C.S. Lewis’s myth *Till We Have Faces* is the epitome of his understanding of spiritual formation, as it is a culmination of many epistemological questions of the self and the Divine that Lewis raises in his other fictional works. In this paper, I will argue that Lewis’ primary sense of spiritual formation is evident in his depiction of the transformative experience of truly seeing and knowing oneself in relation to others and to the Divine. In addition, I will suggest that some of the primary ways this type of spiritual formation is possible is through deep immersion in the Christian narrative through liturgy, spiritual practice, and mutual relationship with others.

One of the most obvious themes in *Till We Have Faces* is that the transformation of a person occurs when one has known one incomplete, often false story and is awakened to the complete, true story of the Divine. This is seen through the process of growth demonstrated in the character of Orual. Through the majority of the story, Orual has known and believed only one story: that she is ugly, often unwanted, and unloved. Her life is filled with suffering and abuse. And in an effort to fill some of that void, she begins to expend alot of energy into loving her younger, more beautiful and virtuous sister Psyche. Through this relationship, Lewis demonstrates the way in which love can easily turn to hate or idolatry. Orual becomes extremely possessive of Psyche and eventually convinces Psyche to do things that cost her much joy and send her into exile. Orual, however, is unable to recognize this and thinks that she is loving Psyche well and has only Psyche’s best interest at heart.
Orual’s transformation does not occur until the end of the book when she tries to read the book she has written and comes to realize that the story she has understood this whole time is not the story that actually happened. She begins to see that she did, out of hate for herself, come to hate Psyche. This self-knowledge is what opens her eyes and heart to the truth, and creates space for her to be formed by the new story. Holyer contends, “The point of the novel is..that our grasp of ultimate truth must grow out of a grasp of truth about ourselves.”¹ Similarly, Myers asserts, “Till We Have Faces is the story of the soul's journey to love and to God the source of love — a journey that...can be accomplished only through self-knowledge.”² Both authors conclude that what we know about ourselves is intricately intertwined with what we know of the Divine (and vice versa).

Dr. Stearns spoke about this in terms of “double knowledge.” She quotes Sharon Jebb-Smith, saying, “The self must reach beyond itself and towards God.”³ In a moment of utter desperation and despair, Orual presented to the gods just how abused, neglected, and wronged by them that she felt. It is only through the realization of her own role in her unhappiness that Orual was able to come to accept reality and also embrace the Divine. She sought an answer to the questions she had asked herself her whole life: why are the gods doing this to me? Why are they taking the one thing (Psyche) I love away? In the very last chapter, after she has begun to grow in self-

¹ Robert Holyer, “The Epistemology of C.S. Lewis’s Till We Have Faces,” Anglican Theological Review 70, no. 3 (1988): 255.


³ Chelle Stearns, Narnia and Double Knowledge” (lecture, SFD 522, Mars Hill Graduate School, Seattle, WA, May 27, 2010).
knowledge, Orual writes, “The complaint was the answer. To have heard myself making it was to be answered.” The realization was that though she intended good, she was filled with much bitterness, envy, and hatred. This understanding is what finally set her free.

This theme of double knowledge is present in many of Lewis’s other fictional works and also is closely related to the theme mentioned previously of entering into knowledge of another, more complete and more true story. Many of the characters in The Great Divorce deal with this very issue. Their decision of whether or not they wish to remain in a hell of unknowing, or make the painful journey towards heaven, is based on whether or not they are able to see, know, and accept certain things about who they are and what is their sin. One character in particular demonstrates this: the beautiful Lady in chapter 12. She has found self-knowledge and is in heaven, serving as a guide. She serves as a guide to the Tragedian, someone who she had tried to love on Earth. But she has realized that her love was not true:

“You mean,” said the Tragedian, “you mean—you did not love me truly in the old days.”
“Only in a poor sort of way,” she answered. “I have asked you to forgive me...in the main I loved you for my own sake: because I needed you.”

