Chapter VI

TILL WE HAVE FACES
A Myth Retold
Till We Have Faces is considered Lewis’ best novel. It was not well received initially, probably because of its difficulty and its differences from his earlier fiction, and it remains the least popular of his fictional works, though the most highly praised by literary critics. In retelling the myth on which the novel is based, Lewis creates a new myth, one that develops more completely and in a more satisfactory way meanings that earlier narrators of the myth were unable to grasp.

“I am so glad you both liked TWHF,” Lewis wrote to the children, Anne and Martin Kilmer, on 7 August 1957. ¹ “I think it much my best book but not many people agree.” Lewis described this book to Charles Wrong on 8 August 1959 as the “favourite of all my books.” It was, nevertheless, he told him, “A complete flop. The worst flop I’ve ever had.”² “You gave me much pleasure by what you said about Till We Have Faces,” he wrote to Anne Scott on 26 August 1960, “for that book, which I consider far and away the best I have written, has been my one big failure both with the critics and with the public.”³

The main charge against the novel when it first appeared was obscurity. However, in recent years there has been a serious reassessment of the book and it is generally regarded not only as Lewis’s best book, but as a very great book. And what some regard as
causing the story to be obscure might be cleared up if we have a knowledge of the background.

In the first English edition of the book Lewis said:

This re-interpretation of an old story has lived in the author's mind, thickening and hardening with the years, ever since he was an undergraduate. That way, he could be said to have worked at it most of his life. Recently, what seemed to be the right form presented itself and themes suddenly interlocked: the straight tale of barbarism, the mind of an ugly woman, dark idolatry and pale enlightenment at war with each other and with vision, and the havoc which a vocation, or even a faith, works on human life.¹

He realized that many would not be familiar with the Greek and Roman mythologies he grew up with, and in a "Note" appended to the first American edition of the novel he summarized the "old story" he was re-interpreting. It is the story of Cupid and Psyche from the Metamorphoses or The Golden Ass of Lucius Apuleius Platonicus (usually known as Apuleius), who was born about AD 125. Many have enjoyed Till We Have Faces without having even heard of Apuleius, but Lewis's novel will be much clearer if the reader has some notion
of the story he was re-interpreting. Lewis’s summary of Apuleius’s tale of Cupid and Psyche is as follows:

A king and queen had three daughters, of whom the youngest was so beautiful that men worshipped her as a goddess and neglected the worship of Venus for her sake. One result was that Psyche (as the youngest was called) had no suitors: men reverenced her supposed deity too much to aspire to her hand. When her father consulted the oracle of Apollo about her marriage he received the answer, “Hope for no human son-in-law. You must expose Psyche on a mountain to be the prey of a dragon.” This he obediently did.

But Venus, jealous of Psyche’s beauty, had already devised a different punishment for her; she had ordered her son Cupid to afflict the girl with an irresistible passion for the basest of men. Cupid set off to do so but, on seeing Psyche, fell in love with her himself. As soon as she was left on the mountain he therefore had her carried off by the West-Wind (Zephyrus) to a secret place where he had prepared a stately palace. Here he visited her by night and enjoyed her love; but he forbade her to see his face.
Presently she begged that she might receive a visit from her two sisters. The god reluctantly consented and wafted them to her palace. Here they were royally feasted, and expressed great delight at all the splendours they saw. But inwardly they were devoured with envy, for their husbands were not gods and their houses not so fine as hers.

They therefore plotted to destroy her happiness. At their next visit they persuaded her that her mysterious husband must really be a monstrous serpent. "You must take into your bedroom tonight," they said, "a lamp covered with a cloak and a sharp knife. When he sleeps uncover the lamp—see the horror that is lying in your bed and stab it to death." All this the gullible Psyche promised to do.

When she uncovered the lamp and saw the sleeping god she gazed on him with insatiable love, till a drop of hot oil from her lamp fell on his shoulder and woke him. Starting up, he spread his shining wings, rebuked her, and vanished from her sight.

The two sisters did not long enjoy their malice, for Cupid took such measures as led both to their death. Psyche meanwhile wandered away, wretched and desolate,
and attempted to drown herself in the first river she came
to; but the god Pan frustrated her attempt and warned her
never to repeat it. After many miseries she fell into the
hands of her bitterest enemy, Venus, who seized her for a
slave, beat her, and set her what were meant to be
impossible tasks. The first, that of sorting out seeds into
separate heaps, she did by the help of some friendly ants.
Next, she had to get a hank of golden wool from some
man-killing sheep; a reed by a river bank whispered to her
that this could be achieved by plucking the wool off the
bushes. After that, she had to fetch a cupful of the water
of the Styx, which could be reached only climbing certain
impracticable mountains, but an eagle met her, took the
cup from her hand, and returned with it full of the water.
Finally she was sent down to the lower world to bring
back to Venus, in a box, the beauty of Persephone, the
Queen of the Dead. A mysterious voice told her how she
could reach Persephone and yet return to our world; on
the way she would be asked for help by various people
who seemed to deserve her pity, but she must refuse them
all. And when Persephone gave her the box (full of
beauty) she must on no account open the lid to look
inside. Psyche obeyed all this and returned to the upper world with the box; but then at last curiosity overcame her and she looked into it. She immediately lost consciousness.

