

The Theme of Love in Religious Education Built on the Story of Psyche and Orual

An analysis of the didactic potential of the work of C. S. Lewis – Till We Have Faces

Lucia Bieliková

Abstract

The article presents a brief analysis of the well-known novel by C. S. Lewis *Till We Have Faces* with regard to its didactic potential in religious or ethical education. It focuses on the theme of love and the fundamental principles on which interpersonal relationships should be built from a Christian perspective. In the story of the mythological sisters Orual and Psyche, the author has depicted all the key ideas about the nature of love and its relationship to God that are also found in *Deus caritas est*, the encyclical on the love of God by Benedict XVI. The ambition of this article is to present these basic motivational story lines as a starting point for the possible use of this work in school teaching or catechesis.

Keywords

Christian love; *Till We Have Faces*; Psyche and Orual; *Deus caritas est*; religious education

Introduction – background, aims and nature of the article

Methods of working with works of art that develop religious perception and understanding in pupils through aesthetic influence are an important part of the didactics of religious education. A distinctive category among them are methods of working with narrative, i.e. fiction, which, against the background of the reading experience, invites students to reflect on the moral values and problems with which the literary characters are confronted. The advantage of this method is that it is an activation strategy (Hábl 2014, 10), as the human brain identifies with the situations depicted during reading as if it were actually experiencing them itself. Thus, a higher stage of thinking occurs than in a simple straightforward transfer of information. That the use of narrative is highly desirable, especially in the education of moral values, is confirmed by the studies and research of many authors, for example, Carr and Harrison (2015, 38), looking at the phenomenon of narrative in the history of mankind and formulating the thesis that stories are an indispensable and indispensable means for us in the process of moral cognition. Tappan and Brown (1991, 175) touch on the reflection of story as a means to the learner's self-understanding and narrative formulation of his or her own experience. Bohlin (2005, 31) explains the great importance of experiencing stories of archetypal depth for the development of one's own framework of moral reasoning and narrative.

Among many other principles and findings on this issue, educators who choose to work with fiction in religious or ethics education need to be able to choose literature that is of the highest quality and value, not only in terms of content, but also in terms of literature. Among the authors who stand out in world literature for such quality is the Northern Irish writer C. S. Lewis, whose work is analysed in our article. *Till We Have Faces* is a novel that presents a creative retelling of the ancient myth of Cupid and Psyche. However, the protagonist is the minor character Orual – Psyche’s half-sister – who narrates the story as her own biography with a surprising ending. In the multitude of motifs and storylines that can be explored in her story, we have focused our analysis on the fundamental questions that arise in the story from the beginning. What is love? What does and doesn’t true love for another person look like? And what role does God play in it? In the following lines, we will try to present the basic ideas of the Christian teaching on love as they are depicted in the plot of the novel *Till We Have Faces*. Given that we are exploring the topic in the context of teaching religious education, we have chosen Benedict XVI’s encyclical *Deus caritas est* (hereafter *DCE*) as the theological framework on which we will draw. By its very nature, this document is an appropriate representative of the Church’s teaching, from which all the contents and ideas conveyed in religious education should be based. For this reason, the themes of the chapters and their sequence are also inspired by the structure of *DCE*. The aim of the analysis thus compiled, is to provide a starting point and to offer tips on the possibilities of working with the work in the teaching of religious education.

The relationship of receiving and giving love – *eros* united with *agape*

When Benedict XVI (*DCE* 5) discusses romantic love and the ideal that marriage should represent, he explains in detail the basic principle of the intertwining of *eros* and *agape* love. Indeed, these two forms are often simplistically considered to be antithetical – *eros* denotes a love that is erotic and physical, while *agape* denotes a love that is spiritual and fully altruistic. If *eros* is truly separated from *agape* in a partnership, as worldly morality often promotes, it becomes nothing more than selfish lust aimed at self-gratification. But if *eros* is patiently purified and shaped by restraint in a relationship, it gradually becomes intertwined until it is completely united with *agape*, when we no longer seek our own gratification but desire to give selflessly for the good of the other person. This principle can be translated into any interpersonal relationship as love drawing and giving (*DCE* 7). A person’s relationship that undervalues and omits either of these forms would gradually become distorted and lose its authenticity.

Lewis’s characters Psyche and Orual are two royal sisters who represent contrasting qualities and actions on many levels. Psyché is an ideal example of love unifying both *eros* and *agape*, but the importance of this principle can be seen much more concretely in the character of Orual, who was incapable of *agape*, a giving love. As an unloved and humiliated child, she learned to look for happiness and love in a few close people to whom she clung with an unhealthy attachment with possessive behavior. This mechanism was most evident in her relationship with Psyche, who was the dearest being to her. When she was chosen as the Great Sacrifice –

which meant death – it was an irreconcilable loss to her. However, after learning that Psyche continued to live and was very happy in her marriage to the god of the Mountain, Orual was unable to rejoice in her happiness. She could not accept the fact that someone other than herself had made Psyche happy, that she would not return to her, and she struggled to convince Psyche and herself that her husband was a mirage or a monster. She refused to accept her freedom and considered herself justified in forcing Psyche to do what she thought was right for her by violent means (under threat of suicide). Psyche thus had to violate the prohibition against looking at her husband's face, which led to disaster in the form of her banishment. But even this event did not yet bring Orual to self-reflection. She blamed the gods for the tragedy and continued to treat people the same way.

