



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

Volume 11
Number 1

Article 2

Summer 7-15-1984

A Myth Retold: C.S. Lewis' *Till We Have Faces*

Ake Bergvall

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore>



Part of the [Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Bergvall, Ake (1984) "A Myth Retold: C.S. Lewis' *Till We Have Faces*," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 11: No. 1, Article 2.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol11/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Mythopoeic Society at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature by an authorized editor of SWOSU Digital Commons. An ADA compliant document is available upon request. For more information, please contact phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu.

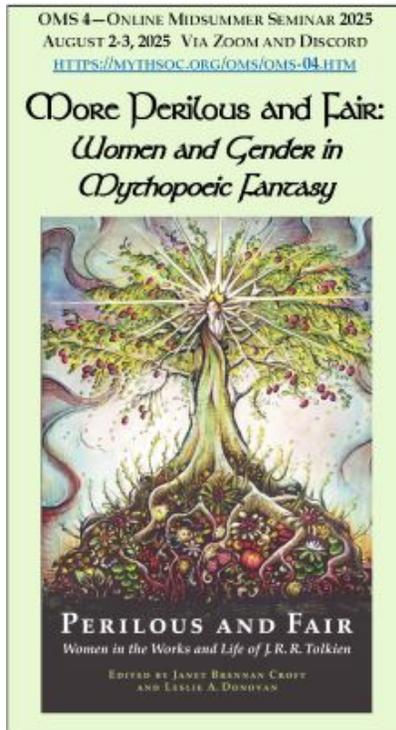
To join the Mythopoeic Society go to:
<http://www.mythsoc.org/join.htm>

SWOSUTM

Online MidSummer Seminar 2025
More Perilous and Fair: Women and Gender in Mythopoeic Fantasy
August 2-5, 2024

Via Zoom and Discord

<https://www.mythsoc.org/oms/oms-04.htm>



A Myth Retold: C.S. Lewis' *Till We Have Faces*

Abstract

Attempts to show that 1) *Till We Have Faces* is “first and foremost [...] a myth working on various levels, although with realistic elements”; and 2) “the second part is a true answer to the earlier questions and is a satisfying coda to the novel.”

Additional Keywords

Lewis, C.S.—Characters—Orual; Lewis, C.S.—Characters—Psyche; Lewis, C.S. *Till We Have Faces*; Lewis, C.S. *Till We Have Faces*—As myth

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).



A Myth Retold

C.S. Lewis' Till We Have Faces

Åke Bergvall

I

Till We Have Faces is a novel that cannot be put very easily into a neat literary compartment. Critics and general readers alike have shown perplexity, and have proposed various categories in which to place it: allegory, realistic novel, and myth have all been argued. Another source of perplexity has been the "answer" in part II to the questions of the first part. Some have found it unsatisfactory or puzzling. Stella Gibbons, in *Light on C.S. Lewis*, is an example of this: "A painful book; Lewis was not a writer to give adult people the easy happy ending. . . A puzzling book too: I feel that Lewis was clear about his allegories and symbols but I also feel that, like his Gods in the story, they do not make themselves clear."¹ To her, allegory is the chief obstacle to understanding. Chad Walch, in *The Literary Legacy of C.S. Lewis*, takes the opposite view by reducing the book into a realistic novel.² The aim of this essay is twofold. I shall first attempt to show that the book first and foremost is a myth working on various levels, although with realistic elements. Secondly, I shall endeavor to show how the second part is a true answer to the earlier questions and is a satisfying coda to the novel.

Till We Have Faces is a retelling of the old myth of Cupid and Psyche, first written down in the second century A.D. by Lucius Apuleius Platonicus as a part of his Latin novel *The Golden Ass*. Robert Graves, the translator of the Latin novel, wrote: "The story of Cupid and Psyche is still widely current as a primitive folk-tale in countries as far apart as Scotland and Hindustan; but taking hints from passages

in Plato's *Phaedo* and *Republic* [Apuleius] turned it into a neat philosophical allegory of the progress of the rational soul towards intellectual love."³

Yet Lewis does more than simply retell the old story. He explained:

The central alteration in my own version consists in making Psyche's palace invisible to normal, mortal eyes. . . 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. I felt quite free to go behind Apuleius, whom I suppose to have been its transmitter, not its inventor.⁴

One important change is touched upon in this note. The heroine Lewis mentions is not Psyche, the heroine of Apuleius' story, but Orual, Psyche's elder sister (the third sister--*Redival*--plays only a minor part in the novel). The whole book (except the very last lines) is written from Orual's perspective and indeed with her as the professed author.

How Orual comes to write the book brings out a crucial difference between *Till We Have Faces* and Apuleius' "Cupid and Psyche". She is old and has for many years been the queen of Glome, "a little barbarian state on the borders of the Hellenistic world of Greek culture."⁵ What causes her to write it is an event that had taken place during a visit to some neighboring states. On this trip she happened to come upon a newly erected temple dedicated to her sister Psyche. The priest told her the story of the

new goddess and what he related was on all important points the story that Apuleius related in "Cupid and Psyche". But the story embittered Orual since it stated that she had seen Psyche's palace and that she had betrayed her sister out of jealousy. So the first part of her book is her own version of the story; it is both a defense of her own actions and an accusation of the gods, whom she feels are to blame for the false version of the story.

What Lewis does is to trace Apuleius' myth to its very origin as a factual event. He is in a sense demythologizing it by relating what "really happened" and by changing the characters into real flesh and blood human beings⁶ Till We Have Faces is a realistically portrayed and profoundly psychological novel.

