Orual: The Search for Justice
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Abstract
Character study of Orual, including the coinherence in her relationship with Psyche, and the importance of the veil as a symbol.

Additional Keywords
Lewis, C.S.—Characters—Orual; Lewis, C.S. Till We Have Faces—Ethics; Lewis, C.S. Till We Have Faces—Religion
In a letter to some young American friends Lewis wrote, "I am so glad you both like Till We Have Faces. I think it much my best book but not many people agree." The novel has never achieved the wide audience of Screwtape Letters or Perelandra because of its complexity; it is a work which demands, and hence rewards, intense study of its many levels of meaning.

The plot follows the original myth of Cupid and Psyche rather closely, although Lewis explained, "I felt quite free to go behind Apuleius, whom I suppose to have been its transmitter, not its inventor." He therefore has made two major changes in the myth: he puts the story into the first person, employing a technique of confession very similar to Viper's Tangle, and he makes the palace invisible to Orual, "if 'making' is not the wrong word for something which forced itself upon me, almost at my first reading of the story, as the way the thing must have been." These changes make Orual, the older sister of Psyche, the center of the myth. One cannot help having compassion for Orual, the princess too ugly to win the love of any man save the Fox. She is motherless, treated roughly by her father, and heretofore the only person she truly loved, Psyche. Yet she is forced to understand herself, to realize that even this love is mostly selfish hatred. Stella Gibbons complained that the book is too severe, that Orual is burdened by her ugliness and by the gods' incomprehensibility so that she has no real chance. Yet this is an incomplete assessment. As Orual bears Psyche's anguish, so Psyche does that for Orual which she cannot do for herself — she brings her beauty of body and soul. What could not be obtained by effort is accepted as gift — a clear parallel to that salvation which cannot be earned but which Christ freely offers. In this light Orual is the person who by deep searching becomes conscious of his own ugliness before the gods. Only when he realizes his true condition, "hears his own voice," can the gods give him that which he needs. While he is crying for justice he cannot receive mercy.

One essential difficulty of the novel is understanding in what way Orual is Psyche and in what way she is Ungit. This duality is similar to Charles Williams' doctrine of substitution: one Christian may voluntarily bear another's pain. Confronted by the gods after she has forced Psyche to disobey, Orual is told, "You, woman, shall know yourself and your work. You also shall be Psyche." Orual is certain that the sentence means instant death, but when she does not die she concludes that her punishment will be the same as Psyche's, to be an exile. "But the gods had been wide of the mark — so then they don't know all things? — if he thought he could grieve me most by making my punishment the same as Psyche's. If I could have borne hers as well as my own..." Her desire, though hardly a prayer, is heard and granted, though not as she expected. She becomes not an exile but a queen, a queen whose burden of state affairs seems light compared to the anguish of knowing herself. While Psyche performs the tasks, Orual bears the pain. When Orual comes before the gods to demand justice, she realizes that Psyche was almost happy performing the tasks, "then it was really I... who bore the anguish. But she achieved the tasks." The Fox asks, "Would you rather have had justice?" Thus Orual is Psyche in sharing her burden. Some of the incidents which Apuleius ascribes to Psyche, Lewis cleverly ascribes to Orual to intensify this coinherence. It is Orual, who attempts to drown herself and cannot, who supplantates the gods for justice, who is unmade for the god and is united with him. Orual casts down her eyes and sees in the pool the reflections of two Psyches, both beautiful, as the god pronounces his judgment once again. "You also are Psyche." The change of the verb may be significant. Orual is condemned to know herself and her work — that she is the Ungit thing which devours everything she thinks she loves. She shall be Psyche. What Psyche knows by instinctive love Orual must learn by self-searching and visions. Each becomes, in some inexplicable sense, the bride of the god even as the church is the bride of Christ.

