

LEWIS'S ISTRÁ AND FRAZER'S ISHTAR: CULTS AND RITUALS IN C.S. LEWIS'S *TILL WE HAVE FACES* (1956)

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SUMÁRIO

Este artigo examina a influência de *The Golden Bough* (1890-1915) de Sir James Frazer no último romance de C.S. Lewis *Till We Have Faces* (1956). O primeiro é um ensaio de antropologia subtítulo "um estudo em magia e religião", enquanto o último é um romance com subtítulo "um mito recontado". O foco principal deste artigo reside nas descrições de crenças e práticas religiosas, em particular a temática mítica da mãe divina e seu filho/amante. A relação Frazer-Lewis pode ser vista como um exemplo forte das ligações íntimas entre a academia do século dezanove e a 'mitopoeia' do século vinte. Assim, Frazer e Lewis aparecem como criadores de mitos e como antropólogos: Frazer começa como um antropólogo, mas acaba a sua escrita com algo que pode ser visto como uma coleção literária de mitos, enquanto Lewis, criador de mitos, se torna um antropólogo em seu mundo imaginado.

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the influence of Sir James Frazer's *Golden Bough* (1890-1915) upon *Till We Have Faces* (1956), the last novel of C. S. Lewis. The former is a research in anthropology subtitled 'a study in magic and religion', whereas the latter is a novel subtitled 'a myth retold'. The main focus of this article is on the descriptions of religious beliefs and practices, particularly the motif of the divine-mother-and-son/lover. The author argues that the Frazer-Lewis connection can be seen as a strong example of intimate links between nineteenth-century scholarship and twentieth-century mythopoeia. Thus both Frazer and Lewis appear to be mythmakers and anthropologists: Frazer starts as an anthropologist, but ends up writing what in a way can be seen as a literary collection of myths, whereas Lewis-the-mythmaker becomes an anthropologist in his own imaginary world.

THE FRAZER-LEWIS CONNECTION

The author of *The Golden Bough* (1890-1915), Sir James Frazer, is a somewhat controversial figure: contemporary anthropology regards him as 'the last great "armchair" evolutionist', 'a classicist who wrote sublimely and extensively on early religion and kinship' (Barbard & Spencer, 1996: 574). In other words, the fieldwork revolution in anthropology has entirely discredited Frazer's theory (at least, as far as his anthropological discoveries are concerned). And yet, *The Golden Bough* has remained in print for over a century, gradually moving the area of its influence from anthropology to literary criticism. Due to the beauty of its style, *The Golden Bough* has become perceived as a masterpiece of letters. For example, the twentieth-century critic Northrop Frye, the author of the groundbreaking *Anatomy of Criticism*, claims that: '*The Golden Bough* purports to be a work of anthropology, but it has had more influence on literary criticism than in its own alleged field, and it may yet prove to be really a work of literary criticism' (Frye, 1957: 109). What Frye said in the 1950s has been acquiring further proofs. Thus one of the most recent reprints of *The Golden Bough* was published in the *Wordsworth Reference Series* aimed at students of literature.¹ Interestingly, the publicity blurb on the back cover of this edition refers to Frazer as 'one of the founders of modern anthropology', the point that anthropologists themselves may dispute. But it also rightly mentions that Frazer's theory of the dying and reviving god, together with his descriptions of fertility rites, human sacrifice and other symbolic practices, influenced the whole generation of twentieth-century writers, including D.H. Lawrence, Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot.²

The name of C.S. Lewis (1898-1963) is not mentioned amongst the authors influenced by Frazer. In fact, just as with Frazer, Lewis's work occupies a rather ambiguous position when it comes to defining it in terms of conventional academic hierarchy of fields. He is chiefly known today as a popular Christian apologist and a writer of children's fantasy books such as

¹ I will use this edition for further page references which will be given in the main text.

² Laurence Coupe analyses the significance of Frazer's influence upon a number of twentieth-century authors, and T. S. Eliot in particular, in his recently published book *Myth* (1997) (reviewed in this issue of *Antropológicas*). The influence of Frazer upon science fiction is discussed by T.A. Shippey in his article '*The Golden Bough* and the Incorporations of Magic in Science Fiction', *Foundation* 12: 119-34.

