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Grace Seeman
Taylor University

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Grace Seeman

Making Literature

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A Passive Darkness: The Veil in “Cock-Crowing” and *Till We Have Faces*

The moment in the traditional wedding ceremony in which the bride’s veil is lifted is rich with symbolic meaning; among other things, it signifies a simultaneous hope for and actualization of the great human desire to know, and to be known in return. Both Henry Vaughan and C. S. Lewis access this same image and its connotations, veiling their characters both metaphorically—as in the narrator in Vaughan’s poem “Cock-Crowing”—and literally—as in Orual, Lewis’s mythic queen in *Till We Have Faces*. But to these authors, the veil is leaden, and through reckoning with this fact, their characters come face-to-face with their own inability to lift their respective veils; Lewis and Vaughan utilize language of darkness and light to create theological nuance around this reality, and in so doing, situate themselves in the doubt-ridden theology of the Renaissance while simultaneously refining it through their refusal to let that theology impinge upon their faith in a good and saving God.

Vaughan wrote his poem “Cock-Crowing” with two major characters: a rooster, and the narrator. In the course of its forty-eight lines, it makes use of the Hermetic magnetism between earth and heaven to draw a common thread between these two, for as the rooster is compelled to crow by the appearance of its native sun, so also is man compelled to seek his creator God.

This analogy breaks down when the efficacy of such a compulsion is called into question, for while there is no evidence in the poem of the rooster falling short of perfection in its pursuit of the sun, Vaughan’s narrator does precisely that in his pursuit of God. The ideal is defined within the poem as full mutual knowledge through the narrator addressing God, saying, “Seeing

thy seed abides in me, / Dwell thou in it, and I in thee” (Vaughan 23-4). However, the realization of this state is impaired by the presence of a veil which “is all the cloak / And cloud which shadows thee from me” (Vaughan 39-40), a veil that, in short, lies between the narrator and his achievement of the state of full knowing and being-known.

What is more, however, the narrator has no power over his veil; he cannot, in his own power, remove this obstacle to his union with God. Such a reality is made evident through the passivity of his language surrounding the veil; for instance, he says “[this veil] must be broken yet in me” (Vaughan 38). In opting not to use the active voice, Vaughan begins to introduce the reader to the idea of an impotent narrator. This interpretational nuance is strengthened by his choice to describe the state of being veiled as standing under a “cloud which shadows thee from me” (40), which draws further attention to the apparent inevitability of man’s being acted upon and thwarted, rather than active himself and successful, with regards to the actualization of his ultimate perfection.

Moreover, the narrator cries out, “O take [the veil] off! Make no delay” (Vaughan 43) in both the first and the second-to-last lines of the last stanza in the poem, indicating that God, the “immortal light and heat” (Vaughan 19) whom he has been addressing since the fourth stanza, holds the power over the veil that he himself lacks. Indeed, he explicitly hopes that the rending of the “veil which [God] hast broke” (Vaughan 37) will be replicated in his own, private veil, leaving no doubt as to who, between God and himself, has the strength to tear it off.

Orual of Glome, the dominant figure in Lewis’s *Till We Have Faces*, differs from Vaughan’s narrator not only in that her veil is physical, but also in that she has the power to lift it. The veil features centrally throughout the entire novel, but its presence in the book’s author-denoted second part furnishes ample resources to make an argument for this difference being

more superficial than anything else. There are two primary instances where Orual unveils herself in this section: first, when she converses with Ansit upon Bardia's death, and second, when she walks out of the city to the river to commit suicide. Sharon Jebb describes Orual in such a way as to provide a window into the shallowness of this fraught action: "To the best of her ability, she grasps her new role [as Queen], warring and ruling and *making use* of the fear which the veil instills in ambassadors and subjects alike" (115, emphasis mine). True, Orual is entirely capable of removing her physical veil, but there is a disconnect here between the veil as an object and the veil as a symbol that is rooted precisely in this pragmatism, and that situates her squarely in the same category as Vaughan's narrator with regards to powerlessness over the metaphorical veil.

In the first scene, Orual goes to pay her respects to Ansit, Bardia's now-widow. What begins as a paying of respects escalates into verbal sparring as the two women debate each other's claims to Bardia and their own resultant disadvantage. As this initial conflict comes to a head, Orual realizes that Ansit is jealous of her and, more to the point, her great command of Bardia's time. She cries incredulously to Ansit, "What...Is it possible you're jealous?" (Lewis 262), and when she is not dignified with any response, she writes, "I sprang to my feet and pulled aside my veil. 'Look, look, you fool!' I cried. 'Are you jealous of this?'" (Lewis 262). This action is used fundamentally as a tool; in the face of Ansit's justified accusation of Orual regarding Orual's monopolization of her husband, Orual has no logical rebuttal and, rather than admitting her own fault and the corruption of her own heart, she appeals to her own ugliness by way of shocking Ansit and excusing her actions. This appeal is made by her unveiling of herself.

