ABSTRACT - Critics have examined Lewis’s novel on multiple fronts, but fail to acknowledge a central meaning of the text. Mara Donaldson, for example, cites Orual’s final epiphany that she can only understand the gods after she writes her book and comes to understand herself (191), but doesn’t realize that the true reason Orual must understand herself and the gods is to realize her own divinity. Lewis illustrates the godliness of Orual, and therefore all other mortals, through themes of individual beauty, veils, and spiritual connection. While Psyche’s beauty easily implies her divinity, Orual’s ugliness shows her unawareness of her own divinity. Orual also frequently complains that the gods hide themselves, physically and psychologically. Yet when she assumes the responsibilities of her earthly kingdom, she veils her face from view, unconsciously mirroring the gods’ actions. Finally, through the spiritual connection between various characters, Lewis shows a spiritual connection between God and mankind. Lewis shows his readers that by fully understanding themselves, they can grow to understand God’s purpose and accept their own divinity.
C. S. Lewis’s novel *Till We Have Faces* has been examined by critics ever since its publication in 1956. Many critical analysts offer valuable and credible insights, such as by describing the novel in terms of the relationship between the Self and the Other. Some critics cite Orual’s final epiphany that she can only understand the gods after she writes her book and comes to understand herself. According to this view, Orual’s “self-understanding and understanding of the gods are both mediated to her through her book, a book that she must rewrite as she uncovers the layers of self-deception within it. Self and God are known only through a text, but the text itself is a construction; there is no absolute, inerrant text” (Donaldson 191). The idea of gaining understanding through the process of writing down one’s thoughts is echoed by another critic, who states that “Orual learns wisdom, not through living her life, but by re-living it through narrative” (Fife 155). Both Donaldson and Fife’s assertions suggest that Lewis’s readers should come away from his novel with a determination to discover the truths about their own lives through writing. These critics, although perceptive, fail to make the final connection and acknowledge that the reason Orual must gain wisdom and understand herself in order to understand the gods is because she herself is divine. By examining the text of *Till We Have Faces*, I intend to illustrate a central meaning partially sensed but incompletely acknowledged by other literary critics: the divine potential of humankind. Lewis suggests the divine potential of humans through his portrayal of beauty in his characters’ appearances, the use of veils, and the motif of spiritual connection.

Lewis first illustrates his characters’ divine potential through the theme of individual beauty. As Carla Arnell writes, “Beauty and ugliness… mark this novel’s world and illustrate an apparent injustice in the distribution of things… Redival, for instance, is often shallow and mean-spirited but also quite beautiful; conversely, Bardia’s wife, Ansit, is good and loving but
homely” (26). By linking the theme of beauty with that of justice, Arnell suggests that Orual’s quest for justice, seen both in her decision to write a complaint against the gods and in her manner of governing the kingdom, stems from her belief in the unjust distribution of beauty. Arnell continues to suggest that only through experience of the sublime is Orual able to overcome this perceived injustice. “In fact, it is an experience of the sublime rather than the beautiful that transforms Orual and leads her not just to justice but to God… The sublime, as [Kant] defined it, is in turn of different kinds. Its feeling is sometimes accompanied with a certain dread, or melancholy” (30). According to this view, Lewis’s novel shows the superiority of sublime to mere physical beauty as a means of transforming the heart and soul. Arnell skillfully identifies beauty, or its absence, as one of Orual’s central complaints against the gods, but fails to realize that Lewis also uses the theme of the beautiful and the sublime to suggest the divinity of his mortal characters.

Lewis’s association of sublime beauty to godliness is first and most visibly portrayed by Psyche, whose beauty amazed all her viewers from the day of her birth, describing her as being as beautiful as Helen of Troy must have been as a newborn child (21). Immediately upon discovering her beauty, the townspeople believe in her godly qualities, including the ability to heal sickness. “Her beauty, which most of them had never seen, worked on them as a terror might work. Then a low murmur, almost a sob, began; swelled, broke into the gasping cry, ‘A goddess, a goddess.’ One woman’s voice rang out clear. ‘It is Ungit herself in mortal shape’” (32). After reading this passage, readers quickly associate Psyche with the classical pantheon of gods and goddesses, seeing her, as did all the other characters of Till We Have Faces, as a divine being. And yet, Lewis clearly meant for Psyche’s beauty to be seen as that of a natural, mortal woman, as is shown by the following passage: “It was beauty that did not astonish you till
afterwards when you had gone out of sight of her and reflected on it… It seemed the most natural thing in the world. As the Fox delighted to say, she was ‘according to nature’; what every thing, ought to have been and meant to be” (22). If Psyche’s beauty, which inspired such worship and adoration was indeed as natural and unsurprising as Orual and their Greek tutor both believed it was, then it only stands to reason that Lewis meant to depict human beings, although mortal, as having equal potential for godliness as Psyche.