The Chronicles of Narnia (1950-1956). But in fact Lewis dedicated his life to the academic study of medieval and Renaissance literature. From 1925 to 1954 he was a Fellow and Tutor at Magdalen College, Oxford, and in 1954 he was appointed Professor of Medieval and Renaissance English Literature at Cambridge. His most influential works in this field include *The Allegory of Love* (1936) and *A Preface to 'Paradise Lost'* (1942) and *The Discarded Image* (1964). During his three decades at Oxford, Lewis was also the central figure of the Inklings, an informal group of academics and writers, including J.R.R. Tolkien and Charles Williams amongst the members, who gathered in Lewis's rooms at Magdalen to read and discuss their work in progress (Carpenter, 1982). The main concern of these meetings was myth and mythopoeia. So it is Lewis's lifelong preoccupation with myth that becomes crucial for the present discussion.

Lewis's fascination with myth and mythology dates back to his childhood and adolescence. A great deal of useful information concerning Lewis's childhood reading of myths and mythopoeic literature can be found in his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy* (1954). During the period of 'Northernness' the stories about ancient gods came to replace his fading Christian faith, and helped to develop a taste for other mythologies. Although intimately connected with the study of great mythopoeic authors, this interest was largely "scientific". During his studies with a private tutor, William Kirkpatrick, Lewis was introduced to the reading of Homer in ancient Greek, along with many other authors and texts drawing on mythological material. By 1916 he had become a true expert on the Eddaic cosmos, and his interest in Valhalla and Valkyries, as Lewis puts it, 'began to turn itself imperceptibly into a scholar's interest in them' (Lewis, 1956: 157).

As Lewis admits in his autobiography, his 'Atheism and Pessimism were fully formed' before his studies with Kirk, whom he calls another atheist of 'the anthropological and pessimistic kind' (Lewis, 1956: 133). Lewis's beliefs of that period are expounded in his letters to Arthur Greeves, with whom Lewis argued about the meaning of Christianity on anthropological grounds, quoting statements about 'dying gods' and 'fertility rites' from Frazer's *The Golden Bough* and Lang's *Myth, Ritual and Religion*. In 1916 (aged 18) he wrote:

All religions, that is, all mythologies to give them a proper name are merely man's own invention – Christ as much as Loki. Primitive man surrounded himself by all sorts of terrible things he didn't understand

Gradually from being mere nature-spirits these supposed being[s] were elevated into more elaborate ideas, such as old gods: and when man became more refined he pretended that these spirits were good as well as powerful.

Thus religion, that is to say mythology grew up [...] and so Christianity came into being – one mythology among many, but the one that we happen to have been brought up in. (Lewis, 1979: 135)

Further in this letter Lewis admits that these comments are not his original thoughts. They are firmly based upon ‘the recognised scientific account of the growth of religions’ (ibid.). One can see that his understanding of myth was deeply rooted in the explanation given by Darwin’s theory of evolution as adopted by the British anthropological school originated by Tylor. On the other hand, as Lewis later confessed, the stories about dying and reviving gods prepared him to ‘feel the myths as profound and suggestive of meaning beyond my grasp even tho’ I could not say in cold prose “what they meant”’ (Lewis, 1979: 427).

Thus Frazer played an important part in shaping Lewis’s outlook before the latter’s conversion to Christianity. But here the association between the two authors usually ends. Lewis’s later works were strongly affected by his rediscovery of Christianity, and it is this fact that is usually emphasised and explored by researchers. I will now argue that Frazer’s influence on Lewis was lifelong and found a particularly strong outlet in *Till We Have Faces*, his last novel.

CULTS AND RITUALS IN *TILL WE HAVE FACES*

Till We Have Faces is a retelling of the myth of Cupid and Psyche as presented in Apuleius’s *Metamorphoses* or *The Golden Ass*. The central alteration in Lewis’s version is making Psyche’s palace invisible to the normal human eye. This change brings in a whole different aspect to the character of the heroine, whom Lewis saw as a naturally Christian soul born at the time of paganism. Lewis considered the novel his best book. He also mentioned that this tale had lived in his mind, ‘thickening and hardening with years, ever since he was an undergraduate’ (Lewis 1978: 8), that is when he still saw the world through the prism of Frazer’s anthropology. In what follows, I will show that Lewis’s descriptions of religious practices and rituals in *Till We Have Faces* were inspired by particular fragments of Frazer’s *Golden Bough*.