The second scene contains similar themes. Orual has a need of getting out of the city unseen in order to kill herself and to escape Ungit, the terrible goddess that she has become. In service of this end, she thinks to herself, "My veil was no longer a means to be unknown. It

revealed me; all men knew the veiled Queen. My disguise now would be to go bareface; there was hardly anyone who had seen me unveiled” (Lewis 278). As before, her veil is something that she makes use of; its physical removal here explicitly and intentionally becomes yet another added layer of her metaphorical veil, yet another means by which she may be unseen.

Through studying these instances, then, the break between Orual’s veil as an article of clothing and Orual’s veil as a symbol becomes apparent. This, in turn, provides essential tools for undermining the easy assumption that her ability to remove the former can be extrapolated in order to make a case for a corresponding ability to remove the latter. Sally A. Bartlett addresses this distinction succinctly, asserting that “The veil [Orual] wears over her face to mask her ugliness before the world, she has already had intact internally for years, acting as a protective barrier between her and her despised self” (193). Since the physical veil was preceded by the internal one, it is subordinated to the latter not just chronologically, but also in terms of precedence, thus creating a hierarchical framework for interpretation that disallows an unqualified equation of the two, regardless of whether they are in place or lifted.

This being established, the internal or metaphorical veil is called to the forefront for examination. Due to the physical veil’s truest classification being as a tool, it is necessarily periphery, necessarily being used by someone—by Orual herself. It is this self that is concealed by the other veil, and by the conclusion of *Till We Have Faces*, as critic Curtis Gruenler summarizes, “Orual comes to acknowledge that the reason the gods don’t speak clearly has to do with the veil that has covered her own face from herself and prevented her from seeing” (260). This of interest because, as one might expect, Orual does not wear her physical veil when she is alone—for instance, one passage reads that she “put on [her] veil...and went down” (Lewis 154), implying it having been discarded at first—yet Gruenler’s analysis discusses her as if she is

continually veiled. From this, then, it becomes evident not only that the removal of the physical veil does not mirror a similar removal in the internal veil, but also that, throughout Orual's entire story, she cannot find a way to remove that second, more fundamental veil. This reality puts her in a similar plight to Vaughan's narrator in "Cock-Crowing"; they both are shown to be necessarily passive with regards to the lifting of their true veils, incapable of the removal of that which keeps them from being known.

Such similarity, though, is not found simply in the entrapment of these characters; it also continues into their liberation, as they both require divine action to be unveiled. Indeed, as Vaughan's narrator pleading with God to unveil him implies God's sole sufficiency therein, Orual only finds herself truly unveiled when she stands before the council of the gods: "Hands came from behind me and tore off my veil — after it, every rag I had on" (Lewis 289), she writes, noting that they do so at the command of the divine judge who is hearing her complaint. Only in this state is she capable of being answered; only in this state, with her veil ripped from her, is she unable to make a tool of it and hide further behind that usage. Its removal—regardless of the dictates of her impotent will—makes her unable to be anything but known, and forces her to stand before the divine as bare as Vaughan's narrator yearns to be.

Their unveiling is not the final word for either character, however; neither Vaughan nor Lewis is willing to be so simplistic. They invite continued thought as they depict the results of the completed unveiling, and nuance these theologically-laden moments with language of darkness and light. Vaughan is notorious for this sort of imagery. This reputation makes sense upon reading "Cock-Crowing," for in it, not only is the sun itself the planter of the "sunny seed" (1) in the rooster, but God is described as "immortal light and heat" (19), as noted earlier, as well as the creator of "a perfect day" (45) and as having the ability to "warm me at thy glorious eye"

(46). Being a part of this day, being thus warmed and “brush[ed] with thy light” (44); these are the images of the poem’s last stanza and describe the ideal of Vaughan’s unveiled narrator.

However, while this sampling of language is quite representative, “Vaughan's popular epithet of ‘poet of light’ needs some qualification. He is by no means a Boehme or a Blake, but the consciousness of darkness, indeed, the conviction that light cannot do without darkness, is essential to the understanding of what he says and of how he says it” (Sandbank 142). This general statement holds, as the language of darkness, while less prolific than that of light, is indispensable in understanding the shining conclusion of “Cock-Crowing”; in the midst of the dominant sun metaphors, God’s absence is posited, and “In such a dark, Egyptian border, / The shades of death dwell and disorder” (Vaughan 29-30). Should he abandon the narrator to being necessarily veiled through refraining from enacting the unveiling himself, he would by default yield precedence to the veil’s “cloud which shadows [him] from [the narrator]” (Vaughan 40). This imagery is not used as a simple contrast, though, for in begging to be unveiled and let into the light, the narrator is asking for action, not asserting reality. In short, while the narrator’s divine unveiling leads inevitably to light, the unveiling itself is not shown to be inevitable; the language of darkness forms an implicit doubt thereof when considered alongside the station of the narrator as set by his pleas.

