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**Till We Have Faces and its Mythological and Literary Precursors**

**Abstract**
Compares Till We Have Faces with its "chief source," the tale of Cupid and Psyche in Apuleius. Briefly compares it with other works of Lewis as well.

**Additional Keywords**
Apuleius, Lucius. "Cupid and Psyche"—Relation to Till We Have Faces; Cupid and Psyche (myth)—Relation to Till We Have Faces; Lewis, C.S. Till We Have Faces—Sources; Bonnie GoodKnight

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TILL WE HAVE FACES
and its Mythological and Literary Precursors
by Andrew Howard

C.S. LEWIS never wrote anything else like Till We Have Faces. Lewis' literary output includes children's books, space fantasies, allegorical fantasies, Christian-apologetic essays, and works of medieval scholarship, but Faces falls distinctly outside of all of these categories. It is difficult even to assign Till We Have Faces to a familiar fictional genre. It contains elements of the historical novel, the maturation novel, the mystic romance, and the fictionalized philosophical treatise; but it does not fit comfortably into any of these categories. For all its singularity, however, Till We Have Faces has some significant links with its mythological and literary precursors, and our understanding of Faces can be deepened by comparing it with its forerunners.

Lewis takes the story of Psyche and Cupid from the second-century Latin novel The Transformations of Lucius, by Lucius Apuleius. The fundamental story of the mortal who is punished for looking upon her divine lover is much older and appears in more than one culture. Lysias, the Greek tutor in Fanes, tells a variant of the story with the sexes reversed, and Robert Graves notes that the story "is still widely current as a primitive folk-tale in countries as far apart as Scotland and Hindustan." In Apuleius' novel the Cupid and Psyche story is a three-chapter short story inserted into a rollicking and rather disheveled tale of the journeys of an unlikely young noblewoman who is turned into an ass for meddling with magic. An old woman tells the story to a frightened young girl, who has just been kidnapped by robbers, in an effort to make her "feel a little better" (Graves, p. 95). Lucius the ass hears the entire story, and remarks that though it was told by a drunken and half-demented old woman, I regretted that I had no means of committing it to writing. (Graves, p. 143)

The drunken old woman's story differs from Lewis' in several respects. Apuleius' story is set unambiguously in the context of Graeco-Roman mythology, the principal divine characters being Venus and her mischievous son Cupid. There are three royal sisters in Apuleius' story, as in Lewis' but all three are beautiful; Psyche, the youngest, far outshines the others in beauty, but they too are lovely. Psyche from the start is a very different character from Lewis' Istra. The old woman calls her "simple-minded" and "silly" (Graves, pp. 113, 115), and there is not trace of the toughness of mind and body which characterize Istra. The two elder sisters are unmistakably cruel, and distinctly jealous of what Psyche receives from her divine husband—for they can see and feel her palace just as easily as she herself can. Thus Apuleius' story corresponds more closely to the tale of the Priest of Istra in Lewis' book (Ch. 21) than to the events of the book themselves.

Lewis attaches great importance to the fact that Istra's

1 C.S. Lewis, Till We Have Faces (New York: Time, Inc. 1966; orig. pub. 1956), p. 7. Subsequent references will be to this edition.
2 Robert Graves, Intro. to his transl. of The Transformations of Lucius (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1951), p. xix. Subsequent references will be to this edition in the form "Graves, p. ."
palace, unlike that of Apuleius' Psyche, is invisible to others:
The central alteration in my own version consists in making Psyche's palace invisible to normal, mortal eyes—if "making" is not the wrong word for something which forced itself upon me, almost at my first reading of the story. This change of course brings with it a more ambivalent motive and a different character for my heroine and finally modifies the whole quality of the tale. (author's note, pp. 274-75)

Nevertheless, Orual's feelings are not totally different from those of Psyche's sisters in Apuleius' story. Her motive for plotting to kill Psyche's husband may be "more ambivalent"—particularly in her own mind, where she can justify the plot in terms of her love for Psyche—but it remains rooted in the same emotion: jealousy.
The sisters of Apuleius' story display a bald, straightforward kind of jealousy—jealousy of what Psyche has. Their feelings about Psyche's fortune, when they see her beautiful palace and her power over invisible servants and the winds, are very simple:

I simply can't stand seeing my youngest sister living in such undeserved style. ...I'll be ashamed to call myself a woman, if I don't see that she get toppled down from her pinnacle before long and flung into the gutter. (Graves, p. 109)

Orual's jealousy is to a certain extent more sophisticated; it is jealousy for Psyche, an unwillingness to give up the girl she brought up, the girl she mothered. This jealousy is that which makes her angry at the gods and motivates her to write her accusation of them; I will deal with it more fully below.

