

St. Maria Goretti Book Club 2022

Till We Have Faces by C. S. Lewis

Character Overview (Ch. IX through Ch. XV)

Returning characters (see notes from Discussion 1):

- Orual, Psyche (Istra), Bardia, the Fox, the King

The god of the Mountain (Cupid):

- Psyche's husband
- Only comes at night, doesn't allow Psyche to see his face (yet)
- When betrayed, does not act in anger, there is a sense of justice in his response

Gram:

- Psyche's guide for the second trip to the Mountain
- Small, dark man who rarely speaks

Notable Discussion Points

Orual's relationship with the gods:

At the time this book is written, we are aware that Orual believes in the gods, though she does not seem to like them nor fear them (see opening paragraph of Chapter 1). In our readings up to this point, Orual recollects her struggle with what to believe. There are conflicting opinions among people she trusts: The Fox speaks skeptically of all religious and non-natural explanations, while Bardia is open to the supernatural. After Psyche's sacrifice, the drought and plague leave Glome like the priest said they would, but isn't it possible this was a coincidence?

Then there's the matter of Psyche. She is found in the wilderness with no obvious shelter and dressed in rags. She tells Orual her story of how the god of the west wind freed her from the Tree, brought her to this palace (unseen by Orual), how she's waited on by invisible servants, and her husband, whom she's not allowed to see the face of, comes to her at night or in the early dawn. Surely Psyche's gone mad, but then, how did she get there? And how is she so healthy and strong? Living exposed in the elements and eating berries and other wild food would affect anyone's appearance, even someone as beautiful as Psyche. And as far as the non-existent palace, what was that thing in the fog just now?

Orual goes back and forth, sometimes seeing, mostly not, sometimes praying, mostly not, ultimately believing in the gods after the events of Psyche's betrayal of the god of the Mountain when he appears to her. She then begins waiting for the anger of gods to strike her down. During this appearance, Orual mentions that the god made it seem that she had always known Psyche's husband was a god, that her doubts and questions had been foolish.

Maybe Orual's doubt was genuine, maybe the god did change the past (pgs. 196-197). However, there's a strong argument to be made that Orual's pride got in the way of her accepting what she already knew. One example of this comes during her first trip to the mountain:

"You see?" she [Psyche] said. 'It's all true. And that – no, listen, Maia – that's why all will come right. We'll make – he will make you able to see, and then -'

'I don't want it!' I cried ... 'I don't want it. I hate it. Hate it, hate it, hate it. Do you understand?' “ (pg. 141)

Psyche's relationship with the god of the mountain:

Psyche's relationship with the god seems to be a clear allegory for us and our relationship with God. Her love for him elevates her love for the rest of creation:

"But why are you saying all this, Orual? You do not think I have left off loving you because I now have a husband to love as well? If you would understand it, that makes me love you – why, it makes me love everyone and everything more." (pg. 180)

Psyche emphasizes that her duty is no longer to Maia or anyone else, but to her husband. And though she loves Maia dearly, she cannot give priority to her wishes. Just so, there are people in our lives we love dearly: parents, siblings, or dear friends who do not believe or have fallen away. Our Christian life calls us to give an unequivocal “no” to sin. When we choose not to participate in it, or support it in others, particularly in things that “everyone is doing”, these people can interpret that as unlove: “We used to do this all the time, why can't you now?” “How can you not support me in this? I thought that you loved me.” As painful as their misunderstanding may be to us, we cannot turn away from what God asks of us, our duty is no longer to mother, father, sister, brother, or friend, but to God alone (and fortunately for those who are not God, this is a duty that will result in us loving them more perfectly than before).

Even though Psyche clearly loves and trusts the god, there isn't much explicitly said as to why. One member of the discussion group brought up that this could be analogous to those moments where God's presence is known to us, we feel Him close by and know that He is real, but we can't explain it. There's no description that can do it justice, you can only know it if you've experienced that yourself, and you can only experience that if you're open to experiencing it.

Psyche's betrayal of the god of the mountain and the resulting punishment:

On the surface, the god's punishment of Psyche can seem unjust. Psyche resisted Orual's urges for her to betray him and look at his face for a long while, it took a threatened suicide attempt by Orual to get her to agree. This suicide threat was accompanied by Orual inflicting a deep cut in her forearm, adding sincerity to the claim. Psyche agrees rather than risking someone she deeply loves taking their own life. Considering that the god of the mountain appears to be all-knowing (page 196), and Psyche likely told him why she did it, he still banishes her what is Lewis trying to say?

A hypothesis: Psyche's existing virtue and the apparent reasonableness of this action are used by Lewis to illustrate our duty to God above all else, and the costs of sin. Psyche is by far the most virtuous human character in this book, and only breaks the one rule the god has given her in the spirit of saving her sister's life. But breaking this one rule is enough to merit losing everything. Psyche prioritizes preventing Orual's threatened suicide over her duty to her husband, she chooses the worldly over the divine, and that's enough in the god of the Mountain's eyes. Orual likely won't commit suicide now, but Psyche has lost her union with the god, her home, and her comforts. God is merciful, and God is understanding, but God is just. When we choose the world over Him, we receive our reward.

The house of the god of the mountain as the Garden of Eden:

There are elements of the house similar to the Garden of Eden: it seems to be a near perfect place where Psyche wants for nothing and has union with a god. She is asked to do one thing: not to look upon the face of the god of the mountain, not yet, similar to the one rule given Adam and Eve. When Psyche betrays the god of the mountain by breaking this rule, she is banished from the house and cursed to suffer in exile.

The dichotomy in Orual's narration:

Lewis' genius shines in this work. Orual's description of events makes her opinion of them clear, but the reader is able to see the truth in the events described, which is often the opposite of what Orual thinks of the situation. The writing is similar to another work of Lewis', *The Screwtape Letters*, where the narrator speaks of Satan, sin, and temptation positively and God and virtue negatively. Orual's misinterpretation of certain events in the books stick out to the reader, cause them to ask questions, and lead them to the truth that Lewis is trying to get across. One notable area we can see this is in how Orual interprets Psyche's love for the god of the mountain and her sense of duty to him as hatred for her and how she gets angry over how Psyche has seemingly thrown their relationship away.

Book citation:

Lewis, C. S. *Till We Have Faces*. 1st ed., HarperCollins Publishers, 2012.