

Study Guide

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T C.S. Lewis's TILL WE HAVE FACES Adapted by Karen Lund

About the Play

Till We Have Faces is a novel by C.S. Lewis that has been adapted for the stage by Taproot Theatre's Producing Artistic Director Karen Lund. The novel retells the story of Cupid and Psyche, an ancient myth that comes to us through a 2nd-century AD novel *Metamorphoses* by Lucius Apuleius Madaurensis, which was adapted from a lost Greek original.

Metamorphoses summary:

"Psyche is the most beautiful woman on earth, and Venus jealously arranges for Psyche's destruction, ordering her son Cupid to arrange for her to fall in love with a worthless wretch. An oracle tells Psyche's parents to expose her on a mountain peak, where she will become the bride of a powerful, monstrous being. Psyche is left on the mountain, and carried away by a gentle wind. Cupid, Venus's son, secretly protects Psyche; Cupid becomes Psyche's mysterious husband, who is invisible to her by day and visits her only at night. Psyche's jealous sisters arouse her curiosity and fear about her husband's identity; Psyche, against Cupid's commands, looks at him by lamplight which wakes Cupid; Cupid abandons Psyche, who wanders in search of him, and takes revenge on her wicked sisters. Psyche is forced to perform various tasks for Venus (including an errand to the underworld) with the help of Cupid and an assortment of friendly creatures, and is finally reunited with her husband. Then Jupiter transforms Psyche into a goddess." (Wikipedia)

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Lewis introduces a number of changes in his version of the story. *Till We Have Faces* is told through the eyes of Orual, Psyche's sister, and introduces her biases and jealousies. From Orual's point of view, the marriage between Psyche and the mysterious god is not a love story, but a threat that steals her sister away. Orual's point of view, from which she compares herself to the beautiful Psyche, leads her to consider herself ugly. The goddess of Lewis's story is not Venus/Aphrodite, but the underworld's Ungit. When Orual visits Psyche on the mountain, Orual is unable to see the castle that Psyche believes she lives in and declares it a delusion—a part of the story that has no equivalent in the original. In Lewis's story, Psyche agrees to look at Cupid (here, God of the Grey Mountain) not because of her curiosity and fear but because Orual has threatened her into doing so.



Watching these changes can give us a sense of what Lewis considers important in his telling of the story. In his story, Psyche's palace is invisible—whether it even exists is itself a question—because he is concerned with issues of belief. Lewis uses those issues to try to create a more mythical quality to the story by avoiding realism. That said, Lewis also added some specific historic details (particularly in its geography) that a myth would usually not contain, to try to ground it in some believable, if not realistic, authenticity.

Lewis separates Orual's story into two parts. In the first, she is old and bitter at the gods for their treatment of her. At the end of the first part, she is confronted with a different version of the story she has been telling, one in which her love for Psyche is selfish and in which she treats others badly as a result. Having had her own myth-telling questioned, in the second part of the story Orual gains self-awareness; she stops blaming the gods for her predicament and begins to sacrifice her own needs for those of others. This character growth, and focus on sacrifice, is also missing in the original story. This play largely dramatizes the first part of Lewis' story; the confrontation that leads Orual to growth and self-awareness is the climax of our play.

Did you know?

Lewis originally titled his work *Bareface*, a reference to Orual's use of the veil in the story. His editor rejected it, fearing readers would mistake it for a Western. Lewis didn't see a problem, but chose to refer to a line from the book, Orual's "How can (the gods) meet us face to face till we have faces?" For Lewis, this line suggests that people must ideally be speaking with their own voice and expressing their own desires, not hiding behind a veil or persona, or expressing others' opinions.

Interestingly, when Lewis was an atheist early in his life, he considered Orual correct in her opinion that the gods were to blame for her fate. His first writings about the topic didn't have the book's second part or Orual's metamorphosis into someone who could learn to spread blame more broadly.



Setting:

Lewis described the setting as "a guess at what it might have been like in a little barbarous state on the borders of the Hellenistic world, with Greek culture just beginning to affect it." From the script we know that the play occurs after the death of Socrates and before the birth of Jesus, giving it a possible span of 400 years (399 BCE–1 CE). This production is set just after the death of Alexander the Great (323 BCE), at the beginning of the Hellenistic Period. Glome, the main setting, is a mythical location with no counterpart in the real world.



About C.S. Lewis

Clive Staples Lewis was born in Belfast, Ireland in 1898. He grew up surrounded by books and was an avid reader. In 1905, Warren, his older brother by three years and his only sibling, was sent to boarding school in England, leaving Lewis to withdraw into a world of imagination, reading widely as well as writing and illustrating his own stories. His mother died of cancer in 1908, and

his father never fully recovered. Both boys felt estranged from their father for years. Suffering, Lewis became an atheist by 1912.



