

Holy Places, Dark Paths: *Till We Have Faces* and the Spiritual Conflicts of C.S. Lewis

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Abstract

Although *Till We Have Faces* (1956) was written late in C.S. Lewis's life (1898-1963), during the peak of his literary renown, the novel remains one of Lewis's least known and least accessible works. Due to its relatively ancient and obscure source material, as well as its tendency towards the esoteric, a healthy interpretation of the novel necessitates a wider look at Lewis's life-long body of work. By approaching *Till We Have Faces* through the framework of Lewis and the corpus of his work, the reader can see two principal conflicts that characterize the work as a whole, and, more specifically, the protagonist Orual's attempts at reconciliation with the gods. The first is Orual's tension between rationalism and romanticism, as seen through the framework of Lewis's *The Pilgrim's Regress* and *Surprised by Joy*; the second is Orual's perverted sense of love, particularly her affection for her sister Psyche, as understood through Lewis's *The Four Loves* and *The Great Divorce*. By analyzing Orual's resolution of these two conflicts, illuminated through Lewis's other books, the reader can see the deeper themes hiding within Lewis's "myth retold," namely, the finitude of man and the inexpressibility of the divine.

Holy Places, Dark Paths: *Till We Have Faces* and the Spiritual Conflicts of C.S. Lewis

Since its publication in 1956, C.S. Lewis's "myth retold" *Till We Have Faces* has always had a rather turbulent existence. Although written late in the author's life (1898-1963), at a point when Lewis was well-respected and his work was widespread, the novel was, at the time, both critically and commercially panned. In a letter to one of his readers, Lewis called it his "one great failure," claiming that "no one seems to have the slightest idea what I'm getting at in it" (*Collected Letters* 1148). Commercially, the novel generated a degree of controversy between Lewis and his publishers, about both the content and title, and ended up selling less than any of his other works (*Collected Letters* 869). On all fronts, it seemed that *Till We Have Faces* was nothing more than a flop.

This was deeply distressing to Lewis, as he himself held it in the highest regard. In the same letter where he notes its public failings, Lewis still writes, "I think it far and away my best book" (*Collected Letters* 1148). For Lewis, the novel was deeply personal and, in a sense, a reflection of his own life. The idea had sat with him for many years, taking form and shape in conjunction with Lewis's own theological epiphanies, and he only chose to write it when he believed he was ready. When the novel was published, despite its lukewarm reception, Lewis never seemed to regret his decision to write the story (*Collected Letters* 1214). In recent years, too, many critics have come to agree with him. Clyde Kilby, a scholar on Lewis's fiction and one of many writers with whom Lewis regularly corresponded, writes, "Although it may be his most difficult book, it amply repays a reader's effort" ("An Interpretation" 171). Kathryn Lindskoog, a Lewis scholar and biographer, agrees, calling it "difficult but rewarding" (270). However,

despite Lewis's own love for the novel and recent critical admiration, *Till We Have Faces* has always been one of Lewis's least popular and least accessible works.

One key reason seems to be that the work, unlike many of Lewis's others, is inherently challenging to readers' expectations. On the surface, the work appears to appeal to each sphere of Lewis's audience, but it firmly refuses to offer the type of resolution that any one of them desires. For those who love and appreciate his explicitly Christian fiction, such as *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1956) or the Space Trilogy, *Till We Have Faces* offers a dark, violent, and rather eccentric piece of storytelling. For those who have grown from Lewis's rational defenses of the faith, in *Mere Christianity* (1952) and *Miracles* (1947), the novel seems to prefer mystery and supra-rationality above logic. For Lewis's academic contemporaries, the tale appears attractive, as it heavily draws on the mythologies of the past, but it remains unapologetically Christian in its worldview, an academic heresy in his time. As a result of its variegated nature, as well, critical interpretations that approach the novel from only one of these spheres often risk the pitfall of reductionism, in a way that is deeply destructive to the tale as a whole.

The primary reason, then, this book seems so unsatisfying and is easily misread is that Lewis deals with paradoxes, mysteries, and spiritual conflicts deeply rooted in the human experience without giving pat solutions. He recognizes the seeming contradictions behind our understanding of the divine but makes no attempt to offer reductive answers. He asks why "holy places are dark places," but is content to explore the question with the lights still off (50). By the novel's end, many of the questions he asks still lack a solid answer; even Orual's reconciliation with the gods in the final pages lacks concrete definition, choosing instead to revel in the divine truths that have not yet been revealed.

For these reasons and more, the novel is truly one of his most difficult works, as well as a dangerous piece to approach with an interpretive agenda. The novel is characterized by conflict, stemming from the heart of Lewis himself. As Peter Kreeft notes, Lewis was a man “never fully resolved” with the tensions he struggled with throughout his adult life (64). How, then, can one approach such a conflicted man and such a subversive novel? More importantly, how can one do so while remaining respectful to the holistic spiritual, philosophical, and epistemological vision that Lewis presents?

The clearest answer is unsurprisingly, though oft taken for granted, Lewis himself. As Kreeft says, “[Lewis’s] life is best told by himself” (9). What many readers too often fail to realize is that nearly all of Lewis’s works are deeply complementary and intertextual, particularly from genre to genre. None of his books was written in a vacuum, and this interconnectedness is inherent throughout his entire body of work. Lewis’s fictive works directly conform to the contours of his criticism and scholarly writings. The central foci of his spiritual works find their concrete incarnation in his imaginative worlds. Even in his poems—perhaps the genre for which Lewis was self-admittedly the least equipped to write—one can see aspects of his literary philosophy that illuminate his better works. Kreeft is correct: “Clive Staples Lewis was not a man; he was a world” (9).