A basis in historical realism can be taken for granted with most novelists, but for Lewis this was a new direction. As a writer of fiction he had sought forms different from the realistic novel, such as Allegory (in the autobiographical Pilgrim's Regress), Science Fiction (in Out of the Silent Planet, Perelandra and That Hideous Strength), and Fantasy (in the seven Chronicles of Narnia). He achieved masterpieces in these genres (except, perhaps, with the early Pilgrim's Regress) and broadened the very concept of what they were to contain. This broadening he also brought with him when he wrote Till We Have Faces, and the book has thus perplexed many readers. Despite its element of historical realism, it is so much more than just a realistic novel. Some early critics saw it as an allegory, yet Lewis's close friend Owen Barfield came closer to the truth when he wrote: "[Till We Have Faces] is much more a myth in its own right than it is an allegory; and if [Lewis] had not previously written both a book about allegory and an avowed allegory of his own, it might have been properly appraised as such."⁷ Lewis himself seemed to deny the presence of allegory when he answered an inquiry from Clyde Kilby: "Much that you take as allegory was intended solely as realistic detail. . . Orual is (not a symbol) but an instance, a 'case' of human affection in its natural condition." (Lewis, Letters, pp. 273-4.) Yet myth was a major ingredient in Lewis' writings and was intimately connected with his general outlook on life. In his space trilogy he had painted a cosmic drama that reflected myths on earth, and in the Narnia books he invented his own world for the same purpose.

But if I previously said that Lewis in Till We Have Faces de-mythologized the myth of Cupid and Psyche, how can I at the same time claim that it is a myth in its own right? The paradox is that Psyche and Orual do not lose their mythic qualities by being portrayed realistically. By living in a society steeped in myth they themselves become carriers of myth.

II

Before looking more closely at that society we need to make a small detour in order to investigate Lewis' attitudes to myth. In An Experiment of Criticism he defined myth from "a literary point of view." His main criterion was that it is "a particular kind of story which has a value in itself—a value independent of its embodiment in any literary work."⁸ Good myths also have in common that they are grave and awe-inspiring:

We feel it to be numinous. It is as if

something of great moment had been communicated to us. The recurrent efforts of the mind to grasp—we mean, chiefly, to conceptualize—this something, are seen in the persistent tendency of humanity to provide myths with allegorical explanations. And after all allegories have been tried, the myth itself continues to feel more important than they. (An Experiment, p. 44.)

To distinguish allegory from myth Lewis gave these definitions in letters to two different inquirers:

By an allegory I mean a composition (whether pictorial or literary) in wh. immaterial realities are represented by feigned physical objects; e. g. a pictured Cupid allegorically represents erotic love. (Lewis, Letters, p. 283.)

A good myth (i. e. a story out of which varying meanings will grow for different readers and in different ages) is a higher thing than an allegory (into which one meaning has been put). Into an allegory a man can put only what he already knows; in a myth he puts what he does not yet know, and c.d. not come by in any other way. (Lewis, Letters, p. 271.)

Myth, for Lewis, contained something divine: "Myth in general is not merely misunderstood history (as Euhemerus thought) nor diabolical illusion (as some of the Fathers thought) but, at its best, a real though unfocused gleam of divine truth falling on human imagination."⁹ Lewis gave his most succinct explanation of the relationship between myth and the Christian revelation in the essay "Is Theology Poetry?":

Theology, while saying that a special illumination has been vouchsafed to Christians (and earlier) to Jews, also says there is some divine illumination vouchsafed to all men. The Divine light, we are told, "lighteneth every man". We should therefore expect to find in the imagination of great Pagan teachers and myth-makers some glimpse of that theme which we believe to be the very plot of the whole cosmic story—the theme of incarnation, death and re-birth. . . . It is like watching something come gradually into focus: first it hangs in the clouds of myth and ritual, vast and vague, then it condenses, grows hard and in a sense small, as a historical event in first-century Palestine.¹⁰

In Till We Have Faces Lewis places us in a society where this illumination has reached the state of "myth and ritual" but has not yet been focused into fact. The religious center of Glome is the holy house of Ungit. Ungit is a "very uneven, lumpy and furrowed" stone. Beyond Glome, to the north-east, lies the Grey Mountain and the god of the Grey Mountain (also called the Shadowbrute) is the son of Ungit. The two deities correspond to the more sophisticated Aphrodite and Eros of the Greeks or to the Venus and Cupid of Apuleius' Golden Ass. Yet Ungit is closer to nature and older than her Greek and Roman alter egos. The house of Ungit looks like a roundish hump, and Orual explains that

it is a holy shape, and the priests say it

resembles, or (in a mystery) that it really is, the egg from which the whole world was hatched or the womb in which the whole world once lay. Every spring the Priest is shut into it and fights, or makes believe to fight, his way out through the western door; and this means that the new year is born.(94)

Ungit is the ancient fertility goddess; temple prostitutes are kept in her house, brides must give her presents, and in a bad year, someone's throat is cut and the blood is poured over her. And if Ungit is far from the Roman Venus, then her son is even further removed from the later conception of Cupid with his mischievous arrows. The sight of the Shadowbrute on the Grey Mountain is a harbinger of evil, showing that a serious offence has been committed that needs expiation. Until this is done the whole state labors under a curse: droughts or floods, sickness, wild animals or enemy activity plague the people. The land is purged through the Great Offering, in which the victim--the Accursed--is given to the Brute. The Priest of Ungit explains:

The Brute is, in a mystery, Ungit herself or Ungit's son, the god of the Mountain; or both. The victim is led up the mountain to the Holy Tree, and bound to the Tree and left. Then the Brute comes. . . . In the Great Offering, the victim must be perfect. For in holy language, a man so offered is said to be Ungit's husband, and a woman is said to be the bride of Ungit's son. And both are called the Brute's supper. And when the Brute is Ungit it lies with the man, and when it is her son it lies with the woman. And either way there is devouring. (48-9)

Here we have an example of how the characters of the novel, although being realistically portrayed, are carriers of myth, and how they mirror the rituals of death and re-birth that we find in the society in which they live. Psyche, in the Great Offering, is made part of the same ritual that takes place in the rite of the Year's birth. She too brings new life, both to the country by breaking the curse and bringing the life-giving rain, and to herself by becoming the bride of the god.

Yet things are changing in Glome. The more refined and philosophical views of the Greeks are slowly seeping in. While Orual is a child her father, the king, buys a Greek slave, whom he calls "the Fox." The Fox is an educated and wise man, with a bent for Stoicism ("Everything is as good or bad as our opinion makes it."), and is set to educate the three daughters of the king. His views are strictly rational; so also on myths: "It's only lies of poets, lies of poets, child. Not in accordance with nature" (8). His skills in mathematics and statesmanship are also recognized and he becomes a trusted counselor to the king. And when the king and the old priest both die within a short span of time, there is not only a change of generations but of many basic values as well. Orual, the queen, and Arnon, the new priest, are both influenced by the Fox. A new statue of Aphrodite is brought from the south and complements--if it does not yet displace--the stone of Ungit. Although Ungit still remains, she is now rationalized and allegorized. She "signifies the earth, which is the womb and mother of all living things." Her son "is the air and the sky, for we see the clouds coming up from the earth in mists and exhalations," and that

he is her husband "means that the sky by its showers makes the earth fruitful" (270-71). The myth has lost its mystery and is reduced to an allegorization of the workings of nature. The development towards Apuleius is already under way. Lewis described this "steady decline of mythology into allegory" in *The Allegory of Love*, where he attributed it to the declining belief in the classical deities.¹¹

III

In the tension between these two world views Orual and Psyche grow up. For the rest of this essay we shall follow their development and notice their different responses to this environment, beginning with Psyche but laying the main stress on Orual, the heroine proper. By doing this I hope the unity



between the two parts and the fitness of the second part will become apparent. It will soon become evident that *Will We Have Faces* is a story about love, dealing not so much with the blessings of human love as with its dangers. It can even be argued that it is a story about divine love, or the relationship between human and divine love.

Psyche, of all the characters in Apuleius' story, has been retained by Lewis with the least alterations. The difference between the two versions lies in the way Psyche is used. On the surface level, Lewis creates a realistic story--"a work of (supposed) historical imagination" (Lewis, *Letters*, p. 273.)--out of what for Apuleius was a mythical story. On a deeper level something even more important happens. What for Apuleius was a "flat" allegory--Psyche, being the Greek word for "soul", representing the progress of the rational soul towards intellectual love--is by Lewis made into something "three dimensional." She is not a symbol, Lewis explained, but

an instance of the anima naturaliter Christianam making the best of the pagan

religion she is brought up in and thus being guided (but always 'under the cloud', always in terms of her own imaginations or that of her people) towards a true God. (Lewis, Letters, p. 274.)

Psyche, as Carolyn Keefe has showed, has all the characteristics of a mystic.¹⁶ Already as a child she is entranced by the Grey Mountain:

Psyche. . . . was half in love with the mountain. She made herself stories about it. "When I'm big," she said, "I will be a great, great queen, married to the greatest king of all, and he will build me a castle of gold and amber up there on the very top." (23)

And when she is pointed out as the Accursed, the victim that has to be given to the god of the Mountain, she is much less frightened than Orual or the Fox. "All her life she has felt a longing that draws her, which makes her face her fate without fear.

"I have always--at least, ever since I can remember--had a kind of longing for death."
"Ah, Psyche," I said, "have I made you so little happy as that?"
"No, no, no," she said. "You don't understand. Not that kind of longing. It was when I was happiest that I longed most. It was on happy days when we were up there on the hills, the three of us, with the wind and the sunshine. . . . And because it was so beautiful, it set me longing, always longing. Somewhere else there must be more of it. Everything seemed to be saying, Psyche come!
. . . The sweetest thing in all my life has been the longing--to reach the mountain, to find the place where all the beauty came from. (74-5)

This longing was for Lewis more than a fiction thought up to enrich a novel. As myth had had a strong emotional impact on his life, so had longing, or "Joy" as he called it, pierced his heart at intervals ever since childhood, and indeed often in connection with experiences of myth. He even wrote an autobiography, Surprised by Joy, in which he describes these moments of longing.

Psyche is brought up to the Great Offering and when Orual in secret goes to the mountain to find what has happened, she is met by a Psyche alive and amazingly well, walking about a palace Orual cannot see. She tells Orual about the bliss she is enjoying and about the god, whose nightly bride she has become. Before meeting him, being tied to the Holy Tree, she had had thoughts that went beyond her present sacrifice. "The only thing that did me good," she explains to Orual,

was quite different. It was hardly a thought, and very hard to put into words. There was a lot of the Fox's philosophy in it--things he says about gods or 'the divine nature' --but mixed up with things the Priest said, too, about the blood and the earth and how sacrifice makes the crops grow. I'm not explaining it well. It seemed to come from somewhere deep inside me, deeper than the part that sees pictures of gold and amber palaces, deeper than fears and tears. (109-10)

Psyche is vaguely and mystically aware of the "plot of the whole cosmic story--the theme of incarnation, death and re-birth."¹² She is herself a sacrifice that brings about the new freshness of rain, and this has made some see her as a symbol of Christ. Yet she is not meant to symbolize Christ; she is rather part of the cosmic myth coming into focus. Lewis commented, "She is in some ways like Christ because every good man or woman is like Christ. What else could they be like?" (Lewis, Letters, p. 274.)