Some readers may assume that, with such an association between sublime beauty and divinity, the ugly-faced main character Orual would therefore be seen as base and unnatural, therefore contradicting Lewis’s theme of inherent godliness in all human beings. However, Orual’s ugliness alludes to her divinity as much as Psyche’s beauty does hers. “Lewis chose the figure of [Orual’s] face as powerful analogue of humanity’s erring self-conception. He is saying, and his gods seem to be saying, that we do not know what we are” (Dorman 49). Dorman never fully speculates on what exactly Lewis suggests humankind truly is, instead apparently content to refer to what he terms “the incomprehensible.” However, close examination shows the supposedly incomprehensible fact to be the innate godliness of mortal beings. Because Orual, as well as the other citizens of her kingdom, is unaware of her own divinity, she cannot see past the ugliness of her face. Only after coming to a true understanding of herself and of her connection to deity does she become aware of her own beauty, as described towards the end of the novel.

“Two figures, reflections, their feet to Psyche’s feet and mine, stood head downward in the water… Yes, both Psyches, both beautiful… beyond all imagining, yet not exactly the same. ‘You also are Psyche,’ came a great voice. I looked up then, and it’s strange that I dared” (307). In Orual’s final dream or vision, she comes to see and acknowledge the innate divinity she shares with her younger sister, whom she had previously idolized as being far better and far more
beautiful than her. As a result, she gains the courage and the strength to look up at the voice of the god. While the god literally signifies Eros from Classical Greek myth, he is often referred to only as “the god” or, in the last part of the novel, as “Lord,” suggesting that he is also supposed to signify Christ. By portraying Orual as she discovers her own divinity and gains the strength to look in the face, metaphorically speaking, of Christ, Lewis is simultaneously suggesting the possibility for his readers to achieve this same level of godhood.

Lewis places great importance in his use of veils in the novel, a motif often noticed by literary analysts. Daryl Ritchcot wrote that Lewis challenges many Classical gender norms, in which mortal female warriors are barbaric and ineffective, by centering his novel on Orual, an ugly woman who becomes a renowned ruler and warrior rather than fulfilling the standard female role as a wife and mother. Ritchcot further suggested that Orual’s donning of a veil serves as a means to hide the Orual’s femininity and alleviate Lewis’s discomfort with his use of the female warrior (2). Several passages do indeed describe Orual as being seen more as a man than a woman, both because of her ugliness. The first time she tries to use a sword, for example, a character named Bardia makes the following comment: “It’s a thousand pities, Lady, that you weren’t a man… you’ve a man’s reach and a quick eye. There are none of the recruits would do as well at a first attempt; I’d like to have the training of you” (65). While this passage, which depicts Orual as having both a manly eye and reach, appears to support Ritchcot’s claim, the motif of a veil is mentioned too frequently to be simply a means to de-feminize Orual and justify her status as a powerful female ruler and warrior. Rather, the veil also serves as a symbol of Orual’s inherent potential for divinity.

Orual’s veil first symbolizes her godliness by recalling Lewis’s portrayal of individual beauty. When she begins to assume the responsibilities over her kingdom, Orual keeps her face
veiled from view. “Hitherto, like all my country-women, I had gone bareface; on those two journeys up to the Mountain I had worn a veil because I wished to be secret. I now determined that I would go always veiled. I have kept this rule… ever since. It is a sort of treaty made with my ugliness” (180). Therefore, Orual assumes the veil with a very specific purpose in mind: to prevent anyone to see her ugly face. Orual’s decision to cover her ugliness may at first appear as an attempt to avoid recognizing or admitting the truth. As Fife asserted, “Later, when she becomes Queen, she hides her soul from the truth just as she conceals her face behind a veil, and her identity as Orual behind her title of Queen” (155). While Orual does try to hide what she has done behind her newfound title, her veil becomes a way for her to overcome her physical ugliness. As discussed earlier in this essay, Orual’s ugly appearance reflects her ignorance of her divinity. After donning a veil and hiding that ugliness, Orual begins to acknowledge her divinity. Therefore, her use of a veil actually reveals, not conceals, the truth.