C.S. Lewis. Photo: Arthur P. Strong © Ingrid Franzon)

Lewis entered Oxford University in 1917 and basically stayed his whole life; even interruptions to fight in World War I and a multi-year professorship at Cambridge didn't shake Oxford as his sense of home. There, he dove into the corners of his mind and began writing books. Over time, he began to experience a spiritual awakening. In 1929, he rejected his atheism and became a communicant in the Church of England.

Alongside his academic writing, Lewis began writing works based in his Christianity, works of Christian apologetics as well as others like the seven-volume

Chronicles of Narnia series, which were a direct Christian allegory. He became known as a Christian apologist, and his fame grew too.

Lewis married American Joy Davidman Gresham, a Jewish woman who converted to Christianity in part because of Lewis's writings, in 1956. She passed away in 1960 after a fight with cancer. Her influence on *Till We Have Faces* was so profound that Lewis told a friend that she was his co-author. He considered his 1956 *Till We Have Faces* the best book of his career. Not well-received at the time, its reputation has grown steadily over time and has now caught up to Lewis's high opinion of it.

Lewis died in 1963.



Joy Davidman and C.S. Lewis

Did you know?

An early version of this script began and ended with actors playing the real-life C.S. Lewis and his wife, Joy Gresham, as a kind of framing device for the main story. Playwright Karen Lund abandoned the framing after Gresham's son Douglas objected.

Characters in The Play



Orual



Candace Vance

Young Orual



Alanah Pascual

Orual: The eldest daughter of Trom, King of Glome. In our portrayal of *Till We Have Faces*, Orual's "ugliness" is not a physical deformity, but simply a matter of how the people around her perceive her (in comparison to her sisters) and how she then learns to perceive herself. But this perception of herself becomes a key part of her identity and her sense of self-worth.

Psyche (New Queen, et al)



Ayo Tushinde

Psyche: Orual's step-sister, the character from the original myth. Known as a great beauty.

Redival (Judge, et al)



Melanie Godsey

Redival: The middle sister, three years younger than Orual, and less kind.

The King (Old Man, et al)



Nolan Palmer

The King: Most often described with adjectives that indicate force and noise. He is an overwhelming presence in Orual's life. She gives his name at the very beginning of the book, but nobody calls him by his name... ever.

Batta, Ansit (et al)



Kim Morris

Batta: A slave and nurse to Orual and her sisters. Close to the King and Redival. Described as "hard-handed".

Ansit: The wife of Bardia, who unusually for the time married her for love, not a dowry.

The Priest, Arnom (et al)



Jeff Allen Pierce

The Priest: Portrayed as a scheming politician, but also a devotee of the goddess Ungit and a priest in her service.

Arnom: The "second priest" and a successor to the Priest after his death. Presented as a little more open than the original Priest.

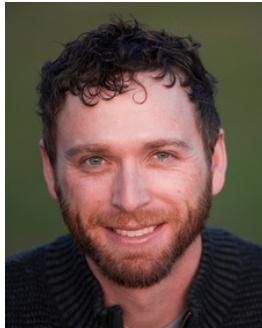
The Fox (et al)



Eric Polani Jensen

The Fox: Formerly a free man, taken as a slave in war and sold to the King as a tutor for his daughters. A Stoic (see section on Stoicism).

Bardia (et al)



Brian Pucheu

Bardia: A slave and the captain of the King's guards.

Cupid/Trunia (Tarin/Illeridia/etc al)



Brandon Reil

Cupid: Referred to here as the God of the Grey Mountain, he is the son of the goddess Ungit, (who plays a similar role to Aphrodite/Venus, goddess of love and beauty). The god of desire and affection.

Trunia: One of 13 sons of the King of Phars. A bit of a flirt.

Understudies



Marianna de Fazio



Ashleigh Coe



Rebecca Gelzer



Frank Lawler



Rowan Gallagher

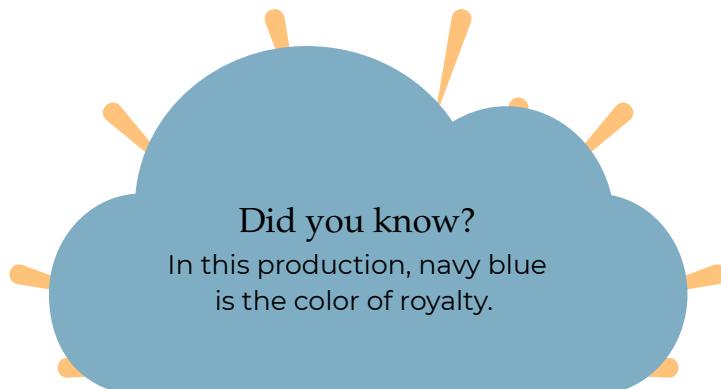
Other mythical Greek figures mentioned in the play:

Anchises: One of two mortal lovers of Aphrodite. Ultimately struck by one of Zeus's thunderbolts.

