Lewis and Tolkien: bridges between worlds

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For reasons that I hope will become apparent, my topic is the last two novels written by two of last century's most influential Christian authors: *Till We Have Faces* by C. S. Lewis and *Smith of Wootton Major* by J. R. R. Tolkien. My interest in *Till We Have Faces* was piqued in a graduate class a few years ago, and for the past year I have been writing my thesis for my MA on *Smith of Wootton Major*. The more I read and ponder these works, the more an uncanny similarity appears, for both novels skilfully juxtapose a secular and a sacred vision. They do this by presenting readers with a character who can see into another world: in *Till We Have Faces*, Psyche can see into the world of the gods, and in *Smith of Wootton Major*, Smith can see into Faery. Both characters live in the same world as do the other characters in the novels, but they are no longer of that world because they can see beyond it. Thus, they can be seen as at least loose allegories of Christians. To show how this works, I will briefly discuss each novel, and then give a few final comments.

In *Till We Have Faces*, C. S. Lewis retells the Cupid and Psyche myth found in Apuleius and Ovid. Lewis adds depth to the myth by making two key changes. First, he makes Psyche's palace invisible to her sister, Orual: only one sister comes to visit Psyche in Lewis's version. When Orual visits Psyche, in Lewis's words:

> The poor sister 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[syche] mad or am I blind?"[1]

Later in the letter, Lewis gives his reason for this change: *Till We Have Faces* "is [the] story of every nice, affectionate agnostic whose dearest one suddenly 'gets religion,' or even every lukewarm Christian whose dearest gets a Vocation".

The second change Lewis makes is to tell the story through Orual's mouth — or pen, as it were — as the story is an autobiographical recollection in two parts. In the first part, Orual proclaims: "I will accuse the gods, especially the god who lives in the Grey Mountain. That is, I will tell all he has done to me."[2] The first part of Orual's autobiography is her complaint against the gods for taking her beloved sister Psyche from her and generally treating her very ill. At this point in her autobiography, her vision is too narrow to see what is truly going on.

Orual's problems begin when Psyche is accused of accepting the worship due to the local pagan deity, Ungit — an accusation that gains momentum when a plague breaks out among the people. Ungit's priest claims that because of Psyche's impiety, she is "The Accursed", and she must be sacrificed to the holy Brute who is "in a mystery, Ungit herself or Ungit's son, the god of the Mountain; or both". Psyche's sacrifice not only gives the story, and Orual's world, its major crisis, it also provides an opportunity for juxtaposing Psyche's sanctified vision with that of the other characters: the King; the Priest of Ungit; the Fox, a stoic Greek slave who is Orual and Psyche's teacher; and of course Orual herself. Their perspectives are:

The King sees Psyche's sacrifice in solely pragmatic terms; he wants the people to be healed so that he can hold onto his power. He says: "What's one girl — why, what would one man be — against the safety of us all? It's only sense that one should die for many."

Ungit's priest speaks from a pagan wisdom, which understands sacrifice: "In the Great Offering, the victim, [Psyche] 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 either way there is a devouring … many different things are said … many sacred stories … many great mysteries."

The Fox sees Psyche's sacrifice as a cruelty born of ignorance, and he sees the priest's divine and dark wisdom as only misleading contradictions: "Do you not see master … that the priest is talking nonsense? [A] goddess … is also a god, and loving is to be eating — a child of six would talk more sense."

Orual sees the situation most strongly in terms of her own selfish love for Psyche. She does believe that the gods exist, but she believes the worst of them. She says to Psyche: "What can these things be except the cowardly murder they seem? To take you — you whom they have worshipped and who never hurt so much as a toad — to make you food for a monster."

The perspectives of the King, Ungit's priest, the Fox and Orual, are similar in two ways. First, their speeches imply that they think about the god of the Mountain in worldly — that is, material or pragmatic — terms. The King thinks of the god as a power to be appeased so that he can continue his rule; Ungit's priest thinks of the god as a source of life but also of contradictions, which demands sacrifice; the Fox thinks of the god as a phantom of the ignorance of men's minds; and Orual views the god as a monster, an opinion that has less to do with the god's true temperament than it does with the fact that he will be taking Psyche from her. The second way these perspectives are similar is that they all, except for that of the Fox, strongly allude to Christ's crucifixion. Psyche is the one who "should die for all", the one who is "perfect", the one who is to be both "married" and

"devoured", and the one who "never hurt so much as a toad" but still must be sacrificed.