Cupid now came to her again, but this time he forgave her. He interceded with Jupiter, who agreed to permit his marriage and make Psyche a goddess. Venus was reconciled and they all lived happily ever after. (311-313)

Lewis said his "re-interpretation" had been in his mind since he was an undergraduate. When he was twenty three years old, an undergraduate at Oxford, he wrote in his diary of 23 November 1922, "After lunch I went out for a walk up Shotover, thinking how to make a masque or play of Psyche and Caspian." About a year later, 9 September 1923, he said, "My head was very full of my old idea of a poem on my own version of the Cupid and Psyche story in which Psyche's sister would not be jealous, but unable to see anything but moors when Psyche showed her the Palace. I have tried it twice before, once in couplet and once in ballad form."5

Fragments of these attempts to re-tell the story were copied by his brother, Warnie, into The Lewis Papers VIII. There are 78 couplets in all. They begin as follows:
The tale of Psyche is unjustly told
And half of the truth concealed by all who hold
With Apuleius...

What “drove them to this thing” was:

But summer rains
Withheld and harvest withering on the plains.
The streams were low, and in the starving tribe
Ran murmurs that of old a dearer bribe
Had charmed the rain. Forgotten customs then
Stirred in their sleep below the hearts of men
Thrusting up evil heads.¹

He insists that the jealousy of Psyche’s two sisters is “slander.” The story of what really happened has been “told amiss”:

For across the tale, they bring
Two ugly elder daughters of the king,
Two Cinderella’s sisters, who must come
To visit Psyche in her secret home
And envy it: and for no other cause
Tempt her to break that fairy country’s laws -
Which leads to her undoing. But all this
Is weighted on one side and told amiss.
It's like the work of some poetic youth,
Angry, and far too certain of the truth.
Mad from the gleams of vision that claim to find
Bye ways to something missed by all mankind.
He thinks that only envy or dull eyes
Keep all men from believing in the prize
He holds in secret. In revenge he drew
— For portrait of us all—the sisters two,
Misunderstanding them: and poets since
Have followed.

Now I say there was a prince
Twin brother to this Psyche, fair as she,
And prettier than a boy would choose to be,
His name was Jardis. Older far than these
Was Caspian who had rocked them on her knees,
The child of the first marriage of the king.

Lewis was to go on attempting to tell the story in verse, but
none of the other attempts has survived. Then, in the spring of 1955
he understood exactly what he wanted to say and the final version in
prose was written with considerable ease. During a weekend at The
Kilns, he and Warnie entertained Joy Gresham and it was during her
visit, and because of her, that he discovered how the story should develop. In a letter of 23 March 1955 to William Gresham, Joy said that Jack was “lamenting that he couldn’t get a good idea for a book.” They settled into comfortable chairs and “kicked a few ideas around till one came to light. Then we had another whisky each and bounced it back and forth between us.” The next day, said Joy, “without further planning, he wrote the first chapter! I read it and made some criticisms.” Lewis then did it over and went on with the next. Writing to her husband again on 29 April, Joy said that while she could not “write one-tenth as well as Jack,” she could nevertheless “tell him how to write more like himself! He is now about three-quarters of the way through the book ... and says he finds my advice indispensable.”

Several of his friends, including his publishers, did not at first understand what Lewis was attempting even in prose. For this reason, perhaps, he was making certain alterations in the myth of Cupid and Psyche.

In the remaining part of the “Note” he wrote for the American edition he says:

The central alteration in my own version consists in making Psyche’s palace invisible to normal, mortal eyes – if “making” is not the wrong word for something which
forced itself upon me, almost at my first reading of the story, as the way the thing must have been. 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. Nothing was further from my aim than to recapture the peculiar quality of the *Metamorphoses*—that strange compound of picaresque novel, horror comic, mystagogue’s tract, pornography and stylistic experiment. Apuleius was of course a man of genius: but in relation to my work he is “source”, not an “influence” nor a “model.”

His version has been followed pretty closely by William Morris (in *The Earthly Paradise*) and by Robert Bridges (*Eros and Psyche*). Neither poem, in my opinion, shows its author at his best. The whole *Metamorphoses* was last translated by Mr. Robert Graves. (Penguin Books, 1950) (313).