In addition, *Till We Have Faces* explores the central spiritual and epistemological conflicts that Lewis had wrestled with his entire life: this includes conflicts such as the tension between the rational and the romantic, the corrupting power of self-love, the finitude of man, and the inexpressibility of the divine realm. Questions such as these cannot be given their proper due in one work or even a few, and Lewis understood this well. In a sense, these conflicts characterized the whole of his life. He wrestled with them

in the private sphere, as well as the public—in the scholarly realm, as well as the imaginative. To understand, then, the thematic conflicts at the heart of *Till We Have Faces*, the reader must understand the spiritual and epistemological conflicts at the heart of Lewis himself. Therefore, by interpreting *Till We Have Faces* through the lens of Lewis's own body of work, the reader may actually begin to make sense of its dark and violent mysteries, as well as the significance behind Orual's long, arduous, and conflicted journey towards divine reconciliation, as dim, blurry, and fractured as it may be.

Before approaching Lewis's tale through this framework, though, a brief explanation of the background and story behind *Till We Have Faces* is necessary. *Till We Have Faces* is a retelling of a classical myth found in the Latin novel *Metamorphoses* (8)—also known as *The Golden Ass*—written by Lucius Apuleius Platonicus (*Till We Have Faces* 311). The original myth tells the story of a beautiful woman named Psyche, the youngest of three daughters. After being mistaken for the goddess Venus and worshipped instead of her, Psyche is sentenced by an oracle of Apollo to be consumed by a monster. However, before she is killed, the god Cupid falls in love with her. Saving her from death, Cupid takes her to a secret palace, where he spends the nights with her. Psyche is free to live in the palace as Cupid's lover, but she is forbidden from looking on his face (*Till We Have Faces* 311-312).

Psyche's two elder sisters, however, are filled with envy for Psyche's fortune, and they conspire against her. The sisters convince her to look on Cupid's face the next evening. Psyche agrees, and when she does, Cupid vanishes. The sisters die shortly after, but Psyche is left to walk the world on her own, until one day when she is caught by the goddess Venus herself, who still despises her. Venus sentences her to complete three

seemingly impossible tasks, but through miraculous interventions, Psyche manages to complete them all. Venus gives her one final task: to travel to the Underworld and capture the beauty of Persephone in a box. Psyche succeeds, but on the journey back, she chooses to look inside the box, against Persephone's own command. She is nearly lost, but at the last moment, Cupid rescues her. The two are married, Psyche becomes a goddess, and they live happily together from then on.

Lewis's retelling of the myth bears a striking resemblance to the overall plot of the original tale; however, the reader must not approach *Till We Have Faces* as being inspired or modeled after Apuleius. Lewis himself writes, "Nothing was further from my aim than to recapture the peculiar quality of the *Metamorphoses* . . . Apuleius was of course a man of genius: but in relation to my work he is a 'source,' not an 'influence' nor a 'model' (*Till We Have Faces* 313). While Lewis may have taken the plot of Apuleius's myth, his perspective and purpose are wholly unique. In a sense, it seems as if Lewis purposely distances and defamiliarizes his version from anything except the basic plot itself, such as his decision to give his own names to the city of Glome and its inhabitants. As Elizabeth Graham notes, "Lewis altered his version to such a point that *Till We Have Faces* is more unlike Apuleius's myth of Cupid and Psyche than it is like it" (10-11). The version of the myth found in *The Golden Ass* is darkly comic, a "strange compound of picaresque novel . . . mystagogue's tract, pornography, and stylistic experiment," while Lewis's tale takes an intensely personal, grave, and intimate perspective (*Till We Have Faces* 313). Simply put, the two, short of their common narrative thread, are separate and not in need of comprehensive comparison.

In addition, Lewis makes two important changes to his version of the myth that further distances it from its source material. The first is the change in point of view to Orual, Psyche's elder sister, making the novel focus on her quarrel with the gods; the second is subtle, but within it lies the novel's *raison d'être*. In a letter to Katharine Farrer, Lewis writes, "Apuleius got it all wrong. The elder sister . . . couldn't see Psyche's palace when she visited her. She saw only rock & heather. When P. said she was giving her noble wine, the poor sister saw & tasted only spring water. Hence her dreadful problem: 'is P. mad or am I blind?' (*Collected Letters* 590). In light of this, the central conflict of the novel changes from Psyche's trials against Venus to Orual's central inability to comprehend the spiritual reality Psyche sees; it is the reason she writes her accusation against the gods and the reason she asks, "Why must holy places be dark places?" (*Till We Have Faces* 249). Lewis, therefore, is using the skeletal structure of Apuleius's tale, but his purpose is not to retell Psyche's ancient journey; it is to turn to her sister and ask her why she reacts with such jealousy, and the answer to that lies squarely in the mystery of holy darkness.

With the mythological background of the story, the source material, and Lewis's own impetus for revisiting the tale in mind, the reader can now begin the task of exploring how Lewis intended Orual's central conflict with the divine to be understood. This is a complex and multi-faceted process, but for the sake of clarity, it is best to look at Lewis's life and body of work through two separate, though interconnected, dimensions. Lewis was nothing if not comprehensive, but a wide range of his work explored certain key conflicts and concepts that remained relatively consistent throughout

his life. First, it will be necessary to look at how Lewis was both a rationalist and a romantic; by understanding how Lewis understood the necessity and insufficiency of both mindsets, as seen in both *The Pilgrim's Regress* and *Surprised by Joy*, the reader is able to interpret Orual's struggle with the conflicting philosophies of the Fox and the Priest of Ungit.

Next, the reader must look inward at Lewis's intense conflict with the corrupting power of self-love. Lewis's explorations of how souls are often damned by the inordinacy of their desires became a key focus of many of his later writings, particularly *The Great Divorce* and *The Four Loves*, and for Orual, this becomes the central obstacle to her reconciliation with the divine. Her possessive love for Psyche must ultimately be relinquished before she can understand her inability to bring a fair accusation against the gods. Ultimately, through these two conflicts—one epistemological and the other spiritual—the reader can see Lewis's desire to reconcile the finitude of man with the inexpressibility of the divine, as well as understand how Orual's second conflict is congruent. By accepting her inability to understand the mysteries of the gods and her penchant for a selfish corruption of love, Orual recognizes their authority while admitting her own epistemological and spiritual insufficiencies, thus beginning the long path toward reconciliation. This path begins with a tension, though: a tension between reason and the imagination, and it is where an interpretation of *Till We Have Faces* must begin.