Another victim of her possessive love was her tutor, Fox, whom, though released from slavery, she prevented from returning home freely by her emotional blackmail. A poignant illustration of true and false love is also found in the episode of Orual's encounter with Ansit, who is the widow of her general, Bardia. This soldier had become a platonic love for Orual, but since a real relationship with him had not been possible, she had sought to at least make the most of the fact that he worked for her. She had kept him in her presence through a lot of work and had humiliated him with taunts in expressions of love for his wife Ansit. In this way she had managed to earn a great deal of his time and presence for herself. It was only after his death that Ansit, in a joint interview, made her realize what a destructive effect this "love" of hers had had on Bardia's life. It had suffocated his married life, depleted his physical and mental strength, and caused him to succumb to illness and die prematurely.

This episode is among the first impulses that begin to open Orual's eyes and show her the truth about her own selfishness. Its depth also lies in the fact that, as a contrast to Orual's selfish love, Ansit explains to her her own attitude towards her husband, who is very self-sacrificing and altruistic. Ansit explains that even if she had had the option of limiting her husband's career to get him more for herself, she would not have done so because she was convinced that Bardia was living the fulfilled life he desired, and she had not wanted to limit his freedom and self-fulfillment for her own satisfaction. Her expression of love was that for her husband's satisfaction she had endured for years a situation that had cost her self-denial and sacrifice. This testimony came as a great surprise to Orual, for she herself had never been able to think like this. Rials and Walls (2022, 83) call this behavior the result of Orual putting the people she "loved" on a pedestal of a god, which caused her to adopt an attitude of unbounded devotion towards them. This grew into a destructive obsession with them that, instead of seeking their good, made the "beloved" people slaves to her needs and ideas. In addition to self-centeredness, this "love" was also largely based on pride, which did not allow Orual to admit that her actions were not motivated by the good of her fellow man, but only by the gratification of herself.

The pattern of self-giving in the sacrifice of Christ – the sacrifice of Psyche

When we consider the ideal of Christian love, the theme of sacrifice is an integral motif and a key characteristic. Benedict XVI, who recalls that Christ's sacrifice on the cross is the ideal model for every Christian of how to live sacrificial self-giving in daily life (*DCE* 12), addresses it in a special way. Similarly, C. S. Lewis specifically highlighted the motif of sacrifice for the good of one's neighbor in the figure of Psyche. It is represented on an explicit level by the event of the Great Sacrifice, which was to propitiate the wrath of the gods and bring lost prosperity to the land of Glom. Psyche was chosen by the sacred lot to be sacrificed, and the king decided that he would agree to this request. It was not, therefore, her own decision, but it was remarkable that she accepted the request with inner peace and acquiescence, believing it to be the right and good decision to which she was destined. So Psyche was led away and tied to a sacred tree, there to mysteriously become the wife of the god who would devour her.

Given that the sacrifice brought real blessings to the land, and the similarity to biblical ones can be seen in many other motifs, several interpretations see in it a reference to the image of Jesus' death (Aarflot 2019, 264). From our perspective, however, it is more noteworthy the attitude that Psyche took towards Orual when she tried to persuade her to break her husband's command. Orual was hostile towards her and insisted with violent aggression on an act that Psyche knew was likely to destroy her happiness altogether. But in spite of such conduct, Orual was still to her a beloved sister for whom she wished well, and she was determined to find a way to share with her the happiness in which she lived. The threat that Orual used to force obedience from Psyche was to kill Psyche first and then herself. Psyche's reply was: "Orual, you could have spared yourself the threat of killing me. All your power over me lies in the latter" (Lewis 2014, 163). This statement shows Psyche's decision to sacrifice her perfect happiness – to risk losing it forever, not out of fear for her life, but out of a desire to save her sister's life. If we try to find a concrete similarity to the Christological motif in this scene as well, we might consider that, just as Christ made himself sin for our salvation (2 Cor 5:21), Psyche puts herself in the position in this situation of betraying her husband's trust and sinning against him by her disobedience in order to save her sister – despite the fact that she is in fact perfectly faithful and convinced of his goodness and love. Through this sacrifice, Orual's story continues so that she can go on to live her life for as long as it took to discover the truth about herself and heal her personal sinfulness.