Lewis was an atheist when he tried telling the story in 1923. After his conversion in 1931 he saw everything from a Christian
perspective, and it was this which called him to see two changes in the Cupid and Psyche story with absolute clarity: (1) Psyche has two half-sisters, but the story is told by Orual (or ‘Maia’ as Psyche calls her), who, when visiting Psyche, cannot see her palace; (2) Lewis had come to know why the palace is invisible to Orual. This very important “why” he explained in a letter of 2 April 1955 to his friend, Katharine Farrer, when he was writing the story:

I’ve given up the Phoenix story for the present, an old, 25 year old, idea having just started into imperative life. My version of Cupid & Psyche. Apuleius got it all wrong. The elder sister (I reduce her to one) 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?” As you see, tho’ I didn’t start from that, it is the story of every nice, affectionate agnostic whose dearest one suddenly ‘gets religion’, or even every luke warm Christian whose dearest one gets a Vocation. Never, I think, treated sympathetically by a Christian writer before. I do it all thro’ the mouth of the elder sister. In a word, I’m very much ‘with book’.
This difficulty caused by one’s dearest “getting religion” was later expanded in a letter of 10 February 1957 to Clyde S. Kilby:

Orual is (not a symbol but) an instance, 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. All this, I hoped, would stand in a mere story in its own right. But –

Of course I had always in mind its close parallel to what is probably at this moment going on in at least five families in your own town at this moment. Someone becomes a Christian, or, in a family nominally Christian already, does something like becoming a missionary or entering a religious Order. The others suffer a sense of outrage. What they love is being taken from them! The boy must be mad! And the conceit of him! Or is there something in it after all? Let’s hope it is only a phase! If only he’d listen to his natural advisers! Oh come back, come back, be sensible, be the dear son we used to know.
Now I, as a Christian, have a good deal of sympathy with these jealous, puzzled, suffering people (for they do suffer, and out of their suffering much of the bitterness against religion arises). I believe the thing is common. There is very nearly a touch of it in Luke II, 48, 'Son, why hast thou so dealt with us?' And is the reply easy for a loving heart to bear?  

Lewis was soon to write *The Four Loves*, and one point made repeatedly in that book is that each of the three natural loves (Affection, Friendship, Eros) left to itself becomes a demon. As he says in the Introduction to *The Four Loves*:

St John's saying that God is love has long been balanced in my mind against the remark of a modern author (M. Denis de Rougemont) that "love ceases to be a demon only when he ceases to be a god"; which of course can be re-stated in the form "begins to be a demon the moment he begins to be a god." This balance seems to me an indispensable safeguard. If we ignore it the truth that God is love may slyly come to mean for us the converse, that love is God.
I suppose that everyone who has thought about the matter will see what M. de Rougemont meant. Every human love, at its height, has a tendency to claim for itself a divine authority. Its voice tends to sound as if it were the will of God Himself. It tells us not to count the cost, it demands of us a total commitment, it attempts to override all other claims and insinuates that any action which is sincerely done “for love’s sake” is thereby lawful and even meritorious. That erotic love and love of one’s country may thus attempt to “become gods” is generally recognized. But family affection may do the same. 10

Lewis made a comment about the book to his former pupil, Father Peter Milward SJ, on 24 September 1959: “The main themes are 1. Natural affection, if left to mere nature, easily becomes a special kind of hatred. 2. God is, to our natural affections, the ultimate object of jealousy.” 11

Just as years before Lewis had difficulties creating the unfallen Lady in Perelandra, so he was now having similar difficulties creating Psyche. By the time he wrote to Mrs Farrer again, on 9 July 1955, the book was written, and she had read it. She had, however, failed to
see what he was trying to do with Psyche, and in replying to her criticism he said:

About Psyche herself your diagnosis is wrong, but that only shows I have failed to get across what I intended. Pin-up girl, nothing! The attempt was precisely to show the biddable ideal daughter, Maia’s little pet (the ideal object for a devouring material love, the live doll), turning into the, sometimes terrifying, sometimes material, goddess. I’ll try to mend it, but not, I think, in the directions you suggest. I think she must have the same deep voice as Orual: for “you also are Psyche”. The whole thing is very tricky, though. The numinous breaking through the childish mustn’t be made just like the mature breaking through the juvenile; the traits of eternal youth have to come in.12

Another friend to whom he showed the manuscript was Christian Hardie (wife of Colin Hardie). He wrote to her on 31 July 1955:

The idea of re-writing the old myth, with the palace invisible, has been in my mind ever since I was an undergraduate and it always involved writing through the mouth of the elder sister. I tried it in all sorts of verse-forms in the days when I still supposed myself to be a
poet. So, though the version you have read was very quickly written, you might say I’ve been at work on Orual for 35 years. Of course in my pre-Christian days she was to be in the right and the gods in the wrong.\(^{13}\) (Emphasis added)