When writing the novel, Lewis was not solely occupied with his retelling of the myth. He also worked as an anthropologist, carefully considering the society of his imagined world, including its religion, cults and rituals.

Lewis's story takes place in an imaginary semi-barbaric Kingdom of Glome, situated on the borders of the Hellenistic world. The king has two daughters, Orual and Redival, and it is Orual who is supposedly the author of the tale. After the death of the queen, the king marries another princess who gives birth to his third daughter called Istra (which means Psyche in the language of Glome). This second wife dies in giving birth. Orual, an ugly and passionate girl, loves the beautiful Istra who also causes more and more admiration and even worship amongst the people of Glome as she grows up. Then many evils and misfortunes come to the land, and the Priest of the goddess Ungit sees Istra as the cause of this bad fortune. The Priest convinces the king that Ungit's anger can only be calmed if someone pure is chosen as 'the Accursed' to be given to the Shadowbrute that has been seen on the Grey Mountain near the city of Glome. So Istra is to be sacrificed to the Shadowbrute but is taken away by the God of the Grey Mountain, the son of Ungit. When Orual goes to bury Psyche's remains, she does not find any, but instead encounters Istra herself. Istra says that she is married to a god whose face she is forbidden to see, and Orual finally persuades her to disobey her husband. When she does, Istra is sent to exile and Orual is confronted by the god himself who tells her that she 'also shall be Psyche'. After that, Orual tries to forget her sister. She becomes the queen of Glome and is busy ruling her country. One day on her journey abroad, she comes across a temple dedicated to the worship of a new goddess Istra. The priest of Istra tells her a myth, the details of which coincide with what had happened during her own meeting with Istra, something that only Orual alone knew. But the priest's story also has a few deviations, saying that Istra's life with her husband was destroyed through her sisters' jealousy. Thus Orual decides to write her own account of the story, and this is the story that we read. The book ends with Orual's vision of herself as the devouring Ungit. Orual undergoes various tasks that Psyche had to go through, until she finally meets her sister and is reconciled with her. Istra brings her sister beauty from Persephone, so the reader is given a new view of Orual, an entirely approving one. Having undergone this change, Orual dies shortly after the vision.

As for religious beliefs and ceremonies practiced in Glome, the main temple is dedicated to Ungit, a kind of great mother goddess. The priest of Ungit

holds the position next to the king. At the beginning of the book the image of Ungit is described as 'a black stone without head or hands or face' (Lewis, 1978: 12). According to the myth, the sacred stone pushed its way up out of the earth, 'a foretaste of, or an ambassador from, whatever things may live and work down there [...] under the dark and weight and heat. [...] she had no face; but [...] she had a thousand faces.' (Lewis, 1978: 281) (Here Lewis echoes Joseph Campbell). According to Orual's Greek tutor, nicknamed the Fox, Ungit is the same whom the Greeks call Aphrodite (or Venus in Rome). Ungit has a son, the God of the Grey Mountain, but he does not live in her house. The Priest of Ungit has a somewhat terrifying appearance: a temple-smell of blood hanging around him and clothes made of dried skins and bladders, with a great mask shaped like a birds head, 'as if there were a bird growing out of his body' (Lewis, 1978: 19).

The argument between the old Priest and the Greek slave Fox about the importance of the great sacrifice for Ungit's satisfaction and for the well-being of Glome represents a significant episode for the discussion of ritual and Frazerian echoes in Lewis's novel. The old Priest comes to the King's palace to speak on behalf of Ungit and all the people of Glome. According to him, all the misfortunes that fell on Glome – the famine, the pestilence, the drought, expectations of war, the lions, and the King's barrenness of male offspring – are due to Ungit's anger that can only be calmed by the rite of the Great Offering. The Accursed must be offered to the Brute that has been seen by a shepherd on the Grey Mountain. The Fox counter-argues that the vision of the Brute was probably no more than a shadow: 'the shepherd's tale is very questionable. If the man had a torch, of necessity the lion would have been a big black shadow behind it. [...] He took a shadow for a monster' (Lewis, 1978: 56). But the old Priest does not agree with this logical explanation: many people say the Brute *is* a shadow. He scares the King with the rebellion of his people and explains how the Great Offering is done:

'It is not done in the house of Ungit. [...] The victim must be given to the Brute. For the Brute is, in a mystery, Ungit herself or Ungit's son, the God of the Mountain; or both. The victim is led up the mountain to the Holy Tree, and bound to the Tree and left. Then the Brute comes. [...] In the Great Offering the victim 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 both are called the Brute's supper. [...] Some say the loving and the devouring are all the same thing. [...] The best in the land are not too good for this office.' (Lewis 1978: 56-57)

Once again, the Fox asks the King's permission to speak. The Priest's talk is full of contradictions: a shadow is an animal, a god and a goddess; loving is eating, the victim is both the Accursed and the best in the land to be married to the god. Yet in the Priest's opinion, in spite of all its subtlety, Greek wisdom is of no use when it comes to religious beliefs and their ritual practice. The Priest says that such wisdom:

'brings no rain and grows no corn; sacrifice does both. [...] They demand to see such things clearly, as if the gods were no more than letters written in a book. I, King, have dealt with the gods for three generations of men, and I know that they dazzle our eyes and flow in and out of one another like eddies on a river, and that nothing that is said clearly can be said truly about them. [...] Holy wisdom is not clear and thin like water, but thick and dark like blood. Why should the Accursed not be both the best and the worst?' (Lewis 1978: 56-57)

By this moment, the strength of argument certainly lies on the Priest's side, which ultimately results in the sacrifice of Istra. In the rational world of today the Fox would have certainly won, but not in the story. At that stage of Glome's history, belief and its ritual aspect determine the course of action. What is more, as if a further proof of the old Priest's claim, the "accursed" Istra does become the wife of the God of the Mountain. Thus we can conclude that, although fully sympathetic with the Fox throughout the whole story, in this episode Lewis makes his old Priest to be closer to the truth than the rationalist Fox. The difference between the old Priest and the new one can provide an example of the Frazerian idea of the decline of belief into ritual and magic into religion.

When Orual becomes the Queen of Glome, a new woman-shaped image of Ungit is made and brought from the lands where people learned from the Greeks. Yet the people of Glome continue to worship the old stone, since, in the light of Frazer's theory, they are still closer to magic than to religion. The new Priest of Ungit learns to talk about the goddess in a more philosophical Greek-like manner. He tells Orual that Ungit 'signifies the earth, which is the womb and mother of all living things' (Lewis, 1978: 281). But the queen goes on to ask:

'... in what way is she the mother of the god of the Mountain?'

'He is the air and the sky; for we see the clouds coming up from the earth in mists and exhalations.'

‘Then why do the stories sometimes say he’s her husband too?’
‘That means that the sky by its showers makes the earth fruitful.’
(Lewis, 1978: 282)

So Ungit is a great mother goddess, and her son/husband represents the air and the sky. Next I will analyse the rituals celebrated in her temple.

The rite of the Year’s birth is Lewis’s most detailed description of the rituals celebrated in the house of Ungit. It consists of the following. The Priest of Ungit is shut in the temple from sunset, and fights his way out on the following noon. Then he is said to be born. As Lewis comments,

like all these sacred matters, it is and it is not [...] . For the fight is with wooden swords, and instead of blood wine is poured over the combatants, and though they say he is shut into the house, it’s only the great door to the city and the west that is shut, and the two smaller doors at the other end are open and common worshippers go in and out at will. (Lewis, 1978: 279)

The morning of the Birth is preceded by a lot of censing and slaughtering, pouring of wine and of blood, dancing and feasting, and burning of fat. Apart from the Priest, the house of Ungit is tended by temple girls who sit in rows, each at the door of her sell, year after year. Orual thinks how these girls are devoured by Ungit, together with silver and sacrificed animals, but nothing is given back.

The rite of the Year’s birth ends when the Priest comes out to the daylight. A great crowd await him outside the temple, shouting ‘He is born! He is born!’, ‘whirling their rattles, and throwing wheat-seed into the air’ (Lewis, 1978: 284), feeling overwhelming joy. As will be shown later, the house of Ungit and the rituals practiced there are strongly reminiscent of a number of those described by Frazer in his *Golden Bough*. But before proceeding to the discussion of Frazer, another observation should be made about the cult of Istra in *Till We Have Faces*.