Psyche meets her lover at night but is not allowed to see his face. Orual (for reasons we shall return to below) wants to "rescue" her and on a second visit she uses emotional blackmail to force Psyche to reveal the face of her lover. Orual plays the part of the tempter in Genesis III, or of Peter in St. Matthew XVI, 22 (This is another of those myths that haunt the imagination of mankind, and Lewis' greatest imaginative use of it is found in Perelandra). Psyche, because of her love for Orual, "breaks the god's command and is driven away to wander the earth. She at this point disappears from the narrative and the focus is almost exclusively on Orual; when she returns again at the end of the novel, she is no longer the flesh and blood Psyche we have met so far but a person seen in the dreams and visions of Orual. The destinies of the two sisters are then so intertwined that we first must return and trace the development of Orual in order to get the right perspective.

IV

A few lines from part V of "The Dry Salvages" by T.S. Eliot illumines the difference between Psyche and Orual:

But to apprehend
The point of intersection of the timeless
With time, is an occupation for the saint--
No occupation either, but something given
And taken, in a lifetime's death in love,
Arduous and selfless and self-surrender.
For most of us, there is only the unattended
Moment, the moment in and out of time. . .
These are only hints and guesses,
Hints followed by guesses.

If Psyche is the saint, then Orual is one of us, living in a world of vague hints and tormenting guesses. This, as we have already seen, is the main point of her accusation of the gods. The version of the story she heard from the priest at Psyche's temple stated that she had seen the god's palace, and that she had acted out of pure jealousy, whereas she feels nothing had been clear to her and that she had acted out of love for Psyche. On a first look her charge may appear just. It is easier to identify with her doubts than with Psyche's mysticism, and jealousy is not an attribute we easily give her. The official recognition after her death was that she "was the most wise, just, valiant, fortunate and merciful of all the princes known in our parts of the world" (309). The very fact that we see the story through her eyes makes us identify with her cause. Yet a close reading will reveal a different picture and the development of Orual becomes "a psychodrama [where] the reader is held engrossed . . . by the meanings beneath meanings." (Walch, Literary Legacy, p. 178.)

Growing up, Orual experiences both privileges and hardships. As the daughter of a king she is thought

to have divine blood and as the eldest heir she will become the next ruler (since no son has been born). Yet she is ugly, and her father constantly reminds her of it. The birth of Psyche brings out her plain looks even more; and yet, the time after her birth turns out to be one of the happiest of Orual's life. She loves to take care of Psyche. "Don't wear yourself out, daughter, with too much toil," the Fox admonishes her,

"even if the child is beautiful as a goddess." But I laughed in his face. I think I laughed more in those days than in all my life before. Toil? I lost more sleep looking on Psyche for the joy of it than in any other way . . . This was the beginning of my best times . . . it was now always we three--the Fox, and Psyche, and I--alone together. (21)

Orual's love for Psyche is contrasted by the obvious jealousy of Redival. When the first bad harvest occurs it is Redival who informs the priest about the worship of Psyche and thus brings about her ordeal. Orual risks the anger of the king and fights the choice of Psyche for the Great Offering, even volunteering to take the place of Psyche herself. In comparison with Redival Orual undoubtedly shows love for Psyche, but what kind of love is it? She wants to rescue Psyche because she cannot stand seeing her sister being drawn away into something she has no part in. She wants Psyche to remain with her, depending on her as in the golden days of her childhood. This is seen in the way she puts Psyche's room in order after she has become queen.

I went to Psyche's room, alone, and put everything in it as it had been before all our sorrows began. I found some verses in Greek which seemed to be a hymn to the god of the Mountain. These I burned. I did not choose that any of that part of her should remain. Even the clothes that she had worn in the last year I burned also; but those she had worn earlier, and especially what were left of those she wore in childhood, and any jewels she had loved as a child, I hung in their proper places. (183)

Orual's fear of losing Psyche is brought out clearly when they meet in secret just before Psyche is to be brought to the Great Offering. Her reaction to Psyche's longing for the mountain is symptomatic.

"O cruel, cruel!" I wailed. "Is it nothing to you that you leave me here alone? Psyche; did you ever love me at all?" . . . She was (how long had she been, and I not to know?) out of my reach, in some place of her own. (73-4)

Lewis explained to Kilby that Orual was "a 'case' of human affection in its natural condition, true, tender, suffering, but in the long run tyrannically possessive and ready to turn to hatred when the beloved ceases to be its possession. What such love particularly cannot stand is to see the beloved passing into a sphere where it cannot follow." (Lewis, *Letters*, p. 274.) In *The Four Loves* he explained further what he meant by "human affection in its natural condition." This book was written a few years after *Till We Have Faces* and, as Green and Hooper pointed out in *C.S. Lewis: A Biography*, "many passages in the novel foreshadow the more analytical treatment of the study."¹³ The study describes the different

kinds of love that humans experience--Affection, Friendship, Eros and Charity--and how they are interrelated. One of Lewis' theses was that love of one of the three first categories "ceases to be a demon only when [it] ceases to be a god." He explains and amplifies this:

Every human love, at its height, has a tendency to claim for itself a divine authority. . . . Then they will destroy us, and also destroy themselves. For natural loves that are allowed to become gods do not remain loves. They are still called so, but can become in fact complicated forms of hatred.¹⁴

To remain healthy the natural loves must "become modes



of Charity while also remaining the natural loves they were." (Ibid., p. 122.) Charity is Gift-love and originates with God. It is "wholly disinterested and desires what is simply best for the beloved." (Ibid., p. 117.) If Apuleius' "Cupid and Psyche" is an allegory of the soul's quest for intellectual love, then *Till We Have Faces* is an example of the groping and hesitant journey of an individual from natural Affection to Charity.

The very center of the novel--and the chief reason for Orual's accusation of the gods--are her two visits to the Grey Mountain. She is confronted by a Psyche who is convinced she is loved by a god and who walks around in a palace Orual cannot see. Orual goes through a tormenting inner struggle as she tries to make Psyche come home with her. She wavers between belief and doubt, between wanting to see Psyche happy and wanting her for herself. Psyche will not come homewith her so she has to go back alone from her first visit (with Bardia, a soldier, who is waiting outside the valley). For a moment she thinks she sees Psyche's palace, but by this time she has already made up her mind and soon brushes it away as an illusion. Her will hardens to action as she prepares to return

again to the mountain. This time she is ruthless in her "love" and forces Psyche to treachery.

Ever since Psyche began showing an interest in the gods, Orual has felt an aversion towards them. They are to her "viler than the vilest men" (71), and if something good seems to be coming from them, then they are only "preparing some new agony. We are their bubbles," she thinks, "they blow us big before they prick us" (97). Yet her hostility is not based on what the gods are but simply on the fact that they have stolen Psyche away from her. As Lewis pointed out in *The Four Loves* when describing how jealousy might enter Affection:

A brother and sister, or two brothers--for sex here is not at work--grow to a certain age sharing everything. . . . Then a dreadful thing happens. One of them flashes ahead--discovers poetry or science or serious music or perhaps undergoes a religious conversion. . . . at first it is jealousy of the thing itself--of this science, this music, of God. . . . Affection is the most instinctive, in this sense the most animal, of the loves. It snarls and bares its teeth like a dog whose food has been snatched away. (Ibid., p. 95-6)

One of the main reasons why Orual does not see the palace is simply that she does not want to see it; to see it would mean she would also see a Psyche happy within it, apart from her. This jealousy also makes her unable to believe that whoever meets with Psyche in the night is anything but a horror.

With this in her mind she spends the night on the mountain, waiting for Psyche to keep her promise and light the candle. She expects Psyche to come creeping back in humility and repentance, yet something very different happens. The beautiful valley is torn apart by thunder and earthquakes. Orual hears the sound of Psyche weeping and sees a light approach.

In the center of the light was something like a man. . . . Though this light stood motionless, my glimpse of the face was as swift as a true flash of lightning. I could not bear it for longer. Not my eyes only, but my heart and blood and very brain were too weak for that. A monster--the Shadowbrute that I and all Glome had imagined--would have subdued me less than the beauty this face wore. (172-3)

The god has a message for her:

"Now Psyche goes out in exile. Now she must hunger and thirst and tread hard roads. Those against whom I cannot fight must do their will upon her. You, woman, shall know yourself and your work. You also shall be Psyche." (173-4)

"You also shall be Psyche." These portentous words follow Orual and she keeps guessing their interpretation. She has seen that the god is no monster but she is still convinced that nothing good can come from the gods. She expects hatred and punishment, believing the words to mean she must share Psyche's sufferings or that she, like her sister, must become a sacrifice. Her heart and her will are hardened; she decides to put on a veil to cover her ugliness as well as her emotions. As the king dies she proves an extremely able and efficient queen. Yet

she still treats people with the same jealous love. Bardia, the soldier who went with her up the mountain, is made her close advisor and she almost unconsciously saps all his strength, leaving only the husk to his wife, whom she fears as her rival. The way she uses other people--the Fox, Redival--follows the same pattern. The irony is that the veil not only hides her face from the surrounding world but also symbolizes her alienation from herself. She struggles desperately not to know herself and her work. What eventually breaks the ice is her visit to the temple of Psyche, when her bitterness against the gods breaks through in full force and she decides to write her accusation, summed up at the end of the first part of her book:

Now you who read, judge between the gods and me. They gave me nothing in the world to love but Psyche and then took her from me. . . . I say, therefore, that there is no creature (toad, scorpion, or serpent) so noxious to man as the gods. Let them answer my charge if they can. (248-50)

V

And the answer does come, described by Orual in the much shorter second part of the book. And here also the difficulties for many readers begin. My hope is that this essay in some respects will clarify the structure of the novel and make the second part of the book more intelligible. A close reading of the first part will, I believe, pave the way. The act of writing the first part down was for Orual, anyway, a revelation.

I know so much more than I did about the woman who wrote it. What began the change was the very writing itself. Let no one lightly set about such a work. Memory, once waked, will play the tyrant. I found I must set down (for I was speaking before judges and must not lie) passions and thoughts of my own which I had clean forgotten. The past which I wrote down was not the past I thought I had (all these years) been remembering. (253)

And her present situation underscores the revelation from the past. Bardia is taken sick of overwork and dies. Orual goes to comfort the widow, but instead learns some hard truths.