In the letter of 10 February 1957 to Clyde S. Kilby he said of Psyche:

Psyche is an instance of the *anima naturaliter Christiana* 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 imagination or that of her people) towards the true God. She is in some ways like Christ not because she is a symbol of Him but because every good man or woman is like Christ. What else could they be like? But of course my interest is primarily in Orual.\(^{14}\)

One of the clearest statements about what Lewis was doing with the three sisters comes in a letter of 7 August 1957 to the children, Anne and Martin Kilmer. Asked whether Psyche, Orual, and Redival are “goddesses,” Lewis said, “They’re just human souls. Psyche has a vocation and becomes a saint. Orual lives the practical life and is,
after many sins, saved. As for Redival—well, we’ll all hope the best for everyone!”

Lewis’s own first choice for a title was *Bareface*. His publisher, Jocelyn Gibb, objected strongly to this and warned Lewis that it might be mistaken for a “Western.” “I don’t see why people...would be deterred from buying it if they did think it a Western,” Lewis replied on 16 February 1956. “Actually, I think the title cryptic enough to be intriguing. (The point, of course, is that O. after going literally bareface in her youth, is made really & spiritually bareface, to herself and all the dead, at the end).”

Then, on 29 February he wrote to Gibb, “One other possible title has occurred to me: *Till We Have Faces*. (My heroine says in one passage, ‘How can the gods meet us face to face till we have faces’).” Many have been puzzled by those words but their meaning becomes clearer when we see how they are used. In the last chapter Orual recalls her Greek tutor saying to her “To say the very thing you really mean, the whole of it, nothing more or less or other than what you really mean; that’s the whole art and joy of words.” She goes on to say:

> When the time comes to you at which you will be forced at last to utter the speech which has lain at the center of
your soul for years, which you have, all that time, idiot-like, been saying over and over, you'll not talk about joy of words. I saw well why the gods do not speak to us openly, nor let us answer. Till that word can be dug out of us, why should they hear the babble that we think we mean? How can they meet us face to face till we have faces? (94)

One of those who were still puzzled by what Lewis meant by the title was Dorothea Conybeare, who asked him to explain it. On receiving a reply, she passed it on to Rose Macaulay, who had also been puzzled. In the letter Lewis said:

How can they (i.e. the gods) meet us face to face till we have faces? The idea was that a human being must become real before it can expect to receive any message from the superhuman: that is, it must be speaking with its own voice (not one of its borrowed voices), expressing its actual desires (not what it imagines that it desires), being for good or ill itself, not any mask, veil or persona.18

Further clarification is found in a poem Lewis was writing at the same time as the book. It is "Legion" and was published in The
Month 13 (April 1955). In this poem “voices” means much the same as “faces.” Addressing God, the petitioner says:

Lord, hear my voice, my present voice I mean,
Not that which may be speaking an hour hence...
for if all
My quarrelling selves must bear an equal voice,
Farewell, thou has created me in vain.

In his piece on “The Re-Interpretation of an Old Story” Lewis speaks of this book as tale of “dark idolatry and pale enlightenment at war with each other.” What he had in mind had been expressed earlier in his essay on Christian Apologetics, in which he says:

We may...divide religions, as we do soups, into “thick” and “clear”. By Thick I mean those which have orgies and ecstasies and mysteries and local attachments: Africa is full of Thick religions. By clear I mean those which are philosophical, ethical and universalizing: Stoicism, Buddhism and the Ethical Church are Clear religions. Now if there is a true religion it must be both Thick and Clear: for the true God must have made both the child and the man, both the savage and the citizen, both the head and the belly....Christianity breaks down the wall of the
partition. It takes a convert from central Africa and tells him to obey an enlightened universalist ethic: it takes a twentieth-century academic prig like me and tells me to go fasting to a Mystery, to drink the blood of the Lord. The savage convert has to be Clear: I have to be Thick. That is how one knows one has come to the real religion.  

The first chapter of the novel provides a setting for the story. It takes place in the land of Glome which is, as Lewis said in his letter of 10 February 1957 to Clyde S. Kilby, "a little barbarous state on the borders of the Hellenistic world with Greek Culture just beginning to affect it." The time is sometime between the death of Socrates in about 399 BC and the birth of Christ. The story is told by Orual, the stepsister of Psyche, looking back on her life when she is an old woman. "I will write in this book," she says, what no one who has happiness would dare to write. I will accuse the gods; especially the god who lives on the Grey Mountain. That is, I will tell all he has done to me from the very beginning, as if I were making my complaint of him before a judge.... I was Orual the eldest daughter of Trom, King of Glome. The city of Glome stands on the left hand of the river Shennit to a traveller
who is coming up from the south-east, not more than a day's journey above Ringal, which is the last town southward that belongs to the land of Glome .... The god of the Grey Mountain, who hates me, is the son of Ungit, but Ungit sits there alone. In the furthest recess of her house where she sits it is so dark that you cannot see her well, but in summer enough light may come down from the smoke-holes in the roof to show her a little. She is a black stone without head or hands or face, and a very great goddess. My old master, whom we called the Fox, said she was the same whom the Greeks call Aphrodite.