But not all of Orual's jealousy is of this higher sort. There are unmistakable traces of jealousy of Istra's good fortune in Orual's feelings, particularly after the girl is taken away from her. She begins to feel jealousy of Psyche's god-husband; when she crosses the river for the first time, with the help of Psyche's strong hand, she thinks, "How strong she grows. She'll be a stronger woman than ever I was. She'll have that as well as her beauty" (p. 92). In Orual's "face-to-face" accusation of the gods the note of envious jealousy is struck among the chords of anger at them for stealing her:

You'll say I was jealous. Jealous of Psyche? Not while she was mine. If you'd have gone the other way to work—if it was my eyes you had opened—you'd soon have seen how I would have shown her and told her and taught her and had her up to my level. But to hear a chit of a girl who had (or ought to have had) no thought in her that I'd not put there, setting up for a seer and a prophetess and next thing to a goddess...how could anyone endure it? (p. 255)

Orual resented Psyche's being above her "level," and would only be content with Psyche's being brought "up" to her level if she could have it on her own terms. Orual's resentment is envious jealousy, an emotion she shares with the sisters in Apuleius' story.

We can draw a more fundamental parallel between Apuleius' story and Lewis'. It lies in their directedness, in the way the stories are headed. In Apuleius' story the emphasis is upon Psyche's maturation—her journey from the simpleness and naiveté that allows her to be duped into trying to murder her husband, through the divinely instituted trials and travails, to her final maturity in which she is granted divine status and a legalized marriage with Cupid. This maturation is a gradual one, and requires considerable divine help—at the end of Psyche's Venusian trials, Cupid has to rescue her from magical sleep when she disobeys Venus' orders and opens Proserpine's casket of beauty. But finally the mortal girl is worthy of Cupid, and from the union of Psyche and Eros can come the flowering of love in the human consciousness—their daughter, Pleasure (Graves, p. 143).

For Graves, the story becomes "a neat philosophical allegory of the progress of the rational soul toward intellectual love" (Graves, Introd., p. xix).

The maturation of Apuleius' Psyche parallels the fundamental movement of Lewis' book. "Facea is also the story of a journey of a soul—a soul that is both Psyche and Orual. Psyche's journey is the mythic, task-filled one—she must separate the seeds into piles, gather the fleece of the man-killing sheep, and bring back the water from the Styx. Orual's journey is one of suffering—she must suffer the griefs and pains of the mythic tasks, and bear the loss of those she loves, the Fox and Bardia as well as Psyche.

Furthermore, Orual matures as she journeys. Probably the first step of her maturation is her willingness to govern wisely and justly, a willingness that gives her a successful reign and a reputation for fairness. When she is the veiled queen she is still the Ungit/Batta figure, "gorged with men's stolen lives" (p. 242), but at least she
governs wisely, and I do not believe Lewis considers this to be of no account. Her maturation starts moving when she begins to see how she has destroyed the lives of Bardia and Redival, and when she gets an inkling into the nature of her love for Psyche in her visit to the temple of Istra. But only when her visitation begins does she really see that her possessiveness taints even her love for Psyche, that she is most guilty of devouring human spirit in this, her deepest love. Having recognized her possessiveness for what it is, she is unable to see her complacency. But the words for 

it is—a railing against Good for taking away what she thinks she has a right to devour. This opens the way for the final step—the cleansing of Orual and the triumphant affirmation of the god’s words, “You shall also be Psyche” (p. 266).

Here an inversion occurs. Until this point Psyche has had to do only one thing—perform her tasks, not lose heart, continue toiling for Aphrodite/Ungit; she has had to “keep on her way” (p. 266). Meanwhile Orual has not only had to keep on her way—that is “offstage” but she has also had to suffer, to bear the pains and burdens of Psyche’s toil. But in the last task it is Orual who needs to do only one thing—suffer—while Psyche must suffer and keep on her way. The suffering is as acute for her as for Orual, but her determination and devotion give her the strength to keep on her way. She suffers and aets, and thereby brings Orual to her final maturation, the beautifying and purifying maturation of ugly Orual into another, beautiful Psyche.

Thus Lewis’ and Apuleius’ stories both involve maturation. But the maturation in parallel lines, not the same line, and we should not make too much of the parallelism. Lewis has not written “a neat philosophical allegory”—in fact, he never writes “neat” books—and we cannot really put Apuleius’ story in the same category as Lewis’ complex and unsettled tale. Parallel lines never meet, and although Lewis and Apuleius travel the same kinds of paths, they end up in different places.