Lewis illuminates the truth of Orual’s divine beauty by orchestrating two separate encounters between her and minor characters. The first of these encounters was with her father, the King of Glome, as soon as he recovers from his illness. “As soon as he saw me veiled, he shouted, ‘Now, girl, what’s this? Hung your curtains up, eh? Were you afraid we’d be dazzled by your beauty? Take off that frippery!’” (Lewis 181). Growing up, Orual was made very aware of her ugliness, largely by the efforts of her own father who called her such names as curd-face and demon. By covering the features that appeared so hideous, Orual rejects the role of ugly daughter that her father has bestowed upon her. Further, when she refuses his orders to remove her veil and symbolically renounce her divine potential, she discovers “what that night on the Mountain had done for me. No one who had seen and heard the god could much fear this roaring old King… He never struck me, and I never feared him again” (181). After encountering the god on
the Mountain, Orual begins to realize the own divine beauty and power lying underneath both the veil and her physical face, which gives her the courage to face the father whom she had always feared. The power of the veil to show Orual’s true divine beauty is further insinuated by her chance meeting with Trunia, the fled prince of Phars, who immediately addresses her as he would a beautiful girl. When Orual, challenging him to find beauty in her face after showing him “the blank wall of the veil,” he replies that he has “Only good ears, sister… I’ll bet a girl with a voice like yours is beautiful” (191). Although Trunia is very clearly an overconfident flirt, he is also clearly unable to see the face that the king had vilified for so long and focuses instead on Orual’s voice, which he deems beautiful. Thus, he suggests Orual’s perception of her own stark ugliness may be wrong. By recognizing that Orual indeed has previously unacknowledged beauty, as suggested by her interactions with the King and Trunia, the reader begins to see more evidence of her divinity.

Orual’s use of a veil also subconsciously reflects the veiled personages of the gods. One of Orual’s basic complaints centers on the gods’ persistent concealment from view, whether it be the darkened temple of Ungit, Psyche’s shadowy, invisible castle, or in their specific dealings with her. “They would give no clear sign, though I begged for it. I had to guess… nor will they show themselves openly and tell us what they would have us do… what is all this but cat-and-mouse play, blindman’s buff, and mere jugglery? Why must holy places be dark places?” (249). In essence, Orual complains that the gods are not being straightforward with their presence or dealings with her as they should, refusing to see any reason or purpose for their silence. Instead, she accuses them of being spiteful and cruel for concealing themselves behind a thick, dark, spiritual veil. Orual’s condemnation of the gods becomes ironic after her own assumption of a veil, when Trunia asks Orual essentially the same question she had asked the gods. “But why,
cruel Queen, do you hide your own face?” (212). Through his use of a veil, Lewis links Orual with the gods, resulting in further support of her divinity. By making this connection, readers may realize that, just as Orual covered her face with a veil for a specific purpose rather than out of spite and cruelty as Trunia suggested, so do the gods veil themselves for an unseen purpose rather than out of spite. When Psyche first admits that her husband had never let her see his face or know his name, Orual fails to realize that he does so to prevent his mother Aphrodite from taking vengeance either upon him or Psyche, as explained in the original Greek myth of Eros and Psyche. Similarly, Orual eventually realizes that the gods’ refusal to show themselves or explain their purposes to her was for a genuine purpose. “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). Just as Orual hid her face in order to spare her people from viewing her ugliness until both she and they recognize her divine goodness, so do the classical gods of Orual’s world hide themselves to spare their followers from confronting them until they are truly ready for that meeting.