(3-4)

It gradually unfolds that the Queen of Glome has just died, and Orual and her sister, Redival, have had their hair cut off as a sign of mourning(4). Soon afterwards the King buys a Greek slave he calls the "Fox." Orual and Redival are brought to meet him, and the King says to the slave, "Now, Greekling, I trust to beget a prince one of these days and I have a mind to see him brought up in all the wisdom of your people. Meanwhile practice on them" (6-7). Orual takes to him at once, and from him she begins to learn Greek mythology and philosophy. Having failed to get a son from his first wife, it is not
many months before the King marries a daughter of the King of Caphad.

The young queen dies after giving birth to a girl, Psyche. The King is furious at not having a son. In his anger he kills a slave and taunts Orual for her ugliness. He threatens to send the Fox to the mines, but he gradually realizes that he (Fox) is useful in writing Greek and as an adviser. Over time Psyche grows up to be so beautiful that the Fox says, “...old fool that I am, I could almost believe that there really is divine blood in your family. Helen herself, new-hatched, must have looked so” (21). Orual, who is like a mother to Psyche, says of her, “I wanted to be a wife so that I could have been her real mother. I wanted to be a boy so that she could be in love with me. I wanted her to be my full sister instead of my half-sister. I wanted her to be a slave so that I could set her free and make her rich”(23).

Redival ends the good time they were having. Their old nurse Batta catches her “kissing and whispering love-talk” (25) to a young officer of the guard named Tarin. The King has him castrated and sold at Ringal. He insists that from now on the Fox never let Redival out of his sight. As a result, the pleasure Orual, Psyche, and the Fox had found in one another’s company is ruined by Redival’s presence. Other
things go wrong as well. Glome has a very bad harvest, the King is unable to wed into another royal house, and Orual becomes afraid for Psyche's sake when people begin to treat her as if she were a goddess. A rebellion caused by Tarin's father is followed by a plague, during which the Fox nearly dies. During his illness, Orual assists her father in the Pillar Room of the Palace with affairs of state.

The Fox is nursed back to health by Psyche, and when news of this gets out people begin to come to the Palace to be healed by her. The King, afraid that they will turn on him if his daughter stops healing, encourages her to mix among them. Eventually, Psyche falls ill of the fever herself.

When the granaries of the city become empty, the King is put under constant pressure to feed the people. After she is well Psyche goes among the people, but it is clear now that the adoration of her has ended. Many call her the "Accursed" (38), and the King feels trapped.

The Priest of Ungit visits the Palace. One by one he lays at the feet of the King the woes which have fallen upon Glome. In the past, he says, the only thing that won favour with Ungit and expiated the sins of Glome was a "Great Offering" (46) to Ungit's son, the god of the Mountain, the "Brute," as he is called. He was seen recently on
the Mountain – “very black and big, a terrible shape”(47). He must be given a victim, the Accursed.

The Great Offering must be given to the Brute, the Priest says,

“...For 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 a devouring... Some say the loving and the devouring are all the same thing....”(48-49)

The King is terrified that he has been chosen to be the victim, and while he pretends otherwise, he is relieved when he learns that it is Psyche. Orual is beside herself, and begs the King to save Psyche. In his anger he beats her savagely, and agrees to sacrifice Psyche.

It is obvious to Orual and the Fox that the King is sheltering behind his own daughter. Meanwhile. Psyche is imprisoned in the
palace, awaiting the Great Offering. Bardia, who is guarding the door, allows Orual a few minutes with her so that she can comfort her.

Orual is disappointed to find Psyche so resigned. She thinks the gods cannot be real because they are said to be so vile. “Or else,” suggests 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). She reveals that since she has been on the Grey Mountain she has felt a great “longing,” which she now thinks may be a longing for death. Orual is appalled: “Oh, cruel, cruel!” she says, “Is it nothing to you that you leave me here alone?... did you ever love me at all?” (73).