Orual is also Ungit. Her veil is the first identification with that faceless goddess, for as Ungit is a masked representation of the divine, so Orual is a veiled woman. She seeks to cover both her body and her soul. The significance of this veil cannot be overestimated. When Orual tells of the changes the veil made, she stresses the political advantages; when ambassadors cannot see her face or read her thoughts she terrifies them and so forces even seasoned liars to truth. So the gods force truth from her by their silence. It is Orual's father who forces her to look in the mirror to see her ugliness; it is her father who first makes her wear a veil so that she will not offend his new queen. In her visions it is her father who rips off that veil and forces her to realize that she is indeed Ungit. When she stands before the court she is unveiled and undressed; her ugliness both of body and of soul are clearly revealed. No longer is there a mystery that makes the common people wonder if there is beauty, monstrosity, or emptiness behind that veil. There is only an ugly woman with a bitter heart.

The veil also figures prominently in the story of Istra as told to Orual by the priest. The goddess' face is covered with a veil; "the thing that marred it was a band or scarf of some black stuff tied round the head of the image so as to hide its face — much like my own veil, but that mine was white." The priest tells her the story essentially as it is found in Apuleius — the sisters see the palace and are jealous. The priest is simple and cannot separate the story and the worship. For him Istra wanders weeping all winter, performing her tasks for Talapal (Venus-Ungit). In the spring she is united to her god and becomes a goddess. "We take off the veil and I change my robe in the..."
spring." Orual attempts to learn if Istra is a goddess or still wandering; the priest knows only that in the winter she wore the black veil and in the spring it was removed. Orual decides to justify herself: "I've heard your story told otherwise, old man. I think the Sister — or the Sisters — might have more to say for themselves than you know." His reply is, in essence, the true reply of the gods: "You may be sure that they would have a word to say for themselves. The Jealous always have." This seemingly unjust accusation drives Orual to write her book, and, as it turns out, to reveal herself until she finally utters her true complaint before the gods. "The complaint was the answer... 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?"

This is the key passage of the novel. Why should the gods answer the questions which are not the true questions? But one must not fall into the supposition that the gods do not know the true voice without its voluntary revelation. In Letters to Malcolm, Lewis treats the problem of confession in prayer, which is essentially the same as Orual's true book:

Ordinarily, to be known by God is to be, for this purpose, in the category of things. We are like earthworms, cabbages, and nebulas, objects of divine knowledge. But when we (a) become aware of the fact — the present fact, not the generalization — and (b) assert with all our will to be so known, then we treat ourselves, in relation to God, not as things but as persons. We have unveiled. Not that any veil could baffie this sight. The change is in us. The passive changes to the active. Instead of merely being known, we show ourselves, we offer ourselves to view... By unveiling, by confessing our sins and 'making known' our requests, we assume the high rank of persons before Him. And He, descending, becomes a person to us, 5

By her confession Orual is able to follow the gods' command: "Die before you die, there is no chance after." When the black-veiled judge orders her clothes and her veil torn off, when she stands revealed as Ungit, she becomes Orual and recognizes her true voice at last. The Fox explains that all are born into Ungit's house and must get free of her, must change. The unveiling forces recognition of self, and that revelation is enough to produce humility. But only the god can make the change. She understood that before and asked why the gods would not help. Now she knows that they cannot speak, they cannot help until the self is unveiled and prays in its true voice. Orual, who had willed not to see the palace, not only sees, but is now ready to dwell there, "for a creation of the natural self is the passport to everlasting life. Nothing that has not died will be resurrected." 6

The dying and unveiling of the self are one. The veil is not the only correlation of Orual and Ungit. In three separate revelations Orual learns that nature of her own love. First Tarin tells her that Redival needed her love and used it as a web — I the swollen spider, squat at its center, gorged with men's stolen lives. "To stop being Ungit she attempts suicide. Isn't the true voice without its voluntary revelation. In Letters to Malcolm, Lewis treats the problem of confession in prayer, which is essentially the same as Orual's true book:

1. 1 Letter to Anne and Martin Kilmer, August 7, 1957.
3. 3 Ibid., p. 313.
6. 6 Ibid., p. 162.