Romanticism and Rationalism are two terms that have unfortunately become very broad in definition; they have been utilized to explain and clarify so many different concepts—some of which contradict each other—that both words have come close to

meaning nothing at all. Lewis himself was so frustrated with the word “Romanticism” that he believed it had “become useless and should be banished from our vocabulary” (*Pilgrim’s Regress* 155). For the limited purposes of this analysis, though, Romanticism can best be understood, in the words of David Ash, as a desire “to regain the . . . conception of man’s spiritual nature and adequately to express that nature, not only in art-forms, literary or otherwise, but in all other aspects of life” (101). Rationalism, conversely, can be understood as the worldview that “opinions and actions should be based on reason and knowledge rather than on religious belief or emotional response” (“Rationalism”).

These two worldviews, though broad and seemingly diametrically opposed to each other, were both close to Lewis’s heart and necessary components to both his conversion and his subsequent worldview. It is for this reason, then, that Kreeft often refers to Lewis as a romantic rationalist, as the two themes “constitute most of the man and his work” (12). Therefore, it is necessary to understand what Lewis meant by both and how he synthesized both in his own works, starting with Romanticism.

Near the end of his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis gives a unique picture to introduce his readers to his view of Romanticism. He writes, “When we are lost in the woods, the sight of a signpost is a great matter” (130). For the wanderer who has hopelessly erred off course, disconnected from any recognizable reality, the simple discovery of a signpost and its ability to suggest the reality of a future destination is enough to be lauded and celebrated. It is a marker: “a pointer to something outer and other” (*Surprised by Joy* 130). The man who is already on a path may not recognize the

necessity of such a marker, but for the man who is hopelessly lost, it is irreplaceable. This signifier—or recognition of something greater—is, in essence, what Lewis considered to be the key function of Romanticism: a realization that there is something truer and fuller than what man simply sees around him, however presently mysterious it may appear.

For Lewis, this function is best realized in the notion of *sehnsucht*, a German word that roughly translates to an “intense longing” or “yearning” (Kehl 309). In his Afterword to *The Pilgrim’s Regress*, Lewis describes this Romantic longing in detail. He notes that it is different from other longings that a person may feel: “other desires are felt as pleasures only if satisfaction is expected in the near future . . . but this desire, even when there is no hope of possible satisfaction, continues to be prized, and even to be preferred to anything else in the world, by those who have once felt it” (*Pilgrim’s Regress* 157). *Sehnsucht* is an intense longing for something more, even if that “something more” is wholly unknown or mysterious to the person in want of it. Lewis likens it to a child who looks at a distant hillside and thinks “if only I were there” (*Pilgrim’s Regress* 157). It is difficult to rationally define the longing the child feels, but the experience is common to all mankind and manifested—though often in distorted forms—through various avenues: fantasy, eroticism, magic, the occult, and even intellectual fulfillment. This intense longing is even an impetus for artistry; as D.G. Kehl writes, “The artist, driven by his/her own yearnings, expresses the world’s yearnings and awakens still others” (318).

Where does this Romantic longing lead then? Lewis believed its destination was, in short, beyond human experience and understanding. He writes that *sehnsucht* should

lead to “the clear knowledge that the human soul was made to enjoy some object that is never fully given—nay, cannot even be imagined as given—in our present mode of subjective and spatio-temporal experience” (*Pilgrim’s Regress* 158). As a Christian, Lewis saw this destination, ultimately, as leading toward the God of the Bible, but the Romantic longing, in and of itself, need only lead a person beyond his material surroundings. As he famously said in *Mere Christianity*, “If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world” (114). *Sehnsucht*, then, through the power of nostalgia, desire, and transcendence, awakens an intense longing inside a man, thus driving him to look beyond himself and the superficial world around him.

Lewis saw this perhaps most vividly in the genre of myth, for which reason he devoted a large portion of his academic work to an understanding of it. In *An Experiment in Criticism*, Lewis writes, “The peculiar attraction of the study, I suspect, springs in part from the same impulse which makes men allegorise the myths. It is one more effort to seize, to conceptualize, the important something which the myth seems to suggest” (45). Like the myth, however, the central problem with the notion of *sehnsucht* is its inherent sense of mystery. In theory, *sehnsucht* seems rather clean; if one takes the word to simply represent the notion that there is more than one’s material surroundings, it is easily digestible and readily accepted by most—excluding those of a materialist philosophy. However, when trying to understand this longing within the myriad complexities of human psychology and spiritual corruption, this “intense longing” can be maddening, paradoxical, and deeply disruptive. Consequently, *sehnsucht* points to a higher realm, but

it remains unapologetically ambiguous in regards to its contours and contents. What's more, by clinging to the longing without ever following its source, one simply resigns himself to remaining as lost as he once was. Again, as Lewis says in *Surprised by Joy*, "The sight of a signpost is a great matter . . . but when we have found the road and are passing signposts every few miles, we shall not stop and stare" (130). Though Lewis remains indebted to his Romantic yearnings, he adamantly asserts that it is not the soul's intended destination. The Romantic yearning sacrifices definition for mystery, but for even the grandest of journeys, something more than mystery is needed.