Still bruised from her father’s beating, Orual is unable to prevent Psyche, drugged and painted, from being taken to the Mountain. There she is left tied to the sacred Tree. While waiting for the right time to go to the Mountain and give Psyche a proper burial, Orual asks Bardia to give her lessons in swordsmanship. He is surprised how good she is. On their return to the Mountain and the Tree, they find the chains in place, but no sign of Psyche. Then, going past the Tree, down to a stream beyond which lies a beautiful valley, they receive a shock: on the other side of the stream is Psyche.
“Oh, Maia.” Psyche says. “I have longed for this... I knew you would come” (102). While Bardia stays on the other side, Orual is helped across the stream by Psyche, who is happier than she has ever been. Sitting on the warm heather, she relates the story of how she was rescued by the Westwind, who took her to a Palace. Invisible female servants ministered to her, but she felt ashamed when she took off her clothes. But why, asks Orual, did she feel ashamed in front of women? “This shame,” explains Psyche, “has nothing to do with He or She. It’s the being mortal – being, how shall I say it?... insufficient... And then... the night came – and then – he .... The Bridegroom... the god himself.” She says her Bridegroom, who only comes at night, never shows his face. When Orual asks to be conducted to Psyche’s Palace, Psyche asks what she means. “Where is the Palace?” says Orual. “How far have we to go to reach it?” “But,” says Psyche, “this is it, Orual! It is here! You are standing on the stairs of the great gate” (114-116).

Orual suspects her sister is mad and is anxious to get her away. Psyche has never seen the Bridegroom, but she will not leave him. “This is my home,” she insists, “I am a wife”(125). Orual is confused because her sister has never looked healthier. Even so, she believes
that she is mad and she pleads with her to come with her away from the Mountain.

Bardia comes forward, when called, and he and Orual camp on the other side of the stream. That night when Orual goes to the stream for a drink she looks across: "There stood the palace; grey, as all things were grey in that hour and place, but solid and motionless, wall within wall, pillar and arch and architrave, acres of it, a labyrinthine beauty" (132).

As she prepares to cross the stream, she looks again. The Palace has vanished. Orual’s heart tells her that Psyche "is ten times happier, there in the Mountain, than you could ever make her. Leave her alone. Don’t spoil it" (138).

After her return to Glome, Oural tells the Fox what she has seen. He is a Greek rationalist and, partly because Orual does not tell him about her glimpse of Psyche’s Palace, he believes that Psyche was probably freed by a "robber or runaway" (143) who pretends to be a god’s messenger, and comes to her in the night as the Bridegroom. Orual decides that she must return to the Mountain and kill Psyche.

Taking with her Bardia, a lamp, some bandages, and a dagger, she returns to the Mountain. She visits Psyche alone and tries to persuade her that her husband is either a monster or a felon. By
stabbing her own arm, she forces Psyche to agree to look at her husband’s face when he is asleep. “You are indeed teaching me about kinds of love I did not know,” says Psyche: “It is like looking into a deep pit. I am not sure whether I like your kind better than hatred. Oh, Orual – to take my love for you... and then to make of it a tool, a weapon, a thing of policy and mastery, an instrument of torture... I begin to think I never knew you” (165).

That night Orual sees a light flare up. Then a “great voice” rises up in “implacable sternness” (171). She hears Psyche weeping as a storm lays waste the valley. A god – the Bridegroom – appears to Orual. His beauty is such that she can hardly look at him. She realizes that she knew all along that Psyche’s lover was a god, that she has blown dust in her own eyes in an attempt to hide from the truth. “Now Psyche goes out in exile,” says the god: “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” (173-174).

Deeply shamed, Orual returns to Glome. She tells neither Bardia nor the Fox of the conversation she had with Psyche. From this time on Orual hides her ugliness with a veil, which she wears all the time. Shortly afterwards the King is injured in a fall, and after defying her
father Orual loses her fear of him. As she continues to train with the sword, Orual begins to repress her identity. "My aim," she says, "was to build up more and more that strength, hard and joyless, which had come to me when I heard the god's sentence; by learning, fighting and labouring, to drive all the woman out of me" (184).

Soon the King and the Priest are mortally ill, and pressure falls upon Orual to take over. Bardia and the Fox negotiate with Arnom, who will become the new priest, to support her. But she must be able to defend the country as well. Trunia, the rightful heir to the throne of Phars, turns up and asks for help against his brother Argan. Orual is an experienced swordsman, and as she prepares to face Argan in combat, her father dies. She solidifies her position as Queen by killing Argan, and her reign begins at this point. She finds that her strength lies in two things: the Fox and Bardia as counsellors, and her veil. She continues the attempt to erase her identity: "One little stairway led me from feast to council, all the bustle and skill and glory of queenship, to my own chamber to be alone with myself—that is, with a nothingness" (236). She erects a new statue of Ungit alongside the old one in the House of Ungit. It was made in Greece, and in comparison to the old Ungit was beautiful and lifelike.
After years of hard work, Queen Orual has put the country in good order, and she decides to go on a progress and travel in other lands. She takes with her Bardia’s son, Llerdia, and a number of others. After a stop in Phars to visit Trunia and Redival, she goes on to Essur. While the others are busy with the camp, Orual wanders into the woods. There she comes across a temple built in the Greek style.