Till We Have Faces uses the juxtaposition of darkness and light in a similarly stark, dramatic fashion; Gruenler notes this, asserting that “Lewis’ novel can be seen to encompass both dark and light for a full-orbed representation of the sacred as both lie and truth” (249). To be sure, there is a great intensity of contrast between darkness and light throughout the work; it is most marked in Orual’s final judgment episode, although rather than moving from darkness to light, as Vaughan’s language—and ideally his narrator—does, Lewis initially sends Orual from

light into darkness. At the beginning of her vision, she writes, “I walked in the dry sand up to my ankles, white with sand to my middle, my throat rough with sand — unmitigated noon above me, and the sun so high that I had no shadow” (Lewis 286). She continues in this uncompromising light for one hundred years, until she abruptly “was hurried in out of the burning sunlight into the dark inwards of the mountain” (Lewis 288), remaining in that mountain’s shadowy heart in front of “the dark assembly” (Lewis 293). Here she stays until the gods accuse her in return and the darkness proves to be only penultimate; she moves to a higher court, an ascent marked by “the air...growing brighter and brighter...as if something had set it on fire” (Lewis 307). It is in this light that, rather than Ungit, Orual is proclaimed by the truest god to be Psyche.

This three-part process is not without effect in Lewis’s treatment of the sacred, just as Gruenler asserted; importantly, it gives great weight to the intermediary stage of darkness, leaving Orual in it at the end of the third chapter, and thus complementing “Cock-Crowing” by fleshing out what Vaughan does little more than allude to. This stage, situated between the punishing and the sublime light, does do the vital work of unveiling Orual; however, it is not veil-less. Her judge is described thus: “Male or female, who could say? Its face was veiled. It was covered from crown to toe in sweepy black” (Lewis 289). She has been known, symbolically speaking, but does not know in return and, although this is halfway to the end goal of full, mutual knowledge, it is accompanied by profound shame as Orual comes to a brutal understanding that her complaint is no more than “speech which has lain at the center of [her] soul for years, which [she has], all that time, idiot-like, been saying over and over” (Lewis 294). The nuance of Lewis’s two veils—one removed, yet one still in place—aligns with and fills out Vaughan’s notion of a characteristically veiled darkness.

At this point, Renaissance theology must be taken into consideration, as Vaughan was writing as a contemporary within it, and Lewis studied it robustly. Debora Shuger, a scholar in the area, examines two of the sixteenth-century's most influential theologians—Richard Hooker and Lancelot Andrewes—and typifies their thought thus:

While both [Hooker and Andrewes] analyze spiritual experience in the language of participation and thus seem to affirm the presence of God to the soul, in fact, that analysis and that affirmation take place only within a larger context that represents religious experience as suffused with doubt, fear of rejection, a sense of the absence of God that verges on despair. (70)

With this in mind, it becomes evident that both Vaughan and Lewis are dialoguing with this very idea, especially when the thematic darkness is given its full weight and not simply ignored in favor of the abundant, traditionally Christian image of light. Its encroaching presence in “Cock-Crowing” and part two of *Till We Have Faces* visualizes the Renaissance doubt that eats at the foundation of any assurance of divine concern in humanity, a doubt that is intensified by man's impotence—and thus his necessary passivity—concerning the removal of his darkening veil. In a theology where God may or may not be involved in the lives of his creatures, the fact that he alone may provide them access to himself becomes deeply troubling. Yet in the face of this, light persists, and is given the dignity of being parting image in both pieces—an ultimacy that allows it to act as an assertion of faith despite the reality of doubt.

Light and darkness twine with activity and passivity in Vaughan's “Cock-Crowing” and Lewis's *Till We Have Faces*. The two sets of opposites inform one another, orbiting around the central image of the veil and, in that interplay, clarifying the Renaissance theological crisis surrounding the possibility of divine disinterest. Still, while Vaughan and Lewis both outline the

contours of this fear in terms of a passive darkness, they, in two different historical moments, choose to leave their readers with the hope of an active light and of a God who, despite themselves and the nighted world in which they live, enables the great human desire for full, mutual knowing and refuses to let himself remain unknown.

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