We have been comparing Faoose with its chief source in an effort to understand what Lewis is doing. When we look for modern literary works with which similar “useful” comparisons can be made, we are drawn almost exclusively to the other works of Lewis himself. Nathaniel Hawthorne made some apropos comment on Lewis, but it is offstage, but it is offstage, and it is offstage—Winthrop, in his essay George MacDonald could probably make some informative comparisons between those authors’ works and Faoose. But the most fertile ground for the digging out of useful parallels is the rich soil of Lewis’ own works. Orual’s self-centeredness and possessiveness shape a great portion of her character, and in particular they make her unable to see what is happening to the people around her. The glaring example of this blindness is her inability to see Psyche’s castle (or, more precisely, her refusal to believe her nighttime vision of it), but others are evident. Everyone around her knows she has destroyed the lives of Lysias and Bardia—Anist is unusual only in her willingness to tell the queen the truth—but Orual can no more see what she has done than see how twisted her love for Psyche is. A striking parallel to her blindness is the inability (unwillingness?) of the Dwarfs in The Last Battle when the concept of Joy is introduced around them as Aslan creates Narnia anew. Like Oraul, the Dwarfs are so determined to have their own way that they fear to see beauty around them, and they deny joyous reality. Aslan explains:

They will not let us help them. They have chosen cunning instead of belief. Their prison is only in their own minds, yet they are in that prison; and so afraid of being taken in that they cannot be taken out.  

Orual realizes that she has been blind even before she repents of her dwarflike, voluntary blindness:

...Oh, you’ll say (you’ve been whispering it to me these forty years) that I’d signs enough her

The Dwarfs’ experiences remind us that Oural’s blindness is very distinctly her own doing—and that she must overcome her fear of the truth before joy will break in on her. If part of Oural’s jealousy is the familiar Apuleius-style envy, the great possessiveness, or jealousy “for” Oural really does love Istra, even in her bad moments, when she calls her her “cruel Psyche” and believes Istra to harbor “scorn...un-love...hatted” (p. 149) for her. But her love is so distorted that it send Psyche to a kind of death and shatters another love. At the heart of Oural’s love is a desire to have Psyche, to grasp her, mold her, and keep her, and when the god takes her away, it is the denial of this total possession which torments Oural most. She says to the gods,

Did you ever remember whose the girl was? She was mine! Mine! You don’t know what that means? Mine! You’re thieves, seducers. That’s my wrong. (p. 255)

Oural’s possessiveness is clearly mirrored in the jealousy of Pam, Michael’s mother in The Great Divorce. Like Oural, Pam is so consumed by her possessive love that she cannot see God in any context other than He Who has my son: “You’re treating God only as a means to Michael, as her brother says. Pam finally says in not loving Michael enough: she she says, “Michael is mine” (Divorce, p. 95), she shows that her love “has turned into a poor, prickly, astringent sort of thing” (Divorce, p. 96). Psyche “had no more dangerous enemies” (p. 266) than Oural and the Fox, who loved her; similarly, while he was on this earth, Michael had no more dangerous enemies than his mother.

The parallel between Pam and Oural is not perfect. David is taken away from Pam precisely because she loves him possessively, while Istra is taken from Oural because the steps Oural takes to enforce her possession. Also, Pam’s love for David excludes love for anyone else, while Oural’s for Istra allows some love for Bardia and Lysias. But the parallel does underscore the dangers of Oural’s possessiveness, and it also gives us a hint as to why, finally, Oural was worthy of being transformed into another Psyche. Lewis is saying of Oural what is MacDonald says of Pam:

There’s still a wee spark of something that’s not just her self in her love that might be blown into a flame... There’s something in a natural affection which will lead it on to eternal life more easily than natural appetite could be led on. But there’s also something in it which makes it easier to stop at the normal level and mistake it for the heavenly... It is a stronger angel, and therefore, when it falls, a stronger devil. (Divorce, pp. 96-97)

Pam’s experience shows both the promise and the danger of Oural’s love. In Oural’s case, the promise triumphs.

Love transformed—that is the essence of Till We Have Faces. The promise of natural love can only triumph within the terrifying joy of God, a joy that must be embraced on its own and not as a means to possessing the object of the love. The experiences of Oural are mirrored in those of the Dwarfs and Pam—and they are concretized in the following Lewsian declarations:

Every preference of a small good to a great, or a partial good to a total good, involves the loss of the small or partial good for which the sacrifice was made.  

The greed to be loved is a fearful thing.  

Love is too young to know what conscience is.

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7 C. S. Lewis, epigram to Till We Have Faces.