"He was tired. He had worked himself out--or been worked. Ten years ago he should have given over and lived as old men do. . . . I know that your queenship drank up his blood year by year and ate out his life." (260-64)

Although one can detect jealousy in the widow's voice as well, there is more than a grain of truth in her accusations.

The process of self-knowledge is begun by a realization of truths about the past and the present, but now the gods begin another kind of "surgery" (it is Orual who uses the word and it shows her changing attitudes towards both the gods and herself). Writing her accusations "was a labor of sifting and sorting, separating motive from motive and both from pretext" (256), and this labor overflows into her dreams. In them she becomes an ant, sorting out seeds into separate piles, an enormous and seemingly impossible task. In a second dream she attracts and is trampled

by golden rams and thus enables an unknown woman to pick the golden wool. The unknown woman and the one who needs the seeds ordered in piles is Psyche. Lewis, in this section, has retained the labors of Psyche from Apuleius but makes new and psychological use of them. Psyche has to perform the same labors as in Apuleius' story but Orual, without herself being aware of it, is there to carry some of her burden, as part of the fulfillment of the god's word to her.

Together with these dreams comes a clear and terrifying vision of who she really is. It is triggered off by two events: the visit to Bardia's widow and a participation in the rite of the Year's birth, during which she must sit next to the black, bloodstained stone of Ungit. The nightmarish vision that follows, like her other dream-visions, can be interpreted either as a sub-conscious mixing of previous events or as a message from the gods. In it her father makes her dig deeper and deeper into the ground of the Pillar-room, from which they both had ruled, finding new and darker versions of the same room. Finally the king makes her look into a mirror in the deepest room (the very bottom of her sub-conscious?). She sees a terrifying sight.

My face was the face of Ungit as I had seen it that day in her house.

"Who is Ungit?" asked the king.

"I am Ungit." (276)

Waking up she realizes the truth of the dream.

Without question it was true. It was I who was Ungit. That ruinous face was mine. It was that Batta-thing, that all-devouring womb-like, yet barren, thing. Glome was a web--I the swollen spider, squat at its center, gorged with men's stolen lives. (276).

A sign of her changing attitude is that she now and then takes off her veil and goes bareface amongst the people (who do not recognize her, not having seen her without it for years). What still is missing is the recognition of her one last delusion.

I had only one comfort left me. However I might have devoured Bardia, I had at least loved Psyche truly. (285)

But her release is near. In a final dream-vision she is brought to a tribunal of the dead. Among them she recognizes the familiar faces of her father and the Fox. She has been brought there to pronounce her accusations against the gods, but she finds herself reading, not the book she had written, but an outpouring of all her sub-conscious and jealous charges against the gods for stealing Psyche from her. At last all her masks are down, both towards herself and others.

The voice I read it in was strange to my ears. There was given to me a certainty that this, at last, was my real voice.

There was a silence in the dark assembly long enough for me to have read the book out yet again. At last the judge spoke.

"Are you answered?" he said.

"Yes," said I. (292-3)

Orual is answered, but are we? I believe the book makes clear that the answer to Orual's charges lies

within herself. The moment she sees what she has been--jealous and possessive--she is also freed to see the gods. It has been she herself, rather than the gods, who has been incomprehensible. The gods cannot meet us humans face to face "till we have faces."

Orual is answered. But now it is her turn to be called to the bar. A well-known voice addresses her, and the Fox comes forward and brings her to a cool chamber, where she will await the gods' judgment. One side of the chamber opens up to an inviting country landscape and the three remaining walls are covered with paintings. The labors of Psyche are depicted and a surprised Orual notices that they also show her helping Psyche out. Yet the third wall depicts one last task that Ungit has set Psyche, in which Orual has only a negative part. The Fox explains:

"Now Psyche must go down into the deadlands to get beauty in a casket from the Queen of the Deadlands, from death herself; and bring it back to give it to Ungit so that Ungit will become beautiful. But this is the law for the journey. If, for any fear or favor or love or pity, she speaks to anyone on the way, then she will never come back to the sunlit lands again." (301)

The journey is Psyche's life story all over again. Different people try to distract her from her path: the people of Glome, the Fox, and finally Orual.

But Psyche is this time able to overcome all temptations and fulfills her task. At last the sisters are re-united as Psyche returns with the casket of beauty. It is a changed Orual who awaits her. She has finally allowed her natural love to become a mode of Charity.

"Oh Psyche, oh goddess," I said. "Never again will I call you mine; but all there is of me shall be yours." . . .

She bent over me to lift me up. Then, when I would not rise, she said; "But Maia, dear Maia, you must stand up. I have not given you the casket. You know I went a long journey to fetch the beauty that would make Ungit beautiful." (305-6)

As Orual had carried some of Psyche's burdens, so Psyche brings the beauty that Orual lacks. Lewis borrowed this substitution of burdens--which for him was a practical way of experiencing Gift-love--from Charles Williams, who had used it in his novel Descent into Hell. Williams gave an explanation of his "doctrine of substitution" in the essay "He Came Down from Heaven":

"Bear ye one another's burdens (Gal. 6:22), and so fulfill the law of Christ." . . . St. Paul's injunction is to such acts as "fulfill the law of Christ," that is, to acts of substitution. . . . We are supposed to be content to "cast our burdens on the Lord." The Lord indicated that the best way to do so was to hand these over to someone else to cast, or even to cast them on Him in someone else. . . . It is in this exchange of burdens that they become light.¹⁵

And now the god comes to judge Orual.