Lewis understood this necessity well; consequently, he sought to incorporate an unapologetic sense of rationalism to his worldview. Though Lewis was fascinated with myth and the imaginative realm, he was a thinker wholly devoted to logic and definition. This tendency can be traced back to Lewis's pre-Christian days. As a young man and adamant atheist, Lewis spent the first portion of his life as a ruthlessly rational man, seeing no place for the paradoxes of spirituality. Though he had always been a lover of myths and folktales, Lewis reductively saw these tales as beautiful lies, valuable for their ability to communicate a story through aesthetics—and perhaps their ability to express *sehnsucht*—but not much more. Lewis speaks of his rational background often in *Surprised by Joy* (1955), noting that one of the first great rational influences in his life was a man named Kirk, who Lewis's father hired as his tutor. Lewis writes, "If ever a man came to being a purely logical entity, that man was Kirk. . . he was a 'Rationalist' of the old, high and dry nineteenth-century type" (*Surprised by Joy* 76-78). Lewis spent a great amount of time with Kirk before his conversion and, even after he became a

Christian, remained deeply indebted to Kirk's merciless march towards reason. He recounts, "Kirk excited and satisfied one side of me. Here was talk that was really about something. Here was a man who thought not about you but about what you said. No doubt I snorted and bridled a little at some of my tossings; but, taking it all in all, I loved the treatment" (*Surprised by Joy* 76-77). Kirk awakened in Lewis the rational side of him that had always existed, but had not yet been tamed, one that enabled in him a degree of truthful insight and virtue that could not be attained otherwise.

However, when Lewis converted to theism in 1929, it was a decision that required an evolution in thought, one that seemingly came at odds with the logic and reason that had, until then, dominated his theoretical thought. As Lewis continued in his studies, interacting with the authors of the past as well as his fellow contemporaries, he discovered a "ludicrous contradiction," namely, that the authors and scholars that he came to respect the most were the ones who subscribed to Christianity or, at the least, a belief in the supernatural (*Surprised by Joy* 117). Upon meeting fellow contemporary Nevill Coghill, Lewis writes, "I soon had the shock of discovering that he—clearly the most intelligent and best informed man in that class—was a Christian and a thorough-going supernaturalist" (*Surprised by Joy* 117). Later, Lewis notes that the authors that he believed to be the most reasonable and insightful—George MacDonald, G.K. Chesterton, Edmund Spenser, John Milton, and even the ancient Greek authors, such as Plato, Aeschylus, and Virgil—were men who held an express belief in the reality of the spiritual and the supernatural. When Lewis finally surrendered to a belief in God, "the absolute leap in the dark," he finally admitted that his rote and reductive form of Reason was

insufficient; religion and supernaturalism no longer appeared to be sub-rational attempts to understand a wholly material realm. On the contrary, as Lewis finally admits, “God was Reason itself,” though that Reason did not necessarily manifest itself in the most rational of ways (*Surprised by Joy* 125).

In order for Lewis to come to terms with the reality of the divine, he had to synthesize these competing worldviews. Romanticism and Rationalism proffered two aspects of the same divine reality. Romanticism awakened in him the intense longing for something wholly unearthly, a truth with a destination that extended far beyond mundane realms, ending at the throne of a divine Creator. As Robert Siegel notes, the Romantic world of fantasy, imagination, and longing lies “in its power to take us out of our skins—away from the small, limited, half-life that is our ordinary consciousness—and to give us an experience of a larger, more complete life, in which we hear the music of the turning spheres” (356).

However, Romanticism on its own imaginatively provides only the acknowledgement of its substance, not a methodology towards its realization. The hunger for a meal acknowledges the need for food; but it does not contain in it the food itself. For that, Lewis had to employ his intellectual faculties, sowed and harvested in him by his fellow rational contemporaries, in order to truly understand its contours. The world of Reason, to be sure, is one that cannot, and should not, answer all questions, but it provides the fundamental method for understanding realities far beyond humanity’s grasp, especially within the context of the numinous. This synthesis was a defining

moment in Lewis's life, bringing him closer to an embrace of the Christian worldview and, more importantly, a reconciliation with the divine.

In Lewis's synthetic resolution of the Romantic longing and the Rational method lies the first great key to understanding how he portrays divine conflict and reconciliation in *Till We Have Faces*. The world of Glome is complex and ambivalent, a city where "myth, psychology, detail, and vision here come together" (Christopher 130). Orual's redemptive path is similarly multi-faceted, but her first great step towards fuller understanding of the divine and towards answering the question of why "holy places are dark places" lies in this very same act of synthesis, one that directly parallels Lewis himself. Orual is caught between the tension of the Rational and Romantic worldviews. The former is noble and virtuous, but ultimately superficial; the latter is dark, violent, and mysterious, but ultimately substantial. In the recognition of both views' strengths and shortcomings, though, and the application of both, comes Orual's first catalytic step towards reality and reconciliation.

From her childhood, Orual is exposed to the reality of the spiritual realm, through both the Romantic longings of her sister Psyche and the barbaric and primitive spirituality of the Priest of Ungit. Psyche's intense longing for something beyond her own experience, as manifested in her desire to live on the mountain that overlooks their city, nearly identically parallels the description of *sehnsucht* Lewis gives in *A Pilgrim's Regress*. Orual reflects, "Psyche, almost from the beginning... 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'” (*Till We Have Faces* 23). Her heart craves an existence beyond her experience, echoing the Lewisian notion of being “made for another world” (*Till We Have Faces* 114). Her subsequent willingness to be sacrificed to the Brute, as well as her acceptance into marriage with the God of the Grey Mountain both demonstrate her recognition and desperate desire to embrace a world beyond her own. This has a strong effect on Orual’s belief in the gods, since Orual has a deep love for Psyche, even if she doesn’t believe in the reality or importance of these things.

Another strong spiritual, imaginative, and romantic influence on Orual is the religion of Ungit, the ancient belief in a primitive, ugly, and barbaric goddess that is manifested to the people through her priest. The Priest also strongly represents what Lewis would call the Romantic longing, the *sehnsucht* described above; however, it is not as clean or idealistic as the Romantic longings of Psyche or those of more modern-day thinkers. The longing is steeped in blood and mystery: an unknown, visceral craving for an unfathomable reality. Unlike the Fox, the Priest recognizes the deep current of spirituality that underlies the whole of Glome’s existence; at one point, he rebukes the Fox and rational people like him, saying, “They demand to see such things clearly, as if the gods were no more than letters written in a book” (*Till We Have Faces* 50). He also recognizes that while divine things appear obscured in the realm of mankind, it is nonetheless necessary for man to seek religious devotion. When talking to the King, he says, in what is perhaps one of the most thematically central passages in the novel, “nothing that is said clearly can be said truly about [the gods]. Holy places are dark places. It is life and strength, not knowledge and words, that we get in them. Holy

wisdom is not clear and thin like water, but thick and dark like blood” (*Till We Have Faces* 50). In this, the reader can see Lewis’s reverence for the religions of old; despite their undeniably egregious errors, they see the substance within the darkness, they recognize the inherent holiness that can only point to a Creator beyond man’s understanding, a Creator who desires blood, sacrifice, justice, and devotion. The religion of Ungit is a religion of gravity, something even Orual recognizes.

