

till we have faces

till we have faces is a powerful novel by C.S. Lewis that masterfully reimagines the myth of Cupid and Psyche, blending ancient storytelling with rich philosophical themes. This article provides an in-depth exploration of "Till We Have Faces," including its origins, plot, characters, major themes, and lasting impact on literature. You'll discover how Lewis's narrative style, symbolism, and exploration of faith and identity set this work apart in the realm of mythic fiction. Whether you're a student, educator, or avid reader seeking to understand the complexities of C.S. Lewis's writing, this comprehensive guide will delve into every critical aspect of the novel. Throughout, you'll find keyword-rich content and insightful analysis to enhance your understanding and appreciation of this timeless classic.

- Origins and Historical Context of Till We Have Faces
- Plot Summary and Key Events
- Main Characters and Their Development
- Major Themes Explored in Till We Have Faces
- Symbolism and Literary Devices
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Origins and Historical Context of Till We Have Faces

Till We Have Faces was published in 1956 and stands as one of C.S. Lewis's final fictional works. Lewis, renowned for his Christian apologetics and the beloved Chronicles of Narnia series, considered this novel his most mature and complex. Till We Have Faces is a retelling of the classical myth of Cupid and Psyche, originally recorded by Apuleius in "The Golden Ass." However, Lewis adapts the story to focus on the perspective of Orual, Psyche's elder sister, introducing psychological depth and philosophical inquiry.

The historical context of the novel is significant. Lewis wrote during a time when mythic retellings were gaining popularity, and he was influenced by both classical literature and his own spiritual journey. The setting of Glome, an imagined ancient kingdom, evokes the atmosphere of antiquity while addressing timeless human struggles. By choosing to write in the first person, Lewis creates intimacy and immediacy, making Orual's internal conflicts resonate with modern readers.

Plot Summary and Key Events in Till We Have Faces

Till We Have Faces follows Orual, the eldest daughter of the King of Glome. Raised in a harsh and patriarchal society, Orual forms a profound attachment to her younger sister Psyche, whose beauty and goodness set her apart. When Psyche is sacrificed to appease the god Ungit, Orual's journey of grief, anger, and self-discovery begins.

Key Plot Points

- Orual's upbringing in the royal household and her relationship with her father
- The arrival of Psyche and the development of their sisterly bond

- Psyche's exile and sacrifice to the gods
- Orual's quest to rescue Psyche and her confrontation with the divine
- Orual's transformation into Queen and her reign over Glome
- The revelation and spiritual reckoning in Orual's old age

Throughout these events, Orual's perspective shapes the narrative, with her reflections and confessions providing psychological insight into her motivations and emotional turmoil. The novel's structure as a memoir and spiritual account allows for deep exploration of character and philosophy.

Main Characters and Their Development

Characterization in *Till We Have Faces* is central to the novel's impact. C.S. Lewis crafts multidimensional figures whose struggles and evolution reflect the broader themes of identity, love, and faith.

Orual

Orual, the protagonist and narrator, is marked by insecurity, jealousy, and intense love for Psyche. Her physical unattractiveness and emotional wounds drive her to seek meaning through control and sacrifice. As Queen, she exhibits strength and wisdom, but her inner journey is defined by self-deception and eventual self-awareness.

Psyche

Psyche represents innocence, beauty, and spiritual purity. Her willingness to face suffering and her mysterious experiences with the divine propel the story's central conflict. Psyche's character serves as both a foil and a catalyst for Orual's transformation.

Supporting Characters

- The King of Glome: Orual's tyrannical father, whose cruelty shapes her worldview
- Bardia: Orual's loyal advisor and military captain, whose devotion influences her leadership
- The Fox: A Greek slave and philosopher, who educates Orual and introduces rationalism and skepticism
- Ungit: The mysterious deity, symbolizing the unknown and primal forces in Glome

Each character contributes to the intricate web of relationships and conflicts that define the narrative's emotional and philosophical depth.

Major Themes Explored in Till We Have Faces

Till We Have Faces is renowned for its exploration of universal themes that resonate across cultures and eras. Lewis uses mythic storytelling to address questions of faith, identity, love, and truth.

Identity and Self-Discovery

The journey of Orual is fundamentally about self-discovery. Her struggle to understand herself, her motives, and her limitations drives the narrative. The title itself alludes to the masks people wear and the challenge of confronting one's true self.