The air was growing brighter and brighter about us; as if something had set it on fire.

Each breath I drew let into me a new terror, joy, overpowering sweetness. I was pierced through and through with the arrows of it. I was being unmade. I was no one. . . . The earth and stars and sun, all that was or will be, existed for his sake. And he was coming. The pillars on the far side of the pool flushed with his approach. (307)

Lewis in this passage--as in some of the most memorable moments of his other fiction--tries to communicate "that which no eye has seen or no ear has heard"; a sense of the numinous.

Orual does not get justice in her trial.

Two figures, reflections, their feet to Psyche's feet and mine, stood head downward in the water. But whose were they? Two Psyche's, the one clothed, the other naked? Yes both Psyche's, both beautiful (if that mattered now) beyond all imagination, yet not exactly the same.

"You also are Psyche," came a great voice. (308)

The god's word on the mountain is come true. Orual has received the beauty of Psyche. But one of the many paradoxes in this novel is that to become Psyche, Orual first had to admit she was Ungit, and for Psyche to be able to give her sister the casket of beauty, she first had to reject her. Nowhere is Lewis' use of Apuleius story as striking as here. What in "Cupid and Psyche" was only the last labor of Psyche, has in this novel acquired a new psychological and mystical meaning. Apuleius' Venus, who wants the casket of beauty for her own use, is Lewis' Ungit, representing the ugliness within Orual that needs a new beauty.

Orual wakes up physically worn out by her visions and writes her last lines before dying a few days later:

I ended my first book with the words no answer. I know now, Lord, why you utter no answer. You are yourself the answer. Before your face questions die away. (308)

VI

Till We Have Faces is a different and, in some respects, a severe book. Yet it is not incomprehensible. The two parts are a unity and the first part carries within itself the seed that becomes the answer of part II. The novel is a quest for true love and self-knowledge. It exposes, without any feeling of moralizing or didacticism, the weaknesses of human love as well as its potential strength and beauty. Thus Lewis, in an extremely readable novel, unobtrusively combines the old literary virtues of "profit with delight."

The novel is also the fruit of a life-long interest in myth. Lewis succeeded with the rare literary feat of making an ancient myth come alive and speak to modern man without losing the strong mythical qualities of the original. The novel not only retells a myth but captures the sentiments of an age in which myth forms the very backbone of society. And the characters of the novel not only live in a myth-permeated society but themselves embody--not allegorize--the same myths. Thus we are aware of the workings of myth on various levels: the whole book as a myth retold, with its characters embodying the myth;

the changing society in which this myth is sprouting and slowly developing into allegory; and finally, Lewis makes us aware of how some of the most important ancient myths carried within them the seeds of the myth come true in Palestine, how history is part of that greater cosmic myth of death and re-birth.

NOTES

¹ Stella Gibbons, "Imaginative Writing," in Light on C.S. Lewis, ed. Jocelyn Gibb (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1965), p. 97.

² The Literary Legacy of C.S. Lewis (London: Sheldon Press, 1979), p. 250.

³ Robert Graves, trans., with an introduction, The Golden Ass, by Apuleius (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1951), p. xix.

⁴ C.S. Lewis, Till We Have Faces (1956; rpt. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), p. 313. References to page numbering will henceforth be shown in the text.

⁵ C.S. Lewis, Letters of C.S. Lewis, ed., with a memoir, by W.H. Lewis (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1966), p. 273.

⁶ As pointed out by James Como in "Till We Have Faces: A Preface to Comprehension," CLS Bull. 7, No. 1 (1975), p. 3.

⁷ Owen Barfield, introduction, Light on C.S. Lewis, pp. xx-xxi.

⁸ An Experiment in Criticism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), p. 41.

⁹ C.S. Lewis, Miracles (1947; rpt. Glasgow: Collins, 1960), p. 138.

¹⁰ "Is Theology Poetry?" in Screwtape Proposes a Toast (Glasgow: Collins, 1965), p. 50.

¹¹ The Allegory of Love (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936), p. 73.

¹² Carolyn Keefe, "Mystic Experience in Till We Have Faces," CLS Bull. 7, No. 1 (1975), pp. 4-7.

¹³ L. Green and W. Hooper, C.S. Lewis: A Biography (London: Collins, 1974), p. 267.

¹⁴ The Four Loves (Glasgow: Collins, 1960), pp. 11-13. 15As quoted in Dorothy Hobson Fitzgerald, "Themes of Joy and Substitution in the works of C.S. Lewis and Charles Williams," CLS Bull. 12, No. 3 (1981), pp. 2-3.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources

Apuleius, The Golden Ass. Trans. and intr. Robert Graves. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1951.
Lewis, C. S. The Allegory of Love. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936.

-----, An Experiment in Criticism. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961.

-----, The Four Loves. Glasgow: Collins, 1960.

-----, "Is Theology Poetry?" in Screwtape Proposes a Toast and Other Pieces. Glasgow, Collins, 1965.

-----, Letters of C. S. Lewis, Ed., with a memoir, W. H. Lewis. London: Geoffrey Bles, 1966.

-----, Miracles: A Preliminary Study. 1947; rpt. Glasgow: Collins, 1960.

-----, Till We Have Faces: A Myth Retold. 1956; rpt. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966.

Secondary Sources

Como, James. "Till We Have Faces: A Preface to Comprehension." CLS Bull. 7, No. 1 (1975), pp. 1-3.

Gibb, Jocelyn, ed. Light on C. S. Lewis. London: Geoffrey Bles, 1965.