However, amidst the pagan sacrifices and deep spirituality of Ungit, there is the Fox, perhaps the greatest rational influence on Orual throughout the entire novel. The Fox is the consummate man of reason, a mentor much like Kirk, and the model of rational thought. Being a prisoner of war brought from the “Greeklands,” the Fox is not from Glome, but he brings with him a deep repository of wisdom and a thirst for knowledge. Orual reflects on him early on, thinking, “I never knew such a man for questions. He wanted to know everything about our country and language and ancestors and gods” (*Till We Have Faces* 7). It is apparent that the Fox questions all and absorbs as much of the world around him as possible, making him strong, admirable, and trustworthy; this is seen well in the many apothegms he shares with Orual and the rest of the royal family, such as when he tells Orual, “We must learn, child, not to fear anything that nature brings” (*Till We Have Faces* 14).

Although the Fox does display a noble and virtuous desire for all forms of knowledge and understanding, he is a man who seems to deny the feasibility of a deeper spirituality. Like Kirk and a young overly-rational Lewis, the Fox can only understand the world of myth as an elegant falsehood. Upon telling Orual a story about the ancient

goddess Aphrodite, the Fox is quick to add a reductive addendum: “‘Not that this ever really happened,’ the Fox said in haste. ‘It’s only lies of poets, lies of poets, child. Not in accordance with nature’” (*Till We Have Faces* 8). As Don Elgin writes, in the Fox’s mind, “Miracle, mystery, and authority must be rejected in favor of a rational, unemotional realism which concerns itself with the natural laws of all things. There is no question of body and soul, nor of the after-life, for—according to Fox’s teaching—all that is valid comes through reason, including the understanding of divine nature” (100). This is deeply formative to a young Orual, who develops a deep admiration for the Fox at a young age, even calling him Grandfather for most of the novel (*Till We Have Faces* 17).

Within the tension of these two conflicting ideologies lies the core of Orual’s great epistemological conflict. What can we know of the gods? What lies behind the face of Ungit? What significance dwells within the stories of gods and divine realms? Are they “beautiful lies” or relics of holy darkness? Is Psyche’s longing to travel beyond the mountain the naïve musings of childlike innocence, or a desire that transcends the material bounds of the world around them?

While Orual’s resolution to this first conflict is gradual and progressive, the essence of this resolution can be seen quite well in her first extended dialogue with Psyche after she is sentenced to be consumed by the Brute, allowing her to embrace the synthesis that Lewis himself formulated. As the two sisters converse, they come to the realization that both the Romanticism of the Priest and the Rationalism of the Fox are fragments of a larger story. The Fox and his epistemology of reason and virtue offer the

sisters a light into the nature of existence, born of wisdom and truth, that nothing else has provided. As Psyche says to Orual, “It’d be dark as a dungeon within me but for his teaching” (*Till We Have Faces* 71). Yet, despite his meticulously methodical approach to the world around him, his reductive rejection of the spiritual substance within all things belies what is immediately evident to the hearts and minds of the people of Glome. Again, Psyche says, “He calls the whole world a city. But what’s a city built on? There’s earth beneath. And outside the wall? Doesn’t all the food come from there as well as all the dangers?” (71-72). Orual concurs: “Doesn’t the whole land smell of [Ungit]? . . . Of course the Fox is wrong. He knows nothing about her. He thought too well of the world” (72).

At the same time, while the Priest may recognize the inherent, sublime sense of spirituality that points beyond rationality, he, too, paints only a dim picture of such reality, refusing to allow any definition to the holy darkness. Orual rightly suggests that if the gods simply are as vindictive and arbitrary as the Priest seems to imply, then they are “viler than the vilest men” (*Till We Have Faces* 71). Psyche offers a more optimistic justification for their actions: “‘Or else,’ said Psyche, ‘they are real gods but don’t really do these things. Or even—mightn’t it be—they do these things and the things are not what they seem to be?’” (71). Either way, both Psyche and Orual seem to agree with Lewis’ own resolution to this spiritual conflict; while the transcendent spirituality of the Priest and the strict rationality of the Fox offer degrees of truth to the spiritual and earthly matters, neither is sufficient on its own. The former gives substance without definition. The latter gives definition without substance. As Psyche and Orual come to agree by the

end of their conversation, “We don’t understand. There must be so much that neither the Priest nor the Fox knows” (72). In this moment of epistemological humility lies the present answer to this eternal conflict, and as the reader can see, it reflects the same structure as Lewis’s own conclusions in *The Pilgrim’s Regress*, *Surprised by Joy*, and the rest of his more autobiographical works.

A careful reading of Orual’s argument reveals that her accusation against the gods is not merely philosophical, as many critics have framed it. The problem goes much deeper. When Psyche resolves that she will allow herself to be sacrificed, Orual angrily exclaims, “I only see that you never loved me. It may well be you are going to the gods. You are becoming cruel like them,” a decidedly heartfelt rebuke (*Till We Have Faces* 76). Later in the novel, at Psyche and Orual’s tense reunion on the mountaintop, Orual’s inability to see the god’s palace is also not merely born of intellectual disagreement. As the reader can see during Psyche and Orual’s bedroom conversation, Orual becomes most distraught when faced with the possibility of losing Psyche, not because of philosophical incongruences or a misconstruing of competing worldviews. The tension between the Romantic and the Rational is only one dimension of her divine conflict, and the second is much more personal; it is the nature of love itself. As Paulette Sauders affirms, while the tension between the romantic and the rational is a primary component of the novel, “the central theme has to do with love—reactions to love, examples of love, perversions of love” (2). The second conflict, therefore, that Orual experiences in her path to divine reconciliation is her possessive love for Psyche, and the myriad corruptions that result from it.