The Priest of Istra tells Orual a sacred story of the new goddess, and his version is very much like the one told by Apuleius. According to him, two sisters visit Istra in her palace and can actually see it. The only reason they convince Istra to have a look at the face of her husband is their jealousy of her. That is why they decide to ruin Istra’s happiness. After the act of

disobedience, Istra wanders around the world weeping, until she falls under the power of Talapal (the local name of Ungit) and she sets her to various kinds of hard labours that seem impossible to do. But Istra manages to complete the tasks and is finally released by the goddess to be reunited with her husband and become a goddess herself. The cult of Istra is based on this myth. The image of the goddess is covered by a black veil during the season when she is under Talapal's power, but in spring the priest takes the black veil off and changes his own robe for a white one. So in spring and summer Istra is a goddess, but when harvest comes, a lamp is brought into the temple during the night and the god flies away. Then Istra is veiled again and stays like this till the following spring. In other words, here we have another myth and ritual connected with decline and rejuvenation. The story of Istra and her love for the God of the Mountain has become associated with the decay and revival of the world of vegetation. In addition, the radical difference between the story as told by the Priest of Istra and the true version as described by Orual is yet another example of the degradation of myth.

So, what is the relationship between the imagined ritual practices in Lewis's *Till We Have Faces* and the real ones depicted in Frazer's *Golden Bough*? The following section will demonstrate that the rites related to Ungit, the God of the Mountain, and Istra are strongly reminiscent of those dedicated to Ishtar or Astarte and Tammuz or Adonis as presented by Frazer.

THE DIVINE-MOTHER-AND-SON MOTIF IN *THE GOLDEN BOUGH*

Frazer's main thesis is that humanity progresses from magic to religious belief to scientific thought. He focuses on the relationship between the natural world, and vegetation in particular, and the myths and rituals of dying and reviving gods. Frazer argues that the spectacle of the changes of seasons made a powerful impression on the minds of early humanity. During the magical age, people thought themselves capable of hastening and retarding these changes by magic art. So ceremonies and rituals were performed in order to make the rain fall, the sun shine, and living things multiply. (As mentioned in the previous section, in *Till We Have Faces* this stage of development is represented by the ritual of the Great Offering of Istra.) With a slow advance of knowledge, people began to understand that the great changes of nature were beyond their actions, not everything happened as a result of their magical acts. This is how religious thought came into being. At this stage rituals were performed to 'help' gods in their

struggle with death. The ceremonies observed for this purpose were essentially based on imitation: one of the basic principles of magic is that you can achieve any desired effect by simply imitating it. As Frazer puts it:

And as they now explained the fluctuations of growth and decay, of reproduction and dissolution, by the marriage, the death, and the rebirth or revival of the gods, their religious or rather magical dramas turned in great measure on these themes. They set forth the fruitful union of the powers of fertility, the sad death of one at least of the divine partners, and his joyful resurrection. (Frazer, 1993: 324)

The changes of seasons and the rites related to them were celebrated more widely and solemnly in the lands bordering the eastern Mediterranean. The yearly decay and revival of life were represented by dying and reviving gods such as Osiris, Tammuz and Attis. Although varied in detail, these rituals were similar in substance. The myth of Tammuz (or Adonis in Greek) is particularly important with regard to the discussion of the God of the Mountain in *Till We Have Faces*.

In Babylonian religious literature Tammuz is described as the youthful spouse or lover of Ishtar, the great mother goddess who represents the reproductive energies of nature. The details of their connection are obscure, but it is known that Tammuz was believed to die and leave this world for the dark subterranean one, and that every year Ishtar was believed to go on a journey to the underworld in quest of him. Whilst she was absent from the upper world, the passion of love would stop and all life was under the threat of extinction. After all, the queen of the underworld, Allatu, allowed Ishtar to be sprinkled with the Water of Life and to depart, together with Tammuz, so that the couple may come back to the upper world and revive all nature. The story of Adonis is similar, though slightly modified in Greece. The argument between Aphrodite and Persephone was settled by Zeus who decided that Adonis should spend one part of the year with Aphrodite in the upper world, and the other part with Persephone in the underworld. (Frazer, 1993: 325-327)

The rites of Adonis were celebrated with particular solemnity in two temples dedicated to Astarte, a Semitic counterpart of Aphrodite. One was Byblus on the coast of Syria and the other was Paphos in Cyprus. Byblus was the Mecca or Jerusalem of the Phoenicians, and the temple of Astarte stood by the great river Adonis, just as Lewis's temple of Ungit stands by the river Shennit.

