

till we have faces a myth retold

Till We Have Faces: A Myth Retold is a profound novel by C.S. Lewis that reimagines the classic myth of Cupid and Psyche. First published in 1956, this work stands apart from Lewis's other writings, which often focus on themes of faith and morality. Instead, "Till We Have Faces" delves into the complexities of love, identity, and the nature of the divine, offering readers a rich tapestry of philosophical and psychological insights. The narrative is narrated by Orual, the elder sister of Psyche, providing a unique perspective that challenges traditional interpretations of the myth.

Overview of the Myth of Cupid and Psyche

The original myth of Cupid and Psyche, which dates back to ancient Roman literature, tells the tale of Psyche, a mortal woman whose beauty rivals that of Venus, the goddess of love. Jealous of Psyche, Venus sends her son Cupid to make her fall in love with a hideous creature. However, upon seeing her, Cupid is struck by her beauty and falls in love with her himself. They are eventually united, but Psyche's curiosity leads her to betray Cupid, causing a series of trials that test their love.

In Lewis's retelling, the story is filtered through the consciousness of Orual, who struggles with her feelings of jealousy, love, and betrayal. This fresh perspective not only humanizes the myth but also explores themes of perception, power, and the nature of the gods.

Character Analysis

Orual

Orual is the central character and narrator of the novel. Her complex personality reflects a myriad of emotions, including love, jealousy, and resentment. Orual's deep-seated love for her sister Psyche drives much of the narrative, as she grapples with feelings of inadequacy and the desire for control over her sister's fate. She embodies the struggle of someone who loves fiercely but is also deeply flawed.

Key aspects of Orual's character include:

- Jealousy: Her jealousy of Psyche's beauty and divine love leads to conflict and ultimately shapes her actions throughout the story.
- Protectiveness: Orual sees herself as Psyche's protector, which complicates her feelings and leads her to make choices that are both selfless and selfish.
- Growth: Over the course of the novel, Orual undergoes significant personal development, culminating in a journey toward self-understanding and acceptance.

Psyche

Psyche serves as the catalyst for the events that unfold. Her beauty and purity attract both Cupid and the wrath of Venus. Unlike Orual, Psyche is portrayed as innocent and trusting, representing the ideal of love that Orual struggles to understand.

Key aspects of Psyche's character include:

- Innocence: Her naivety is both a strength and a vulnerability, as it leads her to trust Cupid despite the conditions of their love.
- Sacrifice: Psyche's trials reflect her willingness to endure suffering for love, showcasing a different kind of strength compared to Orual.
- Divine Connection: Psyche embodies the connection between humanity and the divine, illustrating themes of transcendence and the search for meaning.

Cupid

Cupid, the god of love, plays a pivotal role in the story, representing both the allure and the dangers of love. His relationship with Psyche is both passionate and complicated, mirroring the complexity of love itself.

Key aspects of Cupid's character include:

- Ambiguity: Cupid's dual nature as both a divine figure and a lover creates tension in the story, raising questions about the nature of love and desire.
- Conflict: His struggles with his mother, Venus, add depth to his character, highlighting the challenges that come with love.
- Redemption: Ultimately, Cupid's journey alongside Psyche reflects themes of forgiveness and the transformative power of love.

Thematic Exploration

Love and Jealousy

At the heart of "Till We Have Faces" is a profound exploration of love and jealousy. Orual's feelings toward Psyche are complex; she loves her sister deeply but is also consumed by jealousy of her beauty and the love Psyche receives from Cupid. This duality is essential to understanding Orual's character and the choices she makes.

- Possessive Love: Orual's love is often possessive and controlling, reflecting a fear of losing Psyche to the divine.
- Self-Sacrifice vs. Selfishness: The tension between Orual's desire to protect Psyche and her need for her sister's affection creates a conflict that drives much of the narrative.

Identity and Self-Perception

The novel also delves into themes of identity and self-perception. Orual's struggle to see herself clearly is mirrored in her inability to understand Psyche's divine love. Throughout the story, she wrestles with her perception of herself as both a loving sister and a flawed individual.

- Masks and Facades: The title of the novel itself suggests the theme of masks—both literal and metaphorical. Orual's own perception of beauty and worth is clouded by her insecurities.
- Journey of Self-Discovery: Orual's journey is ultimately one of self-discovery, as she confronts her own shortcomings and learns to embrace her identity.

Divinity and Human Experience

Lewis raises significant questions about the nature of divinity and its relationship to human experience. The gods in the novel are portrayed as distant and often indifferent to human suffering, prompting readers to consider the nature of faith and the divine.

- The Nature of the Gods: Orual's perception of the gods evolves throughout the novel, challenging traditional notions of divinity. She grapples with feelings of betrayal and abandonment, leading to her eventual confrontation with the divine.
- Human Suffering: The trials faced by Psyche and Orual highlight the theme of suffering as an inherent part of the human experience, prompting reflections on the nature of love and sacrifice.

Literary Style and Structure

C.S. Lewis's writing style in "Till We Have Faces" is both lyrical and philosophical. The novel is structured as a first-person narrative, allowing readers to delve deep into Orual's thoughts and emotions. This intimate perspective enhances the exploration of complex themes, providing a rich emotional landscape.

- Symbolism: Lewis employs symbolism throughout the narrative, using elements such as the masks worn by characters to represent deeper truths about identity and perception.
- Philosophical Dialogue: The novel includes philosophical discussions that challenge readers to engage with the themes of love, identity, and the divine on a deeper level.

Conclusion

"Till We Have Faces: A Myth Retold" is a masterful exploration of love, identity, and the human condition. Through the lens of Orual's complex character, C.S. Lewis invites readers to question traditional narratives and reflect on the nature of their own experiences with love and faith. The novel's rich thematic depth and intricate characterizations make it a timeless work that continues to resonate with readers today.

In retelling the myth of Cupid and Psyche, Lewis not only honors the original story but also expands

upon it, offering a fresh perspective that challenges readers to confront their own understandings of love, jealousy, and the divine. Ultimately, "Till We Have Faces" stands as a testament to the enduring power of myth and the human capacity for growth and transformation.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the central theme of 'Till We Have Faces: A Myth Retold'?

The central theme of the novel revolves around love, identity, and the nature of the divine, exploring how personal experiences shape our understanding of truth and reality.

How does C.S. Lewis reinterpret the myth of Cupid and Psyche in this novel?

C.S. Lewis reinterprets the myth by shifting the perspective to Orual, Psyche's sister, allowing readers to see the complex emotions of jealousy, love, and betrayal, ultimately questioning the reliability of personal narratives.

What narrative style is employed in 'Till We Have Faces'?

The novel is told in the first-person perspective of Orual, providing an intimate and subjective viewpoint that enhances the emotional depth and complexity of her character.

How does the character of Orual evolve throughout the story?

Orual evolves from a bitter and resentful figure into one who confronts her own shortcomings and desires, ultimately seeking understanding and redemption by the end of the narrative.

What role does the concept of the 'face' play in the novel?

The concept of the 'face' symbolizes identity, perception, and the masks people wear in society. Orual's struggle with her 'ugliness' and her quest for recognition highlight the themes of self-acceptance and the search for authenticity.

How does Lewis address the theme of faith in 'Till We Have Faces'?

Lewis addresses the theme of faith by contrasting Orual's skepticism and doubt with the faith of Psyche, exploring how different characters respond to divine love and the challenges of belief.

What is the significance of the title 'Till We Have Faces'?

The title signifies the idea that true understanding and connection with others can only occur when individuals reveal their true selves, moving beyond superficial appearances and societal expectations.

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