Again, the best way to understand the nature of this spiritual conflict of Orual's is to step outside of the novel and look to the wider body of Lewis's works. Lewis dealt extensively with the nature of love in his works. Obviously, his 1960 spiritual work *The Four Loves* aptly explores the issue of various kinds of love and how they enable man to relate to each other, as well as to God. However, another key work on the nature of love in his repertoire, often overlooked in discussions of *Till We Have Faces*, is his own divine comedy, the 1946 novella *The Great Divorce*, a slightly earlier piece in Lewis's life with a surprising number of parallels. Together, both pieces provide a sound interpretive framework through which to understand the latter of Orual's spiritual conflicts.

Although *The Four Loves* was written four years after *Till We Have Faces*, Lewis's treatise on the various forms of human and divine love is a worthy source of information through which to approach Orual's development, as Lewis spends much time on both the drastic importance of love and its tragic propensity toward corruption. In the book, Lewis makes the distinction between, fittingly enough, four kinds of love: affection, friendship, eros, and charity, or divine love. Each of these loves is a necessary and cherished aspect of human life and divine relationship. These loves are experienced through two avenues: Gift-love and Need-love, the former an act of offering and the latter an act of receiving, "that which sends a lonely or frightened child to its mother's arms" (*Four Loves* 213). Neither of the two avenues of love is inherently better than the other. While the divine love that God has for his people is Gift-love, it is their hope for his affection—their Need-love—that makes them desirous of his blessings. Additionally, as

Lewis argues, “a man’s spiritual health is exactly proportional to his love for God,” meaning that one’s love for the divine “must always be very largely, and must often be entirely, a Need-love” (*Four Loves* 214).

The three human loves—affection, friendship, and eros—can, in Lewis’s words, “be glorious images of the divine” (*Four Loves* 217). In each of them, an individual has the ability to reflect the sacrificial and generous Gift-love of the divine to his neighbors, and in doing so, he, whether knowingly or unknowingly, gets a glimpse of the very face of God. As Lewis says, “Only by being in some respect like Him...has any earthly Beloved excited our love . . . when we see the face of God we shall know that we have always known it. He has been a party to, has made, sustained, and moved moment by moment within, all our earthly experiences of innocent love” (*Four Loves* 288). All love, therefore, is only love by being a reflection of the divine. As Peter Schakel affirms, “The natural loves need to be converted, infused with divine love, if they are to remain loves” (28).

With this in mind, however, Lewis cautions his readers against the perversion or corruption of love. Human love is a beautiful reflection of the divine, but a reflection is not to be cherished over its source, and any love bereft of its divine origin can scarcely be called love at all. Lewis explains this well early in the book:

We may give our loves the unconditional allegiance which we owe only to God. Then they become gods: then they become demons. 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...The human loves can be glorious images of Divine love. No less than that: but also no more—proximities of likeness which in one instance may help, and in another may hinder, proximity of approach. (*Four Loves* 217)

Simply put, one cannot allow a human love to hold authority over divine love. To do so makes love itself a god, elevating it above the divine author of love himself.

Consequently, any love that is corrupted must regain its sense of hierarchy if it has any hope of being redeemable, thus Lewis' citing of Denis de Rougemont's line "Love ceases to be a demon only when he ceases to be a god" (*Four Loves* 216). Unfortunately, for the fallen, fallible man, love often becomes a demon, and gives rise to these perversions.

Lewis gives many examples of this perversion and corruption of love throughout *The Four Loves*. One particularly stark form can be seen in the perversion of affection. Affection for another can easily lead to jealousy, as well as a preference for the familiar, even when the familiar should be undesirable (Hooper 370). Affection can also lead to an unfair desire for the holistic possession of another's will, such as a corruption of familial affection. Lewis offers the fictional example of a Mrs. Fidget, who "very often said that she lived for her family," but only in ways that constantly put them in the position of having to need her or accept her expressions of love, even when it puts them far out of their way. Mrs. Fidget lived her life around her family: "They couldn't stop her" (*Four Loves* 239). However, her love for her family exists solely to perpetuate her own ego, helping them in ways that required their assistance and participation: "They had to help.

Indeed they were always having to help. That is, they did things for her to help her to do things for them which they didn't want done" (*Four Loves* 240). As Lewis argues, such a love is not love at all: it is an affectionate Need-Love that has been made into its own god and, therefore, into its own demon. Its only hope is a reordering; God must be God before love can be love.

This is a central thematic aspect of a wide majority of Lewis's works; perhaps the most concrete realization of it can be seen, though, in *The Great Divorce* (1945), Lewis's imaginative depiction of damned souls taking a bus trip to Heaven. In the novel, a man is led through the lowlands of Heaven, where he passively observes many encounters between the saved and the unsaved. Lewis depicts Heaven and its inhabitants as creations of pure solidity, while the denizens of Hell who walk through its lowlands are dim ghosts in comparison. The solid spirits of Heaven dialogue with the ghosts of Hell, urging them to give up their corrupted desires and perverted loves for the sake of entering into the heavy and tangible reality of heaven. The thesis of the narrative can best be summed up in the words of George MacDonald, the narrator's Virgil-like heavenly guide: "There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, in the end, 'Thy will be done'" (*Great Divorce* 506). With this context in mind, *The Great Divorce* stands as a fantastic link between the philosophical approach to love seen in the *The Four Loves* and Orual's strikingly similar conflict with perverted love in *Till We Have Faces*.