Through this character, Lewis again demonstrates similar themes as he did with Orual: that when we keep ourselves trapped in knowledge of ourselves that is rooted only in what we see and know from our limited experience, we keep ourselves in a sort of oppressive hell. But, if like the Lady and Orual, we are able to open ourselves up to the

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4 C.S. Lewis, Till We Have Faces: A Myth Retold (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 1956), 294.
Divine and accept knowledge and receive grace for the ways we sin, we are set free.

The story of Narcissus is appropriate here. Narcissus saw but a poor reflection of himself in the pool, but was so captivated with the reflection that he fell in the pool and drowned. For Lewis, it seems that what is required is a measure of faith that lets us see and know that the poor reflection we see is not all there is; it is not the complete, true story. It is a faith that lets us see the Divine as good and not evil, as for us and not against us. This faith is illustrated in the character of Lucy from the Chronicles of Narnia. In one great scene from *Prince Caspian*, Lucy sees Aslan in the woods as she and the others are walking through the mountains. The others are not able to see Him and do not believe Lucy. Lucy, by faith, insists that He is there. This scene is very much like the scene from *Till We Have Faces* where Orual is unable to see the beautiful palace in which Psyche now lives with her husband. Lewis raises questions of epistemology and experience. How do we know what we know? Is it possible for some to see things others cannot? Holyer notes of Orual and Psyche, “Both affirmed the reality of the gods. They differed, however, as to whether the gods are ultimately good or evil.”

As was stated previously, Lewis’s spiritual theology necessitates practical application through deep immersion in the Christian narrative. I want to suggest that this is primarily done through liturgy, spiritual practice, and mutual relationship with others. Orual was unfortunate to have known only one story for most of her life: that she was ugly, unwanted, and unloved. Unable to see outside of this story, Orual did her

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6 Holyer, "The Epistemology of C.S. Lewis's Till We Have Faces," 238.
best to live well within it. But, it did not work. The liturgy of the Church is one of the
primary ways that we enter into a different narrative; the true, more complete narrative
given to us by a righteous God who calls us His people. The liturgy reminds us day to
day, week to week, year to year, that our identity and our existence is not rooted in the
sin and suffering we experience in our lives. Rather, our identity and existence is found
in Jesus Christ, through whom we hope for grace, peace, and transformation here and
now.

Our sin is not the only obstacle which keeps us from a full self-knowledge. Lewis
also considers the role of evil in our formation. In *The Screwtape Letters*, he writes, “it
is funny how mortals always picture us putting things into their minds: in reality our best
work is done by keeping things out.”\(^7\) We must struggle with our own sin, but we also
must deal with the reality of evil and the ways it thwarts our good intentions. Spiritual
practice—prayer, fasting, meditation on the Word, reconciliation, worship—all create
space for us to continually orient ourselves toward God and receive His grace. This is
especially important in light of the forces which shape us, though they are out of our
control.

Lastly, mutuality in relationship is incredibly important as we go through the
continual process of self-knowledge and understanding. Orual was lucky to have a
close friend in The Fox. Though they were not always completely honest with each
other, later in the story their friendship was a place where they felt free to share how
they had hurt one another and how they both contributed to Psyche’s misfortunes. The
poor reflection we see of ourselves, and the journey towards self-knowledge, can only

be worked out in relationship. We need the insight of those around us, and we need the conviction and guidance of the Spirit, the grace of Christ, the love of God, in order to truly see who we are and are meant to be.

Orual was rather unfortunate to not have been able to see the ways in which she contributed to her own unhappiness. Holyer notes that when we consider our relationship with God, “we must contend with both ambiguity and mystery.”

Within this ambiguity and mystery we must have faith that sometimes what we see is not necessarily what is real. We must be open to others’ observations about how we are living our lives. And above all, we must continually allow the narrative God has given us to define our identity and worth. If we press on with some of these things in mind, hopefully we can come to a greater understanding of ourselves that is rooted in God Himself and the purposes He has laid before us.

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8 Holyer, "The Epistemology of C.S. Lewis's Till We Have Faces," 238.
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