Andromeda: Chained to a rock as punishment for her mother Cassiopeia's boasting that Andromeda was more beautiful than the Nereids (sea nymphs). Freed by and later married to Perseus.

Helen: Helen of Troy, said to be the most beautiful woman in the world, daughter of Zeus; her marriage caused the Trojan War.

Zeus: King of the gods.



Themes and Motifs



The Four Loves

C.S. Lewis categorizes love into four types: affection, friendship, romantic love, and divine love. Lewis argues that while the first three natural loves are vital, they become dangerously imbalanced if they are loved in place of God, and that true fulfillment is found in balancing natural loves with divine love.

Joy and Longing

For Lewis, joy was a kind of longing. To him, the longings that people experience when encountering art, music, or the beauty of nature were examples of our souls longing for the divine. Lewis's autobiography is titled *Surprised by Joy*.

The Value of the pre-Christian

Lewis argued that the "pagan knowledge" of the ancient world, while flawed, contains a better understanding of the truth than modern attitudes which focuses only on materialism. The Fox teaches morality and ethics, Bardia has a simple acceptance of the power of the gods, but it is Psyche who combines the two views, believing in gods who are both good and powerful.

Divinity as Both Beautiful and Terrible

Lewis's descriptions of the divine across his writings describe something both beautiful and terrible: good, but not safe. Aslan in the *Chronicles of Narnia* is continually described as loving but not tame. Psyche and Orual describe the divine in similar terms.

Beauty, Ugliness, and the Veil

The metaphors of beauty & ugliness in this story focus on the inner truth of a person and the state of their soul. However, the association of beauty with goodness and ugliness with evil is a standard trope in myths, and both Psyche and Orual are judged on their outward appearances. Orual uses the veil to hide from the gaze of others, but it also becomes symbolic of the truth about herself that she is refusing to face.



Additional Background

Stoicism

Stoicism was a philosophy in the ancient world that believed the universe operated according to reason. Its followers believed in logical reasoning and were committed to philosophical discourse. Stoics believed in practicing the four cardinal virtues—prudence, fortitude, temperance, and justice—and in living in accordance with nature. The Fox in this play is a Stoic.

Women and Warrior Queens

Women had a bit more power and influence in Hellenistic society than in other areas at the time, and a few were able to gain power and wealth. In the nearby Germanic tribes, women had fewer opportunities but could inherit property and occasionally gain political influence.

In Lewis's novel, Orual declares that anyone announcing her wartime deeds to be great probably has her confused with a warrior queen from an earlier time. The ancient world does contain multiple tales of fighting queens in Europe and beyond, but *Till We Have Faces* doesn't specifically refer to any of them.

Slavery

Slavery existed in the Hellenistic world and among the nearby Germanic tribes, including both those who had been born into slavery and those, formerly free, who had been captured in war and enslaved. While an entire conquered people might have been enslaved in the ancient world, it was never justified on the basis of race, like the slavery later known in the New World.

Q & A with Playwright: Karen Lund



How did you decide to create this adaptation?

I fell in love with this book when I first read it in the late 1990s, and I visualized it. From the moment I read it, I could see it on stage. It never occurred to me that I would actually get the permission to be able to adapt it, but I reached out to the C.S. Lewis Foundation to just let them know that we have an audience that's interested. And they immediately were intrigued and signed on in 2010, and so I've been working kind of diligently since then to get something that I thought was really ready.



What is it about the story that was visual to you, that feels theatrical to you?

What I love about this play is that it's both epic and highly personal. The epic nature—it reminds me of *The Odyssey* and so much of our tradition in theatre with the Greeks; It reminds me of Euripides, and Aeschylus, so it has all of the great Greek traditions of theatre, but then there's something about it that's modern and personal as well. And I love that combination. So it's very heightened storytelling, but very emotional and personal at the same time.

Did you know?

C.S. Lewis has been a favorite on the Taproot Theatre stage. In January–February 2025, we performed *Lewis & Tolkien*, an imagined conversation between Lewis and his friend J.R.R. Tolkien. In December 2025, our Christmas touring program performed a version of *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*, and our Acting Studio students performed a another version. We've also staged *Shadowlands* (about Lewis and his wife in 2004), *The Great Divorce* (by Lewis in 2010), and *Freud's Last Session* (Lewis is a main character in 2012), as well as an earlier tour of *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe* (1977-79).