Love and Sacrifice

The novel examines different forms of love: possessive love, sacrificial love, and divine love. Orual's possessiveness toward Psyche is contrasted with Psyche's selfless faith and willingness to sacrifice for a higher calling.

Faith and Doubt

Lewis explores the tension between skepticism and belief through Orual's interactions with the Fox and her experiences with the gods. The ambiguity of divine justice and the nature of faith are central to the novel's philosophical questions.

Symbolism and Literary Devices in Till We Have Faces

C.S. Lewis employs a range of literary devices and symbolism to enrich the narrative of Till We Have Faces. The novel's mythic structure, allegorical elements, and use of imagery contribute to its enduring appeal.

Symbolic Motifs

- Masks and Faces: Representing identity, truth, and self-revelation
- Darkness and Light: Symbolizing ignorance, enlightenment, and spiritual transformation
- The River and the Mountain: Indicating the journey toward knowledge and the divine

Narrative Technique

The first-person confessional style allows readers intimate access to Orual's thoughts and emotions, making her transformation compelling and relatable. Lewis's skillful use of allegory invites readers to interpret the story on multiple levels—psychological, spiritual, and philosophical.

Critical Reception and Legacy of *Till We Have Faces*

Till We Have Faces received mixed reviews upon its release but has grown in reputation over the decades. Critics have praised Lewis's mature prose, psychological realism, and profound engagement with myth. The novel is often cited as Lewis's greatest literary achievement, appealing to both secular and religious audiences.

The legacy of *till we have faces* endures in modern literature and academic study. Its influence can be seen in subsequent mythic retellings and philosophical fiction, and it continues to inspire discussions about faith, meaning, and human nature.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: What is the main plot of Till We Have Faces?

A: The main plot follows Orual, the Queen of Glome, as she recounts her life, her relationship with her sister Psyche, and her struggle to understand the mysteries of love, faith, and the gods. The story is a reimagining of the myth of Cupid and Psyche, focusing on Orual's perspective and personal transformation.

Q: Who are the central characters in Till We Have Faces?

A: Central characters include Orual (the protagonist), Psyche (her sister), the King of Glome, the Fox (a Greek slave and philosopher), Bardia (military captain), and Ungit (the local deity). Each character plays a significant role in the development of the narrative and themes.

Q: What themes are explored in Till We Have Faces?

A: Major themes include identity, self-discovery, love (in its many forms), sacrifice, faith, doubt, and the nature of the divine. The novel invites readers to reflect on personal and philosophical questions through its mythic framework.

Q: How does C.S. Lewis use symbolism in Till We Have Faces?

A: Lewis uses masks, faces, darkness, light, rivers, and mountains as symbols for identity, truth, transformation, and the journey toward spiritual enlightenment. These motifs deepen the narrative and encourage readers to seek meaning beyond the surface story.

Q: Is *Till We Have Faces* suitable for academic study?

A: Yes, *Till We Have Faces* is often studied in literature, theology, and philosophy courses due to its rich themes, complex characters, and sophisticated use of myth. Its layered narrative and allegorical elements make it ideal for critical analysis.

Q: What makes *Till We Have Faces* unique among C.S. Lewis's works?

A: Unlike his other fiction, *Till We Have Faces* is a deeply psychological and philosophical novel that retells a classical myth from a unique perspective. It is considered Lewis's most mature and nuanced literary achievement.

Q: How does the novel address the concept of faith?

A: The novel explores faith through Orual's doubts, her encounters with the divine, and the contrast between reason and belief. Lewis presents faith as a journey, marked by struggle, revelation, and transformation.

Q: Why is the title "*Till We Have Faces*" significant?

A: The title refers to the idea of true identity and self-revelation. It suggests that only when individuals confront their real selves—removing masks—can they truly communicate, understand, and be understood.

Q: What literary devices are prominent in *Till We Have Faces*?

A: The novel features allegory, symbolism, first-person narrative, and mythic structure. Lewis's use of these devices enhances the psychological and philosophical depth of the story.

Q: How has Till We Have Faces influenced modern literature?

A: Till We Have Faces has inspired writers interested in mythic retellings, psychological fiction, and spiritual literature. Its themes and narrative style continue to resonate, making it a significant work in the canon of 20th-century literature.

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