It is also noteworthy that in *Till We Have Faces* the rite of the Year's birth, dedicated to the God of the Mountain, is celebrated in the house of his mother Ungit. The custom of sacred harlots at the temple of Astarte is also reminiscent of the temple girls in the house of Ungit.

Frazer concludes that the worship of the great mother goddess personifying all the reproductive energies of nature and her divine son/lover was very popular amongst many people of Western Asia and later in the Roman Empire (Frazer, 1993: 356). In spite of small differences in names and details, the substance of myths and rituals was the same. As demonstrated earlier, Lewis must have been affected by this paradigm when writing his last novel.

Apart from the divine-mother-and-son connection, there are more proofs for Frazer's influence on Lewis. When Istra becomes a goddess, her cult is based on the change of seasons, the decay and revival of vegetation. This echoes the myth and cult of Ishtar (or Istar, as her name is also transcribed in English) as presented by Frazer. In fact, the link becomes even more obvious if we consider the names of the two goddesses. Lewis seems to have swapped the last two letters around and made 'Istar' 'Istra'. And yet the Babylonian Ishtar is a great mother goddess, unlike the poor Istra. This is where the character of Orual provides the necessary link. As mentioned in section 2, during her first encounter with the God of the Mountain, Orual is told that she 'also shall be Psyche', and so it happens right at the end of the novel. On the other hand, during the vision that precedes her death, Orual comes to believe that she herself is the devouring Ungit. In other words, Orual in a way represents both Psyche (whose cult is connected to the change of seasons) and Ungit (the great mother of all things in nature). According to Frazer, the cult and rituals related to Ishtar combine both of these representations. Thus Lewis does not merely copy his images from Frazer. He carefully reconsiders and disperses the fragments of the old myths between his two main heroines, Istra and Orual.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Lewis regarded myths as splinters of truth. In Chapter XV of *Miracles* (1947) he talks about myth as 'not a misunderstood history (as Euhemerus thought) nor diabolical illusion (as some Fathers thought) nor priestly lying (as the philosophers of the Enlightenment thought) but, at its best, a real though unfocused gleam of divine truth falling on human imagination' (Lewis, 1966: 138fn). In his myth of the God of the Mountain and Istra, Lewis not only

rearranges the gleams of truth as we find them in the ancient Greek myth of Cupid and Psyche. He also takes into consideration and rewrites the myths of the great mother goddess and her son/husband as presented by Frazer in *The Golden Bough*.

This paper has been trying to draw the reader's attention to *Till We Have Faces*, a fine but largely neglected book by C.S. Lewis. My purpose here has been to trace the origins of Lewis's mythic images to his reading of Frazer, thereby drawing links between twentieth-century mythopoeia and nineteenth-century anthropology. Lewis's descriptions of beliefs and ritual practices in his novel are certainly reminiscent of a number of fragments from Frazer's *Golden Bough*. Besides, there are also Frazerian echoes in Lewis's treatment of the evolution of cults and rituals in the imaginary kingdom of Glome. Yet I would argue that there more to say about the Frazer-Lewis connection. As mentioned in section 1, both Frazer and Lewis have recently been downgraded by scholars from their own fields. In the case of Frazer, this is due to the lack of factual confirmation for his conclusions. In the case of Lewis, this is mainly because of his unscientific approach to the study of literature, very unfashionable today just as it was in Lewis's time dominated by structuralism. Lewis's association with Christian apologetics and mythmaking does not help his academic prestige either. Thus in a way both Frazer and Lewis appear to be mythmakers and anthropologists: Frazer starts as an anthropologist, but ends up writing what can be seen as a literary collection of myths, whereas Lewis-the-mythmaker becomes an anthropologist in his own imaginary world.

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