Q & A with Playwright: Karen Lund



Do you think there are differences between Lewis's version of the story and yours?

I think my key motivator was to fully illuminate what Lewis was trying to say with his story. That being said, any interpretation is simply that: an interpretation. And it has to be driven by your own point of view. So, I would be remiss to think that it was completely what he had in mind, even though that's my intention. What Lewis was trying to do with this script was getting us to look at ourselves, and see ourselves through these characters, so I really wanted to make sure I was honoring that.

What do you hope audiences will get out of this production?

I hope that they will actually begin to see themselves as part of their own epic story, that each of us is the hero or heroine of our own epic story, and that we have no idea as we walk through it the impact we're making on those around us, on our society, on our neighbors, classmates, and families, and we'll start to recognize that each one of our actions resonates, and those resonations can be positive or negative, as we choose to make them.

You've directed a lot of plays, and this time you're not directing. Do you have your own vision for the design of this play, or are you trying not to have your own vision?

I am purposefully turning over all the visual and conceptual ideas to our director, so that she can then be another voice. So, we have C.S. Lewis's voice, and then my interpretation of that, and then the director is taking my script. When you're directing a play, the script becomes more sacred than the original text. So, the script is what she's going to be illuminating, and I've really left it to her. I would be disingenuous if I said I didn't have my own visual ideas, but I'm keeping them very much to myself, so that this director can create something totally unique.



Pre-show Discussion Questions



1. Have you read anything by C.S. Lewis? What was your impression of what you read? What does your previous experience reading Lewis lead you to think you will be seeing on stage in a different Lewis story?
2. What is your experience of the mythological character Cupid? What are your expectations of a play that puts Cupid onstage as a character?
3. Orual asks, "How can the gods meet us face to face till we have faces?" Before watching the play, what sense (if any) do you make of that question?

Activity: Find two different versions of the Cupid and Psyche myth (written, or in any of the other areas of art in which their story has been retold: painting, sculpture, poetry, drama, or opera). How are they different? What do those differences suggest as far as the kinds of choices artists need to make when dramatizing this story?

- If you wanted to retell the story of Cupid and Psyche in a different context (modern, or from a distinct point in history), what time period(s) do you think you would want to use? Which eras would make the best sense of the story?

Things to Think About While Watching the Show



1. What clues do you have as to the time period this performance is set in? How do individual design elements contribute to those clues? (In addition to costumes, sets, and sound, be sure to think about the lighting design here!)
2. Think about the role of the costumes in this play. What elements from history can you see? Compare the costumes of the old priest and the new priest—what do you know about the difference in their characters just from what they are wearing?
3. There is a lot of fabric on stage during this show. What is the purpose of the fabric used in both the sets and props here? How does it advance the storytelling?
4. One of Karen Lund's goals for this script is to bring an epic story down to include to level of the intimate. In what ways are intimate elements included in this story? How do they help create the play's overall effect?

Post-show Discussion Questions and Activities



1. In what ways did *Till We Have Faces* meet your expectations? In what ways was it surprising?
2. Go back to the question "How can the gods meet us face to face till we have faces?" Do you make better (or just different) sense of this question now that you've seen the play?
3. Compare this version of the Cupid and Psyche myth to the others you have encountered. Do you understand the changes that Lewis has made to his story? Do you agree with them?

Activity: Pick an art form and retell the myth of Cupid and Psyche in a different historical context. In what ways do you come to a new understanding of the myth, or of Lewis's work dramatizing it?

Taproot's Education Programs



In-School Residencies & Workshops

From drama games to acting classes to putting on a production, Taproot Theatre's residencies can range from several weeks to months, or an entire school year. Whether during the school day or after school as an enrichment program, let Taproot's trained teaching artists introduce a whole new world to your students.

Our theatre arts professional will visit your classroom for a workshop that will inspire and excite your students. They will develop basic acting skills and explore non-theatre curriculum using theater as a medium.



Touring Productions

The Road Company performs social-emotional learning plays for elementary and secondary schools, focusing on bullying prevention and social responsibility.

Taproot also provides touring Christmas productions during the holidays and Improv comedy year-round for churches, clubs, office parties, and other groups.

Learn more about Taproot Theatre's education programs by visiting www.taproottheatre.org.



Camps & Classes

Taproot Theatre Company's Acting Studio is a year-round instructional program for theatre artists of all ages and experience levels. We are devoted to the wholeness of the artist with the goal of creating a nurturing environment to help each student develop his or her unique gifts.