, no answer.