There are various passages that demonstrate this, but the most apt parallel can be seen in the latter half of the novel, when the narrator witnesses a pivotal vignette between

the dim ghost of a distraught mother and her brother, a solid heavenly spirit. The mother desperately wishes to be reunited with her son Michael, but her brother informs her that she would be wholly invisible to him in her present state. He exhorts her, “You will become solid enough for Michael to perceive you when you learn to want Someone Else besides Michael” (*Great Divorce* 518). The mother is deeply disturbed and perplexed by the idea; she can’t fathom the idea of loving someone other than Michael, saying, “If He loved me He’d let me see my boy” (*Great Divorce* 518). Her brother, though, refutes such a notion, and suggests that her love for her son, bereft of a love for their mutual Creator, is no love at all:

He wanted your merely instinctive love for your child to turn into something better. He wanted you to love Michael as he understands love. You cannot love a fellow-creature fully till you love God...no natural feelings are high or low, holy or unholy, in themselves. They are all holy when God’s hand is on the rein. They all go bad when they set up on their own and make themselves into false gods. (*Great Divorce* 518-519)

In this moment, the solid spirit echoes the central focus of *The Four Loves*, exhorting his sister to understand that no love can be love when it is devoid of its divine source. Her love is inordinate, perverted, and its only chance at redemption is through a reconciliation with its Maker.

The mother simply cannot accept the idea. Her parental affection for her son—in its pure form, a noble and admirable Gift-Love—has become her demon, breeding in her

a possessive and wholly selfish form of love. Near the end of her conversation, she reveals as such, saying, “Give me my boy. Do you hear...I believe in a God of love. No one had a right to come between me and my son. Not even God. Tell Him that to His face. I want my boy, and I mean to have him. He is mine, do you understand? Mine, mine, mine, for ever and ever” (*Great Divorce* 520). This, in essence, is the cry of the possessive lover. Rejecting the notion that any deity could take precedence over earthly love, the lover elevates the object of their affection to the highest seat in their personal chain of being; no other love matters. Joe Christopher takes the idea one step further, arguing, too, that the mother, in creating such an inordinate love, “does not love her son enough, rather than too much” (97).

Lewis, through MacDonald, explains this after they leave the two spirits. He says, “There’s something in natural affection which will lead it on to eternal love more easily than natural appetite . . . but there’s also something in it which makes it easier to stop at the natural level and mistake it for the heavenly . . . It is a stronger angel, and therefore, when it falls, a fiercer devil” (*Great Divorce* 521). The narrator is saddened and confused, asking if there is any hope for the woman. MacDonald concludes by assuring him that “there is but one good; that is God. Everything else is good when it looks to Him and bad when it turns from Him. And the higher and mightier it is in the natural order, the more demoniac it will be if it rebels. It’s not out of bad mice or bad fleas you make demons, but out of bad archangels” (*Great Divorce* 522).

It is with this thematic context in mind that the reader must return to *Till We Have Faces*, for it is this very same corruption of love that Orual must resolve and overcome in

order to reconcile herself with the gods. As mentioned above, the second of Orual's two principal spiritual conflicts is this very same corruption of love, particularly affection. Again, Sauders supports such an idea, saying, "Orual clearly personifies perverted Affection, enveloping, possessive Need-love. This identification is most easily seen in her relationship with Psyche" (5). Orual clearly loves Psyche. Much like the mother in *The Great Divorce* and Mrs. Fidget in *The Four Loves*, Orual would "would rather see [her] family members in Hell for the chance of controlling them than find true love in Heaven, love that cares about the real good of another" (Edwards 137). Orual desires the attention, time, and heart of Psyche above all else. As Kilby says, "She needs to be needed" (*The Christian World* 58). It is no coincidence, then, that Orual offers a strikingly similar response in her climactic accusation against the gods that the mother does in *The Great Divorce*. In the novel's final moments, Orual finally reveals the core of her complaint, the true reason for her anger: "Did you ever remember whose [Psyche] was? She was mine. *Mine*. Do you not know what the word means? *Mine!*" (*Till We Have Faces* 292).

What, then, is the source of this corruption? Why is Orual's love for Psyche perverted rather than noble? The key lies, primarily, in its inordinacy, its unwillingness to let the gods be gods above her earthly loves, to not only recognize the reality of the spiritual realm, but also submit to it. This is much different from Orual's first conflict. While her first few conversations with Psyche center around the aforementioned tension between the rational and the romantic—a very real conflict, the importance of which cannot be understated—the second half of the novel becomes further and further an

internal conflict as Orual grows further hardened by her separation from Psyche. The fact that Orual actually does witness the reality of the castle, “solid and motionless,” but still chooses to reject the gods demonstrates that her conflict is just as emotional as it is empirical (Wagner 28). Orual simply cannot believe that a good or loving god would separate her from someone she loves so deeply. Psyche assures her that the god she is betrothed to is benevolent, but Orual refuses the notion, saying, “Nothing that’s beautiful hides its face. Nothing that’s honest hides its name” (*Till We Have Faces* 160). Psyche, however, rebukes her, saying she knows “little of love” (162).

Psyche is obviously aware of Orual’s deep affection for her; even more, she must be aware that Orual has now based the whole of her existence around the possession of Psyche’s presence. What eludes Orual is what Psyche understands by intimate experience: that divine authority overrules earthly loves. As she tells Orual, “He is a god. He has good grounds for what he does, be sure. How should I know of them? I am only his simple Psyche” (*Till We Have Faces* 163). This is the central disconnect between Psyche and Orual; Psyche recognizes the primacy of divine love, letting all others fall into proper subordination, while Orual can only see what is in the forefront of her mind: her desperate affection for Psyche and her desire to both be with Psyche and have Psyche want to be with her.