But Psyche sees the situation differently. She says, "To be eaten and to be married to the god [of the Mountain] might not be so different. We don't understand. There must be so much that neither the Priest nor the Fox knows … The sweetest thing in all my life has been the longing — to reach the Mountain, to find the place where all the beauty comes from … All my life the god of the Mountain has been wooing me … I am going to be with my lover." Where others find the contradictions, cruelty and dark reflections of their secular vision, Psyche finds light and the source of all beauty.

By the end of the book both Orual and readers see that Psyche has been right — things were not what they seemed. In the second part of Orual's autobiography, she re-evaluates her complaint against the gods, finding through conversations and visions that she is not as innocent as she first supposed. In a vision, Orual finds herself reading her complaint to the gods themselves, but, as she says: "it was not the book I had written". It is Orual's true complaint, her life as she would have seen it if she had the honesty of Psyche's vision. Writing of the vision she says: "Till that word can be dug out of us, why should [the gods] hear the babble that we think we mean? How can they meet us face to face till we have faces?" Psyche and Orual are reunited in a vision, and through Psyche's sacrificial love and the grace of the Gods, Orual gains the same vision as Psyche. In a word, she becomes sanctified.

Now let us turn to Tolkien's novel. *Smith of Wootton Major*[3] is the story of a quasi-English medieval village with some unfamiliar customs, one of which is to hold a feast for 24 good children once every 24 years, and at the centre of this feast is a Great Cake. At one such feast the son of the village blacksmith swallows a tiny silver star, which is in his slice of cake. Because of this star, Smith becomes one of the few humans, if not the only one, to be able to walk in the land of Faery. In Faery Smith sees many things — Elves returning from their wars on the "Dark Marches of which men know nothing"; the tree of the King of Faery, which "bore at once leaves and flowers and fruits uncounted, and not one was

The house of Tom Bombadil

Phyllis Berka

the same"; and a vale where "the air is so lucid that eyes can see the red tongues of birds as they sing on the trees upon the far side of the valley, though that is very wide and the birds are no greater than wrens".

But although *Smith of Wootton Major* exhibits some of the same characteristics as *Till We Have Faces*, especially that of one character who can see into a world that other characters cannot, Tolkien's work is not overtly religious like Lewis's. In fact, Tolkien goes to some pains to ensure that the story is not taken simply as a religious allegory. He admits that the Great Hall, where the Master Cooks lives and the feasts are held, "is evidently in a way an 'allegory' of the village church" and that "the Master Cook with his house adjacent, and his office that is not hereditary, is plainly the Parson and the priesthood". But Tolkien is quick to point out that there is no overt religion in the tale and that "Faery [itself] is not religious". He says: "It is fairly evident that [Faery] is not Heaven or Paradise. Certainly its inhabitants, Elves, are not angels or emissaries of God (direct) … The Elves are not busy with a plan to reawaken religious devotion in Wootton. The Cooking allegory would not be suitable to any such import."

But religious allusions do exist in the work, particularly concerning Faery. On the morning of Smith's tenth birthday, when the star becomes active — it has sat dormant inside Smith waiting for its time to come — a mighty wind rushes over the land, and Smith is so overjoyed that "he began to sing, high and clear, in strange words that he seemed to know by heart; and in a moment the star fell out of his mouth and he caught it in his open hand … Without thinking he clapped his hand to his head, and there the star stayed in the middle of his forehead … Some of its light passed into his eyes." The wind rushing, Smith speaking in a language he does not know, and the star shining on Smith's forehead all allude to the Pentecost in Acts 2, when the apostles receive the Holy Spirit. Thus, the ability to see Faery, which the star gives Smith, can be equated with a sanctified vision of the world. As a side note: although this religious allusion seems obvious when I explain it here, in the story it's not obvious at all. Unlike some of Lewis's allusions, which feel to me as if they are included to draw attention to themselves, this allusion feels like an integral part of the story as a story. Yet there is something holy about Faery. In his essay *Smith of Wootton Major*, Tolkien says:

> [Faery] represents love … This 'love' will produce both *truth* and *delight*. Things seen in its light will be respected, and they will also appear delightful, beautiful, wonderful, even glorious. Faery might be said indeed to represent Imagination (without definition because taking in all the definition of this word) … This compound — of awareness of a limitless world outside our domestic parish; a love (in truth and admiration) for all things in it; and a desire for wonder, marvels, both perceived and conceived — this 'Faery' is as necessary for the health and complete functioning of the Human as is sunlight for physical life: sunlight as distinguished from the soil, say, though it in fact permeates even that. (Tolkien's italics)

In the story, Faery is an actual physical reality, but as Tolkien makes plain in the passage above, Faery may be synonymous with a creative and sanctified vision of the world: "Things seen in its light will be respected, and they will also appear delightful, beautiful, wonderful, even glorious." Thus, although religion is not as overt in Smith as it is in *Till We Have Faces*, both novels exhibit a character with what may be called a sanctified vision.

Finally, like *Till We Have Faces*, *Smith of Wootton Major* does not initially introduce readers to a character who has that sanctified vision. Smith is not named in the novel until about one-fourth of the way through the story. Instead readers are first presented with the perspective of Nokes, a "solid sort of man" who believes that Faery is a make-believe place, fit only for amusing children. Nokes is the Master Cook who, with some help, bakes the cake containing the silver star. Ironically, his narrow ideas of Faery are symbolized by a small doll of the Fairy-Queen that he causes to be placed on the cake "to amuse the children".

In the beginning of the story, Tolkien controls the narrative in very subtle ways so that readers empathize with Nokes and his perspective of reality. Here are two brief examples. First, when Alf, Nokes's apprentice — who readers later learn is the King of Faery himself in the guise of a small boy — first comes to Wootton Major, his friends call him by his name, "but to [Nokes and the rest of the villagers] he was just Prentice" because they only see him in terms of his job. Confirming his empathy with Nokes and his perception of the world, the narrator also refers to Alf as Prentice, at least until Smith is introduced. Second, at times readers are given the same level of knowledge as Nokes, even being forced to empathize with him through the syntax of the narrative. One scene where this happens reads:

> "That's Funny!" [Nokes] said as he held [the fay star] up to the light.
>
> "No, it isn't!" said a voice behind him, so suddenly that he jumped. It was the voice of Prentice, and he had never spoken to the Master in that tone before. Indeed he seldom spoke to Nokes at all unless he was spoken to first. Very right and proper in a youngster.

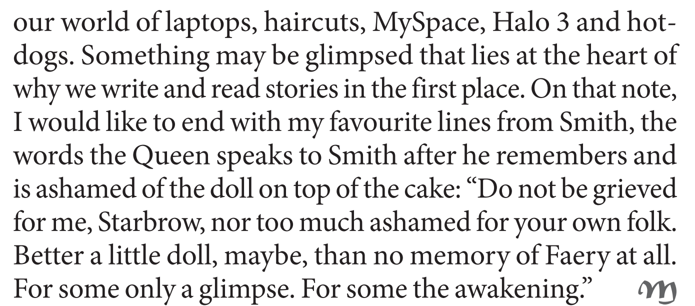
Like Nokes, who must turn around to see who is talking, readers' knowledge of the speaker is delayed by the syntax of the following sentences: "'No it isn't!' said a voice behind him. It was the voice of Prentice." To reinforce this perspective, Nokes's evaluation of the situation is also given in the narrative itself: "Indeed he seldom spoke to Nokes at all unless he was spoken to first. Very right and proper in a youngster."

Thus, both *Smith of Wootton Major* and *Till We Have Faces* contrast a sacred or sanctified vision with a secular vision. Both novels also initially force readers to empathize with a secular vision, only gradually revealing the sacred vision. This technique engages readers and allows them to experience the transition, or what I might call "literary sanctification". As Mara Donaldson points out about *Till*

We Have Faces: "Orual's rewriting of her book deconstructs her previous writing, and along with it her identity and her understanding of the gods." Mineko Honda adds that "with Orual, the reader is also forced to reinterpret the invisibility of the castle and to think over the character of Orual, of God, and of Reality." That is, Lewis's novel, by its very structure, invites readers to participate in Orual's redemption and sanctification. This is what leads Mara Donaldson to argue that the novel "is itself a story about the nature and importance of story".

