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Orual: The Search for Justice

Abstract

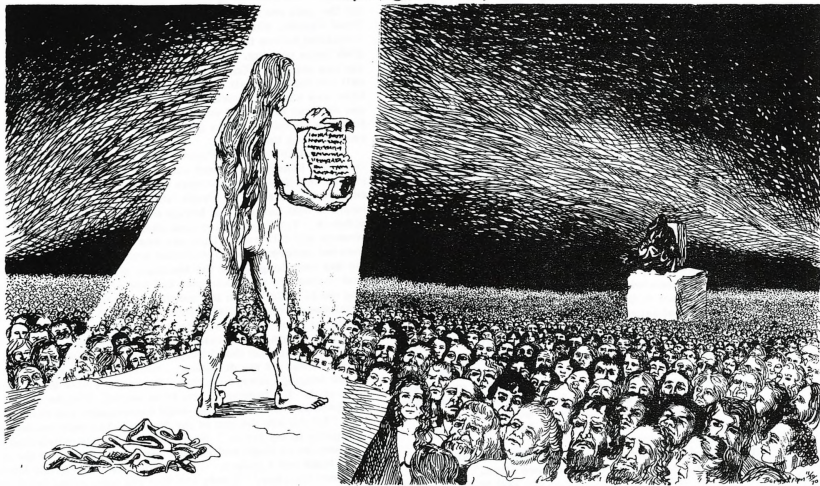
Character study of Orual, including the coinherence in her relationship with Psyche, and the importance of the veil as a symbol.

Additional Keywords

Lewis, C.S.—Characters—Orual; Lewis, C.S. Till We Have Faces—Ethics; Lewis, C.S. Till We Have Faces—Religion

ORUAL: THE SEARCH FOR JUSTICE

by Margaret Hannay



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."¹ The novel has never achieved the wide audience of *Secrets of the Temple* 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."² 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."³

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 bereft of 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 has 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.⁴ 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 coincidence. It is Orual, who attempts to drown herself and cannot, who supplicates the gods for justice, who is unnamed for the god and is united with him. Orual casts down her eyes and sees in the pool the reflections of two Psyche's, 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 also 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 Talapat (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 plenty to say for themselves. The Jealous always have." This seeming-ly 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 communion 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) assent 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 baffle this sight. The change is in us. The passive changes to the active. Instead of merely being known, we show, we tell, 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 the 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 crucifixion 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 to say, "First of all Orual loved me much; then the Fox came and she loved little; then the baby came and she loved me not at all." After Bardia's death his wife cries out, "Yours is Queen's love, not commoners'! Perhaps you spring from the gods, love like the gods. Like the Shadowbrute. They say the loving and the devouring are all one, don't they?" Like the possessive mother in *The Great Divorce* Orual was using, devouring all she loved; she is forced to realize a love like that is mostly hatred. "And now I thought I had come to the very bottom and that the gods could tell me no worse." But she has a vision in which her father forces her to dig and descend through a hole in the pillar room into another of clay, and to dig through many such into one of living rock. He leads her to the mirror, and Orual sees reflected the face of Ungit just as she had seen her in the temple. She recognizes the vision as truth: "Without question it was true. It was I who was Ungit. That ruinous face was mine. I was the Batta-thing, that all devouring womblake, yet barren, thing. Glome was a web — I the swollen spider, squat at its center, gorged with men's stolen lives." To stop being Ungit she attempts suicide, first with a sword and then again in the river. The god speaks to her: "Do not do it... You cannot escape Ungit by going to the deadlands, for she is there also. Die before you die. There is no chance after." "Lord, I am Ungit," but there is no answer. She returns home to puzzle over this.¹

was Ungit. What did it mean? Do the gods flow in and out of us as they flow in and out of each other?"

Orual decides that she is Ungit because she is ugly in soul as well as in body, so she set out to change her soul into one of beauty. The attempt is futile "unless the gods helped. And why did the gods not help?" Her only comfort is that she had truly loved Psyche, but this too is taken from her. As she reads her complaint before the gods, all the hatred of Psyche and of the gods come pouring. It is then that she learns humility. Then she can confess, "Oh, Psyche, oh, goddess... never again will I call you mine, but all there is of me shall be yours. Alas, you know now what it's worth. I never wished you well, never had one selfless thought of you. I was a craver." When Orual is finally so humbled she is given beauty; Orual becomes Psyche and ceases being Ungit.

In this respect, Psyche is a Christ-figure; she brings to Orual the beauty she cannot win for herself. Psyche is also sacrificed on a tree, she provides healing, she is called the Accursed, she is punished for Orual, she descends into Hades, she is reunited with her god and brings before him Orual for whom she suffered. Yet Psyche also embodies the Emeth theme in Lewis; because she follows the light she has and seeks after a God she does not understand, her services are acceptable to the real God. She has been longing for the Mountain since childhood. Her earliest poems are about her gold and amber palace; that the great king would build her on the mountain. In her last interview with Orual she drives her sister into a frenzy of jealousy by not sorrowing as Orual sorrows. She reveals to Orual her deepest longings, longings for death. But it is a morbid desire. "It was when I was happiest that I longed most... looking across as the Grey Mountain in the distance... because it was so beautiful it set me longing, always longing. Somewhere else there must be more of it. Everything seems to be saying, Psyche come!... It almost hurt me." Psyche could contemplate her sacrifice with joy. "All my life the god of the Mountain has been wooing me... I am going to my lover." Somehow Psyche has penetrated the dark stories of Ungit and retains her joyous dream of the god who would build her a palace. Orual only sees that Psyche loves the god more than her. "I only see that you have never loved me. It may well be you are going to the gods. You are becoming cruel like them." Orual speaks truer words than she knows. Psyche is cruel in the same way as the gods, cruel because her own divine joy cannot be spoiled by whining, by a love that demands ownership. As Lewis says in *The Great Divorce*, hell has not power to veto the joy of heaven.

Each receives that which she has truly sought. Psyche becomes the bride of the god; Orual drives her from the god. Yet Orual has misgivings, glimpses of the god. She too is wooed by the joy of the mountain, but she sets her heart against it. She feels great emptiness when Psyche is not dead, and does not really want to listen to her story. She rejoices when Psyche says that her longing for the palace and the god has disappeared, and is dismayed when Psyche once again believes it. For "If this is all true, I've been wrong all my life. Everything has to be begun all over again." Because she is not willing to begin again she refuses to believe in the palace, even when she catches a glimpse of it through the mist, and she refuses to believe in the god until he thunders his judgment on Psyche. The gods speak to her to forbid her to die; they speak to her through Psyche, through Ungit, and even through visions. She believes that if everything were as clear as it was in the myth of Istra that the priest told, she would have made the right choice. But perhaps if she had truly wanted to see the palace, she would have seen it.

Yet one must not think of Orual as a jealous beast or an unnatural sister. For Arnorn added a note to Orual's roll stating that she was the best of all the princes known in their part of the world. She is Everyman seen through God's eyes.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Letter to Anne and Martin Kilmer, August 7, 1957.
- 2 C.S. Lewis, *Till We Have Faces*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1964, p. 313.
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 Stella Gibbons, "Imaginative Writing," in Jocelyn Gidd, editor of *Light on C.S. Lewis*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, Inc., 1965, p. 96.
- 5 C.S. Kilby, ed., *A Mind Awake: An Anthology of C.S. Lewis*. London: Geoffrey Bles, 1968, p. 102.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 162.