Meeting God as a necessary condition for the ability to love

At the end of *Till We Have Faces*, Orual's story flows into the key and most important event of the whole work – the meeting with God, in which he undergoes a personal trial and transformation. Earlier, she has recognized both her sinfulness and the desperate fact that she herself can do nothing to change it. This realization was the gateway to understanding that her attitude toward the gods had been unjust and built on lies all her life. Orual was not a non-believer because she did not deny their existence. However, she had been convinced all her life that the gods were evil and insidious beings who only played tricks on people and brought them suffering. Unlike Psyche, who had longed to be united with them since childhood and had an

unwavering faith in their goodness even in times of trial and tribulation, Orual was unwilling to entertain the idea that what was happening might not actually be as bad as she saw it from her position.

When Psyche became the wife of a god, Orual refused to believe she was happy, but created an image of a monster who had insidiously stolen her sister's love. She blamed the gods for all the bitterness of her life and summoned them to court to convict them of these deeds. The gods' response was for Orual to recognize the truth of her sinfulness and selfishness, the realization that she had messed up the lives of her "beloveds" by desiring to possess them. In this knowledge, she tensely approaches her own divine judgment, which, surprisingly, does not consist in punishing her. In a moment of a personal encounter with God, she realizes his greatness and holiness, and this experience eclipses every form of love she has known until then. From this moment on, Orual is personally transformed – she is no longer a sinner, but has become, as it were, a second, equally beautiful Psyche. She realizes that she can love no one more than God, but because of this and through him, she already loves Psyche more than ever. Orual has thus experienced divine mercy, and through a single moment of personal encounter, she has come to understand what she herself had been unable to realize all her life. This conclusion aptly depicts what Benedict XVI presented as the framing truth of Christian charity in *DCE*. It is the idea that each of us can only become an authentic Christian who can love others in the way of Jesus through a personal encounter with God. Only if we truly give God the most important place in our lives because we have come to know His love personally can we love other people much more than if that first place belonged to them (*DCE* 1).

Conclusion – suggestions for didactic use

Through the analysis of the novel C. S. Lewis' *Till We Have Faces* and its comparison with the theology of the encyclical *Deus caritas est*, we have shown that the work has great potential to bring several Christian values and principles to the reader in an engaging and understandable way. From a didactic point of view, it can thus become a very good tool in the teaching of religious education. Based on the analysis presented in this article, it would be possible to use excerpts from the work, for example, in teaching topics related to love and relationship building. A comparison of the work with the encyclical of *DCE* gives us confidence that we would find in it a sufficiently good portrayal of each of the essential principles of love that are supposed to characterize the Christian. Our analysis can be a useful basis for teaching topics in the area of building interpersonal relationships or marriage in the high school age group. A lesson based on the story, could be built mainly on reading and analyzing the text passage and then discussing it. One possible concrete way of setting it up is given in the following example.

The teacher chooses one of the sub-themes we have identified in the analysis and formulates a question as the topic of the lesson to which the idea will provide an answer. The aim of the lesson will be to get the pupils to discover this idea and to take their own position on it. Specifically, the questions might be: What does true love look like? This is about explaining

the principle of the union of eros and agape. What is the meaning of sacrifice? This explores the importance of selfless sacrifice. Where does love come from? This is about discovering the relationship with God as the source of true and perfect love. For each of these themes, one or more textual excerpts from *Till We Have Faces* could be selected in which the themes mentioned in the analysis could be clearly discerned. The teacher's task would be to prepare them for the pupils in such a way that they are a sufficiently coherent and at the same time not too time-consuming reading the part of the story.

It is appropriate to work with the text of the passage on several levels. The basic one is to understand the text on its literary level, to identify the theme, the characters and the relationships between them, and to orient oneself to the key issues and motifs that the plot deals with. At the next stage, pupils should be able to articulate the general message of thought that the text presents, based on specific images and situations in the passage. The last, very important part of the reflection should be the pupils' discussion of the values and ideas they have discovered in the text. They should have enough space to confront each other with their own opinions and arguments about the ideas depicted or be able to relate the readings to examples from their own lives. All of these phases of work with the text need to be moderated by the teacher with a set of appropriately prepared questions that will stimulate the pupils and follow the set lesson line in a concise way. Appropriate supplements to more thoroughly internalise the ideas being discussed could be time for quiet and individual reflection, or an activity providing some kind of artistic reflection and fixation.

The essential difference of a lesson designed in this way as opposed to a simple presentation of the Church's doctrine becomes a process in which the students themselves, accompanied by an aesthetic experience, discover and discuss the key message. The ambition of this article is to inspire and motivate educators and catechists to discover the potential not only of this novel, but also of other high quality fiction texts that can contribute to a more attractive and effective teaching of religious or ethical education.

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Mgr. Lucia Bieliková

<https://orcid.org/0009-0009-6489-3964>

Piaristická spojená škola sv. Jozefa Kalazanského

Piaristická 6, 949 01 Nitra, Slovakia

lucia.bielikova@piarko.sk