Finally, Lewis illustrates the divine beauty of his characters through the motif of spiritual connection. As the god Eros told Orual after Psyche lit the lamp and looked upon him, “You, woman, shall know yourself and your work. You also shall be Psyche” (174). Some critics believe he uses this connection to address how mankind must love. As one such critic writes, “Orual does love, and inspires great love, gift-love in others, but her love is merely need-love, self-love. The wisdom she lacks is the perspective that her part of the story must be in harmony, in obedience, to the story as written by the gods. She must learn gift-love by becoming Psyche” (Fife 156). Thus, Psyche represents the spiritual “gift-love” of the soul while Orual represents the physical “need-love” of the body. Just as the goddess Ungit has a Greek counterpart in the softer,
more loving Aphrodite, Orual’s counterpart is her softer, younger sister Psyche. Both must work together to be whole, reflecting the need for a successful relationship to combine gift-love and need-love. Another critic further developed this idea. “To reach this wholeness… Orual must realize her affinity with the lower dichotomous manifestation of Aphrodite in Ungit, with Ungit's selfish demand for sacrifices, even the blood of her servants in her desperate Need-love” (Watson 7). While examining this conception of different aspects of love, both the spiritual and physical, these two critics come very close to acknowledging Lewis’s purpose in illustrating mankind’s inherent potential for godliness, especially Watson, who cites a passage in the end of Lewis’s book. As the ghost of Lewis’s character the Fox tells Orual in her vision, “That was one of the true things I used to say to you. Don’t you remember? We’re all limbs and parts of one Whole. Hence, of each other. Men, and gods, flow in and out and mingle” (300). Watson uses passages such as this one to suggest a motif of dichotomy; just as the goddess of love has two roles—that of the Greek Aphrodite and Glome’s goddess Ungit—so does love itself play two separate roles in the characters of Psyche and Orual. However, by taking these observations a step further, readers come to realize Lewis’s intent to show the connection between mankind and divinity. By comparing the connection between Orual and Psyche with that between Ungit and Aphrodite, the reader makes a third connection between Orual and Ungit. Thus, by depicting his mortal characters as being intrinsically connected to the gods, Lewis asserts the innate potential of divinity in mankind.

Lewis also portrays the spiritual connection of beauty in Orual and Psyche’s similar reactions to nature. Before Psyche is brought up to the Mountain to be sacrificed to the Shadowbrute (Eros), Bardia grants Orual a short moment to talk with and comfort her younger sister. But to Orual’s surprise, Psyche is actually very calm and happy about the arrangement,
claiming to have always felt a longing for death. When a devastated Orual asks how she had made her so sad, Psyche quickly responds that she had never longed for death out of sorrow. “It was when I was happiest that I longed most. It was on happy days when we were up there on the hills… And because it was so beautiful, it set me longing, always longing. Somewhere else there must be more of it. Everything seemed to be saying, Psyche come!” (74). As Lewis connects beauty to divinity in *Till We Have Faces*, Psyche’s spiritual connection to the beautiful hills and woods further demonstrates her similar spiritual connection to divinity. Nor is Psyche the only character to feel this way; Orual, with her ugly face, later describes a similar spiritual connection to the Mountain. “The sight of the huge world put mad ideas into me, as if I could wander away, wander forever, see strange and beautiful things … [and] made me feel that I had misjudged the world… Even my ugliness I could not quite believe in. Who can feel ugly when the heart meets delight?” (96). Orual’s ugliness, as discussed earlier in this essay, reflects her ignorance of her own divinity. Thus, when she acknowledges her feelings of spiritual connection to the world around her and denies her belief in her ugliness, she unconsciously accepts, to some extent, her own divinity.

Lewis uses the theme of beauty in *Till We Have Faces*—illustrated by the individual appearances of his characters, the motif of veils, and spiritual unity both with the beauty in others and in nature—to show the divine potential of mortal beings. Rather than an isolated incident, however, this theme appears in much of Lewis’s writing. In *Perelandra*, the second book of his *Space Trilogy*, Lewis depicts a new Garden of Eden situation in which the Queen (a new Eve character) ultimately chooses not to give in to temptation. As a result, the King and Queen become god and goddess of Perelandra. As Lewis wrote, the two perfected beings were “Paradise itself in its two Persons, Paradise walking hand in hand, its two bodies shining in the
light like emeralds yet not themselves too bright to look at… And the gods kneeled and bowed their huge bodies before the small forms of that young King and Queen” (204). By showing these evidences of mortal divinity, both in Till We Have Faces and consistently in his other writings, Lewis reveals his personal beliefs concerning theology and suggests to his readers that by fully understanding themselves, they can not both grow to understand God’s purpose in their lives and accept and achieve their own divinity.
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