On the altar is the image of a goddess, made of pale wood. It is marred by a band of black cloth tied round the head so as to hide its face. A priest tells her the story of this goddess – Istra – which is very like that of Orual and Psyche, except that in the story both of Istra’s sisters visit her, and both see her palace. “They saw the palace?” Orual asks the priest. “Of course they saw the palace ....They weren’t blind,” he answers. “Why did she – they – want to separate her from the god,” Orual asks, “if they had seen the palace?” The priest answers, “They wanted to destroy her because they had seen her palace.” “But why?” she asks. The answer is “Because they were jealous. Her husband and her house were so much finer than theirs”(243-244).

For years Orual’s old quarrel with the gods had slept, but now she is resolved to state her case against them. “Jealousy! I jealous of Psyche?” (245), she says to herself. She then hurries back to Glome to
write her accusation against the gods. That accusation is the first twenty-one chapters of *Till We Have Faces*. At the end of chapter XXI she reviews her charges. The gods took Psyche from her; they put her in a position where it hung upon her word as to whether Psyche should “continue in bliss or be cast out into misery;” they would not tell her “whether she was the bride of a god, or mad, or a brute’s or villain’s spoil;” they would give her no “clear sign,” though she begged for it (249). Finally, they have “sent out a lying story in which I was given no riddle to guess... and of my own will destroyed her, and that for jealousy.” If the gods do not answer these charges, might it be “because they have no answer?” (249-250).

Orual has not finished her Case Against the Gods. What follows in Part II of *Till We Have Faces* is similar to the tasks Venus gave Psyche in Apuleius’s *Metamorphoses*. Orual is to undertake tasks which will force her to see herself as she really is.

From Tarin she learns how lonely Redival was after she turned from her to the Fox and Psyche. Soon afterwards she discovers that Bardia is ill. and as she prepares to visit him Arnom stops her. He says Bardia’s loyalty would drive him to do whatever she wanted, but he is an old man who should be allowed to “drowse and dream” (258). When Bardia’s wife, Ansit, meets the Queen, she reproves her
for taking Bardia from her. “What mad thought is in your mind?” says Orual. “Oh, I know well enough,” answers Ansit, “that you were not lovers. You left me that…When you had used him, you would let him steal home to me; until you needed him again” (262). Orual is forced to admit that she has always been in love with Bardia. Lewis’s publisher, Jocelyn Gibb, had not realized this, and in a letter of 16 February 1956, Lewis said:

... am I to understand that you...got as far as Orual’s scene with Bardia’s widow without having yet realized that Orual was, in a most perfectly ordinary, jealous, ravenous, biological fashion, in love with Bardia? 22

Shortly after the visit to Ansit, Orual takes part in the rite of the Year’s birth. The Priest is shut up in the house of Ungit from sunset, and on the following morning fights his way out and is said to be born. The fight is staged with wooden swords, and wine is poured over the combatants instead of blood.

As Queen, Orual must sit in Ungit’s house and await the birth of the new year. Sitting there, she looks closely at Ungit herself, a shapeless, uneven, lumpy, furrowed stone, covered with blood. She detects on Ungit “a face such as you might see in a loaf, swollen,
"Who is Ungit?" she asks Arnom. "She signifies the earth," he says, "which is the womb and mother of all living things." When Orual notices that the people prefer the old shapeless Ungit to the beautiful new Greek statue, she asks one why this is. The answer is: "That other, the Greek Ungit, she wouldn't understand my speech. She's only for nobles and learned men. There's no comfort in her." (272).

At home Orual has a dream in which her father appears. He takes her into the Pillar Room where he forces her to dig a hole. Descending deeper and deeper, they come to a Pillar Room far below the Palace. And there the King forces Orual to look into a mirror. She has the face of Ungit. "It was I who was Ungit," Orual writes: "That ruinous face was mine. I was that Batta-thing, that all-devouring, womblike, yet barren, thing. Glome was a web; I the swollen spider, squat at its center, gorged with men's stolen lives." (276). After facing this truth Orual tries to commit suicide, but is prevented by a god. "Do not do it," he says: "You cannot escape Ungit by going to the deadlands, for she is there also. Die before you die. There is no chance after." (279).

Orual is determined to die to herself and achieve beauty of soul. "To say that I was Ungit," she explains, "meant that I was as ugly in
soul as she; greedy, blood-gorged. But if I practiced true philosophy, as Socrates meant it, I should change my ugly soul into a fair one. And this, the gods helping me, I would do” (282). This was not as easy as she imagined. Although she set out every morning “to be just and calm and wise” in all her thoughts and acts, it was not long before she was back “in some old rage, resentment, gnawing fantasy, or sullen bitterness” (282).