Orual, however, is unwilling to submit; her possessive love for Psyche still reigns supreme, and it is ultimately this possessive love that causes her to make the catastrophic choices she does. It is her possessive love that motivates her to coerce Psyche into disobeying the gods, “betraying the best of lovers,” at the threat of her own life (*Till We*

Have Faces 166). It is her selfish love that causes her to work Bardia, her closest advisor, to death (264). Ultimately, it is Bardia's wife, Ansit, that tells Orual the brutal truth about her love for others: "Yours is Queen's love, not commoners'. Perhaps you who spring from the gods love like the gods . . . You're full fed. Gorged with other men's lives, women's too: Bardia's, mine, the Fox's, your sister's" (264-265). Just like the corrupted Affection of Mrs. Fidget, she "can twist anything, even love, into some sort of misery or exploitation," a state of the heart that fatally wounds all of those closest to her: Bardia, the Fox, Redival, and, above all, Psyche (*Four Loves* 241). The Fox explains it well in the final pages of the novel; Orual's love for Psyche was wholly corrupted, out of divine order, and it was almost strong enough to be the death of all those around her: "[Psyche] had no more dangerous enemies than us . . . for mortals, as you said, will become more and more jealous. And mother and wife and child and friend will all be in league to keep a soul from being united with the Divine Nature" (*Till We Have Faces* 304). This, in essence, is the core of this latter spiritual conflict; human love, perverted, seeking to overthrow the Divine Nature, makes up the central conflict of *The Four Loves*, *The Great Divorce*, and, as seen here, the latter half of *Till We Have Faces*.

The reader, at this point, within the larger context of Lewis's works, can see these two principal conflicts preventing Orual's reconciliation with the gods. The first, though partially resolved through Psyche and Orual's initial conversations, still persists: how is Orual to understand the overbearing reality of a spiritual realm that is wholly beyond reason? How, also, can she do so in a way that is at least partially understandable within the confines of the finite? The second is like it, but more internal, emotional, and spiritual

in nature: How is Orual to overcome her self-born perversions of love that hinder her from loving Psyche as she should and resolving her accusation against the gods? Through what avenue can she finally find answers, and ultimately, hope? What must she do to free herself from both the unending tension of reason and faith and the perversion of the human loves?

The answer is two-fold, and can be best understood through Orual's climactic encounter with the gods themselves: Orual must accept the authority and inexpressibility of the divine, and from that, her own personal finitude. In light of a supra-rational divinity and an endlessly-corruptible humanity, these two axioms are the only tenable conclusions she can make, and it is through these two revelations that she can ultimately make peace with the fact that "holy places are dark places" (*Till We Have Faces* 50).

Until the final moments of the novel, Orual holds her accusation against the gods with the highest of value, but in comparison to the magnitude and inexpressibility of the gods, it proves to be wholly worthless. When Orual stands before Ungit and the "countless gazers," she views her written complaint against the gods with surprise: "I looked at the roll in my hand and saw at once that it was not the book I had written. It couldn't be; it was far too small. And too old—a little, shabby, crumpled thing, nothing like my great book I had worked on all day, day after day" (*Till We Have Faces* 289). Her accusations, far from being perfect and irrefutable, prove to be worthless scraps of maniacal musings. When she presents it to the judge, it is far from a lengthy diatribe; she had merely been "reading it over and over" (292). Why is her accusation so insufficient? The simple truth is the gods are so far beyond her earthly qualms that it simply, by

nature, pales in comparison to their nature. Her finitude is so wholly apparent that she says, “The complaint was the answer. To have heard myself making it was to be answered” (294). In this moment, Orual understands her Romantic longings, the *sehnsucht* she has long run from, along with the reality that her grand accusations were merely the petty complaints of a corrupted lover, and she brings into view the reality that she is a wholly finite and infantile creature. She humbly realizes that her perverted affection for Psyche nearly separated them all from the gods; in this moment, the Fox is correct: Psyche “had no more dangerous enemies than us” (304).

In addition, the reality of her finitude and corruption enables her to consider and ultimately accept the existence of the gods. As she notes, “I saw well why the gods do not speak to us openly, nor let us answer...why should they hear the babble that we think we mean? How can they meet us face to face till we have faces?” (*Till We Have Faces* 294). Orual, in light of her limited understanding, embraces “the Divine’s existence and participation in the world,” as well as her inability to understand their ways (Gray 31). She moves beyond the reductive rationalism of the Fox and the dark romanticism of the Priest of Ungit, realizing the truth that both only partially grasped: that holy places are only dark places only because man lacks the ability to see them in their fullness. Such a realization allows Orual to see how utterly wrong and guilty of blasphemy she has been throughout her entire life, but as the Fox hopefully reminds her, the gods do not deal with mankind justly: “What would become of us if they were [just]?” (297). Despite Orual’s close-minded rejection of the divine, despite her possessive and selfish love for Psyche, and despite a life spent fleeing from the only authority that can claim a face, she will be

dealt with mercifully. As she passes away in the final pages of the novel, she is not passing into death: she is stepping into reconciliation with the divine presence she had so long feared. In Orual's final words, she concludes, "I know now, Lord, why you utter no answer. You are yourself the answer. Before your face questions die away. What other answer would suffice?" (308). This realization is the ultimate crux of human existence, and it is in these lines that *Till We Have Faces* and, more broadly, the conflicts of C.S. Lewis himself find their resolution.

As the reader can see, *Till We Have Faces* is far from Lewis's most accessible work, and it is not even his most beloved. However, within the homeward path of its broken protagonist lies a universal spiritual struggle for reconciliation, one strongly paralleled in the life of Lewis himself. Lewis's life and works provide a roadmap through which to navigate Orual's struggle with holy darkness, and through looking at her path to reconciliation through the Lewisian lenses of rationalism, romanticism, and ultimately, the very nature of divine love itself, one can overcome the epistemological and spiritual conflicts that obscure the fullness of reality. The realm of the gods is one of darkness, of sacrifice, of mystery, and of blood. It is far from understandable with finite minds and earthly bodies. But within these holy realms lies something solid: the immeasurable weight of the divine, the source and fulfillment of *sehnsucht*, a place humanity does not have a face to see but was always created to behold. By accepting the reality of this realm, and mankind's present inability to comprehend it, the reader himself can begin, along with Orual and Lewis, to walk the path toward divine reconciliation, a path ultimately leading toward home.

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