The same can be said of *Smith of Wootton Major*. When Smith meets the Queen of Faery on his last journey to that land, he lowers his eyes in shame both for himself and for his fellow humans, remembering the dancing doll on top of the cake when he was a child. In some way, readers also participate in this shame because the novel is structured in the beginning so that they will not judge Nokes's decoration too harshly. When the Queen in effect forgives and blesses Smith, readers in some way participate in these as well.

Looking back at these novels and what they have meant to me, I realize that they have in a way had some of the same effect of 'baptizing' my imagination as Lewis reported upon reading *Phantastes*. I believe that something may be glimpsed in these novels that is deeper and more true than



our world of laptops, haircuts, MySpace, Halo 3 and hotdogs. Something may be glimpsed that lies at the heart of why we write and read stories in the first place. On that note, I would like to end with my favourite lines from Smith, the words the Queen speaks to Smith after he remembers and is ashamed of the doll on top of the cake: "Do not be grieved for me, Starbrow, nor too much ashamed for your own folk. Better a little doll, maybe, than no memory of Faery at all. For some only a glimpse. For some the awakening." M

1. Lewis, C. S. *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis* 590 (HarperCollins, 2005).
2. Lewis, C. S. *Till We Have Faces: A Myth Retold* 3, 48–9, 61, 71–6, 289, 294 (Harcourt, 1984).
3. Tolkien, J. R. R. 'Smith of Wootton Major' in *Smith of Wootton Major: Extended Edition* (ed. Flieger, V.) 84–101, 100–1 (Harper Collins, 2005).

This essay was originally given as a presentation at the Southwest Conference of Christianity and Literature in Dallas, Texas (October 2007). For those of you familiar with the nerves, scheduling, strong coffee and attempted courtesy of academic conferences, the paper went off remarkably smoothly. It assured this first-time graduate student that perhaps an academic career was on the cards. I'm thankful to many who have helped and are helping me share this paper and these thoughts again.

The words of Húrin and Morgoth: microcosm, macrocosm and the later legendarium

KRISTINE LARSEN

In a 1951 letter to Milton Waldman (ref. 1, p. 144), Tolkien explained that "once upon a time … I had in mind to make a body of more or less connected legend, ranging from the large and cosmogonic, to the level of fairy story." Although he never completed this life's work, the one most dear to his heart, through the dedicated hands of his son Christopher, a version of this grand tale was finally published more than 30 years ago as *The Silmarillion*. However, as Verlyn Flieger warns us[2], "the published *Silmarillion* gives a misleading impression of coherence and finality, as if it were a canonical text, whereas the mass of material from which that volume was taken is a jumble of overlapping and often competing stories, annals, and lexicons." Our first peek into the sausage making that Christopher had taken upon himself was in the volume *Unfinished Tales*, which included an enlarged version of the story of Túrin Turambar entitled 'Narn I Hîn Húrin'. Christopher Tolkien placed the major work on this saga to the 1950s, after the completion of *The Lord of the Rings*. One brief section of this 100+ page-long story is entitled 'The Words of Húrin and Morgoth', a two-page conversation between Morgoth and his prisoner Húrin. Although interesting, the true depth of this section could not be discerned until the later publication of the *History of Middle-earth* volumes, especially *Morgoth's Ring*. For in that volume, we see the depth and breadth of Tolkien's post-*LOTR* revisiting of the legendarium.

Christopher Tolkien calls these writings a "record of prolonged interior debate" (ref. 3, p. 370), including attempts to make the cosmological elements of the legendarium more clearly aligned with the real universe. Among the elements of Tolkien's "dismantling and reconstruction" (ref. 3, p. 370) are the following: Melkor's ultimate power, especially in relation to 'The Elder King', Manwë; Melkor's marring of the world, and how he became bound to the physical world; the Fall of Humans; the ultimate fate of Arda.

Christopher Tolkien provides a valuable window into his father's later thoughts on these issues in such texts as 'Laws and Customs Among the Eldar', the 'Athrabeth Finrod Ah Andreth', the essays referred to as 'Myths Transformed', and various versions of the 'Ainulindalë'. However, 'The Words of