In another dream she attempts to catch the golden fleece from the rams of the gods so that she can become beautiful with the gods’ beauty. But she ends up being trampled by the rams, not because of anger, but because the rams were like the gladness of the Divine Nature which “wounds and perhaps destroys us merely by being what it is” (284). She spots another woman calmly collecting the golden fleece from a hedge. What Orual sought in vain, she took at her leisure. In compensation, Orual says to herself, “However I might have devoured Bardia, I had at least loved Psyche truly” (285).

In another dream, imagining herself to be Ungit’s slave, she walks over burning sands with an empty bowl which she must fill with the water of death and bring back for Ungit. However, she soon finds herself in a courtroom, the bowl having turned into a book – her
complaint against the gods. In her rage against them she claims Psyche as her own:

“...The girl was mine. What right had you to steal her away into your dreadful heights?... I was my own and Psyche was mine and no one else had any right to her. Oh, you’ll say you took her away into bliss and joy and such as I could never have given her, and I ought to have been glad of it for her sake. Why? What should I care for some horrible, new happiness which I hadn’t given her and which separated her from me?...She was mine. Mine; do you not know what the word means? Mine!...” (291-292)

The Judge stops her, and Orual realizes that she has been reading this same thing over and over, “...starting the first word again almost before the last was out of my mouth....There was given to me a certainty that this, at last, was my real voice.” “Are you answered?” asks the Judge. “Yes,” says Orual (292-293).

To have heard herself making the complaint was to be answered. Orual recalls the Fox saying that the “whole art and joy of words” was to “say the very thing you really mean.” And now, using the words that became the title of the book, Orual sees why it is so
important to utter the speech at the center of one's soul: "I saw well
why the gods do not speak to us openly, nor let us answer. Till that
word can be dug out of us, why should they hear the babble that we
think we mean? How can they meet us face to face till we have
faces?" (294).

The trial having ended, the Fox approaches. He shows Orual a
series of living pictures in which Psyche undertakes four tasks. She is
able to do the first three easily because Orual, as it turns out, has
borne the anguish for her. However, in the last picture Orual is
horrified to see a woman like herself— it was herself— holding out her
hands to Psyche, her left arm dripping with blood (from the attempt to
force Psyche to light the lamp in order to see her husband). "Oh,
Psyche," it wails: "Oh, my own child, my only love. Come back.
Come back. Back to the old world where we were happy together.
Come back to Maia." "Did we really do these things to her?" Orual
asks the Fox. "Yes," he answers, "we did":

She had no more dangerous enemies than us.
And in that far distant day when the gods
become wholly beautiful, or we at last are shown
how beautiful they always were, this will happen
more and more. 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. (304)

Voices are now heard proclaiming the return of Psyche from the land of the dead. She has returned with the casket of beauty that Ungit commanded her to bring. "Oh, Psyche, Oh, goddess," says Orual: "Never again will I call you mine" (305). She is reunited with Psyche, and as they talk word arrives that the god is coming to judge Orual. As Orual and Psyche stand across a pool of water from the god they see reflected in the water two Psyches—both beautiful beyond all imagining. "You also are Psyche," comes the voice of the god (308).

The vision ends, and Orual is soon afterwards found in the garden of her Palace, the book of accusations against the gods in her hand. "The old body," she realizes when she comes round, "will not stand many more such seeings; perhaps (but who can tell?) the soul will not need them" (308). Arnom the priest tells her she is near her death. Four days later she picks up the pen again and writes her last words:
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. What other answer would suffice? Only words, words; to be led out to battle against other words. Long did I hate you. Long did I fear you. I might—(308)

The existential problem of the dividing gulf is powerfully dramatized in the interplay between characters in *Till We Have Faces*, and indeed, the tension between Psyche and Orual, Orual and Bardia, Orual and the Grandfather, make possible the dichotomy of believer versus nonbeliever, and divine versus human love. Most important to the expression of this existential problem, however, is Orual's interior monologue; by making an Everyman of Orual. Lewis has avoided the danger of gratuitous didacticism, always a possibility with allegory. For it is, in fact, as allegory that the novel must be read. For its recycling of myth and universal insights into human nature, *Till We Have Faces* appeals to secular readers and critics and to Christians for its eloquent presentation of the problematic of Christian life on earth. For these reasons in general, and for its particular concern with the dangers of obsessive love, the work will undoubtedly and deservedly retain its seat
of honor in the Lewis canon. Queen Orual, for this reader, is memorable, for her pain, her universality, her humanity, and *Till We Have Faces* is unforgettable for its rendering of the ever-present and ever-dividing human capacity for selfishness and destructive love.
References