(continued on page 22)

One reader pointed out to me that I seldom make clear the distinction between historical telescoping of elements and telescoping that transpires as the result of the syntax of the language itself. For that lapse I apologize profusely. That confusion became most apparent in a discussion of "aure". "aure", as a combination of "au(t)" and "ure", should be viewed historically. There was some question about the plausibility of the "r" and "t" collapsing together. It should be remembered that the articulatory points for both consonants, in Quenya, are precisely the same: at the back of the teeth. The "r" here is not a retroflex like it is in American English pronunciation. If Quenya pronunciation follows real word articulatory rules (which I believe that it does to some measure), the intervocalic "r" is actually a flap rather than the expected trill. Flapped "r" and "t" are extremely close phonetically, the only difference (I say this guardedly) being the difference in voicing (in fact, some phonetic alphabets make the flapped "r" into a kind of "d"). Intervocally, the "t" would pick up that voicing under local word articulatory rules. What we have then are two overlapping morphological elements, "aut" and "ure", easily coalescing into "aure". Some objected to the telescoping because they thought it unlikely that the Elves would refer to "day" as "departing heat". That they could and most likely did accept that understanding is for me the clincher. The Eldar were, after all, the "Children of the Stars", those who came into being before the sun arose in the heavens for the first time. "Passing heat" or "departing heat", under these circumstances becomes informative culturally, the essential function of the languages in any event.

At this point, I readily accept a second criticism of my explications: I generally deal in the "not-quite-so-obvious" rather than the "accepted" translation or even Tolkien's given interpretations. I so confessing, I hasten to add that this has been purposeful. We wanted those who were familiar with the languages to perceive what we believe to be the intended richness of the languages, particularly that of Quenya. Unfortunately, by not stating the "obvious" as well, some have been led to believe that my given interpretation was the only one possible. For that I apologize, but will undoubtedly continue in the same vein. Tolkien's conception of beauty compels me to view his languages from as many perspectives as possible. His is a multi-dimensional world, it can be walked about in and around and through; it must be to be believed. His languages demand no more...nor less.

Ben Urrutia wrote concerning my comment in ML-37 that the names of Hobbiton are Spanish; he felt that I may have overstated the point. Ben suggested that the term "hispanicized" would be more accurate. I agree. He also quoted from the Appendix F or LR (p. 516) drawing to my attention again that male Hobbit names generally ended in "-a" while the female endings were predominately "-o" and "-e". I found it particularly interesting that Tolkien would make an issue of the endings and then almost immediately provide us with counter-evidence like "Frodo", "Bungo", "Bibbo", etc. It makes one wonder whether Tolkien was speaking of the endings in "Westron-English", "Elvish", or "Hobbitish". I believe that the last is the case. Frodo's name in Elvish is, by the way, "Daur".

At the expense of delving once more into the phallically arcane, I approach the world "Wetwang" with some trepidation. There were a number of readers concerned about Mr. Donahue's assertion that "Wetwang" was somehow evidence that Tolkien did indeed dabble in

the coarse. "Wang", according to the OED, is a variety of "wong" which has to do with plowable fields. "Wetwang", then, is just what you would expect it to be: a field that is too water-logged to be cultivated.

One last question raised, this from Nancy Martsch who attended my presentation at Mythcon XIII. The issue involved the use of calligraphy to depict character in the classic Fairy Tale fashion; that is, that the preferred writing mode, either Tengwar or Angerthas, somehow conveyed the basic nature of the character who used it. The point Nancy raised had to do with the use of the word "practicality" as it applied to one or the other of the forms of writing. The "practicality" of one mode over another has little to do with OUR perception of practicality, but that of the character, which is in turn a reflection of his basic nature. What is fascinating is that the "practicality" of the Elves embraces the "aesthetically pleasing", while the "practicality" of the dwarves embraces the "utilitarian." This is not to say that they are mutually exclusive, but to aver that a particular group emphasizes one over the other. I believe that Tolkien sets up an "aesthetic-utilitarian" dichotomy and fills in the spectrum with the other characters and races in Middle-earth. Interestingly enough, at the center of the spectrum are the Hobbits. Their "decorated verse hand" and their "pointed style" show the "bi-partisan" rift in their culture. I suspect that if all were known, it would be true that the more aesthetically inclined Hobbits prefer the "decorated verse hand". There is no question that the Tengwar is more practical on paper and the Angerthas on stone, but why does one race choose one medium over another? Perhaps a more important question would be, what it is that the Elves write as contrasted with the Dwarves? Poetry versus History, I would say, at least that is true with what is extant. Again, the Hobbits fall in middle ground. Poetry certainly suffices as the aesthetic quality and history as the utilitarian. Also, I think that it is safe to say that the general human perception of the aesthetic does not usually include a noisy hammer and chisel. Oddly enough, Gimli thinks that it does, but that is, of course, a Dwarf's perception. That in and of itself shapes our view of Dwarves in general and places them in their part of the spectrum.

Every aspect of Middle-earth affords opportunities for insight into Tolkien's art, but the magic of his languages is at the heart of the matter.



A MYTH RETOLD continued from page 12

Green, R. L. and W. Hooper. C. S. Lewis: A Biography. London: Collins, 1974.

Hobson Fitzgerald, Dorothy. "Themes of Joy and Substitution in the Works of C. S. Lewis and Charles Williams." CSL Bull, 7, No. 1 (1975), pp. 4-7.

Walch, Chad. The Literary Legacy of C. S. Lewis. London: Sheldon Press, 1979.